



OFFICE OF CONGRESSMAN RON KLEIN
FLORIDA'S 22ND CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Congressman Ron Klein's Five Star Veterans' Priority Plan

Congressman Ron Klein stood with South Florida veterans to unveil his Five Star Veterans' Priority Plan. The plan outlines five critical legislative priorities for our nation's veterans. They are:

- Mandate Full Funding for Veterans' Healthcare
- Eliminate the Backlog for Disability Benefits
- Revive the GI Bill for the 21st Century
- Strengthen Benefits for National Guard and Reserves
- Guarantee Health Benefits for Returning Service Members



Congressman Ron Klein discusses veteran's issues with South Florida servicemen.

Congressman Ron Klein's Five Star Veterans' Priority Plan

Star #1 - Mandate Full Funding for Veterans' Healthcare

- Currently, the Veteran's Affairs budget is appropriated by Congress every year as discretionary funding. This is a problem because yearly funding consistently falls short of actual needs. Funding over the years has not kept pace with medical inflation, let alone the increased demand for services. Under this process, veterans' health care is forced to compete with other programs for funding, and is subject to annual budgetary battles.
- The legislative solution is quick passage of the Assured Funding for Veterans Health Care Act of 2007, (H.R. 2514) which would replace the yearly wrangling for funding with permanent direct spending, allowing the VA to strategically plan for the long term and achieve greater efficiency while cutting costs.
- Congressman Ron Klein was among the very first co-sponsors of H.R. 2514, and has consistently and publicly urged the chairman of the Committee on Veterans Affairs to hold hearings so this legislation can quickly pass Congress and be signed into law.
- This bill will provide the VA with the funds it needs to manage healthcare programs and services and to hire new clinicians, nurses and support staff to meet the demand for high quality medical care.
- Today, almost 90% of federal healthcare spending is direct rather than discretionary. Guaranteed funding for VA healthcare would free members of Congress from the annual budgetary battles they face and allow them to concentrate on oversight of VA programs and services.
- The Assured Funding for Veterans Health Care Act of 2007, (H.R. 2514) is supported by a variety of veteran's groups, including: The American Legion, American Veterans (AMVETS), Blinded Veterans Association, Disabled American Veterans, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Vietnam Veterans of America, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, and more.

Star #2 - Eliminate the Backlog for Disability Benefits

- Right now, the backlog for benefits at the VA is nothing short of shocking. More than 500,000 veterans nationwide have benefits claims pending with the Department of Veterans Affairs. Approximately 100,000 of such claims are over a year old, still with no resolution.
- After hearing stories from constituents waiting endlessly for answers from the Department of Veterans Affairs, Congressman Ron Klein took action. He authored a letter to the VA's Acting Under Secretary for Benefits, Rear Admiral Patrick Dunne, expressing serious concern over the backlog of veterans claims from constituents in his Congressional district.
- Klein requested that the VA provide him with an update on every single outstanding case in his district every 30 days, in order to ensure that returning service members from South Florida receive the benefits they have earned.
- In addition to his letter, Klein testified before the House Budget Committee in February of this year, requesting full funding for the veterans' budget with special attention to clearing the benefits claim backlog.

Star #3 - Revive the GI Bill for the 21st Century

- In the 1940s, the first G.I. Bill helped transform notions of equality in American society. By nearly any measure, the program was a tremendous success. Out of a wartime veterans population of 15 million, some 7.8 million took advantage of G.I. Bill benefits. For every dollar we invested in veterans, seven dollars was generated.
- Congressman Ron Klein believes it is time to revive this legislation for the 21st century. Currently, veterans' educational benefits are administered under an outdated G.I. Bill, which was designed for peacetime – not wartime – service.
- Klein is a co-sponsor of several pieces of legislation which will provide veterans with educational benefits that meet their needs in today's world.
- One of these bills is H.R.5740, the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, which would increase the availability of educational benefits to all members of the military who have served on active duty since September 11, 2001, including activated reservists and National Guard.
- An additional legislative fix which Klein has co-sponsored is H.R. 5684, the "Veterans Education Improvement Act", which would cover the cost of tuition plus a monthly cost of living stipend. It would also give veterans the benefit of time by extending the limitation for use of education benefits from 10 years to 15 years. This legislation has bipartisan support, and was passed out of the Veterans Affairs Committee last week.

Star #4 - Strengthen Benefits for National Guard and Reserves

- National Guard service in Iraq and Afghanistan has been extraordinary, and unprecedented. By the end of last year, nearly 200,000 members of the Army National Guard had been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.
- In addition to the toll that long and repeated deployments take on families and communities, about half the soldiers in the National Guard who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan returned home suffering from psychological trauma. This rate is almost one-third higher than that of active-duty Army members.
- To address this critical problem, the U.S. Congress passed a bill (H.R.4986) which is now a law. This legislation:
 - Allows Reservists who serve on active duty to use their enhanced educational benefits for up to 10 years after leaving the reserves (previously they had to be used immediately) and to be paid on an accelerated basis.
 - Allows Reservists with three cumulative years of active duty service to qualify for education benefits at 80 percent of the active duty rate. (Previously, they were required to serve two years continuous active duty to get this benefit.)
 - Reduces the age at which a Reservist can draw retirement below the age of 60 by 3 months for every aggregate 90 days of active duty service in most military operations.
 - Reimburses up to \$300 for travel expenses for reserve training.
 - Establishes a national combat veteran reintegration program to help reservists reintegrate into their families and communities through family services and post-deployment screening.

Star #5 - Guarantee Health Benefits for Returning Servicemembers

- Returning veterans are entitled to mental and physical health care, both of which should be of the highest quality.
- Not all battlefield injuries are physical. Some 28 percent of soldiers who experience high-intensity combat screen positive for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- The U.S. Congress passed a bill (H.R.4986) which is now law. This legislation:
 - Allows returning service members from Iraq and Afghanistan to claim healthcare benefits—both mental and physical—for five years after their discharge, even if they do not have immediately apparent service-connected disabilities. It sometimes takes time for injuries to develop.