

Veterans Fight for Benefits
Bruce E. Parry
Veterans for Unification
November 28, 2006

A group of veteran activists from the Chicago area met on Saturday, November 25 to map out a strategy to reinvigorate the veteran's movement in Chicago and across Illinois. The meeting was attended by thirteen of the most active veterans in the Chicago area, representing a number of activist organizations.

The decision of the group was to focus on mandatory funding of VA healthcare as a central issue around which to organize veterans. Currently, VA healthcare is funded through a process that requires Congressional debate every year. This means that the VA healthcare budget is a political football tossed back and forth year after year.

Over the last five years, a movement has grown to make VA healthcare funding what is called an "entitlement." In Congressional jargon, an entitlement is something that is automatically funded unless Congress takes action, the exact opposite of what happens now. Instead of being an annual political football, VA healthcare would be funded by a formula.

The group decided to devote its energies to getting this passed in Congress. This is a hot issue among veterans groups and throughout the veterans' community, and is an achievable goal. It will allow Chicago veterans to link up with other veterans across the country.

The group approved two main tactical approaches to achieve this goal. One is by passing resolutions at the state, county and local levels. Veterans' groups will fight to get resolutions on ballots and passed by city councils, county boards and state legislatures, that call for the federal government to pass mandatory funding. Veterans in Chicago will link up with groups doing the same thing in other states. Resolutions by other civic and labor organizations will compliment the legislative thrust.

There will also be a direct action campaign: veterans will be going to Washington, DC to get the attention of Congressional representatives and demonstrate to them the importance of this issue. Chicago veterans will work with groups from other states to converge on Washington together for maximum effect.

Each veterans group and members of the coalition may also develop other routes to achieve the goal. The key, it was decided, was to focus on a battle that could be won.

Mandatory funding, as the group defines it, stems from the original proposals made to Congress. VA funding would be automatically computed. The base amount would be the cost of providing a single veteran healthcare for one year. That would be multiplied by the number of veterans the VA serves annually, and an adjustment for inflation—rising healthcare costs—would be included based on a formula. The bill would require a one-time VA healthcare budget increase to meet the actual costs of providing healthcare to veterans already being served.