Mr. Chairman, I believe that this Congress needs to

recognize that caring for our veterans is a continuing cost of the war

on terrorism.

My amendment adds $630 million in emergency funding so that the VA

can better meet the needs of veterans returning home from Iraq and

Afghanistan, and with this financial relief the VA will also be able to

provide better care to the heroes of earlier conflicts.

Here is the situation. The VA projected that it would treat 110,000

Operation Iraqi and Enduring Freedom veterans this fiscal year. At the

end of January, the first third of the fiscal year, the VA had already

treated 74,000 veterans. At this rate, the VA will treat twice the

number of veterans than projected.

Our veterans need our support now. There is no better place to

include funding for our veterans and military families than in the bill

addressing the costs of the war.

First, I have added $250 million for mental health. According to a

recent Army study, as many as one in three veterans returning from

combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan will experience symptoms

related to mental health problems.

This amendment will make available $9 million to expand veterans'

access to family therapy; $168 million to implement the VA's own

Comprehensive Mental Health Plan; $24 million for additional substance

abuse treatment, one in five post-traumatic stress disorder patients

have had substance abuse problems; $35 million to increase capacity to

treat returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who need outpatient

mental health services; $15 million for increased in-patient PTSD

treatments, about a 12 percent increase; $3 million to increase

staffing for VA efforts to seamlessly transition returning veterans

with the Post-Deployment Health Assessment.

The VA is seeing more and more veterans from previous conflicts with

post-traumatic stress disorder. This is a growing concern, and it is

smart to provide quality mental health care to our returning veterans

now and help forestall greater problems and more expense in the future.

The amendment also adds $110 million for prosthetics, a 10 percent

increase. We all marvel at what we have done today to help return

veterans to a full life, but it is not cheap. Above-knee replacement

costs about $50,000, and then it needs periodic adjustment and

maintenance. In past years, the VA prosthetic budget had grown by 17

percent a year. By 2007, the administration would cut back the growth

to 12 percent. Now is certainly not the time to cut these important

programs.

In another area, I added $200 million for direct medical services.

Just like last year, we are already hearing anecdotes about shortages

at VA medical facilities. Supply problems, budget problems, we do not

need a crystal ball to make these predictions. With all the extra new

veterans in need of medical care, there will be another budget

shortfall.

This is by no means the fault of the men and women in the VA. The VA

has made a real innovation by establishing state-of-the-art polytrauma

centers, but they cost real money. These centers treat the worst

injuries, sharing information with one another and military hospitals

by videophone.

The amendment also adds $15 million for medical and vocational

rehabilitation services. Service-disabled veterans applying for

vocational rehabilitation and employment services increased

dramatically over the last decade, roughly a 75 percent increase.

Demand for this service will grow even faster due to the ongoing

conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Finally, the amendment includes $55 million for increased staffing to

process the growing number of disability claims. Currently, the backlog

is more than 370,000 cases, and it is getting worse. In 2005, the VA

was averaging 167 days to process one of these claims.

In 2006, it has grown to 185 days. In a time of war, we need to treat

our heroes well. Slowing down the process of disability claims is a

slap in the face.

Before closing, I would like to acknowledge Chairman Walsh's

recognizing that there is a need for VA funding. In fact, he was good

enough to grant the VA authority to use $275 million for the

construction of a VA Hospital in New Orleans on a need basis.

VA facilities are already feeling the crunch when it comes to their

budgets. Why are we not preparing for the future? Why are we willing to

let the VA funding run out this year? Why is this administration not

willing to fully fund the true cost of the war?

I am here to tell you that we can do better and we must do better.

Our troops bravely put their lives on the line and it is our moral duty

to provide them the care they were promised. Mr. Chairman, it is high

time we stop paying lip service to our veterans and realize that caring

for veterans is an ongoing cost of the war. It is high time that we

start working towards providing the

VA with the tools needed to provide proper care for our servicemen and

-women.

Mr. Chairman, I urge my colleagues to support the amendment and to

support the brave men and women in uniform.