

At a time of war, how dare we reduce veterans' benefits?

April 13th, 2003

By Representative Jan Schakowsky

Op-Ed for the Chicago Sun-Times

Late into the night of March 20, the U.S. House heard speech after passionate speech in favor of a resolution proclaiming support for U.S. troops in Iraq, but offering them nothing substantive.

Minutes after passing that symbolic resolution, Republicans passed their budget calling for a \$28 billion cut in veterans' benefits and health care, with Republicans providing all but one vote. This huge cut was reduced on Friday to \$6.2 billion, the amount originally proposed for veterans' cuts by President Bush in his 2004 budget.

Is this good news for Illinois veterans? Not unless they want their already eroded benefits cut even further.

I find it incomprehensible that a plan to reduce benefits for veterans in Illinois and across the country would even be contemplated at a time when hundreds of thousands of active-duty soldiers are risking their lives in Iraq.

A report produced by the Government Reform Committee Democratic staff concluded that the

cuts proposed by the Bush administration would cause:

". . . over 65,000 Illinois veterans, including an estimated 36,000 veterans enrolled at VA facilities in the Chicago area, to be denied VA health care or to drop out of the VA system, while increasing costs for thousands more."

First, the Bush administration has already stopped enrolling Priority 8 veterans (those who have an income of \$38,100 or more and no service-related disability), denying them access to any VA care. The report found that as a result of this proposed suspension, 173,000 veterans nationwide would be denied care, including 7,160 in Illinois, of whom 4,000 are in the Chicago area.

Second, President Bush would require the VA to charge all Priority 7 and Priority 8 veterans now in the system a \$250 annual enrollment fee in order to receive service.

As a result of the fee, the VA estimates that 55 percent of enrolled Priority 7 and Priority 8 veterans would be forced to drop out of the VA system nationwide, including 32,000 veterans in the Chicago area. (Priority 7 veterans have incomes between \$24,644 and \$38,100 and have no service-related disability.)

Finally, a third set of provisions would increase co-payments for Priority 7 and Priority 8 veterans who do stay enrolled in the VA program.

The co-payments for primary care services would increase 33 percent, from \$15 per visit to \$20 per visit. The co-payments for prescription drugs would more than double, from \$7 to \$15 per 30-day prescription.

On average, the report concluded, veterans would have to pay an additional \$97 a year in co-payments plus the new enrollment fee of \$250. However, many veterans could see an increase of almost \$600 a year.

I join the Disabled American Veterans in asking, "Is there is no honor left in the hallowed halls of our government that you choose to dishonor the sacrifices of our nation's heroes and rob our programs--health care and disability compensation--to pay for tax cuts for the wealthy?"

Democrats in Congress are now fighting the president's proposal and are working to restore cuts in veterans' benefits and veterans' health care for the sake of our troops fighting in Iraq and the millions of veterans across the country. But this fight cannot be won unless veterans let the president and the Republican-controlled Congress know that they will not stand for these cuts.

Despite all the enthusiastic and well-deserved praise of our troops coming from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, the Bush administration has failed to put its money where its mouth is.

Rep. Jan Schakowsky is a Democrat from Illinois' 9th Congressional District.