

Congress Improves Benefits for Military Personnel

Graham/Clinton/DeWine/Leahy Secure TRICARE for National Guard and Reserve

WASHINGTON -- The United States Senate last night approved the Fiscal Year 2006 Defense Authorization bill.

The legislation improves benefits for military personnel including a provision offered by U.S. Senators Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina), Hillary Clinton (D-New York), Mike DeWine (R-Ohio), and Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont) to expand TRICARE to all drilling reservists.

Graham, Clinton, DeWine, and Leahy have worked together and with other Senators to expand access to health care for members of the National Guard and Reserve who are playing an ever-increasing and historic role in the global War on Terror. The Senators noted that Guardsmen and Reservists now make up approximately 40 percent of American forces in Iraq.

“Our work reflects a significant triumph for the Guard, Reserves and their families,” said Graham, chairman of the Armed Services Subcommittee on Personnel. “Now, after years of relative neglect, these soldiers’ health care coverage and benefits are more in line with their service to our nation. This year’s bill provides continuous health care coverage for all drilling reservists, an important improvement over what we were able to accomplish last year.”

“I am pleased that we have made further progress towards our goal of increasing access of health benefits for our National Guard and Reserve and their families in New York and around the country,” Senator Clinton said. “Providing the Guard and Reserves, as well as their families, with adequate support and benefits is the least that a grateful nation can do.”

“We know how important it is that we fund our military hardware and base installations. At the same time, we can’t ignore our military personnel. We can’t ignore those who volunteer to protect us,” stated Senator Mike DeWine. “It’s the least we can do, particularly as we continue to rely more and more on our Reserve and National Guard.”

“This is a measurable step forward for readiness and for fairness for the Guard and its people,” said Leahy, the co-chair of the Senate’s National Guard Caucus. “Ensuring that every member of the Guard and Reserve has access to affordable health insurance is vital to the well-being of this essential force. At a time when the troops of our Guard and Reserve are contributing so much to the war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as protecting us at home, this package of new health insurance benefits will make a real difference, and it’s the least they deserve.”

Under the expansion of TRICARE championed by the Senators, all members of the Selected Reserve are eligible to enroll in the military health care program for a monthly premium. The premiums are based on categories of eligibility:

- **Category 1:** Members of the Selected Reserve who are called to active duty qualify for TRICARE Reserve Select (TRS). Under this program, established last year, a reservist would accumulate one year of TRS coverage for every 90 days of active duty service. Monthly premiums during the years of accumulated eligibility are only 28 percent of the program cost. The government picks up the remaining 72 percent. As has always been the case, coverage is free of charge while on active duty. This bill now permits accumulation of earned periods of coverage for frequently deployed personnel. In addition, it authorizes 6 months of transitional coverage for family members following the death of the Reserve member, if the member dies while in an inactive status.
- **Category 2:** Members of the Selected Reserve who are not called to active duty, and who otherwise do not qualify for health insurance due to unemployment or lack of employer-provided coverage, are eligible to enroll in TRICARE for a 50 percent cost-sharing premium. The government will pay the remaining 50 percent.
- **Category 3:** Members of the Selected Reserve who do not fit into either of the above categories but would like to participate in TRICARE are eligible to do so for an 85 percent cost share. Employers are allowed and encouraged to contribute to the reservist's share. The government contributes 15 percent of the costs.

“I will continue to work to improve benefits available to members of the Guard and Reserve,” said Graham. “The nation will continue to need their services, in large numbers, in fighting the War on Terror. I am proud of and appreciate the progress we’ve made this year with the Senate and Bush Administration working together.”

“I am pleased a compromise was reached and that the Senate today joined me in honoring the service of our National Guard and Reserve members by giving them and their families the healthcare benefits they need and deserve,” Senator Clinton said.

“Recent reports indicate about 40 percent of the junior enlisted lack any civilian health insurance and this TRICARE expansion will help them and their families receive needed coverage. We must ensure greater continuity in health care for our Guardsmen and Reservists, which will enhance overall military medical readiness. This is both a readiness and retention issue. Now more than ever, we need to provide our Reserve and Guard personnel with adequate support. Ensuring our servicemen and women have access to healthcare insurance is the right thing to do,” added Senator DeWine.

The defense bill authorized additional benefits for the men and women serving our nation in uniform. Among these important changes were:

- A 3.1 percent pay raise for all military personnel;
- Payment of “matching fund” contributions of up to 5 percent of basic pay for first term enlistees who participate in the Thrift Savings Plan. The TSP is a 401(k) retirement plan available to all federal employees.
- Increases in maximum amounts of assignment incentive pay and hardship duty pay.
- \$60 million increase in child care and family assistance services to active-duty and Reserve military families.
- Critical skills retention bonus of up to \$100,000 over a career for members of the Selected Reserve.
- Increases TRICARE benefits for the surviving children of members who die on active duty.
- Increases to \$100,000 in the death gratuity allowance payable to survivors of all active duty military decedents, including retroactive payment to October 7, 2001, the date of commencement of Operation Enduring Freedom.
- Directs the establishment of a uniform Department policy on casualty assistance to improve the services provided to survivors and next of kin of military members killed on active duty.
- In addition the bill authorizes increases in the active-duty end strength of 10,000 for the Army and 1,000 for the Marine Corps.

The bill has been passed by the House and is expected to be signed into law by President Bush in the coming days.