

Altmire Works to Improve Health Care for America's Military Personnel and Veterans

(Washington, DC)-Today, Rep. Jason Altmire (PA-4) voted to improve patient care for servicemen and women wounded while serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Wounded Warrior Assistance Act of 2007, H.R. 1538, ensures that American troops returning home from the battlefield will receive the medical care and support they have earned and deserve. The bipartisan measure passed the House this afternoon by a vote of 426 to 0.

"More than 24,000 American troops have been wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan," said Rep. Altmire. "While this legislation is an important first step in addressing the problems at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and at military medical facilities across the country, I am determined to continue to be actively involved and will work to ensure that our returning soldiers and military veterans do not face substandard conditions."

Last month, The Washington Post reported that returning wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. faced neglect, substandard conditions and mountains of red tape. The Wounded Warrior Assistance Act will reform the administrative processes at military health facilities by providing a system of case managers, counselors and advocates for military personnel returning from combat to help them get the medical care they need and to navigate the military's health care bureaucracy. It also sets up a toll-free "hotline" for reporting problems at military medical facilities that support patients and family members. The Wounded Warrior Assistance Act also:

- Calls for improved training for Department of Defense health care professionals, medical care case managers, and patient advocates to improve their effectiveness in assisting recovering wounded warriors;
- Creates an Army Wounded Warrior Battalion pilot program modeled after the Wounded Warrior Regiment program in the Marine Corps. The unit is intended to track active duty soldiers in "out-patient status" who still require medical care;
- Begins the process of reforming the disability evaluation system in order to restore its integrity and efficiency; and
- Improves the transition of wounded service members from the Armed Forces to the Department of Veterans Affairs by taking substantive steps in reducing the turmoil of being transferred from one system to the other for service members who are being retired or separated for health reasons.

As part of his commitment to ensuring high quality health care to U.S. service members and military veterans, Rep. Altmire toured Walter Reed Army Medical Center on Monday to see firsthand the hospital's condition and to speak with Army officials regarding plans to improve patient care. Last month, Rep. Altmire also examined the H.J. Heinz Progressive Care Center of the Veterans Affairs Pittsburgh Health System in O'Hara Township.

"Recent revelations by the Department of Veterans Affairs that substandard conditions are occurring system-wide raise serious questions about whether the federal government is prepared to meet the needs of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan," said Rep. Altmire. "The VA's investigation of 1,400 hospitals and health clinics uncovered more than 1,000 incidents of substandard conditions, including problems at Pittsburgh area facilities."

The internal review by the Department of Veterans Affairs found roof leaks, mold, peeling paint and other maintenance problems throughout its network of veterans' health care facilities. The report also uncovered bug and rodent infestations and safety threats, such as suicide hazards at some psychiatric facilities and faulty fire alarms and smoke detectors.

"These problems are not 'routine,' but reflect a failure to plan ahead for the full range of services needed during a time of war," added Rep. Altmire. "It is frustrating to think that our brave men and women have been suffering in substandard conditions. The new Congress is working to ensure that this never happens again and that we provide our military and our veterans with what they deserve: the finest quality health care available."