

NEW DIRECTIONS, INC.,

Los Angeles, CA, March 26, 2003.

To: Representative Maxine Waters.

From: John Keaveney.

Subject: Department of Veterans Affairs Funding Cuts.

DEAR CONGRESSWOMAN WATERS: I am writing for your help Congresswoman Waters because you have always been a strong advocate for veterans, protecting veterans' benefits and defending veterans from special interests in Congress and here locally. I am pleading with you once again to help our Nation's veterans. It has come to our attention that the House Budget Committee chaired by Congressman Jim Nussle (R-IA) pushed through a bill to cut \$25 billion from the Veterans' Administration over the next 10 years. I know you agree that if the government can consider funding tax breaks for the rich and businesses, then they certainly can make it a priority to help our Nation's veterans and homeless by not allowing a major cut in benefits to veterans.

The shame of this is that this was done on March 13, as America was asking hundreds of thousands of servicemen and women to lay their lives on the line as our country was making final preparations to go to war with Iraq. I find it difficult to describe my feelings about this development especially considering that this Nation is now engaged in a war and simultaneously enacting legislation making huge cuts in funding for veterans' services. To propose cuts in V.A. nurses, doctors, hospitals and other important services to veterans at a time of war feels to many veterans like an act of treason. I do not believe that the American public is informed properly about this issue. Just imagine, how would our troops in the Middle East feel about this? It seems inexcusable at a time like this to virtually tear up the agreement America has had with veterans for more than 100 years which is to care for those who have borne the brunt of battle.

Veterans expect the promises made to them to be honored as this should be considered a sacred agreement. Thank you for your time and devotion to serving our country in honor of our nation's servicemen and women.

God bless you.

JOHN KEAVENEY.

NATIONAL VETERANS FOUNDATION,

Los Angeles, CA, March 27, 2003.

Congresswoman MAXINE WATERS,

Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, DC.

DEAR CONGRESSWOMAN WATERS: As author and founder of the National Vet Center program (Public Law 96-22), and founder and president of the National Veterans Foundation which has been operating since 1987, I want to express my extreme shock and dismay over the recent announcement concerning the House Veterans Affairs Committee decision to drastically cut Veterans' health-care benefits.

We have seen many disturbing things with past administrations concerning veterans support, but this present attempt to slash budgets supporting our nation's veterans is the most shameful. A \$25 billion cut from the Veterans Administration over the next 10 years is a staggering amount to an already severely reduced and diminished program. Veterans comprise 30% of the nation's homeless, many of them are in desperate need of services . . . many more are at the brink of homelessness and what is probably worse, a crisis of hopelessness.

Where is the logic of cutting these programs precisely when we are sending our young men and women into the field to secure the peace and safety not just of our nation, but of the world?

Cuts in VA hospitals, in doctors and nurses, in rehabilitation and retraining, and

in counseling to heal wounded psyches, seems cruel and treasonous. What kind of country asks its citizens to be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice, and then penalizes those who rise to the challenge?

Lincoln's Address at Gettysburg dictates our responsibility to these brave men and women: to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan.

We are barely doing that now. How is it possible for our existing system to undergo these savings cuts and still offer services to the hundreds of thousands of troops now engaged in Iraq? Then there's Afghanistan, not to mention the countless thousands of military personnel in support positions all over the world. We are looking at a vast increase in the number of those we must serve. To cut funding for veterans services in a time of war while simultaneously offering a tax break that would have its greatest impact on the affluent and on business seems indefensible.

You have always been a strong advocate for veterans. You have protected veterans' benefits from special interests locally and in our Congress. Please help us now. We need your strong, clear voice.

Sincerely,

SHAD MESHAD,

President and Founder.

Mr. TOWNS. Mr. Speaker, today I rise to express my deep concern and stringent opposition to the proposed cuts in veterans health care contained in the President's 2004 Budget. While a tax cut may require us to discuss reductions in many vital programs, there are few cuts that are as unkind as the cuts the President wishes to visit upon those brave men and women who were willing to serve and if necessary die for this country.

Mr. Speaker, this House recently voted on a 2004 budget from the President which will cut funding for veterans health care and benefit programs by nearly \$25 billion over the next ten years. These cuts would require the Veterans' Administration for the first time in its history to require monetary payment from those who have already paid with their service to this nation. According to the Veterans' Administration, approximately one out of every two veterans could lose their only source of medical care under the President's budget plan. What should the VA say to a veteran who needs treatment but cannot afford to pay? I cannot believe that we would honor their service by turning them away. And yet, under the President's plan, rejection may be the only response that a fiscally-strapped health care system can give.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that the veterans who served this country responded affirmatively to this nation's call to service. We cannot now respond negatively to their call for help.

Mr. ETHERIDGE. Mr. Speaker, as we stand here today in Washington, DC, thousands of our men and women in uniform are in harm's way, fighting for the freedom and the values that we hold dear.

They are in our thoughts and our prayers. They do not know what fate awaits them, but they know they are fulfilling their duty and serving their country.

When these brave Americans return home, they will join the ranks of over 26 million American veterans.

In my state of North Carolina, we are home to more than 150,000 veterans.

I served in the United States Army for two years. I never fought in combat or served overseas. And I'm certainly no hero, but I understand the sacrifices that our veterans have made.

Our troops fighting overseas today should know that when they come home the country that they have served will not turn its back on them.

Once the fighting is over, veterans should know that the government will fulfill its promises to take care of those injured in battle and to provide for health care and education assistance.

It is absolutely outrageous that the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives wants to push through a budget that severely cuts funding for our nation's veterans.

They passed this budget under the cover of darkness because they knew it could not stand the light of day.

That budget breaks the solemn promise made to the very men and women who fight for our freedom.

You've heard my colleagues tell you how the budget cuts would affect veterans' programs nationwide, but I want to tell you about one specific proposal that would significantly impact North Carolina's veterans.

The budget cuts mean that many North Carolina veterans won't be able to continue receiving VA health care because of new \$250 enrollment fees.

The VA estimates that 1.25 million veterans who are already a part of the health care system will be forced out because of these steep new fees.

In North Carolina this could translate into over 27,000 veterans cut out of health care.

For those who can afford to stay in the VA health care system, many will be forced to pay significant new costs.

An estimated 22,000 North Carolina veterans, referred to as Priority 7 and Priority 8 veterans, will pay a new \$250 enrollment fee, increased copays for physician benefits and prescription drug fees.

All in all, this will mean a total average increase of \$347 each year. Others could be forced to pay even more, as much as \$600 annually.

The budget passed by the House means that 4,100 veterans in North Carolina will not even have the opportunity to enroll in VA health system.

These so-called Priority 8 veterans, who were not injured in service and who make above a level between \$24,450 and \$38,100 depending on location and situation, will be denied care.

Our country made a promise to the men and women in our armed forces. Our troops and our veterans have fulfilled their duty to their country. Now it is our turn to make good on our promises.

Congress should reject the Republican budget and honor our commitments to our veterans.

GENERAL LEAVE

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks on the subject of my special order.

THE SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. MARIO DIAZ-BALART). Is there objection to the request of the gentlewoman from Texas?

There was no objection.