

Preparedness Act of 2002, strengthens the role of the Department of Veterans Affairs to protect the people of the United States from terrorists, particularly bio-terrorism threats such as last year's anthrax attacks in Washington, New York, New Jersey and Florida. We must be proactive in preparing the United States for a future terrorist attack. As Vice President CHENEY cautioned this year, "The prospects of a future attack against the United States are almost certain. Not a matter of it, but when. It could happen tomorrow, it could happen next week, it could happen next year, but they will keep trying." We must respond in an effective and comprehensive manner to protect the American people when an attack occurs. This bill would help do just that.

Under this bill, four geographically separated National Medical Emergency Preparedness Centers would be established. Each center would study and develop treatments for human exposure to chemical, biological, explosive and nuclear substances that may be used as weapons of mass destruction.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is a good host for such a new and important mission. In addition to its medical care mission to care for millions of veterans, the veterans health care system is the nation's largest provider of graduate medical education and is a major contributor to biomedical and other scientific research. Because of its widely dispersed, integrated health care system, VA is an essential asset in responding to national, regional and local emergencies. The VA is an integral part of the Federal Response Plan, and an important local resource in natural disasters. This bill strengthens VA's role as a helping agency in such events, and particularly those that may be caused in the future by those bent on destruction of freedom and the American way of life.

Not only would the four emergency preparedness centers conduct research and develop detection, diagnosis, prevention, and treatment methods; but they would also be charged as clearinghouses to disseminate the information to other public and private health care providers, to improve the quality of care for patients who may be exposed to deadly chemicals or radiation.

In addition, our bill would also require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a program to develop and disseminate model education and training programs for medical response to terrorist activities. VA's infrastructure, which includes affiliations with over 107 medical schools, and other schools of health professions, would prepare current and future medical professionals in this country to be knowledgeable and medically competent in the treatment of casualties from terrorist attacks. In my home state, the University of Kansas School of Medicine currently partners with 4 Veterans Medical Centers and educates over 700 medical students and more than 390 resident physicians in training.

This bill also provides the VA a formal role in the national disaster medical system, and authorizes the VA to treat first responders, active-duty military forces deployed in domestic deployments, fire fighters, police officers and members of the general public who may fall victim to terrorism or mass casualty disasters. Another important part of this bill is the establishment of a centralized office at VA headquarters to manage all emergency preparedness, security and law enforcement activities,

and to organize the VA's resources for maximum efficiency and effectiveness in protecting the security of VA's patients, staff, and infrastructure from the risk and threat of terrorism.

Mr. Speaker, this is a good bill for the American people. The professionals who need to be trained in saving lives will be properly armed with information, education and expertise to provide health care. Mechanisms will be put in place to study the likely avenues and methods of chemical, biological, and radiological poisoning. The VA will also be a part of a national presence for rapid response by local and Federal officials in types of emergencies that only a year ago we could scarcely imagine.

H.R. 3253 is a bipartisan and bicameral compromise, Mr. Speaker. As Chairman of the Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Veterans Affairs, I am very pleased that the long journey of this legislation concludes today and that we shall send the bill to the President. I want to commend my Chairman, the gentleman from New Jersey, Mr. SMITH, for his leadership and advocacy on this measure, as well as our colleagues, the Ranking Member of the full Committee, the gentleman from Illinois, Mr. EVANS, and the Ranking Member of my Subcommittee, the gentleman from California, Mr. FILNER, for their work. As my Chairman has said previously on the floor of this Chamber, he feels a personal obligation, from events in his own district in the anthrax incidents, that Congress act to improve our safety and prevent such future travesties. I commend him for his dedication and agree that this measure aids in that respect.

I also thank our colleagues in the Senate for their cooperation, contributions and comity.

This bill may be seen as only a small effort today, Mr. Speaker, but it could pay large dividends down the road in America's war on terrorism. I urge its adoption by the House.

Mr. EVANS. Mr. Speaker, I rise in strong support of H.R. 3253, the Department of Veterans Affairs Emergency Preparedness Act of 2002, as amended.

After the tragic events of September 11th last year, our Chairman, CHRIS SMITH, again demonstrated his leadership. He authored and introduced legislation authorizing an important role for the Department of Veterans Affairs in our national fight against terrorism. This is the primary purpose of the measure before us.

VA provides medical care to millions of veterans each year. It conducts ground-breaking health care research. It also provides educational opportunities to many of our nation's health care providers. VA is truly an unparalleled national resource.

This legislation provides the structure and authority for VA to leverage its expertise to combat terrorism. For VA to achieve this goal it must have adequate resources.

Today, VA does not have enough resources. This is not my judgment. This is the judgment of the Task Force to Improve Health Care Delivery to Veterans established by President Bush. I call on the President to fully fund the VA, to provide all funding needed by VA to deliver timely and quality care to our veterans. Mr. President, provide VA the resources it requires to combat terrorism.

I am pleased H.R. 3253, as amended, has been approved by the other body. I urge all Members to support this important legislation so it can be sent to the White House for action by the President.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support passage of this legislation.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. SIMPSON). Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Texas?

There was no objection.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Without objection, the various amendments to the titles are agreed to.

There was no objection.

AUTHORIZING THE CLERK TO MAKE CORRECTIONS IN ENGROSSMENT OF VARIOUS LEGISLATIVE MEASURES

Mr. ARMEY. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that, in the engrossment of the measures just passed, the Clerk be authorized to correct spelling, punctuation, numbering, and cross-references, and to make such other changes as may be necessary to reflect the actions of the House.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Texas?

There was no objection.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. ARMEY. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks on the measures just passed and to insert extraneous material thereon.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Texas?

There was no objection.

RELATING TO EARLY ORGANIZATION OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES FOR THE 108TH CONGRESS

Mr. ARMEY. Mr. Speaker, I offer a resolution (H. Res. 590), and I ask unanimous consent for its immediate consideration.

The Clerk read the resolution, as follows:

H. RES. 590

Resolved, That any organizational caucus or conference in the House of Representatives for the One Hundred Eighth Congress may begin on or after November 1, 2002.

SEC. 2. (a) With the approval of the majority leader (in the case of a Member or Member-elect of the majority party) or the minority leader (in the case of a Member or Member-elect of the minority party), the provisions of law described in subsection (b) shall apply with respect to the attendance of a Member or Member-elect at a program conducted by the Committee on House Administration for the orientation of new members of the One Hundred Eighth Congress in the same manner as such provisions apply to the attendance of the Member or Member-elect at the organizational caucus or conference.

(b) The provisions of law described in this subsection are as follows:

(1) Subsections (b) and (c) of section 202 of House Resolution 988, Ninety-third Congress, agreed to on October 8, 1974, and enacted into permanent law by chapter III of title I of the Supplemental Appropriations Act, 1975 (2 U.S.C. 29a).