

Altmire Makes Name Supporting Veterans

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By J.D. Prose

(Washington, DC) - During his first five months in office, U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire has criticized the Bush administration's handling of the war in Iraq while at the same time becoming a frequent and reliable voice for veterans.

In the last month alone, Altmire, D-4, McCandless Township, has conducted a subcommittee hearing on helping veterans who are small-business owners; co-sponsored legislation to freeze bonuses for Veterans Affairs officials until a backlog of cases is reduced; co-sponsored an amendment to allow the immediate family of deployed troops to use Family Medical Leave Act benefits to deal with deployment issues; and seen language in his earlier bill increasing assistance to veterans with possible traumatic brain injuries folded into legislation that passed the House.

Altmire's also voted for supplemental troop funding, signed a petition opposing the closing of a commissary and post exchange in Oakdale and shared his outrage when decrepit conditions at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. were revealed.

While some might peg Altmire's efforts as smart politics in a district full of veterans - Beaver County has 21,000 of them - Altmire said supporting current and former members of the military is simply the right thing to do.

"There's no group that should stand ahead of our nation's veterans," he said Friday.

Altmire, the chairman of the House small business subcommittee on investigations and oversight, said he might conduct another hearing on the ability of the National Veterans Business Development Corp. and the Small Business Administration to help returning veterans succeed as entrepreneurs.

The House has passed legislation to allow spouses, parents and children of troops to use their Family Medical Leave Act benefits if necessary. Families might need time to get their "financial house in order" if a loved one is deployed and parents might have to miss work to see a son or daughter deployed, Altmire said.

"That is really going to impact people's lives," he said.

Brain injuries are one of the most frequent types of injuries suffered by troops in part because advanced medical care now allows victims to survive wounds that might have claimed lives in the past, Altmire said.

Altmire said it was ridiculous that VA senior officials received \$3.8 million in "outrageous bonuses" last year while nearly 500,000 benefit cases sat in limbo.

Most recently, Altmire voted for legislation funding operations in Iraq.

The decision by Democrats to drop a timeline for withdrawal drew criticism from war opponents, but Altmire said President George Bush had promised to veto the measure if it required a withdrawal and that would have only delayed funding for the troops in the field.

"There should be no argument on whether the troops fighting this war get our resources," Altmire said.

"What we did was the responsible thing to do."