Battle over benefits puts legislation on hold

Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, postponed discussion of H.R. 5286—the VA Construction and Lease Authorization, Health and Benefits Enhancement Act—after DAV and other leading veterans service organizations (VSOs) pointed out to lawmakers that the bill would result in a 10-year reduction in cost-of-living or COLA benefits for veterans in the form of a round down.

This bill authorizes construction and renovation for a number of VA facilities. While we fully support construction and enhancement of VA’s infrastructure, DAV expressed concern because the projects the bill authorizes rely on veterans to pay for them with their disability compensation.

That same day, DAV Washington Headquarters Executive Director Garry Augustine sent a letter to House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., explaining that the legislation would cost veterans dearly by rounding down the percentage increase in their disability compensation benefits.

“If enacted, this round-down would take more than $1.6 billion from the pockets of ill and injured veterans, many of whom rely solely on this benefit to support themselves and their families,” Augustine said in the letter.

Augustine said the 10-year cost-of-living adjustment would be the largest reduction in veterans benefits that Congress has sought in recent history. Outpatient facilities should not be built “on the backs of veterans,” he said, calling for Congress to find other ways to come up with money to pay for the Department of Veterans Affairs’ construction projects.

We are calling on Congress to find a bipartisan solution to
the funding problem. However, House Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Jeff Miller (R-FL) offered no estimate on when this issue would be resolved, allowing the bill to move forward. “I look forward to hearing from these groups regarding their ideas for how to move forward with this important project without violating budget rules or adjusting other VA benefits and services,” he said.