

Marine on a Mission

A West Valley lawmaker with an Ivy League education wants to outflank Arizona's budget cuts to support poor families and fellow veterans. Can he win?

WHEN RUBEN GALLEGO first returned from his Iraq deployment in 2005, he no longer cared about politics or helping his community.

After losing his best friend in combat, Gallego grew angry from his war experiences and the lack of services he saw for veterans back home. After all, he served in the 3rd Battalion, 25th Marine Regiment, Lima Company, an infantry unit Gallego says saw more combat than most. The 3/25 – as it's often called – lost 46 Marines and two Navy corpsmen between January 2005 and January 2006, according to the Marines' website.

Now the very anger that pushed Gallego away from politics has drawn him back to them, he says. Gallego just completed his first legislative session as the Arizona State Representative for District 16, an area that includes most of southwest Phoenix and part of Guadalupe.

As a Democrat, a veteran, and a first-generation American, Gallego can empathize with many of his constituents. He grew up with a single mother who supported him and his three sisters, and Gallego remembers days of sharing a bed in his aunt's basement with all three sisters. He also recalls how his working mother could not afford health insurance for him and his sisters. District 16 faces a similar dilemma: Many residents fall into that "working poor" category and are unable to afford health insurance, Gallego says.

Yet today, this 31-year-old Harvard graduate can testify to the payoff of community support and hard work. It's this background, combined with his service in the Marines, that prompted Gallego to tackle two priorities for District 16 during his freshman legislative session: veterans' issues and the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS), the state's Medicaid program.

Over the past three years, more than \$1 billion in state and federal funds for AHCCCS has been cut, says Jennifer Carusetta, chief legislative liaison for AHCCCS. According to the Arizona State Legislature's website, Gallego sponsored at least four bills this past session supporting AHCCCS.

These bills tackled issues such as fund-

ing for non-experimental organ transplants and screening of AHCCCS applicants for veteran status. Any veterans who apply for AHCCCS would in turn have their eligibility transferred to the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services for additional care. Although the bills concerning transplants are still awaiting their first reading, Gallego says he is working with AHCCCS to improve its current system of screening for veteran status.

"We [District 16] don't have many doctors, many primary care physicians, many urgent cares. So when you shut down AHCCCS, you potentially cut out more health care facilities [for the public]," Gallego says.

His first *successful* bill, however, helps Gallego's fellow veterans. House Bill 2410, which Republican Governor Jan Brewer signed into law April 12, grants in-state tuition status to any veteran honorably discharged from the Armed Forces who resides in Arizona, even if that veteran has lived in

the state less than a year. According to the bill's summary on the Arizona Legislature's website, only New Mexico, Minnesota and Texas currently provide the same benefit.

"It's one of my proudest [bills]," Gallego says, smiling.

It was also a bipartisan effort. Gallego developed the bill with Republican State Representative Ted Vogt, a U.S. Air Force veteran from Tucson who served in Afghanistan and represents a huge swath of southeastern Arizona.

"Ruben is just an extremely intelligent and fun person to work with," Vogt says. "There is nothing more amazing than the men and women who volunteer to serve our country."

— Shari Lopatin

