United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 29, 2008

The Honorable Kent Conrad
Chairman
Senate Committee on the Budget
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Judd Gregg
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on the Budget
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Conrad and Gregg:

As the Budget Committee begins consideration of the Fiscal Year 2009 Budget Resolution, we respectfully request that you continue to give the appropriate priority to the needs of our nation's veterans. In doing so, we urge you to provide additional funding toward addressing the increasing backlog of pending claims within the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). We applaud the leadership the Committee has shown on this issue and are hopeful that we can continue to build upon the commitment Congress has made to deal with this claims backlog which causes undue hardships for a growing number of veterans and their families each year.

According to a VBA Workload Report from February 16, 2008, the total number of pending compensation and pension claims was 663,319, up from 626,429 this time last year. The number pending for more than 180 days is now nearly 27 percent. Additionally, claims requiring a disability rating determination (which are the most time-consuming and resource-intensive to process) have increased to 404,999, an increase of more than 50 percent since 2003.

In recent years, the Budget Committee and Congress have taken the lead in tackling the claims backlog and improving the management of the VBA. Through these efforts, much-needed resources have been provided to increase the number of claims processing staff essential to reducing the pending claims backlog and improving the timeliness of the claims process. Yet, much remains to be done.

Between Fiscal Year 2000 and Fiscal Year 2007, the number of filed claims increased 45 percent, from 578,773 to 838,141. For Fiscal Year 2009, the VA, which has consistently underestimated its workload in the past, projects the number to increase to approximately 872,000, and cautions that ongoing hostilities in Iraq and Afghanistan could increase its workload even further.

In light of these mounting challenges, we are hopeful the Committee will further invest in the training and technology initiatives the VBA desperately needs to better address the claims backlog and to improve the timeliness, accuracy and consistency of service that our veterans deserve. It is the least we can do for those whom we owe so much, and to reassure future generations that a grateful nation will not forget them when their military service is complete.

Sincerely,

Blanche L. Lincoln

Olympia J. Snowe

Joe Biden

Carl Levin

John F. Kerry

Claire McCaskill

Bob Casey, Jr.

Mark Pryor

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Elizabeth Dole

Mark Pryor

Barbara A. Mikulski

Jay Rockefeller

Norm Coleman

Jim Webb

Mark Warner

Dick Durbin

Ron Wyden

Daniel K. Inouye

Debbie Stabenow

Tom Harkin

Ken Salazar

Amy Klobuchar

Barbara Boxer

Susan M. Collins