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Gov. Blagojevich signs landmark veterans health insurance legislation

Veterans Care will provide thousands of veterans with access to affordable, comprehensive medical coverage

CHICAGO— On the eve of Memorial Day, Governor Rod R. Blagojevich signed into law his landmark veterans' health insurance initiative that will provide access to affordable, comprehensive health care to thousands of veterans across Illinois. In his State of the State address, the Governor proposed the creation of *Veterans Care*, and in May, both Houses of the General Assembly unanimously passed legislation creating the *Veterans Care* program. The program will help up to 9,000 veterans in Illinois who currently earn too much to qualify for Veterans Administration Healthcare but cannot afford to purchase health insurance in the private market.

“There are thousands of veterans in Illinois who are living without health insurance because they can't afford it. How can you ask these men and women to risk their lives defending our freedom, only to turn your backs on them when they come home? That's exactly what the federal government has done. They may think that's an acceptable way to treat our veterans. But we don't. That's why we created the *Veterans Care* program, and it's why we're going to keep expanding it every year,” Gov. Blagojevich said.

The federal government has been consistently cutting off veterans' health care since 2003, despite a growing need for health services as thousands of veterans return from Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2003, the Bush Administration cut off health care for thousands of veterans making as little as \$25,000 a year. Over the past three years, this has prevented one million veterans, who make as little as \$26,903 a year from enrolling in VA health care.

Last year, the VA acknowledged a \$2.7 billion shortfall in funding for veterans health care, a shortcoming made the more dramatic as more than 144,000 veterans returning from the Middle East have required medical treatment.

Last December, four major veterans organizations – AMVETS, the Disabled American Veterans, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States – warned that as a result of the Bush Administration proposals, veterans using the VA health care system are facing substantially higher co-payments and waiting times, and are at-risk for higher fees. They also warned that for the fourth year in a row, the President's budget proposes increased health care costs of one million veterans by imposing new fees at a cost of more than \$2.6 billion over five years, and driving at least 200,000 additional veterans out of the system.

In all, there are approximately 70,000 uninsured veterans in Illinois. The federal Veterans Health Administration (VHA) covers those veterans who have service-related disabilities or who have recently returned from active duty, and then, space permitting, covers other veterans who do not have health insurance and have an income below a threshold set by the Veterans Health Administration each year. Veterans who have no access to care and who regularly fall through the cracks are those earning above the

VHA threshold, which varies by county based on the local standard of living.

This new program will be operated by the Department of Healthcare and Family Services in collaboration with the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs. The Departments estimate that approximately 9,000 veterans will qualify for this new program. *Veterans Care* will provide comprehensive healthcare to them at affordable rates, with average monthly premiums of \$40.

SB 627 becomes effective immediately.

“In the Land of Lincoln, no veteran should go without decent health care coverage,” Lt. Governor Pat Quinn said. “Veterans Care will assist our veterans in obtaining the comprehensive, affordable health care they deserve.”

To be eligible for *Veterans Care*, a veteran must meet the following criteria:

- Be between the ages of 19 and 64;
- Have been uninsured for the past six months;
- Be ineligible for VHA and other healthcare programs like FamilyCare;
- Have a household income up to 25% of the Federal Poverty Level above the VHA threshold at the beginning of the program, and if funds permit after 6 months of operation up to 50% of the federal poverty level above the VHA threshold;
- Not have been dishonorably discharged from service.
- Be willing to pay a monthly premium of \$40, plus co-payments for doctor visits and prescriptions.

“This legislation backs up many of the promises the federal government couldn't keep. Our veterans who have fallen through the cracks will now get the health care they deserve, and I'm proud that our state officials, including Governor Blagojevich understand the medical needs of so many Illinoisans,” said Sen. Debbie DeFrancesco Halvorson (D-Crete), the Senate sponsor of the legislation.

“I would like to thank Governor Blagojevich and Lt. Governor Pat Quinn for their work and concerns of behalf of the Veterans in the State of Illinois,” said Rep. Frank Mautino (D-Spring Valley), who sponsored the legislation in the House of Representatives. “By signing this legislation, Veterans that have fallen through the cracks of the Federal Government will now have access to quality healthcare.”

Since 2003, Gov. Blagojevich has taken several measures and launched a number of initiatives to help the state's veterans, especially at a time when they have been left behind by the federal government. Initiatives

undertaken in 2006 include:

protecting veterans and their families

This year, the Governor signed into law the following legislation:

- Senate Bill 1144, which shields grieving military families from protests during funerals and memorial services of fallen soldiers. The “Let Them Rest in Peace Act” requires protesters to stay at least 200 feet away from family and friends as they mourn soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice.
- House Bill 4121, which punishes individuals who falsely claim to be decorated war heroes. The new law creates criminal charges and imposes penalties on individuals falsely representing themselves as recipients of various military honors, including the Purple Heart, the Congressional Medal of Honor, the Distinguished Service Cross, the Navy Cross, the Air Force Cross, the Silver Star and the Bronze Star.
- House Bill 4822, which protects Illinois veterans from discrimination in employment and housing by changing the definition of military status in the state’s Human Rights Act. Under the new law, military status now includes a veteran of the Armed Forces of the United States, a reserve component of the Armed Forces of the United States, the Illinois Army National Guard and the Illinois Air National Guard.
- House Bill 4703, which strengthens consumer protections for active military members under the Illinois Patriot Plan. The new law imposes hefty financial penalties on companies for offenses such as canceling life insurance policies or turning off heat while soldiers are deployed.
- The Governor also called on Secretary James Nicholson of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to take immediate steps to protect veterans from identity theft and financial devastation in the wake of stolen data belonging to millions of veterans nationwide.

expanding care and treatment of veterans

Last week, top officials from the Governor’s administration broke ground on a new 80-bed addition to the LaSalle Veterans’ Home. Because of the dire need of long-term health care for older veterans living in Illinois, Gov. Blagojevich ordered the release of \$13 million last September for construction of the 60,000-square-foot unit that will serve dozens more of the state’s disabled veterans. The 80-bed expansion will allow the Home to admit 40 residents into the Alzheimer’s unit and 40 into the skilled care unit as well as hire 60 to 65 additional employees. It will also include five enclosed courtyard areas to provide safe, secure outdoor recreation space for the residents. The new addition should be complete by the end of 2007.

The project is being overseen by the Illinois Capital Development Board, which manages all state construction projects.

The LaSalle Veterans Home, which opened in December 1990, is located in a residential area on the northeast side of LaSalle in LaSalle County, on a campus of slightly more than four acres. The home provides intermediate and skilled nursing services for veterans, and they currently have a total capacity of 120 beds including 18 special needs beds for veterans suffering from Alzheimer's Disease or related dementias.

helping veterans get the benefits they are entitled to

Last year, following through on a promise made during his 2005 State of the State Address, the Governor hired 25 new Veteran Service Officers and deployed them across the state to significantly improve the state's outreach to one million Illinois veterans and their families. Thanks to the increase in staffing, the VSOs have helped more than 5,000 additional veterans apply and receive federal compensation and other benefits during the first quarter of 2006, compared to the same time period in 2005.

VSOs help veterans cut through the red tape and bureaucracy associated with applying and receiving compensation and other benefits from the federal Veterans' Healthcare Administration. Their primary job responsibility is assisting Illinois veterans applying for the nearly \$400 million in federal money that is available but unclaimed every year by the 26.5 million veterans across the country.

On May 20, the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs hosted a "Supermarket of Veterans Benefits" where hundreds of Central Illinois veterans were able to get information about their federal benefits and services from Veteran Service Officers, as well as connect with educational opportunities and job openings. This "Supermarket" followed similar events held last year in Chicago, Springfield and Marion.

In addition to providing information, the state's 50 Veteran Service Offices will also serve as a sign-up location for *Veterans Care*.

expanding funding of state programs and services for veterans

Earlier this month, the Governor announced that just three months after going on sale, the state's first lottery ticket designed to benefit Illinois veterans and their families has generated more than \$1 million for veterans. *Veterans Cash* is the first instant ticket in Illinois Lottery history where a portion of the proceeds will help fund state programs and services for veterans.

Proceeds from the sale of this ticket will be deposited into an interest bearing account in the State Treasury called the "Illinois Veterans Assistance Fund." The Illinois General Assembly will appropriate this money solely to the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA) who will award grants, fund additional services or conduct research relating to veterans' Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, homelessness, health insurance costs, and disability benefits.

Gov. Blagojevich and the Illinois Lottery launched the *Veterans Cash* instant lottery ticket on February 10, 2006. Since then, the scratch-off ticket has raised \$1,060,086 for new state programs and services that will help Illinois veterans and their families. *Veterans Cash* is currently available at all Illinois Lottery retail locations. Each ticket costs \$2 and has a top prize of \$20,000.