

News from Congressman

Chet Edwards

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Edwards' Amendments To Boost Funds For Military Widows and Veterans Health Care Rejected in Budget Committee *Edwards Vows To Continue Fight*

(Washington) – Today, the House Budget Committee rejected, on a party line vote, two amendments offered by U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards to increase funding by \$3 billion above the amount requested in the President's budget for military widows and veterans health care under the proposed 2005 Budget Resolution.

“As we commemorate the one-year anniversary of Operation Iraqi Freedom on the floor today, it is shameful for the Republicans on the Budget Committee to endorse cuts in veterans' services,” said Edwards, referring to the 16-21 party-line vote on his veterans' health care amendment, which came just hours before the House was scheduled to vote on a resolution commending our troops and expressing gratitude for their service in Iraq.

“It is time,” Edwards said, “that we support our veterans not just with our words but with our deeds.”

Last year, in a similar incident, the House of Representatives passed H.Con.Res. 104, which expressed “the unequivocal support and appreciation of the nation” for our troops and their families, just eight minutes after it passed a Budget Resolution that cut \$28 billion over ten years from veterans' health care, education, and disability compensation.

Today, the “Support America's Veterans” amendment offered by Edwards during budget mark-up would have increased funding for veterans by \$2.5 billion above the amount requested in the President's budget and \$1.3 billion above the Budget Committee leadership's proposed budget. This increase is strongly supported by both veterans groups and the Republican Chairman of the Committee on Veterans Affairs Chris Smith (R-NJ) who joined Rep. Lane Evans in sending a letter to the Budget Committee stating a \$2.5 billion increase would be needed just to maintain current veterans health care services.

“By rejecting my amendment today, my Republican Budget colleagues, in effect, endorsed a \$1.3 billion cut in veterans' health care services. That's bad enough, but to do so on the same day as a House vote to express ‘gratitude’ to our troops in Iraq borders on hypocrisy.”

Edwards' second amendment offered today was the ‘Support America's Military Widows’ amendment to eliminate the drastic age-62 reduction in the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) for spouses of deceased military retirees, the top priority of military service organizations this year. Survivors of military retirees collect,

through the SBP, 55% of their spouse's retirement pay. However, at age 62, the pension is reduced by over one-third to 35% of the original retirement pay. Edwards' amendment would provide \$500 million over five years to fund H.R. 3763, a bill sponsored by Jeff Miller (R-FL), which would phase out the penalty over the next ten years. 63% of House members have co-sponsored the bill, but the 13 Republican Cosponsors on the Budget Committee opposed the Edwards amendment.

"Reducing survivor benefits to those whose spouses have served their nation in the Armed Services is an insult," said Edwards. "The debt we owe our nation's military service men and women can never be fully repaid, but protecting their surviving spouses is the least we can do to honor their sacrifice for our nation. A 62 year-old widow should not be expected to live on just 17% of their family's active duty service pay."

Both amendments would have been paid for by slightly reducing tax cuts for those making \$1 million or more a year, one-tenth of 1% of the total population, from \$126,000 to \$119,000 a year.

Last week, the House Budget Committee rejected, also on a party line vote, the Edwards "Support Our Troops" amendment to the proposed 2005 Budget Resolution, which would boost funding levels for military troops by \$2.5 billion. The \$2.5 Billion includes \$86 million for family separation pay, \$55 million for imminent danger pay, \$14 million for Impact Aid education funding for military schoolchildren, \$1 billion for Tri-Care military health coverage for reservists, \$1 Billion for military housing programs, \$50 million for military family assistance centers, and \$350 million in targeted pay raises for senior enlisted officers to bring their pay closer to civilian pay levels.

"Just as our Budget Committee efforts last year were the first step toward successful increases in VA health care and partial reductions of the Disabled Veterans Tax, my three amendments were the first step toward improving benefits for military widows and veterans this year," said Edwards. "We have only just begun to fight."

The 2005 Budget Resolution is expected to come before the full House next week. The Senate passed its \$2.36 billion budget last week.

Chet Edwards is serving his seventh term in the U.S. House of Representatives. He is one of only six House members serving on both the House Budget and Appropriations Committees.