

THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET

A Budget for Veterans by Veterans

www.independentbudget.org

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Veterans Betrayed by Meager Health Care Funding

WASHINGTON, July 18—Organizations representing millions of America's veterans say the men and women who sacrificed for our country have been betrayed by inadequate funding levels for their health care contained in a fiscal year 2004 appropriations bill funding the Department of Veterans Affairs and other federal agencies.

The VA-HUD Independent Agencies appropriations bill, which calls for a \$1.4 billion increase over last year and approximately the President's request, is wholly inadequate to provide health care to sick and disabled veterans and represents a flagrant disregard of promises made to veterans by this Congress, according to the authors of *The Independent Budget* (<http://www.independentbudget.org/>).

Despite assurances from House of Representative leaders earlier this year that funding for veterans health care would meet demands placed on the system, House appropriators abandoned that pledge and approved Bush Administration funding levels nearly \$2 billion below the budget resolution recommendation approved by the House three months ago. The plan also approved the Bush Administration request to increase co-payments for prescription drugs and outpatient visits and charge certain veterans a \$250 annual enrollment tax to get their health care at VA." Members of the House Leadership specifically and personally assured national staff of the four veterans organizations that the enrollment fee and co-payment increases would not be assumed in the fiscal year 2004 budget resolution.

"So much for promises. We believe providing veterans with timely access to the full range of health benefits earned through their military service is a national obligation," the authors of *The Independent Budget* said. "The funding levels and cost-shifting schemes are specifically designed to ration care at VA hospitals, increase waiting times for services and rely on higher fees and co-payments from certain sick and disabled veterans to subsidize the health care for others."

The Independent Budget developed by AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America and Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States recommended a \$27.2 billion appropriation for VA health care, a \$3.3 billion increase over the current level.

The Conference Agreement on the fiscal year 2004 budget resolution provides \$29.96 billion in discretionary budget authority, an increase of \$3.4 billion, or 12.9 percent – nearly all of which is expected to be for VA medical programs. "Providing a wholly inadequate \$1.4 billion increase calls into question all of the press releases and news conferences touting this Congress' commitment to the men and women who have served this nation," said *The Independent Budget* authors.

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IMMEDIATE ACTION REQUIRED

HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS PANEL ABANDONS PRIOR PLEDGE TO FULLY FUND VA HEALTH CARE

BILL GOES TO HOUSE FLOOR THIS WEEK - VA HEALTH CARE \$1.8 BILLION BELOW PREVIOUSLY PROMISED LEVELS

CONTACT YOU MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES TODAY

Earlier this year, after a bitter fight, the House and Senate approved budget guidelines for the coming year calling for a \$3.2 billion increase in VA health care funding for fiscal year 2004. That level closely matched the recommendation, contained in the Independent Budget developed by PVA, AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, and Veterans of Foreign Wars. We were assured by House Leadership that funding for veterans' health care would not be cut and that levels would fully meet the demands on the VA health care system.

Last night, the House Committee on Appropriations approved a funding bill that ignored the previous pledge and reverted to funding levels submitted by the Administration calling for an increase of only \$1.4 billion for the coming year - \$1.8 billion below the Independent Budget recommendation and the level approved previously in the House and Senate Budget Resolution for FY 2004.

Reacting to outrage from PVA and other veterans organizations the Appropriations Committee did remove from the bill a provision recommended by the Administration that would raise co-payments for outpatient visits, more than double co-pays for prescription drugs and charge an annual \$250 enrollment tax for Category 7 and 8 veterans.

THE HOUSE LEADERSHIP PLANS TO BRING THIS BILL TO THE HOUSE FLOOR - THIS WEEK - BEFORE THEY ADJOURN FOR THE AUGUST RECESS ON JULY 29TH.

THEIR HOPE IS TO ACT QUICKLY AND SNEAK THIS BILL THROUGH THIS WEEK TO AVOID OBVIOUS PROLONGED BACKLASH FROM THE VETERAN COMMUNITY DURING THE AUGUST BREAK.

At this point it is not clear what amendments could be offered to restore the funding, or whether those amendments would be blocked under House procedures, or would fail.

The main thing to do at this point is **TO STOP THE BILL FROM GOING TO THE HOUSE FLOOR AND SUPPORT AN EFFORT TO SEND IT BACK TO COMMITTEE TO BE FIXED.**

CONTACT YOUR MEMBER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES WITH THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE: ACT NOW!

Don't let this inadequate funding bill go to the House Floor. Send it back to the Appropriations Committee to be fixed with higher funding levels approved by the House earlier this year in the Budget Resolution for next year and promised to veterans by the House Leadership.

The House Appropriations Bill accepts Administration-proposed funding levels that are grossly inadequate to meet the health care needs of veterans next year.

The \$1.4 billion increase in veterans' health care proposed by the Administration and approved by the Committee is designed to limit funding for the VA health care system and further ration VA health care services. There are still over 134,000 veterans across the country waiting for appointments. That number will increase dramatically if this bill becomes law.

The House Leadership earlier this year personally assured the veterans organizations that VA funding would increase by an additional \$1.8 billion over the level contained in the Appropriations Committee's bill.

Daily casualties from Iraq and Afghanistan should remind all members of the House of the continuing obligation to meet the needs of disabled veterans in a first class manner. VA health care should not be funded on the cheap. We owe veterans more than that.

Don't let this bill go to the House Floor.

See attached Independent Budget letter sent to all members of the House of Representatives.