

## House passes bill to keep injured soldiers from repaying bonuses

By Jerome Sherman

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(Washington, DC) - The House today unanimously approved a bill that would prohibit the military from taking sign-up bonuses from soldiers who are forced to end their service because of injuries.

The bill, sponsored by Rep. Jason Altmire, D-McCandless, received national attention last month, after stories surfaced about a former private from Mt. Lebanon who had been told to repay \$2,800 from his bonus.

"I'm excited this is moving forward as quickly as it is," Jordan Fox, who was partially blinded when his vehicle hit a roadside bomb in Iraq, said yesterday. "This is definitely a little more than I thought it would be."

Army officials say Mr. Fox's situation stemmed from a bureaucratic mistake, and he doesn't have to repay the money. They also say only one other soldier has complained about a similar problem.

"It is Department of Defense policy that soldiers who become ill or are wounded while on active duty are entitled to keep all recruitment bonuses due to them," Audra Calloway, an Army spokeswoman, said in an e-mail message.

She said soldiers in similar situations should contact the "wounded warrior hotline," 800-984-8523, or send an e-mail to [wfsupport@conus.army.mil](mailto:wfsupport@conus.army.mil).

Still, lawmakers and some veterans organizations are concerned that military officials may not recognize how large the problem is.

"[Soldiers] are not going to know they deserve the bonuses," said Todd Bowers, director of government affairs for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "There are going to be many more cases. I can guarantee that."

Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich., said he recently met a veteran in his district who was asked to repay his bonus after losing a foot and a leg in Iraq. Another veteran, he said, left an anonymous message at his office, describing a similar situation.

"Veterans are reluctant to come forward even though they're being shortchanged by their government," Mr. Stupak said. "This is not a clerical error."

The Veterans of Foreign Wars backs the bill, although Joe Davis, a spokesman in the organization's Washington, DC office, said there have been very few complaints about bonus repayments.

"It's an isolated incident and not a widespread epidemic," he said.

Mr. Altmire first learned about the issue after reading a report released this summer by the Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors, co-chaired by former Sen. Bob Dole and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala. Military officials told the commission they would make sure wounded veterans weren't being asked to repay sign-up bonuses, but Mr. Altmire wanted to address the issue with legislation.

Then Mr. Fox's story broke, and House leaders decided to push Mr. Altmire's bill as part of a package of legislation focused on veterans issues.

"There's no greater honor that we could give them than to make sure that they get every penny that they're entitled to," Mr. Altmire said.

Late last week, the Senate approved a similar bill, sponsored by Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., and Pennsylvania's Sen. Bob Casey, a Democrat. Both chambers of Congress must reconcile minor differences in the legislation before they can a final bill to President Bush for his signature.