

House OKs expanded health benefits for veterans

Record budget
Programs include better
traumatic brain injury
screening and research

By **JIM ABRAMS**
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WASHINGTON — The House approved a spate of bills Wednesday to benefit veterans, including one aimed at improving screening and treatment of veterans with traumatic brain injuries.

The House also agreed to ex-

tend health care eligibility for combat veterans, provide more chiropractic care and expand outreach programs to ensure that veterans get the benefits they deserve.

The bills “keep our contract with our nation’s veterans and there’s no better time than just before Memorial Day to say thank you,” said Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Filner, D-Calif.

On Tuesday a House Appropriations subcommittee approved a record budget for Veterans Affairs programs for the fiscal

year beginning in October, including the largest single increase in veterans health care funding in history.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., in a meeting with veterans service organizations Wednesday, said Democrats promised a new direction when they captured the congressional majority and “nowhere is that more important than in our treatment of our troops and our veterans.”

Congress is now debating the Iraq war “ferociously,” Filner told the veterans, with Demo-

crats taking the lead in calling for the withdrawal of U.S. troops. But “we are not going to confuse the war and the warrior.”

The bills passed Wednesday included:

H.R. 2199, which sets up care facilities at four geographically placed locations to deal with traumatic brain injury, which sponsor Rep. Michael Michaud, D-Maine, called the “signature wound of this war” in Iraq.

The bill also orders mandatory screening of veterans for traumatic brain injury, or TBI,

sets up a registry of those who show symptoms, authorizes \$70 million over four years for research into TBI and forms a committee on the care of veterans with brain injuries.

H.R. 612, which ensures that those who served in combat in the Persian Gulf War or later hostilities are eligible for health care for five years after their service ends, instead of the current two years. It would cost \$115 million through 2012.

H.R. 1470, which requires that chiropractic care be available at 75 VA medical centers by

the end of 2009 and all medical centers by the end of 2011.

H.R. 67, which sets up a grant program for state and local veterans’ outreach programs to ensure that veterans are receiving the benefits they are entitled to.

H.R. 2239, which expands eligibility for vocational rehabilitation benefits for severely injured service members and allows the VA to extend vocational rehabilitation and employment benefits to injured service members before they are discharged from active duty.