

## Much Work Remains As We Move Into 2010!

I hope you had a wonderful Christmas season, and I wish each of you the very best for a happy and healthy New Year.

While 2009 was a good year in general; we are looking forward to an even better year ahead. **Last year NAUS helped repel threats against VA and TRICARE healthcare benefits, secure assured funding for VA healthcare, provide a 3.4 percent pay raise for our military personnel (a half-percent more than the Administration requested), extend TRICARE Standard to Gray Area retirees and enact a long list of initiatives to protect absentee voting rights for military personnel and their families.** The passage of each was a major victory when you consider the fact they came about in an era of extreme budget constraints.

At the same time however, Congress failed to adopt legislation last year addressing other key NAUS goals like expanding concurrent receipt, repealing the SBP/DIC offset or providing much deserved recognition to WWII Merchant Mariners. These initiatives, and others like them will remain high on our priority list for 2010. And the good news is that pending bills will "roll over" to the next session meaning we can continue to build on existing levels of support for key issues without having to start all over.

**Topping our priority list this year will be the preservation of military and veterans healthcare benefits.** We can't rule out another attempt by DoD to raise TRICARE fees and quite frankly, based on past history alone it is expected. Many readers of the Journal are worried that this important earned benefit will be taken away or severely diminished by the ongoing healthcare reform effort in Congress. Their concerns are not misplaced because Congress still has a lot of work to do in this area. **The House-passed reform bill contains language protecting VA and TRICARE benefits but the Senate version being debated as I write this message, does not. We are working with our supporters in that chamber to fix that.** Even if that effort is successful, these protections must still survive the Conference Committee tasked with resolving differences between the House and Senate versions. History is fraught with examples of well-intentioned efforts prior to conference action that were dropped (intentionally or by accident) or altered as part of the negotiation process.

Another unanswered concern pertaining to healthcare reform is how slashing more than \$500 billion from future Medicare spending might impact TRICARE beneficiaries. In truth, we probably won't have the final answer for years to come but it stands to reason these cuts may permeate throughout the entire Medicare system. Given the close ties between Medicare and TRICARE, this concern bears merit, and more importantly, our continued attention.

As the year closed, Congress finally completed action on the remaining fiscal year 2010 appropriations bills.

With a grand stroke, it rolled six of the seven remaining bills into a single bill, called an "omnibus package," holding back the must-pass defense bill as a vehicle for a number of measures sought by leadership. One of the many provisions attached to defense appropriations was language to temporarily block a scheduled 21.2 percent cut in Medicare and TRICARE reimbursement to doctors on Jan. 1, 2010.

The postponement of these scheduled cuts is, of course, welcome news. Given the potential damage these cuts would have had on access to health care for Medicare and TRICARE patients, congressional action was not only timely, it was critical. However, it does not resolve the need for a more permanent fix. Finding agreement for a long-term solution remains one of our top priorities in the Second Session of the 111th Congress.

We also hope Members of Congress will pay closer attention to the budget and funding process. 2009 marked the 15th straight year Congress failed to pass annual funding bills on time and this trend of inaction and misplaced priorities contributes to the low satisfaction rates we see regarding Congress lately."

As always, you can find in-depth coverage on the issues described above and many others in our outstanding Legislative Update section beginning on page 12. Also, read about the NAUS Board of Directors and Annual Membership meetings held in November. I remind you that knowledge is the first line of defense in any conflict and with the given economic climate and existing budget challenges, defending your earned benefits has never been more important. I'm sure you will find this information helpful.

**And with your continued support I assure you NAUS is up to the challenge of facing whatever the New Year brings. Together, we will ensure the voice of the uniformed service member is heard loud and clear in 2010.**



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