A major win for veterans was registered Sept. 27 when the Veterans’ Mental Health and Other Care Improvements Act of 2008 was passed by Congress and sent to the President for his signature.

The bill (S.2162) has been significantly revised since its introduction last year to include a number of provisions important to the DAV.

“DAV’s grassroots efforts and our Stand Up for Veterans initiative calls for addressing the needs for all veterans, particularly those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, who have incurred devastating injuries and disabilities,” said National Legislative Director Joseph A. Violante. “This bill is a step forward in improving care for those with traumatic brain injury, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other psychological wounds of war.”

Specifically, this bill expands mental health care and treatment for substance use disorders for veterans. It sets a standard minimum level of care and authorizes $3 million for a two-year pilot program to explore providing assessment, education and treatment of substance abuse online.

It also authorizes $8 million through fiscal 2012 for the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to conduct research into co-morbid PTSD and substance use disorders. It also enables VA to provide mental health services, including counseling, to veterans’ families, and set up a program to aid the families of returning service members.
The bill would also mandate a review of VA’s residential mental health care facilities, to ensure they are adequately staffed, and require a review of VA facilities to ensure they are up to par for female veterans.

Violante credited the thousands of DAV members who urged their lawmakers to support improvements in mental health services with passage of this measure. He said much more needs to be done.

“When the new Congress convenes in 2009,” he said, “the DAV will be ready to work with lawmakers to make further improvements in care and services for veterans and their caregivers.”