

WASHINGTON, DC – Three major veteran service organizations testified yesterday in support of a bill introduced by Rep. Mike Honda (D-CA) that protects uninsured veterans from being saddled with hospital bills for emergency care received at non-Veterans Affairs hospitals.

The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars and Vietnam Veterans of America testified today during a hearing before the Subcommittee on Health, which is part of the U.S. House Committee of Veterans Affairs. Honda's bill (H.R. 4146) would amend the Millennium Health Care Act.

Currently, when the nearest VA hospital is full or too far, veterans who need emergency care are taken to non-VA facilities. However, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs only covers the initial emergency cost at facilities outside its system. If a veteran remains at that hospital, he or she is responsible for the bill.

"The horrible result is uninsured veterans with stratospheric insurance bills," Honda said. "This problem is likely to grow as veterans' ranks swell with service men and women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan."

The bill amends the Millennium Health Care Act, which has left many veterans in a no man's land when this unintended situation occurs.

In a statement introduced at the hearing, the Vietnam Veterans of America said the bill "...just seems to make a lot of sense...One only has to wonder why such a provision [even] needs to be added into law."

Honda testified before the subcommittee that Robert Dahlberg, a Vietnam veteran, suffered this situation two years ago after he was involved in a helicopter crash while fighting a fire in Northern California. Dahlberg, a constituent in Honda's district, went to register with the VA and asked more questions than usual and learned about this gap in the Millennium Health Care Act.

"Then I heard the words '...and then you will need to get yourself, once stabilized, to a VA hospital.' These words alarmed me. So even if I had a heart attack and was stabilized at a non-VA hospital it was my responsibility to get myself to a VA hospital?" said Dahlberg, who contacted Honda's office about the issue. "This requirement to get oneself to a VA hospital after stabilization is at best a joke. It could leave veterans of all ages financially destitute with a huge bill from the non-VA hospital. This is unconscionable."

The bill is cosponsored by: Rep. John Hall (D-NY), Rep. Donna Christensen (D-VI), Rep. Raul Grijalva (D-AZ), Rep. Mark Souder (R-IN), Rep. Jim McDermott (D-WA), Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-NY), Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite (R-FL), Rep. Lynn Woolsey (D-CA), and Rep. John Conyers (D-MI).

“We owe our veterans a debt of gratitude for their service. It is inexcusable for Congress to allow this crack in the system to even exist,” Honda said. “A person without insurance normally is not in the best financial situation, so this crack in the system only adds to the burden these brave men and women have to carry. We must treat our veterans with the respect they deserve, and this small change to an existing law will save veterans a great deal of grief.”