



Talking Points 2014 Mid-Winter Conference

- 1. Advance Appropriations for All VA Programs, Services and Benefits**
- 2. Comprehensive Support For Caregivers Of Veterans Of All Eras**
- 3. Department Of Veterans Affairs Fiscal Year 2015 Budget**



Advance Appropriations for All VA Programs, Services and Benefits

The government shutdown last October confirmed what has become increasingly clear: the federal budget and appropriations process is broken. Over the past 25 years, the full-year budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has been enacted by the start of the fiscal year only three times. Consequently, VA has been hampered by dozens of short-term continuing resolutions (CRs) that have created financial uncertainty and prevented efficient planning and execution of funds for veterans programs. Without knowing how much funding would be available before the fiscal year begins, VA has been hindered in hiring new employees, procuring major equipment, signing contracts or starting new initiatives to improve the delivery of benefits and services to the men and women who served.

In 2009, as the result of a multi-year grassroots advocacy effort by DAV and other VSOs, Congress passed, and the President signed, the Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act (Public Law 111-81) to provide advance appropriations for veterans medical care programs. Advance appropriations allow Congress to approve funding one year in advance of each fiscal year, guaranteeing timely and predictable funding is already available, even during budget stalemates or government shutdowns. While many VA offices and services were closed during the recent shutdown, VA hospitals and clinics were able to provide uninterrupted health care. By contrast, the shutdown delayed, disrupted and suspended other critical services for veterans. Claims processing to reduce the backlog was slowed, activities at national cemeteries were scaled back, and vital medical research projects were nearly suspended.

Building on the universally acclaimed success of advance appropriations for VA medical programs, House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Jeff Miller (R-Fla.) and Ranking Minority Member Mike Michaud (D-Me.) last year introduced the Putting Veterans Funding First Act (H.R. 813) to extend advance appropriations to all VA discretionary programs. Senators Mark Begich (D- Alaska) and John Boozman (R-Ark.) introduced companion legislation (S. 932) in the Senate. On August 1, 2013, the House VA Committee approved H.R. 813 unanimously. On November 19, 2013 the Senate VA Committee approved S. 932, with an amendment to include mandatory VA benefits, by a 13 to 1 vote. Including mandatory accounts would ensure that even during a prolonged government shutdown, veterans benefits, such as disability compensation, will be paid on time without interruption.

Advance appropriations will not increase spending or add to the deficit since the funding levels are still set by Congress every year; however the law authorizing that spending will be approved well before annual budget battles begin. In addition, after approving the funding levels in advance, Congress has an additional year to make adjustments if the need for resources rises or falls leading up to that year. Furthermore, every oversight tool Congress uses today for regular appropriations will be available for advance appropriations.

- ***Both the House and the Senate must quickly bring the Putting Veterans Funding First Act up for a vote and send it to the President for approval.***

Comprehensive Support For Caregivers of Veterans Of All Eras

Studies show caregivers improve patients' health, reduce readmissions, and delay institutionalization, decreasing health care costs. However, caregivers often make personal sacrifices in terms of their own health and well-being by serving in this role.

A study conducted by the National Alliance for Caregiving found the vast majority of caregivers of disabled veterans from all war eras reported increased stress or anxiety and sleep deprivation. The report shows declines in healthy behaviors of caregivers—such as exercising, eating habits and keeping their own medical appointments. Over half of the caregivers in the study had cut back their number of work hours and almost half stopped working or took early retirement, resulting in financial hardship.

Congress enacted Public Law 111-163, requiring the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide comprehensive caregiver assistance and services to family caregivers of veterans injured on or after September 11, 2001. These services include caregiver education and training, respite care, mental health services, a monthly stipend, and enrollment in CHAMPVA for health care coverage.

Preliminary data suggests VA's caregiver support program is effective, and mirrors other research on multi-component caregiver support, significantly lifting caregiver burden, reducing costly inpatient stays, and delaying nursing home admissions.

Countless caregivers of veterans severely ill and injured from earlier wartime service are not eligible for VA's comprehensive support. After a lifetime of caregiving, many family members of severely disabled veterans are aging and their capacity to continue in their role is declining. Although most family caregivers continue to willingly undertake this role, they require support and services to mitigate the negative physical, emotional, and financial consequences of caregiving.

Pending in Congress are H.R. 3383 and S. 851, the Caregivers Expansion and Improvement Act of 2013, and this measure is included in section 303 of S. 1982, the Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act of 2014. If enacted, provisions in these bills would allow family caregivers of veterans with serious service-connected injuries or illnesses to receive comprehensive caregiver assistance from VA.

- ***Congress should authorize comprehensive supports, benefits, and services to family caregivers of veterans of all eras.***

Department of Veterans Affairs Fiscal Year 2015 Budget

Congress has yet to receive the Administration's fiscal year (FY) 2015 budget request. Indications are the Administration's budget will be submitted at the beginning of March 2014. DAV urges Congress to provide a total discretionary budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) of \$72.9 billion.

Failing to pass VA's budget on time and at adequate funding levels simply leads to one sad fact: our government is failing to meet its obligations to the heroes of our nation.

DAV and the co-authors of *The Independent Budget*, AMVETS, PVA, and VFW, call for the following:

- **Medical Care:** \$61.1 billion for FY 2015—\$2.3 billion more than what the Administration recommended (\$58.8 billion) in the FY 2015 advance appropriation last year;
- **Health care advanced appropriations:** \$62.4 billion for FY 2016;
- **Benefits processing:** \$2.5 billion—approximately \$44 million more than the FY 2014 appropriated level;
- **Major and Minor Construction:** \$3.9 billion for all construction programs—approximately \$2.7 billion more than the FY 2014 appropriated level and well below the true funding needs of construction projects that the VA must undertake; and
- **Medical and Prosthetic Research:** \$611 million, which is approximately \$25 million more than the FY 2014 appropriated level.

Of great concern to DAV and our VSO counterparts is the serious underfunding of VA construction accounts. From FY 2002 through 2014, *The Independent Budget* recommended \$23.5 billion for major and minor construction, yet less than \$13.5 billion was appropriated by Congress to keep rapidly aging facilities safe and operational for the proper care and treatment of millions of wounded, ill and injured veterans of all generations and for the staff who serve them.

- ***Congress should follow the recommendations of *The Independent Budget* in providing appropriations for fiscal year 2015 for VA and related programs.***
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DAV empowers veterans to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity. It is dedicated to a single purpose: fulfilling our promises to the men and women who served. DAV does this by ensuring that veterans and their families can access the full range of benefits available to them; fighting for the interests of America's injured heroes on Capitol Hill; and educating the public about the great sacrifices and needs of veterans transitioning back to civilian life. DAV, a non-profit organization with 1.2 million members, was founded in 1920 and chartered by the U. S. Congress in 1932. Learn more at www.dav.org.