

Washington, D.C. (July 24, 2012) – U.S. Reps. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL), Tom Rooney (R-FL), Kurt Schrader (D-OR), and Ron Barber (D-AZ) today introduced bipartisan legislation to strengthen the Veterans Affairs (VA) pension program and combat scams against retired veterans.

The Protecting Veterans Pensions Act would address a common scam in which unethical financial advisors and firms prey on elderly and disabled veterans by promising to help them qualify for VA pension benefits if they divert their assets into trusts or annuities. While the firms profit from those trusts or annuities, they are often poor investments for seniors, leaving veterans without access to adequate financial resources. These firms further profit by charging veterans exorbitant fees and selling them additional, costly services. Since VA only considers net worth at the time a veteran applies for benefits, the Department cannot determine if an applicant has diverted assets in order to qualify. The Rooney-Schrader bill would close this loophole by creating a three-year "look-back" period to determine eligibility.

"As Vice Chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee, I strive to be an advocate for veterans and their families in Tampa Bay and throughout the country," Bilirakis said. "I have made it a priority to ensure that veterans receive the benefits they have earned through their service to our nation, and that includes protection against scams and people trying to take advantage of our nation's heroes."

"As a veteran myself, I am outraged by the actions of those who would prey on America's elderly and disabled veterans," Rooney said. "These financial predators are scamming their victims out of the resources they need, while undermining the VA pension program for the veterans who rely on it. By creating a three-year look-back period, we can strengthen the pension program and put an end to this fraud against our nation's heroes."

"It is the aim of this bipartisan legislation to protect veterans and their families from predatory financial advisors, who are abusing taxpayer money and selling veterans unnecessary and costly financial products," said Schrader. "We have a duty to those who serve to provide them with the safety and security that was provided for us while they were in uniform."

"It is an honor for me to represent a district that 100,000 veterans call home," Barber said. "But with that honor comes the responsibility to ensure that these veterans, who stepped forward to serve our nation, are not now defrauded. We must stop 'pension poachers' from taking advantage of our veterans."