



## **Chairman Charlie Dent**

*Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs  
House Committee on Appropriations*

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### FY19 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies

#### Opening Statement (as prepared)

April 26, 2018

The Subcommittee will come to order.

Today, we consider fiscal year 2019 funding for the Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies bill. This is the first subcommittee markup of the season, and a quick start for the Committee – a month after the fiscal year 2018 omnibus was signed into law. Consistent with the two-year budget caps agreement, this bill provides \$96.9 billion in discretionary budget authority. I appreciate all of you coming to this ‘daybreak’ markup. We’re trying to accommodate the important hearings the other subcommittees are having this morning and hope our business can be finished by 10:00am. In the interests of time, I don’t plan to give the longer opening statement I usually do describing the detailed contents of the bill. Your staff were able to review the bill and report yesterday, and I hope they’ve been able to relay to you the elements of the package that you are most interested in.

The funding recommendation includes:

\$10.3 billion in military construction funds;

\$921 million in Overseas Contingency Operations funds, as requested by the President;

\$85.3 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs, as requested by the President;

And \$921 million for the Related Agencies in our bill--the American Battle Monuments Commission, Arlington National Cemetery, the Armed Forces Retirement Home, and the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims.

This year there has been increased member interest in our bill. Member requests are up 25 percent over the fiscal year 2018 level—we have considered over 1,300 requests since March 16 and reopened the data base once so that Members could modify their requests after seeing the omnibus bill. We put a lot of effort into looking at each one and have accommodated the vast majority of the requests. So the staff hasn't seen much daylight, and I have to thank all of them for their hard work throughout the process.

I greatly appreciate the participation and support of our Subcommittee members, on both sides of the aisle, as we considered priorities and funding levels for the important programs in our bill and held budget hearings for the Department of Defense Installations Secretaries and the VA Secretary. I couldn't do it without the fine work of the Subcommittee Ranking Member, Mrs. Wasserman Schultz. The gentlelady from Florida is an active and tenacious participant in our debates and never shies away from drilling down to get to the crux of the issue.

I would like to recognize the Chair and Ranking Member of the Full Committee for their strong support for this bill. Chairman Frelinghuysen has provided us continued leadership and the funding levels we need to serve our military and our veterans, and he and Mrs. Lowey continue to ask the hard questions that keep the focus on the veteran, but serve the taxpayer as well. All of us on the subcommittee truly appreciate their leadership.

## SUMMARY

This bill provides comprehensive support for servicemembers, military families, and veterans. It supports our troops with the facilities and services necessary to maintain readiness and morale at bases here in the states and around the world. It provides for Defense Department schools and health clinics that take care of military families.

And the bill funds our veteran healthcare systems to ensure that our promise to care for those who have sacrificed in defense of the nation continues as those men and women return home. We owe this to our vets and are committed to sustained oversight so that programs deliver what they promise, and taxpayers are well served by the investments we make.

In Military Construction, the bill builds on the substantial increases we were able to include in last year's omnibus. Total funding, including OCO, is \$412 million above fiscal year 2018 and a hair below the request. I am happy to note that the recommended funding level includes \$837 million to take care of the most critical projects on DOD's unfunded priorities list.

- The recommendation funds Family Housing at \$1.6 billion, DOD schools at \$368 million, and hospital construction at \$361 million.
- We provide \$467 million, the request level, for the Guard and Reserve.
- We fund the NATO Security Investment Program at \$171 million, as requested, to support infrastructure for wartime, deterrence, peace and crisis operations and training requirements.

#### Veterans Affairs

- VA funding in the bill is 4.8 percent over last year's enacted level. Under the recommendation, VA will have \$85.3 billion available for fiscal year 2019—which is the same as the requested level. We have spread the internal funding pieces differently than the request.
- Two weeks ago, OMB submitted a VA budget amendment totaling \$2.4 billion -- \$500 million for VA's current non-VA care programs and \$1.9 billion as a band-aid to keep the Choice program going until the authorizers replace it with a consolidated non-VA care program. The recommendation includes the \$500 million, but not the \$1.9 billion. We don't want to start funding the existing Choice program with our funds, since it has always been funded by the authorizers with mandatory money. We will certainly pick up funding for the new program, which we hope will be in effect by the end of fiscal year 2019.
- In Medical Care, we were able to fully fund the budget request for programs our Members have requested – mental health care, homeless assistance, suicide prevention, PTSD, TBI, and opioid abuse prevention.
- In line with the budget caps deal, the bill provides \$2 billion for VA facility infrastructure repair, with priority placed on seismic correction and non-

recurring maintenance. In addition, the regular major and minor construction accounts also receive substantial increases.

- We provide \$1.2 billion for the electronic health record and have multiple safeguards written in to track VA's progress as they develop it.
- We have also funded increases for disability claims processing and the Board of Veterans Appeals.

In closing:

This is a solid bill that is focused on the needs of servicemembers, veterans and their families. We had to balance priorities, and figure out "needs" versus "wants", which are tasks that are central to our duties as appropriators.

In total, the recommendation is \$4.2 billion over the fiscal year 2018 level, a 4.5 percent increase. The funding level for VA is the highest ever. In Military Construction, we have taken care of housing, schools, hospitals and operational mission needs.

I urge you to support the bill.

I would now like to turn to Ms. Wasserman Schultz, our distinguished Ranking Member, for her comments.