



Proudly Serving Those Who Served Our Country by Senator Norm Coleman

Over the course of our country's history, we have asked men and women to serve in America's Armed Forces to protect and defend our country and our allies. I have an immeasurable amount of respect for these men and women who proudly serve our country. Both my father and my grandfather served courageously in times of war, and both received Purple Heart's for their service. They are my heroes, along with each service man and woman who has helped protect the liberties and freedoms our country enjoys. Our nation's soldiers and veterans have made countless sacrifices on behalf of our country throughout our proud history to protect our freedoms and liberty. In return for their service, sacrifices, and loyalty to our country, our nation promises to be there for them when they return. They are our heroes, and must be treated as such.

Providing access to quality health care for our nation's veterans is a top priority for me as your United States Senator. With this goal in mind, earlier this month I went on a three-site tour through veterans facilities in Luverne, Fergus Falls, and St. Cloud to receive updates on their service quality and resource availability and to discuss crucial issues facing Minnesota veterans with those who work in the facility. I also met with the wonderful residents like Evelyn Cox who served during WWII in Washington D.C. as a Marine. I received valuable reports and insights from all sides involved on the issue of veterans care.

What most impressed me on my tour was the level of service our Minnesota caregivers provide to our veterans daily. They are doing a wonderful job. Many times, they go above and beyond their own call of duty, and this care and compassion of staff was evident in each of the facilities I visited. The staff—including the doctors, nurses, administrators, and various other personnel—are clearly making a difference in the lives of our veterans, and for this, I am grateful. I was also impressed by the high quality of the veterans homes and hospitals I visited. Unique features like the newly added "Main Street" in Fergus Falls, adds a personal touch to the home, helping to make the residents more comfortable.

While visiting the St. Cloud Veterans Hospital, I met with Clark Dyrud, the newly appointed Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs. I look forward to working with Commissioner Dyrud to ensure that construction and improvement projects for our veterans facilities take priority and get the support in Congress they need. I also met with a group of extraordinary individuals in St. Cloud who have joined hands and are in the final stages of planning for a facility for homeless veterans to be built at the St. Cloud VA Medical Center. Nearly 23 percent of homeless adults are veterans and the VA is the only federal agency that provides substantial hands-on assistance with more than 10,000 transitional and permanent beds authorized for homeless veterans throughout the country. As we move forward, I vow to give my strong support to continue helping the VA and the dedicated folks I met in St. Cloud to end this tragic problem in Minnesota and across the country.

I am encouraged that over the last ten years, funding for veterans medical care has doubled, including a 47 percent increase since 2001. In 2003, Veterans Affairs spent more than \$956 million in Minnesota serving about 439,000 veterans. One of my main concerns is that we are able to provide our nation's veterans with access to quality health care. In March, I was proud to vote for an amendment during consideration of the Senate budget resolution that would have increased funding for veterans medical care by an additional \$2.8 billion for fiscal year 2006. Although the amendment failed by a vote of 47-53, I pledge that I will continue to work to ensure appropriate funding for veterans medical care.

During the 108th Congress, the Senate passed legislation bringing veterans closer to full concurrent receipt of retirement and disability pay. The Senate also passed a provision to eliminate the concurrent receipt phase-in period entirely for veterans who are 100 percent disabled. Last year, the Senate approved a measure ending the reduction in Survivor Benefit Plan payments when a widow reaches 62. All three measures enjoyed my strong support.

Like many Minnesotans, I was deeply troubled by the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* story from July 2004 entitled, "Wounded and Forgotten," which reported that almost 600,000 veterans were eligible for benefits but not receiving them, simply because they didn't know they qualified. To address this problem I introduced the Veterans Benefits Outreach Act, bipartisan legislation that calls for the VA to develop a strategy each year to reach out to veterans who are not receiving benefits for which they are eligible. As a result veterans would become more informed about the benefits our country has promised them and get access to those resources they need and deserve.

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* also published a story entitled, "Battling the VA," concerning wrongfully denied benefits. In response, I am requesting the Government Accountability Office to fully investigate this matter and report back to Congress.

For over 200 years, our nation has been protected by brave men and women who put their county before themselves and many times before their families. I admire these service men and women who have courageously served our country, and I feel that it is time that we take care of and protect them, just as they cared for and protected the United States and its citizens. I will continue to fight for our veterans as their advocate for better access to medical care, more benefits for their survivors, and greater education on benefits and resources available to our nation's veterans.



Senator Coleman meets with Evelyn Cox in Luverne, MN. Cox was a Marine Sergeant stationed in Washington, DC with the Armed Forces Staff College during WWII.