

name removed as a cosponsor of H.R. 1449.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. LATHAM). Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from North Carolina?

There was no objection.

#### GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. WALSH. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material on H.R. 2528 and that I may include tabular material on the same.

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

There was no objection.

#### MILITARY QUALITY OF LIFE AND VETERANS AFFAIRS APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2006

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to House Resolution 298 and rule XVIII, the Chair declares the House in the Committee of the Whole House on the State of the Union for the consideration of the bill, H.R. 2528.

The Chair designates the gentleman from New Hampshire (Mr. BASS) as chairman of the Committee of the Whole, and requests the gentlewoman from Illinois (Mrs. BIGGERT) to assume the chair temporarily.

□ 1147

#### IN THE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

Accordingly, the House resolved itself into the Committee of the Whole House on the State of the Union for the consideration of the bill (H.R. 2528) making appropriations for military quality of life functions of the Department of Defense, military construction, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and related agencies for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2006, and for other purposes, with Mrs. BIGGERT (Acting Chairman) in the chair.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The Acting CHAIRMAN. Pursuant to the rule, the bill is considered as having been read the first time.

Under the rule, the gentleman from New York (Mr. WALSH) and the gentleman from Texas (Mr. EDWARDS) each will control 30 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from New York (Mr. WALSH).

Mr. WALSH. Madam Chairman, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Madam Chairman, today I am proud to represent the first Subcommittee on Military Quality of Life and Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies appropriations bill for consideration of the House.

This subcommittee was formed for the purpose of taking a more comprehensive look at the programs related to providing a suitable quality of life for our service men and women, from recruitment through retirement.

I believe the bill before Members today does just that, and it does it in a fiscally responsible way.

Since the advent of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973, quality of life has come to play an increasingly important role. In the short time between the subcommittee's organization and today, I have met with many officials from the Department of Defense who are energized and excited with the makeup of this new subcommittee. Everyone we met said the same thing, you recruit the soldier, but you retain "the family"; and this new bill structure will make a significant contribution to that goal.

I have also met with many people on the issues related to the Defense Health Program and the VA. Again, there is excitement about the synergies that currently exist and the ones that can be developed or enhanced between DOD and VA. This bill makes all that possible.

I salute the gentleman from California (Chairman LEWIS) for having the foresight and persistence to bring about this positive change.

The bill before us today totals \$121.8 billion, of which \$85.2 billion is discretionary spending and \$36.6 billion is mandatory spending. On the discretionary side, the bill is \$1.1 billion above the President's request and \$5.9 billion above last year's bill. The bill funds the VA at \$68.1 billion, \$2.3 billion above fiscal year 2005, and \$635 million above the budget request. Included in this amount is \$21 billion for medical services, a \$1.6 billion increase above the 2005 enacted level, and \$1 billion above the budget request. This is an 8.5 percent increase over last year. I would also note that with the funding in this bill, the medical services account will grow by 18.2 percent over the past 2 years.

Also, this funding level does not assume adoption of any new fees, nor does it preclude the committee of jurisdiction from moving on such legislation. The VA funding level, among other things, restores funding for long-term care to the level it was in the fiscal year 2005 appropriation, and we direct the Secretary to work with the National Association of State Veterans Homes to come to some agreeable policy to make the program work better for veterans and the taxpayers.

The bill also includes language directing the Department to spend not less than \$2.2 billion on specialty mental health care in fiscal year 2006, in direct concern to many Members of Congress that the VA needs to make this a priority. We have never specified funding for a category of care in this bill in the past.

We have also included report language directing the Department to more than double the funding available for mental health research. For the Department of Defense, the bill provides \$53.5 billion. Within this total is funding for military construction, family housing construction and maintenance,

costs associated with BRAC for the prior rounds and the current round, basic allowance for housing payments, facilities sustainment, restoration and modernization, and environmental restoration.

Regarding BRAC, let me just repeat what we have said in subcommittee. As of now, we consider the Secretary of Defense's recommendations just that, recommendations only. We will be following the commission process, but we see no need to make changes to the military construction budget at this time. Also included in this total is \$20 billion for the Defense Health Program, an increase of \$1.8 billion above fiscal year 2005 and \$192 million above the budget request. This amount supports troop readiness by making sure we have an adequate funding level to prepare our soldiers, sailors, and airmen for training and deployments while caring for their families and dependents.

One last thing I wanted to mention is the joint DOD-VA incentives program which was authorized in fiscal year 2003 and has been appropriated since that time. This program creates a fund which creates the opportunity for the DOD and VA to explore joint ventures in research and information technology that establishes and enhances continuity between these two Departments and contributes to the synergies we all want.

We have a responsibility to make sure that the limited resources we have are spent efficiently and effectively and that programs achieve their mission. The structure of this bill provides us with an opportunity to take a bold look across programs and Departments and find synergies and efficiencies. Change is not always easy to go through, and it does not happen overnight; but we have taken the first step towards producing a more focused bill, and I want to thank the gentleman from California (Mr. LEWIS) for his vision and support.

Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to the gentleman from Texas (Mr. EDWARDS), the ranking member of the subcommittee. We have developed a strong working relationship based upon trust. He has a wealth of experience with the military, given his long association with Fort Hood, Texas. He has been very generous with his time and his counsel as we assembled this bill, and it is much appreciated.

Thanks to my subcommittee members for their active participation in the hearing process and also for their advice, and also to our very professional staff led by the capable Carol Murphy, and to my personal staff for their help in preparing this work product. I am very grateful to all of them. This would not have been possible without their help.