

**WASHINGTON** -- The House of Representatives today passed the final version of legislation that increases funding for medical care and medical research for the nation's veterans. With approval on a vote of 409-14, the bill now goes to the Senate, where it is expected to pass, and then to the President for his approval.

U.S. Rep. Spencer Bachus (R-AL), a member of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, said the legislation provides \$17.3 billion for VA medical care -- an increase of \$248.6 million over last year's level -- and increases funding for VA medical research by \$44 million to \$316 million.

"Our nation is blessed with many treasures, but none more important than the peace and freedoms we enjoy. These improvements to veterans benefits are a way of thanking our veterans for providing that peace and safeguarding our freedoms," Bachus said.

In addition to the funding increases in the bill approved today, Bachus points out that more than 500,000 veterans and their surviving family members will benefit from legislation that went into effect Oct. 1, the beginning of the new fiscal year.

Bachus called the new law, the Veterans Benefits Improvement Act, "a tremendous victory for our veterans and their families who have sacrificed so much for our nation." The \$1.6 billion in benefit improvements funded over five years in the act was included as part of the transportation bill that was signed into law on June 9 and became effective last Thursday.

The benefit improvements include an increase in the basic monthly full-time GI Bill education rate by 20 percent from \$440 to \$528. This provision alone will help an estimated 386,000 veterans during the first year. There is also a 20 percent increase in education benefits for surviving dependents of veterans who either died or are disabled from service-connected causes. The educational provisions benefit both college students and those enrolled in cooperative, correspondence, apprentice and flight training courses.

The new law also allows the surviving spouse of a veteran to resume receiving benefits under the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation program if a subsequent remarriage ends. Bachus said that change repeals a 1990 law and will bring a \$433 million increase in benefits

over five years to about 6,000 surviving spouses.

Severely disabled veterans will also see increases from \$38,000 to \$43,000 in adaptive housing grants and from \$5,500 to \$8,000 in adaptive automobile allowances. These programs allow those veterans to purchase homes adapted to their needs and to meet the rising cost of automobiles. Both programs will increase by \$10 million over five years.

Low-income disabled veterans needing full-time aid and attendance of another person will receive an increase of \$600 a year. This alternative to nursing home care will increase benefits by \$200 million over five years and will affect about 62,000 veterans in the first year.