

Leading the Fight for Full Concurrent Receipt

Over the last several years, I have tried to correct a long-standing injustice affecting our nation's veterans. Most veterans who retire with 20 years of honorable service, and who also have a service-related disability, are not permitted to collect both their retirement pay and disability benefits concurrently. This prohibition on "concurrent receipt" has plagued our veterans for too long.

Many may wonder why Congress returns to this issue year after year, and attempts to keep this fight alive. The White House and Pentagon are opposed to concurrent receipt, and the Office of Management and Budget says that there is no money for it - so why take up this struggle each year in this very difficult environment?

For me, this is a simple matter of fundamental fairness. There is no reason to deny a veteran who has served his country honorably for 20 years the right to the full value of his retirement pay simply because his service also caused him to become disabled. But that is exactly what this terribly unfair law does.

A retired disabled veteran must deduct from his retirement pay, dollar for dollar, the amount of any disability compensation received. In many cases, the effect is to totally wipe out the veteran's retirement pay. The end result is that the disabled military retiree loses all of the value of his 20 or more years of service to our nation. We do not subject any other federal retiree to this kind of offset, only our disabled military retirees.

There is an important distinction between military retired pay and VA disability compensation. Military retired pay is the promised reward that is earned by 20 or more years of uniformed service; it is based on the length of service. VA disability compensation, however, is unrelated to the length of service. It is intended to compensate a veteran for the loss of a function that results from service-connected disability, and the lost or diminished future earning capacity that a typical person with those disabilities would experience. A military retiree should not have to forfeit his retirement pay because he is disabled.

The disabled military retirees that I hear from in Nevada and across the country feel betrayed by this outdated and unjust law. They feel cheated because they lose the vested value of their years of service when the government every month seriously shortchanges their retirement checks.

In recent years we have made important progress in the effort to compensate some severely disabled veterans, including the establishment of Combat-Related Special Compensation programs in 2003. Last year I was able to include a limited version of concurrent receipt in the 2004 National Defense Authorization Act. This legislation extended concurrent receipt to all veterans who are 50 percent to 100 percent disabled, any veteran who sustained combat-related injuries and Purple Heart recipients regardless of their degree of disability, and to eligible national guardsman and reservists, who were previously left out of the earlier compensation programs. These payments will be phased in over the next 10 years.

Most recently, I also introduced an amendment to the 2005 NDAA which would eliminate the 10-year phase-in period for veterans who are rated 100 percent disabled. I am hopeful that this measure will be adopted.

I will continue this fight. We must keep working on this issue until all veterans are covered.

Increasing Funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

As a member of the Department of Veterans Affairs-Department of Housing and Urban Development (VA-HUD) Appropriations committee, we must fully fund veterans health care. I worked to restore an additional \$1.3 billion in emergency funding for the VA last year—totalling \$30 billion for health care, \$3 billion more than the previous year.

Improving Veterans Health Care Across Nevada

I pushed for a new veterans hospital in southern Nevada, and VA Secretary Anthony Principi recently announced a new inpatient hospital, outpatient clinic and nursing home care unit for the region.

Additionally, the CARES commission on veterans health care recognized the need for a Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in Fallon and an expansion of services at the Reno VA Medical Center. I am committed to providing Nevada's veterans with more access to quality health care options, including a new CBOC in Elko.

For Defense and Veterans Legislation you can visit my Web-Site at:

<http://reid.senate.gov/military/ourtroops.html>

For other information visit my Web-Site at <http://reid.senate.gov>