

WASHINGTON, DC (May 31, 2010) – Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) delivered the following remarks today at a ceremony to commemorate Memorial Day. Schakowsky participated in the Norwood Park Memorial Day Parade.

"Today, on Memorial Day, we pause to recognize those men and women who gave their lives in defense of our country. We should also redouble our commitment to caring for and serving our veterans and military families who make enormous sacrifices to keep our nation safe and secure.

"Last week, together with other members of the Congressional Caucus on Women's Issues, I laid a wreath at Arlington Cemetery to honor all servicewomen who gave their lives for their country. Like their male colleagues, they often leave behind families, young children, and loved ones. Today, we recognize and honor their sacrifice, and the sacrifice of their families.

"We must pay tribute to them both through our words and through our actions. We have a responsibility to provide for the men and women currently serving in our military, as well as to ensure that our veterans receive the benefits and services they deserve.

"On Friday, the House passed the American Jobs and Closing Tax Loopholes Act. This bill begins to phase out the Disabled Veterans Tax, which unfairly forces disabled military retirees to give up one dollar of their pension for every dollar they receive in disability pay. Veterans forced to retire early because of severe service-connected injuries deserve full disability and retirement pay, and, under this legislation, they will finally be able to receive these benefits.

"We also passed the National Defense Authorization Act, legislation which will provide our troops with the resources they need to defend the United States. This bill provides a pay increase for service members, contains critical benefits for the families of soldiers, strengthens military readiness by providing essential equipment, and helps protect our troops both at home and abroad.

"We are also working to provide the benefits that our veterans have earned. President Obama's fiscal year 2011 budget includes \$125 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs for fiscal year 2011. This is an \$11 billion increase over the previous year and will help the VA modernize and better assist our veterans in meeting the challenges of today.

"The VA continues to face a rapidly expanding caseload, and resources have not kept pace with that demand. Over a million claims were received last year, and that number will continue to climb. I have heard countless heartbreaking stories of claims taking years to process, and I know the devastating impact those delays can have on families, particularly in today's economic climate.

"My office continues to work with veterans to help them access their benefits, but this is a much broader problem. In order to meet this ever-growing demand, I strongly support President Obama's proposal to devote an additional \$460 million to cutting the backlog. This funding will allow the VA to hire over 4000 additional claims processors.

"Last fall, we celebrated the opening of a new location for the Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in Evanston. The new CBOC has the capacity to serve more veterans than ever before, helping us provide quality care for our ever-growing veteran population.

"On a national level, on May 5th President Obama signed the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 into law. This legislation, which passed both Houses of Congress unanimously, creates a support system for veteran caregivers that includes training, education, and financial assistance. This legislation also provided major improvements in mental health services, health care services for America's women veterans, services for homeless veterans, and programs to assist rural veterans.

"We also continue to work to ensure that all eligible veterans can access the benefits of the 2008 Post 9/11 GI bill, which expanded the promise of a full, four-year education to veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This landmark legislation authorized the largest educational assistance program in over fifty years; now, we have to take further steps to ensure that the VA is able to cope with those new demands. To do that, Secretary Shinseki has proposed a plan to automate the processing of applications for benefits under the Post 9/11 GI Bill. This effort will help bring the VA into the 21st century, allowing the agency to process an ever-growing number of claims.

"President Obama's FY 2011 budget also includes \$4.2 billion to tackle homelessness among our veterans. The VA has estimated that at least 131,000 veterans are homeless on any given night. Though the agency already operates the largest system of assistance programs for the homeless in the United States, too many veterans still do not know where they will sleep each night. The proposed increase will allow the VA to greatly expand its services for the homeless.

"I met last week with Labor Secretary Hilda Solis and she told us about a new joint effort between her Department and the Department of Housing and Urban Development to address the health, housing, and employment needs of homeless veterans- men and women and their families.

"Further, President Obama's budget includes \$5.2 billion for mental health, which will fund the diagnosis and treatment of depression, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, all of which can be debilitating to veterans and their families. A study published last year found that nearly 40% of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans enrolled in the veterans health system had been received mental health diagnoses. Of these, 22% were for post-traumatic stress disorder, and 17% were for depression. As the number of veterans experiencing mental health difficulties continues to rise, it is vital that we increase our efforts to help these men and women.

"As co-chair of the Congressional Women's Caucus, I would particularly like to highlight the progress we are making toward meeting the specific needs of female veterans. There are approximately 1.8 million female veterans in the United States right now. With more and more women breaking down barriers and serving our country in the armed forces, we need to do more to ensure that female veterans can access a full range of services and benefits.

"It has been estimated that the number of female veterans enrolled in VA medical care could increase by another 30% in the next five years, so it is critical that we act quickly to ensure that the VA is able to meet their needs. The proposed FY 2011 budget includes \$217.6 to meet gender-specific health care needs of female veterans, money that will enable the VA to improve the quality of care, as well as improvements in privacy and security.

"We've also started planning for the future. In October, President Obama signed H.R. 1016, the Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act, into law. This landmark legislation, which I strongly support, will guarantee timely and predictable funding for the VA by allowing Congress to fund veterans' health care a year in advance of the regular appropriations process. This will help to ensure that veterans' medical care is not held up by political delays. In keeping with this legislation, the administration has requested \$54.3 billion in advance appropriations for 2012 for health care.

"Finally, I want to highlight the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which funded critical infrastructure improvements while also creating jobs for American workers. In particular, this bill funds many much-needed improvements for the Department of Veterans Affairs, including hospital renovations, new troop and family housing, and facilities to help returning soldiers transition to civilian life. The ARRA also helps fight unemployment among veterans by providing a tax credit to businesses that hire recently discharged veterans.

"In Washington, we remain committed to supporting members of our armed forces and their families, as well as providing our veterans with the benefits and services they have earned. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan stretch on, and more young men and women elect to serve their nation overseas, it becomes increasingly critical to improve and expand the range of benefits they receive when they return home."

