

The American Legion Strongly Opposed to President's Plan to Charge Wounded Heroes for Treatment

WASHINGTON, DC (March 16, 2009) – The leader of the nation's largest veterans organization says he is "deeply disappointed and concerned" after a meeting with President Obama today to discuss a proposal to force private insurance companies to pay for the treatment of military veterans who have suffered service-connected disabilities and injuries. The Obama administration recently revealed a plan to require private insurance carriers to reimburse the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in such cases.

"It became apparent during our discussion today that the President intends to move forward with this unreasonable plan," said Commander David K. Rehbein of The American Legion. "He says he is looking to generate \$540-million by this method, but refused to hear arguments about the moral and government-avowed obligations that would be compromised by it."

The Commander, clearly angered as he emerged from the session said, "This reimbursement plan would be inconsistent with the mandate '... to care for him who shall have borne the battle...' given that the United States government sent members of the armed forces into harm's way, and not private insurance companies. I say again that The American Legion does not and will not support any plan that seeks to bill a veteran for treatment of a service connected disability at the very agency that was created to treat the unique need of America's veterans!"

Commander Rehbein was among a group of senior officials from veterans service organizations joining the President, White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki and Steven Kosiak, the overseer of defense spending at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The group's early afternoon conversation at The White House was precipitated by a letter of protest presented to the President earlier this month. The letter, co-signed by Commander Rehbein and the heads of ten colleague organizations, read, in part, "There is simply no logical explanation for billing a veteran's personal insurance for care that the VA has a responsibility to provide. While we understand the fiscal difficulties this country faces right now, placing the burden of those fiscal problems on the men and women who have already sacrificed a great deal for this country is unconscionable."

Commander Rehbein reiterated points made last week in testimony to both House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees. It was stated then that The American Legion believes that the reimbursement plan would be inconsistent with the mandate that VA treat service-connected injuries and disabilities given that the United States government sends members of the armed forces into harm's way, and not private insurance companies. The proposed requirement for these companies to reimburse the VA would not only be unfair, says the Legion, but would have an adverse impact on service-connected disabled veterans and their families. The Legion argues that, depending on the severity of the medical conditions involved, maximum insurance coverage limits could be

reached through treatment of the veteran's condition alone. That would leave the rest of the family without health care benefits. The Legion also points out that many health insurance companies require deductibles to be paid before any benefits are covered. Additionally, the Legion is concerned that private insurance premiums would be elevated to cover service-connected disabled veterans and their families, especially if the veterans are self-employed or employed in small businesses unable to negotiate more favorable across-the-board insurance policy pricing. The American Legion also believes that some employers, especially small businesses, would be reluctant to hire veterans with service-connected disabilities due to the negative impact their employment might have on obtaining and financing company health care benefits.

"I got the distinct impression that the only hope of this plan not being enacted," said Commander Rehbein, "is for an alternative plan to be developed that would generate the desired \$540-million in revenue. The American Legion has long advocated for Medicare reimbursement to VA for the treatment of veterans. This, we believe, would more easily meet the President's financial goal. We will present that idea in an anticipated conference call with White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel in the near future.

"I only hope the administration will really listen to us then. This matter has far more serious ramifications than the President is imagining," concluded the Commander.

Media contacts: Craig Roberts, (202) 263-2982, Cell (202) 406-0887 or Joe March, (317) 630-1253; Cell (317) 748-1926. A high resolution photo of Nat. Cmdr. Rehbein is available at www.legion.org.