

President's budget released today allocates \$120 million for the hospital. In order to insure the swift completion of the Lake Nona hospital it is imperative that the VA receive full funding in this budget year.

Today, there are more than 26.5 million veterans living in the United States and Puerto Rico with more than 1.8 million of them residing in the State of Florida. That is the second highest total in America, second only to California. More than one-third of these live in the Central Florida area alone.

According to the VA, Central Florida is the number one destination for combat veterans 65 years of age or older. It is also the number one area for veterans who have 50 percent or more service connected disability and 18 percent of our veterans have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has estimated the cost to complete this hospital at \$597 million. This hospital is a top priority for the VA and is badly needed in central Florida. It is vital that the remaining \$537 million, to finish construction, is included in the Fiscal Year 2009 Military Construction appropriations bill.

I hope you will consider the inclusion of these funds as you work through the many important requests during the FY09 appropriations process.

Sincerely,

TOM FEENEY,
Member of Congress.

LETTER TO HIS HOLINESS BENE-
DICT XVI FROM REPRESENTA-
TIVE McCOTTER

HON. THADDEUS G. McCOTTER

OF MICHIGAN

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, July 29, 2008

Mr. McCOTTER. Madam Speaker, today I rise to place into the RECORD my letter to His Holiness Benedict XVI concerning the persecution of the Christian community in Iraq.

JULY 24, 2008.

His Holiness BENEDEICT XVI,
Apostolic Palace,
Vatican City State, Europe.

YOUR HOLINESS: It is with great respect that I write to you as both a Member of Congress and a Roman Catholic. Your witness to justice and advocacy of the plight of the persecuted is an instrument of hope.

Your Holiness has emphasized the importance to the Church of the well-being of the ancient Christian community of Iraq. It is now widely acknowledged to be an "endangered" community, with nearly half of its members forced to flee Iraq over the past five years. As the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Migration & Refugee Services reported last July: "Especially critical is the plight of Iraq's minority religious communities, including Christians and Mandaeans (or Sabaeans). These groups, whose home has been what is now Iraq for many centuries, are literally being obliterated—not because they are fleeing generalized violence but because they are being specifically and viciously victimized by Islamic extremists and, in some cases, common criminals."

As you meet with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki tomorrow, please know that the United States is shifting its burden to the Iraqi government. It is imperative that he acknowledge and commit to the future well-being of Iraq's endangered religious minorities.

Concerned Americans, including the ChaldoAssyrian Christians in my Congres-

sional district, are anxious that the Maliki government address the following issues to ensure that the Iraqi Christians, who have made contributions to Iraqi society far beyond what their numbers suggest, and other smallest minorities are able to maintain their presence as part of the national fabric of that country: Security, including protection for their vulnerable clergy, development assistance, humanitarian aid for the large number of displaced among them, educational opportunities, full civic participation, including thorough measures to guarantee free and fair provincial elections later this year that would allow them just representation, and equal treatment under the constitution that would allow political autonomy in the Nineveh Plains.

Be assured that I will remain actively engaged with the ChaldoAssyrian Church and civic leaders in the United States and Iraq to protect the fundamental dignity of this oppressed ancient community of Iraq.

The psalmist seeking deliverance from his enemies remembers the great mercy of God. "Blessed be the Lord! For he has shown me the wonders of his love in a besieged city. . . . Be strong and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord" (Psalm 31: 21,24) The Christians of Iraq have suffered threats of violence, kidnappings, murder and being exiled from their ancient homeland. And yet, they are resilient in the face of what is certainly an existential threat. Their great faith and your advocacy on their behalf, give them hope.

I have the honor to profess myself with the most profound respect, your Holiness, sincerely yours,

THADDEUS G. McCOTTER,
Member of Congress.

EARMARK DECLARATION

HON. PETER T. KING

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, July 29, 2008

Mr. KING of New York. I submit the following:

Requesting Member: Congressman PETER T. KING

Bill Number: H.R. 6599.

Account: Military Construction, Air National Guard.

Legal Name of Requesting Entity: New York National Guard.

Address of Requesting Entity: 330 Old Niskayuna Road, Latham, NY 12110.

Description of Request: \$7.5 million will be used to construct Phase II of the Pararescue Facility. The use of taxpayer dollars is justified because The Francis Gabreski Air National Guard Base improves pararescue operations and survival equipment functions on Long Island.

INTRODUCING THE FOSTER
CHILDREN OPPORTUNITY ACT

HON. FORTNEY PETE STARK

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, July 29, 2008

Mr. STARK. Madam Speaker, I rise today with Representative XAVIER BECERRA to introduce legislation aimed at ensuring all foster children have a fighting chance to lead healthy and productive lives after they leave care.

Each year, hundreds and perhaps thousands of abused and neglected children leave the child welfare system and become illegal immigrants through no fault of their own. Under current law, abused and neglected immigrant children in the child welfare system are eligible to become legal permanent residents under the Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) provisions of immigration law. In order to obtain SIJS, a court must find that the child is in long-term foster care with no opportunity for family reunification (either in the U.S. or in their home country). If a child also meets additional immigration criteria, such as not having a criminal record, they can become a Legal Permanent Resident. Once a child leaves the child welfare system, however, they are no longer eligible for SIJS. A series of articles in the Los Angeles Times and other reports have documented how children have aged-out of foster care or been adopted without obtaining SIJS. The result is that these abused and neglected children are forced into the underground economy, are extremely vulnerable to exploitation, and are under the constant threat of deportation back to a country that is unfamiliar to them and may be home to their abuser.

The Foster Children Opportunity Act aims to correct this terrible situation by requiring that all children in the foster care system be screened for SIJS eligibility and assisted through the legal process to obtain SIJS and eventually Legal Permanent Resident Status. The bill will provide technical assistance to help child welfare agencies better understand this problem and provide resources to train judges, attorneys, and other legal workers in a complex area of law.

This legislation will not change any aspect of current immigration law, nor will it result in any adults who have engaged in illegal behavior from gaining legal status. The bill simply aims to protect abused and neglected children by ensuring they have a fighting chance at leading healthy and productive lives when they exit foster care.

The Foster Children Opportunity Act will:

Require State plans for foster care and adoption assistance to document procedures to assist immigrant children in obtaining SIJS, Legal Permanent Residency, or other appropriate forms of immigration relief when doing so is in the child's best interest;

Require child welfare agencies to assist immigrant children, and document their efforts, in obtaining SIJS, Legal Permanent Residency, or other appropriate forms of relief under immigration law before the child exits foster care;

Require juvenile courts and child welfare agencies to determine whether filing petitions or appointing immigration counsel for a potentially SIJS eligible child is in that child's best interest;

Permit the Court Improvement Program to use funds to educate and train judges and lawyers to assist SIJS-eligible foster children;

Direct the Secretary of the Health and Human Services Agency, in consultation with the Secretary of Homeland Security, to provide technical assistance to child welfare agencies in carrying out the provisions of this bill.

Members on all sides of the immigration debate should put down our differences when it comes to protecting abused and neglected children. We should not let the poisonous politics of immigration interfere with helping foster