

Our country's armed forces and our veterans are constantly on my mind. Just a couple weeks ago I visited soldiers recovering at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, including an injured soldier from Watsonville. I will continue to support our uniformed men and women and our many veterans.

The last two years have seen some great strides toward fully caring for our veterans. In 2007, Congress provided historic increases in veterans' health care and benefits totaling nearly \$12 billion. In 2008, Congress is continuing those efforts. The fiscal year 2009 veterans' affairs budget is \$4.6 billion more than the previous budget. This increase will improve access to health services for all vets, including the 36,000 veterans who call the Central Coast home.

An issue that has grabbed a lot of headlines recently is the increasing numbers of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with traumatic brain injuries or post-traumatic stress disorder. These disorders are difficult enough on their own, but they also often lead to other problems including substance abuse and homelessness. Congress has included almost \$4 billion for specialty mental health care and almost \$600 million for substance abuse programs. Additionally, the Democratic leadership rejected President Bush's proposed cuts to homeless veteran grants and per diem programs, keeping the funding for these important initiatives intact.

The process to create a veterans' cemetery at Fort Ord is also moving forward. A report from the Department of Veterans Affairs released last year concluded that the best way to establish the cemetery is through the State Cemetery Grants Program. Under this program, the federal government covers all construction costs, but the state must pay for operations and maintenance costs. California has been reluctant to make this commitment, but the creation of a public-private partnership has ensured the process will move forward. At my urging along with other local leaders, the Fort Ord Reuse Authority has agreed to fund the design and planning of the cemetery.

A new veterans clinic for our local vets is another top priority. The current clinics in Capitola and at the former Fort Ord are not capable of meeting the needs of our veterans and our active military population. The VA and the Department of Defense recently began a feasibility study to determine how best to serve our region's veterans, which should see results soon. The Defense Language Institute will soon open the doors to a new dental facility, funded by \$6.7 million I secured in the annual appropriations process.

If you need assistance or clarification about VA policies, your health care or compensation claims, please call one of my local offices. You can reach the Salinas office at 831-424-2229 and the Santa Cruz office at 831-429-1976.

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