

Washington, D.C. - Rep. Peter Welch hosted a veterans roundtable today at the Burlington VFW Post 782 and announced he has authored several new bills that are part of his legislative agenda of improving veterans care.

Vermont's Adj. General Michael Dubie also spoke at the event before the open forum.

The purpose of the forum was to continue the discussions Welch has had around the state with Vermont's veteran community about caring for our existing veterans and planning for the care of returning soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Providing our veterans with the excellent care they deserve when they return home from war must be a priority. My goal is to continue to push for concrete steps we can take to improve the lives of our existing veterans and those due to return from war," said Welch. "I believe the Administration is woefully unprepared to adequately meet the future needs of our veterans."

"We make a pact with the troops that we are obligated to fulfill. After they have sacrificed for our country on the battlefield, we must assure they are taken care of when they return home," added Welch.

The three bills Welch will introduce when he returns to Washington are:

**1) Legislation to improve the transition from the Department of Defense (DoD) to the Veterans Affairs (VA) medical system.** The DoD would be required to give all soldiers a medical exam before being discharged, have the results of those exams be accepted by the VA for the purpose of determining benefits eligibility, and allow the DoD, if requested by the soldier, to electronically transmit the patient records to the VA.

"This legislation will reduce the bureaucratic hurdles faced by soldiers first entering the VA system," notes Welch.

**2) Legislation to require that at least two additional benefits claims representatives be added to each VA Vets Center around the county, including Vermont's centers in White River Jct. and South Burlington.** This step is intended to immediately begin to address the huge backlog in processing VA benefits claims, and to ensure that the VA Benefits Administration provides better customer service to veterans filing claims. The number of pending benefits claims have jumped from 69,000 in 2001 to more than 400,000 in December 2006.

**3) Legislation to allow members of the Guard and Reservists to participate in the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program.** This successful BDD program allows soldiers to process their claims up to six months prior to discharge so they can begin receiving benefits as soon as they leave the military. Allowing Guard and Reservists- who comprise 40 percent of the forces in Iraq and Afghanistan- to access BDD is intended to help address the claim denial rate which is twice as high for Reserve and Guard veterans.

"Vermont's Guard and Reserve have shouldered an enormous burden in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and are entitled to the benefits they deserve when they come home," added Welch.

Welch has led the investigation into inadequate care at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and successfully amended legislation to improve care for recovering soldiers.

An investigation initiated by Welch is now underway by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) into the adequacy of the federal government's plans to provide services to returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. In March, Welch enlisted 42 of his freshman colleagues to join him in calling for this independent assessment.

In addition, he advocated for a re-write to President Bush's budget proposal that would have had disastrous consequences for veterans. The House passed a budget for FY 2008 which increases funding for Veterans Administration health care by \$6.6 billion over 2007, the largest annual increase in VA health care in 77 years.