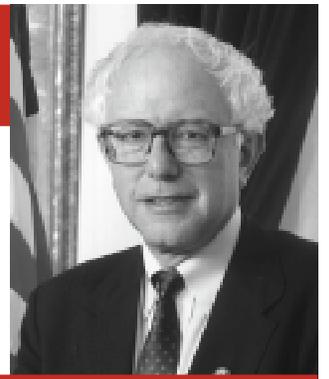




U.S. Representative

Bernie Sanders

A Special Focus on Veterans' Issues



Fall 1999

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Vermont Veteran,

I want to take this opportunity to keep you informed about issues of concern to Vermont veterans. I also want to urge you to contact my office if you are having problems with the VA, the Department of Defense or other government agencies. We can often be of assistance on these matters. Further, I hope you'll check out the information we've provided on page 3 regarding how prescription drugs are available through the VA system at a significantly reduced cost. Utilizing the VA might save you money on the medications that you are using.

To my mind, the federal government has no greater commitments than those it has made to the men and women who have put their lives on the line defending our country. Some of these people have been wounded in body, and some in spirit. All have done their duty. It is unconscionable that the U.S. government renege on the promises it made to them.

This year, working with some of the major veterans' organizations, I strongly supported a \$3 billion increase in funding for veterans' programs. I believed this large increase was appropriate because of the massive cut-backs for veterans needs that we have seen in recent years. Some may think that a \$3 billion increase over the President's budget is a lot of money. It is, but not in contrast to current congressional priorities. (A few months ago, for example, a majority of the members in Congress voted to support \$792 billion in tax breaks – much of which would have gone to the wealthy).

In the end, while we were not successful in getting the full \$3 billion increase that we wanted, we were able to secure \$1.7 billion in additional funding. This represents 9% more than last year, the largest increase for veterans' funding in many years. The job of the Vermont Congressional delegation, and other representatives from the Northeast, is to now make certain that our region of the country gets its fair share of that increase.

In terms of the VA hospital in White River Junction, I and the other members of the Vermont delegation, have been fighting hard to make certain that it continues to provide the high quality of care that Vermont veterans deserve. We recently secured a promise from the VA that White River Junction would receive an additional \$7 million to fund a Rural Veterans Healthcare Initiative pilot project to address the special needs that arise in serving veterans in rural areas. This extra money means that the hospital's budget should be at least level funded for the coming year.

On another issue, I have introduced H.R. 652 which would double the veterans' funeral benefit from \$300 to \$600. I authored this bill because I heard from many Vermonters who correctly pointed out that, in today's world, \$300 is a very small amount for a funeral and that this program has not kept pace with increased funeral costs.

Finally, I wanted to let you know that I am a co-sponsor of H.R. 303, which would eliminate the offset between military retiree pay and VA disability benefits. Military retirees who are also eligible for VA disability benefits should be able to receive the full amount of each. The current system of offsetting disability benefits and retiree pay is grossly unfair and needs to be changed.

Let me conclude by urging you, once again, to contact my office if there are any problems that you think we can help on. Together, let us go forward to make certain that veterans receive the respect and benefits to which they are entitled.

Sincerely yours,

Bernie
Bernard Sanders
U.S. Congressman

We Must Change the VA's Health Care Funding Formula

Along with Senators Leahy and Jeffords, and veterans from throughout the state, I have fought hard to preserve and improve the quality of health care at the VA hospital in White River Junction. Last year, we received an important commitment from the VA that the White River Junction facility would receive an additional \$7.2 million to improve the delivery of health care to veterans in rural areas. This was an important step forward in making certain

that our hospital would continue to provide high quality health care.

One of the major funding problems that we in Vermont have to deal with is not only an inadequate congressional appropriation but a federal funding formula which discriminates against the northeast. While we can all agree that veterans across the country need more

resources, the needs of veterans in the South should not come at the expense of veterans in Vermont and the rest of the Northeast. For that reason I, and other northeastern members of Congress, have been working hard to change VERA – the formula that the VA uses to allocate financial resources to the various regions of the country. We also recently opposed legislation which would put at risk inpatient health programs at VA hospitals in the northeast – including White River Junction.



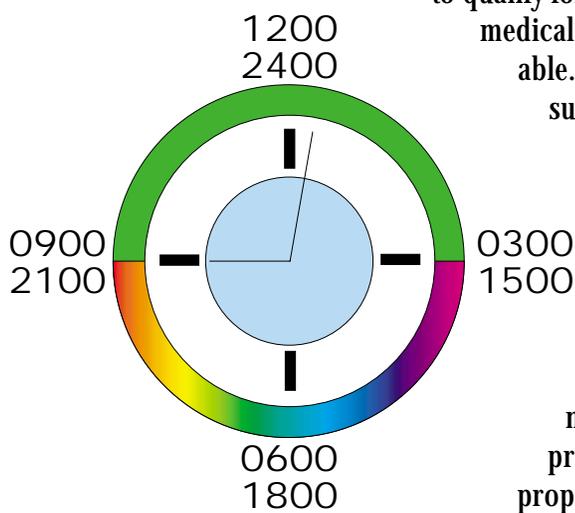
Ending the Long Wait for Service Records

Over the last several years, a number of veterans have informed my office that they were experiencing serious and unacceptable

delays in getting copies of their military records. Some of the veterans were waiting months and even years to get the records they needed in order to qualify for veterans' benefits or medical care. This was unacceptable. After researching the issue my office learned that one of the major reasons for the delays was that the National Military Personnel Records Center was very far behind the times in terms of computers and modern technology. Last year, I added a provision to the relevant appropriation bill that gave the

National Military Personnel Records Center an additional \$2 million in order to upgrade their technological capabilities. This amendment had the support of the VFW, the American Legion, and other veterans groups.

This \$2 million was the first installment to fund a 5 year modernization program designed to guarantee that 90% of veterans will receive their records in 10 days. This year I made sure that the next installment of \$1.6 million was provided in the House bill. I will continue to follow the progress of this modernization program so that we remain on target. Veterans should not have to wait months or years before receiving copies of their records.

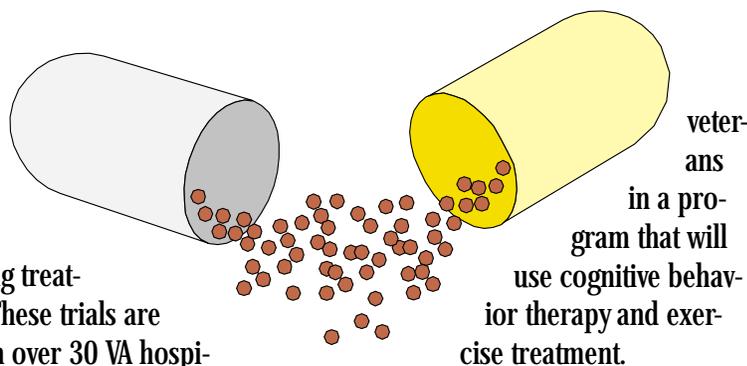


Gulf War Illness

My office continues to play a leadership role in Congress in the fight against Persian Gulf War Illness. During the last several years I have met with hundreds of Vermonters who are suffering from this serious medical problem. They are part of the close to one hundred thousand Gulf War veterans who are struggling with this disease.

In the 1999 Appropriations process I secured substantial funding for medical research into the cause and treatment of

Gulf War Illness. I also helped push for the first two VA clinical trials that are testing treatment hypotheses. These trials are now taking place in over 30 VA hospitals around the country, including White River Junction. One of the trials is treating veterans who test positive for mycoplasma infection, believed to be a possible cause of a variety of Gulf War Illness symptoms. The other trial will involve



If you are suffering from Gulf War Illness and would like to participate in a clinical treatment trial, you can call my office or the VA hospital at White River Junction, 802-295-9363 x 6054 for more information.

Important Notice for Vets

Veterans are Entitled to Prescription Drugs at a Significant Discount from the VA

It has come to my attention that many veterans are not aware that most prescription drugs can be obtained through the VA health care system at a significantly reduced cost. Each 30-day supply of medication costs \$2.00 per month and may be free if the veteran has a lower income or if the medication is for a service-connected condition.

In order to be eligible for this prescription drug benefit, you must be under the regular care of a VA provider and the medication must be prescribed by the VA provider. It is important to have the medical records from your non-VA doctors prescribing your medicines at the VA clinic at the time of your appointment to avoid delays in receiving your medications. Although the VA pharmacy does not carry every medication, in most cases another similar medication will be available for those medicines the VA doesn't stock.

You can choose to see a physician at the VA facility in White River Junction, Burlington or Bennington. Appointments are available during the weekday, as well as evenings and weekends (you may, in fact, find that you can get a quicker appointment if you can visit a facility during the evening or on a weekend).

I strongly encourage all veterans who might be eligible for this benefit to call my Burlington office for more information at (800) 339-9834 or (802) 862-0697.



Agent Orange

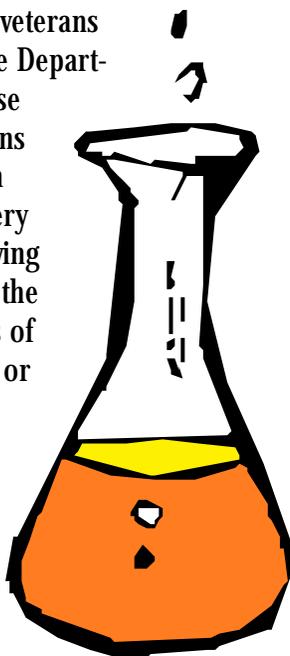
At my request, a hearing to discuss the health effects of Agent Orange, a widely used defoliant in Vietnam, is scheduled for February 23rd before the Subcommittee on National Security, Veterans Affairs, and International Relations.

In the late 1970s, concerns began to emerge over the long-term health problems of Vietnam veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange. Agent Orange is a herbicide which contains dioxin, a chemical compound which is known to cause a variety of adverse health problems in animals. The effect of this exposure on human health remains very controversial.

There are many Vietnam veterans who believe that exposure to Agent

Orange has caused serious illness and death for thousands of their comrades.

Many of these veterans believe that the Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration have done a very poor job in trying to understand the health impacts of Agent Orange, or providing the health care and benefits that the affected veterans require. On the other



hand, there are experts who believe that Agent Orange exposure in Vietnam did not result in widespread health problems. The purpose of the subcommittee hearing is to get opinion from all sides, and to see how the government might best go forward in this area.

My office will be scheduling a public meeting in Vermont on the impact of Agent Orange for Vietnam veterans. For more information about this meeting, please call my office at 800-339-9834 or 802-862-0697.

Rep. Bernie Sanders

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Washington, D.C. 20515

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If you receive more than one copy of this newsletter, we apologize. Please feel free to pass the extra copy along to an interested friend.

This mailing was prepared, published, and mailed at taxpayer expense.

Contact Information for Veterans

State Veterans Affairs Office	Montpelier	828-3379
Vermont Veterans Home	Bennington	442-6353
	Toll-free	800-505-4000
Veterans Administration Regional Office (<i>Benefits and Assistance</i>)		
	White River Junction	296-5177
	Toll-free	800-827-1000
Medical Center	White River Junction	295-9363
VA Outreach Clinic	White River Junction	296-6399
Appletree Bay VA Clinic	Burlington	864-4492
Bennington VA Clinic	Bennington	447-6913
Vet Centers	South Burlington	862-1806
	White River Junction	295-2908
Department of Veterans Affairs		
Acquisition Policy and Review Service (<i>businesses</i>)		202-273-6047
Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization		202-565-8124
Assistant Secretary for Information Resources Management		
(<i>Freedom of Information Act Requests</i>)		202-273-8135
To report waste or abuse in the DVA:		
Inspector General's Hotline		800-488-8244

DVA Annual Report – write to the Analysis and Reports Service:
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Information on cemeteries and burial, write to:
The National Cemetery System
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

*Look inside
for important
information
about VA
prescription
prices!*

How to Contact Bernie Sanders

Bernie's Office
1-800-339-9834
802-862-0697

Bernie's Website
www.house.gov/bernie

Bernie's e-mail
bernie@mail.house.gov