

S. 1963 – Caregiver and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act

This bill in its current form unfairly discriminates against severely disabled veterans from wars and conflicts before September 11, 2001. Many of these veterans have required caregiver assistance for decades and were not the beneficiary of recent advancements in military medical care.

There are currently 35,000 veterans receiving aid and attendance benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs. The program run by the Department of Veterans Affairs provides an additional cash benefit to severely disabled wartime veterans in need of assistance for daily living. The VA estimates that 2,000 veterans have received severe injuries after September 11, 2001 and would qualify for extra caregiver assistance in this bill.¹ Caregivers for tens of thousands of wartime veterans of prior wars would not.

Our nation faces a severe long-term fiscal crisis. If we don't start paying for new programs we're not going to have a country left to defend. The bill is not paid for by identifying any wasteful, duplicative, or obsolete federal programs and represents a false promise intended more to help DC politicians and lobbyists than veterans in need.

CBO estimates that the bill will cost \$3.7 billion over five years if all funds are appropriated that are authorized. However, if the funds are not appropriated, then this benefit will amount to an empty promise to veterans. As written, this is a press release bill intended to bolster the image of politicians among veterans.

As a Senate authorization bill, no funding for this program is ensured and any funding that may eventually be provided will be borrowed.

The caregiver provision duplicates a program that already exists, and is underutilized.

The Department of Veterans Affairs Aid and Attendance program provides up to \$2,900 additionally a month for veterans who need caregiver assistance for daily living. This program is currently authorized by law² and is available to all veterans who served during wartime and were injured. Department of Veterans Affairs officials have stated that this benefit is underutilized.³

Only 27% of veterans and 14% of veterans' widows who qualify for aid and attendance benefits receive them. The others are either unaware of this benefit or do not choose to apply for this benefit.⁴

¹ Congressional Budget Office Cost Estimate, "S. 801, Caregiver and Veterans Health Services Act of 2009," August 31, 2009, <http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/105xx/doc10548/s801.pdf>.

² 38 U.S.C. Section 1114

³ Lade, Diane, "Little-known VA program can help vets with out-of-pocket medical costs," South Florida Sun-Sentinel, February 16, 2006, <http://www.veteranaid.org/docs/AA.pdf>.

⁴ Reuters, "Senior Star at Weber Place Sheds Light on Underutilized \$23,000 VA Benefit," June 19, 2009,

The Department of Veterans Affairs is failing to keep its promises to current veterans.

Both recent veterans of current wars and veterans of prior wars are experiencing months of delays on disability claims and appeals.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is currently experiencing a backlog of over 400,000 overdue disability claims. **The average time for processing claims is 162 days.**⁵ The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee has held two hearings in the last five months on problems in the way the VA handles disability issues, on both timeliness and accuracy of adjudication of benefits.⁶

The problems at VA are not limited to just the processing of initial claims. When a veteran receives a disability rating and does not agree with it, he must file an appeal with new evidence of why he should be granted the higher rating. While the number of disability appeals has dropped from 126,000 to 95,000, **processing time has increased from 543 days in 2003 to 639 days in 2008.**⁷

Thousands of new student veterans still have not been paid for their earned Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits due to bureaucratic problems at the VA in administering these new benefits.

The Senate provided no funding for this program in this year's appropriation, and is calling for a study of the benefits of caregiver provided assistance.

In the committee report accompanying the recently passed military construction appropriations bill, it states

"With regard to family caregivers, the Committee believes additional information would be helpful in assessing the best methods of providing long-term care for the most seriously injured veterans, as well as the support for family members who become the primary care providers for this group of veterans. The Committee directs the VA to conduct a study to assess patient outcomes of veterans receiving a majority of their care from a family caregiver, including the effect such care has on the veteran's ability to recover to the maximum extent possible and the non-economic impact on family members providing such care."⁸

⁵ Dao, James, "Veterans Affairs Faces Surge of Disability Claims," New York Times, July 12, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/13/us/13backlog.html>.

⁶ Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs website, "Hearing Schedule", <http://veterans.senate.gov/hearings.cfm>.

⁷ Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, "Hearing on Review of Veterans' Disability Compensation," July 29, 2009.

⁸ Committee Report 111-40 to accompany S. 1407, the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2010.

Senator Coburn's amendment directs the Secretary of State to reduce funding to the United Nations and transfer to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs the necessary funding to provide for the caregiver provisions for severely disabled wartime veterans of ALL wars.

This amendment to the veterans' caregiver bill reduces the contributions that the United States makes to the United Nations by a sufficient amount to provide caregiver benefits to ALL severely disabled wartime veterans, not just veterans injured after September 11th, 2001. Our disabled wartime veterans are certainly a more pressing priority than funding wasteful and corrupt programs at the United Nations.

The United States taxpayer is the single largest contributor to the United Nations providing over \$4 billion annually to the entire United Nations system that is estimated to be at least \$20 billion. Compared to a U.S. federal budget that is rife with waste, fraud, and abuse, the U.N. budget is much worse with funding that unaudited and un-auditable, and spent by U.N. agencies that levy taxes and fees on each other.

The United Nations procurement task force found that 43% of all U.N. procurement is tainted by fraud, waste, and abuse. In one year this amounts to over \$630 million. The United Nations headquarters renovation is currently \$800 million over its initial estimated price, with the U.S. taxpayer paying the highest amount of any nation for each cost overrun. The Oil for Food program run at the U.N. provided at least \$7.4 billion in illicit revenues to Saddam Hussein's government.

The United Nations cannot account for tens of millions spent in Afghanistan on the recent fraudulent election there, with most of the funding coming from U.S. taxpayers. In one instance, the United Nations Development Program paid \$6.8 million for transportation costs in areas where no U.N. officials were present. Overall audits found that U.N. monitoring of U.S. taxpayer funds was "seriously inadequate."

In the National Defense Authorization Act of 2007 and the National Defense Authorization Act of 2010, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is now required by law to report annually to Congress the total cash and in-kind contributions to the U.N. from the United States. OMB has passed this responsibility to the State Department, and unfortunately, our lead agency on U.N. matters ignored this law in 2007, and when it finally provided the required funding reports in 2008, it appears that the reports are missing over \$1 billion worth of funding information. The State Department has not submitted its report for 2008.

The national debt just passed \$12 trillion and the Congress must pass a debt limit increase. Passing the veterans caregivers bill without having the increased spending offset elsewhere is completely irresponsible and further condemning our grandchildren to poverty and a lower standard of living.