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Legislation Provides \$1.8 Billion Less Than Promised

WASHINGTON, D.C.- U.S. Congressman John B. Larson (CT-01) will vote against a spending bill on the House floor today that provides \$1.8 billion less in funding specifically for veteran's healthcare than was promised in the Republican Budget Resolution passed earlier this year. In total, the Veterans Affairs, Housing and Urban Development (VA-HUD) Appropriations bill for fiscal year 2004, H.R. 2861, provides \$2.1 billion less than was included in the Majority's Budget Resolution for the VA. The bill provides a total of \$60.7 billion for the VA, with \$27.2 billion for healthcare. Veterans groups have stated that a \$3.3 billion increase would at the very least be adequate for next year.

The GOP-controlled House Rules Committee refused to allow an amendment offered by Reps. Lane Evans (IL) and Chris Smith (NJ) that would have increased funding for veterans healthcare by \$1.8 billion to ensure the VA is able to continue to treat all veterans currently enrolled in the system. It also refused to allow an amendment that was offered by Rep. Chet Edwards (TX) to add \$2.2 billion to VA medical care for veterans. The Rules Committee determines which amendments to legislation can be ruled in order and reach the House floor for a vote. While the amendments were allowed to be debated on the floor under a procedural "unanimous consent agreement," they were ruled out of order, again preventing a vote.

Larson stated: "As usual, the Republican budget provides far less funding for veterans healthcare than is needed to ensure that veterans receive adequate service in the VA healthcare system. The Rules Committee also blocked attempts to increase funding to levels that the GOP promised in their own budget resolution that Congress passed in April. Attempts to put these amendments forward were again blocked on the House floor. The small overall increase in funding for veterans that was included will not meet the pressing needs of our veterans or even be enough to keep up with hospital cost inflation or the number of veterans enrolled in the system.

"An average of 200,000 veterans are sometimes waiting more than six months for an appointment at VA hospitals. A report this month from the American Legion states that the VA healthcare system is severely overburdened and struggling to keep pace with growing demand, with an estimated 110,000 veterans waiting for initial appointments at the VA for non service-related problems.

"When veterans first entered the military, they were promised a lifetime of health care services, as well as their own health care service network in exchange for their sacrifice. What is most outrageous is that after all the lip service and rhetoric paid to American veterans, the Republican Majority then turns around and reduces funding for their healthcare. It is long past time that Congress match its words with real action to ensure veterans receive the level of service they were promised," said Larson.

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