

Washington, DC (October 12, 2011) – This week, the U.S. House of Representatives passed two veterans packages that include bills introduced by Rep. Gus Bilirakis (FL-09), Vice Chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee.

"At 1.7 million, Florida has the second-largest population of military veterans in the U.S. and we must ensure that they receive unhindered access to the services and benefits they have earned," Bilirakis said.

By a voice vote on Tuesday, the House passed H.R. 2349, the Veterans' Benefits Training Improvement Act, which includes language Bilirakis introduced as [H.R. 1826 in order to reinstate the criminal penalties](#) on any individual who charges veterans unauthorized fees for claims before the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Though it is already a violation of the law to charge a veteran for filing a benefits claim before the VA, no federal punishment exists. The bill would make this offense punishable by up to one year in prison and or fines.

"This hole leaves the door open for fly-by-night companies and con artists to take advantage of veterans, unlawfully charging them hundreds or even thousands of dollars," Bilirakis said. "Crooked practices must be stopped, and this enforcement mechanism is a critical first step."

On Wednesday, the House passed H.R. 2433, the Veterans' Opportunity to Work Act, which included language Bilirakis introduced as [H.R. 2274, which will create an accountability mechanism](#) to ensure that the Post 9/11 Educational Assistance Program is adequately providing the education benefits intended.

"This will help ensure that the program is efficiently and effectively providing our nation's veterans with an education," Bilirakis said. "It is essential that we know the number of people using the benefit, expenditures, and the number of credit hours, certificates and degrees earned by beneficiaries, and my legislation requires that the VA report those numbers on an annual basis."

The bills will now be forwarded to the Senate for further consideration, and Bilirakis will work

with the Senate to ensure that these vital measures are taken up.