

(Washington, DC) — U.S. Congressman Jason Altmire (PA-4) testified before the House Budget Committee today, urging it to reject proposals in President Bush's FY 2009 budget that would raise veterans' health care fees, slash Medicare funding for western Pennsylvania hospitals, and reduce funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) that helps thousands of Pennsylvanians pay their home heating bills.

“President Bush’s budget nickel and dimes a host of programs important to western Pennsylvanians, including veterans’ health care, Medicare, and energy assistance.”

Altmire said.

“I am committed to working in a bipartisan fashion to create a fiscally-responsible budget that honors our nation’s commitment to our veterans and provides adequate funding for critical domestic initiatives.”

Congressman Altmire is working to stop President Bush's proposal to raise the fees and co-payments veterans pay for their medical care by \$5.2 billion. These increases would almost double the cost of prescriptions for veterans and make them pay enrollment fees of up to \$750 per year. This could cause almost 200,000 veterans to leave the Veterans Administration's (VA) health care system.

Additionally, the president's budget contains only a 0.6 percent funding increase for veterans, when adjusted for inflation. Every major veterans organization has said Bush's proposal would grossly underfund the VA, especially considering that over 100,000 new veterans will seek treatment from the VA in fiscal year 2009. Congressman Altmire is pressing for \$6 billion increase over last year's funding level, because this is the amount veterans' organizations say is needed to ensure the VA can keep up with growing demands. A letter Congressman Altmire sent to the House Budget Committee urging them to provide adequate funding for veterans initiatives is attached.

Congressman Altmire also pressed the House Budget Committee to reject President Bush's proposal to cut Medicare by \$556 billion over ten years, which would make it harder for western Pennsylvania hospitals to provide patients with quality care. Bush's funding cuts would translate into a \$14 million cut to Alle-Kiski Medical Center in Natrona Heights, a \$15 million cut to Jameson Hospital in New Castle, and a \$29 million cut to Heritage Valley's Medical Center in Beaver. The president's proposals would also increase Medicare beneficiaries' premiums by \$26 billion.

“With 124,000 Medicare beneficiaries in my district, I find it incomprehensible that the president is proposing to slash Medicare funding just as the baby boomers begin to retire,” Altmire said. “There are more effective ways to reform Medicare than by blindly slashing reimbursements to hospitals and other providers and increasing premiums for seniors.”

With a sluggish economy and rising energy prices making it harder and harder for working families to pay their home heating bills, Congressman Altmire also pressed the House Budget Committee to reject the president’s call to cut LIHEAP funding by \$570 million. In Pennsylvania, LIHEAP helps 285,000 low-income households pay their heating bills.