

(Washington, DC) - U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire (PA-4) today cosponsored legislation to freeze all fiscal year 2007 bonuses to senior level Veterans Affairs Department (VA) officials until the VA reduces its backlog of benefit cases to fewer than 100,000. The bill was introduced in response to an Associated Press report that more than \$3.8 million in bonuses were paid in 2006 to senior officials at the VA while the cash-strapped agency faced a \$1 billion budgetary shortfall and struggled to treat veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to The Associated Press, annual bonuses to VA officials averaged \$16,000, the highest among federal government agencies, and ranged up to \$33,000. One of the officials receiving a top bonus of \$33,000 in 2006 was the deputy undersecretary for benefits, who helps manage a disability claim system that has a backlog of more than 600,000 cases and an average delay of 177 days.

"This is an outrage and an insult to our veterans," said Rep. Altmire, an original co-sponsor of the legislation.

"Bonuses are usually based on performance, but in this case it appears officials have been rewarding themselves for one failure after another, including questionable accounting practices, lapses in data security, backlogs and substandard conditions at VA health care facilities. VA officials should not be receiving a 'pat on the back' with taxpayer money while our veterans are waiting in line to receive the health care benefits they have earned and deserve."

"Our local VA hospital staff works tirelessly each day to provide our veterans with essential health care services," added Rep. Altmire. **"I find it unconscionable that senior VA officials are padding their pockets, while our local facilities lack sufficient resources and the national system struggles to meet our obligation to provide care for those who have served and sacrificed so much to defend our country."**

Currently, the VA's fiscal year 2007 bonuses are scheduled to be paid in September of this year. The bill will prevent the payment of these bonuses until the VA's backlog is significantly reduced.