



# **VETERANS' BENEFITS AND AMERICA'S PRIORITIES, OR ENDLESS WAR IN IRAQ?**

**How a veto of the Labor, Health and Human Services, and  
Education funding bill will shortchange those who have served**

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

In early November, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bipartisan appropriations package that included two appropriation bills: Military Construction-Veterans Affairs and Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education (Labor-HHS). This important package contains funding for America's national security, veterans, health care, cancer research, education, job training and other critical priorities. The Senate also voted on these two appropriation bills separately and both bills passed with a bi-partisan, veto-proof majority. Now each bill has passed the House and are ready to go to President Bush so that he can sign these critical bills into law. However the President has threatened to veto nearly all appropriations bills that provide more than his Fiscal Year 2008 budget request, including Labor-HHS.

A solid majority of Representatives in the Florida Delegation have supported this funding for critical human needs: Democrats and Republicans alike. Fourteen of the twenty-five members voted to pass this legislation, and the remaining eleven must put the needs of their constituents before the upside-down priorities of the Bush Administration. All members who originally voted for these critical programs must vote to overturn the promised presidential veto.

The Labor-HHS bill funds a broad range of constituencies and needs, from veterans programs to disease research, to education. The programs in the bill all share a common, fundamental goal of strengthening this nation by investing in and improving the quality of life of its people, especially the most vulnerable.

## **VETERANS DAY & THE LABOR-HHS BATTLE:**

This Veterans Day passed on the heels of the news that 2007 has been the deadliest year yet for American troops in Iraq and the country is reminded of the sacrifices of our veterans. Even in this time of war, President Bush and the past Republican led Congresses have consistently under-funded our veterans. This year, appropriations bills like Labor-HHS begin to reverse course and ensure that our veterans receive the care they deserve. The Labor-HHS bill invests in critical domestic priorities like job training and medical research as well as additional important veterans programs.

While most veteran-related programs are funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Departments of Labor and Health and Human Services provide critical services to help veterans, especially the two-thirds of returning veterans who have not enrolled in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care program.

The Florida Delegation should pledge to override a presidential veto of health care for the nearly 2 million veterans in this country without health insurance, veterans' job training, assistance for homeless veterans, and traumatic brain injury programs found in Labor-HHS.

President Bush's Labor-HHS veto would mean cuts in funding for these critical programs:

- **\$3.4 billion** for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which provides mental health and suicide prevention services. Experts believe that conditions such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may put veterans at risk of suicide. A new report found that Army suicides recently reached a 26-year high.
- **\$231 million** for the Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training program to help returning veterans find good-paying jobs and enforce their rights as veterans seeking employment.

- **\$23.6 million** for the military veterans that comprise 23 percent of America's homeless population in the Homeless Veterans Program.
- **\$9.5 million** to help Americans with traumatic brain injuries (TBI) receive emergency and hospital care, rehabilitation, education, and long-term support. Experts say TBI is a signature injury of service in Iraq and that many returning National Guard soldiers will rely on the community-based systems of care funded by the Labor-HHS bill, rather than VA provided care.

### **What Veterans Are Saying:**

“As a soldier, I left my family, friends and career to serve my country – and in a few months, I’ll do it again as I return to Iraq in the same capacity as I served before. This week, Congress is considering legislation that provides the money for services that America’s veterans, soldiers, and their families depend on when they return home. It provides mental health and suicide prevention services – with recent reports showing that Army suicide rates are at a 26-year high, it’s more important than ever that we provide the proper services for our veterans. This bill also includes money to help returning veterans find good paying jobs and prevent homelessness among veterans,” said Joe Peck, Army Reserve Civil Affairs Team Sergeant who served in Iraq from April 2006 to April 2007.

“It is important to talk about what happens to veterans when they return home. We must do everything we can to protect those who put their lives on the line for their country. This is why Congress must override President Bush’s veto on the Labor-HHS funding bill. It’s not just the Veterans Affairs department that cares for veterans. The Labor-HHS bill includes investment in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which provides mental health and suicide prevention services. Experts believe that conditions such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may put veterans at risk of suicide. This is important because so many veterans do not realize they need help until long after they return – and only seek this help in their community hospitals,” said General Mike Caldwell, Deputy Director of the Oregon Military Department.

“This legislation addresses veteran suicide rates and helps soldiers adjust to life back in America once they return from fighting abroad. It funds all of the vital services provided to Americans through the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education. I call on members of Congress, including the New Mexico delegation, to remember us when we return by providing the services that so many of our soldiers need to really make it home and reestablish their lives,” said Christin Lynn McKinley, a resident of New Mexico and a Desert Storm veteran.

### **HYPOCRISY OVER SPENDING:**

The battle over spending priorities is shaping up to be one of the most important domestic policy fights since the showdown over privatizing Social Security and it is taking place simultaneously with the intense national debate over Iraq. The president desperately tries to claim that these vetoes are motivated by a desire to restore fiscal discipline, but while saying that the \$22 billion dollar more in Congress’ budget is “excessive,” he has asked Congress for nearly \$200 billion in borrowed money to cover the [\\$10 billion](#) per month we are spending in Iraq. [<http://opencrs.com/document/RL33110/2007-06-28%2000:00:00>]

The battle over this bill exposes the hypocrisy of those who say we *can* afford to continue funding the war in Iraq, but we *can’t* afford to fund critical programs.

The very programs the president says we can't afford (including health care access, medical research, Head Start and college loans) could be funded for a tiny fraction of what we are spending on the Iraq War – over \$450 billion so far and rising by over \$10 billion every month.

## THE COST OF WAR vs. AMERICA'S PRIORITIES:

What does that \$9.8 billion difference in the President's budget mean? According to the House Appropriations Committee release "Clear Differences: How the President and Congress Differ on Labor, Health and Education" the President's budget would cut existing programs under the guise of "fiscal responsibility" for what he spends on a few days of the war in Iraq.

AT ISSUE	THE PRESIDENT	THE CONFERENCE REPORT
<p><b>HEALTH CARE</b></p> <p>One in six Americans is without health insurance – that's 47 million Americans. Fresh off his recent veto of the bill to extend health care to 10 million children in families struggling to make ends meet, the president stands poised to veto the bill that would expand health care access for over a million underinsured Americans.</p>	<p>... cuts funding for one of the primary federal agencies responsible for increasing health care access, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), by <b>\$595 million</b> below 2007.</p> <p>This includes a 50% cut to rural health programs (from \$282 million to \$140 million).</p>	<p>... rejects those cuts and provides <b>\$1.5 billion</b> above the president's request for programs to improve health care access</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>ROUGHLY THE COST OF 5 DAYS IN IRAQ</b></p> <p><b>\$1.4 billion is used at HRSA to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide 1.2 million more underinsured Americans access to Community Health Centers;</li> <li>• Invest \$166 million more for rural health programs, area health education centers, and the National Health Service Corps. These programs support more than 1,200 small, at-risk rural hospitals in underserved communities; and</li> <li>• Expand healthcare coverage to targeted groups through State Health Access Grants, a new initiative.</li> </ul> <p>\$95 million is provided for two new initiatives including: High risk insurance pools to create affordable insurance for almost 200,000 people and Health insurance counseling to help Medicare beneficiaries understand their benefits.</p>

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<p><b>Medical Research</b></p> <p>The National Institutes of Health are responsible for cutting edge research into deadly diseases like cancer, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, stroke and heart disease.</p>	<p>... cuts funding for medical research at the <b>National Institutes of Health by \$480 million</b>, a cut that would lead to about 800 fewer research grants than last year.</p>	<p>... rejects those cuts, investing about <b>\$1.4 billion above the president's request, ROUGHLY THE COST OF 4 DAYS IN IRAQ</b> in order to produce over 1,400 more research grants into life threatening diseases.</p>
<p><b>Education</b></p> <p>On September 26, the president vigorously defended the No Child Left Behind law.</p> <p>He called on Congress to improve education saying, "Don't go backwards when it comes to educational excellence... We've come too far to turn back."</p> <p>He talks the talk, but what about walking the walk?</p>	<p>... cuts funding for the <b>Department of Education by \$1.2 billion.</b></p> <p>His budget:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eliminates funding for every campus-based student aid program outside of Pell Grants and College Work-Study (\$901.4 million)- impacting 1 million students;</li> <li>• Recalls \$419 million from Perkins Loan revolving funds used by 1,315 colleges and universities to provide affordable student loans;</li> <li>• Cuts IDEA Special Education by \$291 million;</li> <li>• Cuts or eliminates important programs to produce quality teachers (\$100 million) and improve classroom technology (\$272 million); and</li> <li>• Cuts Head Start by \$100 million.</li> </ul>	<p>... rejects those cuts, investing <b>\$4.5 billion above the president's request for the Department of Education ROUGHLY THE COST OF 2 WEEKS IN IRAQ</b> including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$2 billion above the President's request into programs that help families pay for college - benefiting 8.5 million students - to prepare our nation for the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy. This includes increasing the maximum Pell Grant from \$4,310 to \$4,925.</li> <li>• \$600 million above the President's request for No Child Left Behind Programs including funding for Title I grants to help low-income kids (+ \$401 million), improving teacher quality (+\$250 million), after school programs (+\$100 million), and classroom technology (+\$272 million) while making responsible cuts to problem programs.</li> <li>• \$800 million above the President's request for Special Education to help educate the 6.9 million American kids with disabilities.</li> <li>• \$254 million above the President's request for Head Start to help low-income children be successful in school.</li> </ul>

AT ISSUE	THE PRESIDENT	THE CONFERENCE REPORT
<p><b>Job Training and Vocational Education</b></p> <p>The housing market slump, the credit crunch that goes with it, and climbing oil prices have economic forecasters predicting the worst. The current administration has the worst record on job growth since Herbert Hoover. Our economy is in trouble. The situation cries out for investments in first class jobs programs.</p>	<p>... cuts the largest job training and vocational ed programs by \$1.2 billion.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cuts training for adults, youth, and dislocated workers by \$609 million, eliminating services for 173,000 people.</li> <li>• Cuts state grants for vocational education in half (\$581 million).</li> <li>• Cuts Job Corps by \$56 million, eliminating occupational skills training for 4,300 disadvantaged, youth who lack education and job skills.</li> </ul>	<p>... rejects those cuts, investing \$1.3 billion above the President's request,</p> <p><b>ROUGHLY THE COST OF 4 DAYS IN IRAQ</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Just rejecting the president's cuts to Adult, Youth and Dislocated Worker Training programs, keeping them at 2007 levels, puts them \$609 million above the President's request.</li> <li>• A 2% increase to Vocational Education state grants puts them \$606 million above the President's request.</li> <li>• A 2.7% increase for Job Corps puts that program at \$98 million above the President's request for the nationwide network of facilities that provide training, job placement and support services to at-risk young adults.</li> </ul>
<p><b>The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program</b> helps low-income and elderly families pay their home heating bills.</p>	<p>...cuts LIHEAP by \$379 million.</p>	<p>... rejected those cuts, investing \$630 million more than the President's request,</p> <p><b>ROUGHLY THE COST OF 2 DAYS IN IRAQ</b></p> <p>to provide help to 1.5 million additional families who face a colder winter and rising home energy prices this winter.</p>

AT ISSUE	THE PRESIDENT	THE CONFERENCE REPORT
<p><b>Block Grants: Economic Development and Helping Alleviate Poverty</b></p> <p><b>Community Service Block Grants</b> help states meet the needs of low-income individuals with services such as adult education, housing assistance, nutrition programs, emergency services, employment aid and health services. CSBG services and activities are provided to over 95% of all U.S. counties.</p> <p><b>Social Services Block Grants</b> help each state meet the needs of their residents, including: child care, protective services, help for the disabled, adoption, counseling, transportation, foster care, substance abuse, congregate meals, and other critical services for low-income families.</p>	<p>... slashed these programs by <b>\$1.13 billion</b>, it:</p> <p>Eliminates funding for Community Service Block Grants (\$630 million) and</p> <p>Cuts Social Services Block Grants by \$500 million.</p>	<p>... rejected those cuts, investing <b>\$1.17 billion</b> above the President,</p> <p><b>ROUGHLY THE COST OF 3 DAYS IN IRAQ</b></p> <p>including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$665 million more than the President’s request for Community Services Block Grants;</li> <li>• \$500 million more than the President’s request for Social Services Block Grants, simply maintaining last year’s level.</li> </ul>

## **WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR FLORIDIANS?**

**Home-Delivered Nutrition Services Program** – Florida stands to lose over \$1.3 million.

**Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program** – Florida stands to lose \$8.2 million leaving 12,200 low income families without assistance to pay heating and cooling bills.

**Head Start** – Florida stands to lose \$9.7 million in funding, cutting 1,300 slots.

**Child Care and Development Block Grant** – Florida stands to lose \$1.8 million.

**Elementary and Secondary Education** – On top of the state property tax cuts which will significantly reduce funding in every county for schools, Florida stands to lose \$68.7 million in federal funding.

(Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 11/13/2007)

## **CONCLUSION:**

Because our troops have left their family, career and social networks to serve their country, we owe it to them to provide job training and homelessness prevention programs necessary to help them transition back into civilian life. This is about priorities, and this funding bill addresses those priorities. After more than 4 years and over \$500 billion spent in Iraq, our country's veterans are feeling the strain of the Bush administration's reckless domestic policies. Now the president is threatening to veto critical funding for programs that ensure our veterans and their families get the help and support they need and deserve.

The upcoming showdown between Congress and the president over the Labor-HHS funding bill will be a test for members – will they follow the president and his misguided priorities, or will they stand up for the interests of all Americans? The bill passed the House and Senate with strong bipartisan support, so a vote to sustain a presidential veto is playing politics with critical funding for our veterans, our health and our education. Members who voted for veterans funding in the Military Construction/Veterans bill and are concerned with meeting our veterans' needs will support the Labor-HHS conference report, too, and pledge to override a presidential veto.

Clearly this is not a fight about spending. The President's tax cuts benefiting the wealthy and corporate interests combined with his war in Iraq have cost trillions of dollars, turning a surplus into a deficit in just a few short years. While President Bush proposes budget cuts of \$16 billion from these important domestic programs, he continues to advocate for permanent tax cuts for the rich and corporate special interests and supplemental emergency spending for the war in Iraq. The president cannot claim fiscal responsibility when he vetoes everything from veteran's healthcare and job training, to cancer research funding, more head start slots and heating assistance for the poor while continuing to increase reckless war spending and tax cuts.

Our veterans, our neighbors, our children and the communities we live in depend on the Florida Delegation to support appropriations bills that will invest in our nation's future. We believe these votes are among the most important they will cast. This is about more than a single appropriations bill or even the budget; it's a debate about our priorities as a country and whether the Florida Delegation and their colleagues are going to stand up for the needs of America's families.