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LARRY CRAIG

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NEWS RELEASE

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Doing More For Veterans **by Senator Larry Craig**

“In war, there are no unwounded soldiers.” This truth, penned by author José Narosky long ago, is never far from my mind. It’s a constant reminder of the sacrifices our men and women in the Armed Forces make, and the corresponding obligation of our country to support the healing and restoration of those veterans who have paid such a dear price for our freedom.

As a longtime member of the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, I have worked hard over the years to improve the care and benefits our veterans receive. Recently, the Senate passed important legislation designed to improve benefits for our veterans -- a legislative package that included several bills I developed. The Veterans’ Benefit Enhancement Act of 2007 will increase and expand support for veterans, their families, and their survivors.

Among the provisions that I included in this legislation are retroactive benefits for certain soldiers injured in the line of duty, even if they were not hurt or impaired in war operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. This provision would remove a requirement for the Secretary of a military branch to verify that a traumatic injury occurred in a combat theater before a soldier can qualify for benefits from traumatic injury protection coverage under the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance program. I hope this reform will make it easier and faster for injured soldiers to qualify for the benefits they deserve.

Another provision that I included in the package reforms the Department of Veterans Affairs' use of state agencies for approving courses of education for veterans under the Montgomery GI Bill veterans' educational assistance program. This will authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to promote the development of veterans' apprenticeship and on-job training programs, among other important reforms. There has also been a lot of discussion about modernizing the Montgomery GI Bill, and to that end, we passed provisions that would accelerate payment of veterans’ educational assistance to certain veterans enrolled in the GI Bill program.

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One of the most frequent complaints I hear from veterans is about backlogs in filing or appealing their claims. As Chairman of the Committee, I found that retired judges in the VA Court of Appeals can be recalled into service if the appeals claims backlog gets too big – in fact, that continuing duty to serve has been used to justify providing these retired judges with full pay for life. I was shocked to find that these judges were not being recalled to combat what had become an outright crisis for the Court. My provision would eliminate the 180-day per-year limit on service of retired Court judges who voluntarily return to such service, essentially providing an incentive for judges to return to service. It is my hope that this legislation will help speed up the resolution of veterans' claims.

No, in war there are no unwounded soldiers. But it is our duty to ensure there is no lack of helping hands to assist them, and I am pleased to play a small role in that effort.