

## Schakowsky shoots down veterans' benefit cuts

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U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky would like the federal government to put its money where its mouth is and support the troops at home \_

a k a our veterans - as well as those overseas.

Schakowsky, who represents the Ninth Congressional District, which includes Des Plaines, Park Ridge, Niles, Skokie, Evanston and Wilmette, as well as Northwest Side and Lake Shore Chicago neighborhoods, addressed a gathering of the Veterans Roundtable at the Des Plaines Community Senior Center March 28.

"Many of you know that I have been in opposition to our going to war with Iraq. But having said that, now that we are there, there is no space between any of us, between the president of the United States or me, in hoping for a swift and successful conclusion to the war with the least loss of life on all sides," she said.

"But on March 21 between midnight and 3 a.m., the U.S. House of Representatives did two things. First, the members passed a resolution that was billed as the House's support of our troops. Then, five minutes later, they cut \$28 million\* from veterans' benefits and veterans'

health care. Can you call that support?" she asked.

The cut faced much opposition and passed by the slimmest of margins - 215 to 213 votes.

Then a substitute resolution that would have restored funding for mandatory veterans benefits - compensation for service connected disabilities, burial expenses, pensions for permanently disabled low income veterans, GI bill reimbursements, rehabilitation and housing loan costs - failed.

The outcry from veterans' groups could be heard throughout the country, Schakowsky said.

"Has Congress no shame? Is there no honor left in the hallowed halls of our government that you would choose to dishonor the sacrifices of our nation's heroes and rob our program of health care and disability compensation in favor of tax cuts for the wealthy?" the Disabled American Veterans asked in one of many statements read by Schakowsky.

"We do not consider payment for poor disabled veterans, pensions for the poorest disabled veterans and GI bill benefits for soldiers returning from Afghanistan to be 'fraud, waste or abuse,'" the Paralyzed Veterans of America states.

"This budget defies common sense. There must be a better way to provide tax relief to the American people than to balance the budget on the backs of disabled veterans," the American Legion said in its statement.

However, veterans were not the only ones whose programs were cut. The budget also slashed funding for a \$172,000 million impact aid program for active military personnel, Schakowsky said.

"If we say that we respect those on active duty, we should be funding these programs right now. If we say that we respect veterans, we should not be making cuts in veterans' programs," she

added.

### Hope in Senate

However, all is not lost. The U.S. Senate passed a budget that actually restored the veterans' benefits, so the House cuts could be rescinded.

There also are several bills that would benefit veterans - if passed.

The "Equity for Reservist Pay Act" requires federal agencies to pay employees called on by the National Guard and the reserves the difference between their salaries and military wages while on active duty.

The "Keep Our Promises to American Military Retirees" bill gives all retirees the option of using the federal employees' health benefits program, and get the same benefits that retired federal employees use.

That would give retirees under 65 in under-served areas the opportunity to find more doctors to take their insurance. The U.S. government would pay the full cost of enrollment in that program for those who entered the service before 1956.

The "Retired Pay Restoration Act," which Schakowsky is co-sponsoring, would allow veterans with service-related disabilities to receive the full amount of both disability compensation and retirement pay without deduction from either.

"A whole host of bills should be acted upon immediately. But the cost of war is only one of the reasons that the country can't afford to do these things at this time," Schakowsky said.

Another big reason is that more than \$1 trillion of tax cuts are to go almost entirely to the nation's wealthiest residents.

"The president said, 'The only certainty of war is the certainty of sacrifice.' But sacrifice needs to be shared and the one group that has not been asked to sacrifice is the wealthiest Americans who are being offered major tax breaks," Schakowsky said.

"We have to conserve those resources in order to be able to afford the expenses of war - whether one agrees with it or not - to provide the kind of benefits that veterans, children and poor people need," she added.

\* - actual amount \$28 billion