



# Chairman Charlie Dent

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

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**FY 2017 Subcommittee Markup - Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related  
Agencies Appropriations Bill  
March 23, 2016  
Opening Statement As Prepared**

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The Subcommittee will come to order.

Today, we consider fiscal year 2017 funding for the Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies bill. This is the first subcommittee markup of the season, and quite a quick start for the Committee. Chairman Rogers gave us the green light and \$81.6 billion in budget authority, so we are ready. Our funding target today reflects the \$1.070 trillion topline level, which was enacted into law through the budget agreement last year. The funding recommendation includes: \$7.7 billion in military construction funds; \$172 million in Overseas Contingency Operations funds, as requested by the President; \$73.5 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs; and \$241 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.

In addition to being out of the gate early, this year there has been increased member interest in our bill. Member requests are up 45 percent over the fiscal year 2016 level—we considered over 1,040 requests since March 1. 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 and professionalism 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 oversight hearings that included Department of Defense Installations Secretaries and the VA Secretary and Inspector General. I couldn't do it without the fine work of the Subcommittee Ranking Member, Mr. Bishop. The gentleman from Georgia is knowledgeable and a true partner in conducting oversight – somehow he always finds the flaw in an argument and graciously points it out.

I would like to recognize the Chair and Ranking Member of the Full Committee for their tremendous level of support for this bill. Chairman Rogers 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.

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 this great 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 budget requests for the Services were historically low. In Army's case, it was the lowest request in 24 years. The Department of Defense prioritized the needs of Combatant Commands and new mission requirements within their requests. Existing missions were often left short. I am very happy to note that the recommended funding level includes \$512 million to take care of the most critical projects on DOD's unfunded priorities list. These are worthy projects that could not fit into the budget request, such as Reserve and National Guard Readiness Centers and an aircraft maintenance hangar and Communications facility to support F-35Cs.

The recommendation fully funded Family Housing at \$1.3 Billion, DOD schools at \$246 million, and hospital construction at \$304 million. We provide \$673 million for the Guard and Reserve, an increase of \$122 million, for projects in 21 states. We increase the NATO Security Investment Program by \$43 million, to \$178 million, as requested, to support infrastructure for wartime, deterrence, peace and crisis operations and training requirements. We include \$172 million in OCO funding, for European Reassurance Initiative and counter-terrorism projects.

Given the horror that unfolded in Brussels yesterday, it is clear that it is critical to continue these security investments.

VA is funded at 3.0% over last year's enacted level. Under the recommendation, VA will have \$73.5 billion available for fiscal year 2017—which is 98% of the requested level.

VA requested funds in addition to those provided in advance last year—We provided an \$850 million increase in medical services, which is 80% of what VA requested in that account.

In Medical Services, we fully funded the budget request for: Hepatitis C at \$1.5 billion; Veteran Homelessness at \$1.6 billion; Long-Term Care at \$8.6 billion; and caregiver Stipends at \$725 million.

We also fully funded significant increases for these programs, in response to many member requests: \$2.8 billion for claims processing and \$156 million for appeals, \$663 million for medical and prosthetic research, and \$160 million for the Office of the Inspector General.

We continue to focus on major construction oversight- the bill includes language that will hold back 100% of the funding for the largest construction projects until VA meets management conditions, and we maintain strict restrictions on transfers, use of bid savings, and scope changes.

We provide funding for the electronic health record and fully support interoperability of the health record between VA and DOD, but we fence the funds until VA meets milestones and certifies interoperability to meet statutory requirements.

We include language regarding improved standards for the Suicide Hotline and certification of mental health therapists to expand access for veterans who need their care.

In closing: This is a solid, bipartisan bill that is focused on the needs of servicemembers, veterans and all 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 \$1.7 billion over the fiscal year 2016 level; a 2.2 percent increase. The funding level for VA is the highest ever. Within the VA recommendation, Medical Care is funded at 5 percent over last year’s level, continuing a phenomenal growth curve. In Military Construction, we have taken care of housing, schools, hospitals and operational mission needs.

I urge you to support the bill.

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