

SAMPLE OP-EDS

September 30, 2014 at 2:00 p.m.

FIX THE VA FOR THE LONG RUN

By Ronald F. Hope

It might be a notable anniversary, but it's not one to celebrate—it's one from which we should learn. And one for which both Congress and the administration should make amends.

One year ago, on Oct. 1, 2013, the federal government shut down. For 16 days, tens of millions of Americans were left in limbo, not least our veterans. Though VA medical centers stayed open because their appropriations are approved in advance, work stopped on more than 250,000 veterans' disability claims awaiting appeals, burials at national cemeteries were scaled back and vital medical and prosthetic research projects were threatened. No one in their right mind wants a repeat of this dark period.

This year, thankfully, no government shutdown appears to be in the offing. But partisan gridlock and political dysfunction are still going strong, to the detriment of our veterans. Congress' failure to approve appropriations bills on time means that this Oct. 1—the start of fiscal year 2015—funding will be provided only through a short-term stop gap (known as a continuing resolution). This means that from now through Dec. 11—and if the past is any guide, perhaps much longer—the VA will not know how much money it has to meet its mission for the rest of the current fiscal year, which runs through Sept. 30, 2015.

Sadly, this is standard operating procedure. Continuing resolutions for the VA have been used in 23 out of the past 26 fiscal years, causing huge disruptions for the department and sabotaging its capacity to effectively plan and administer services for those who have risked their lives for our country.

Even worse, these annual appropriation delays are but one example of the political irresponsibility that has stretched the VA to the breaking point. Funding is not only unpredictable—it's inadequate. Year after year, the White House proposes and Congress appropriates far less than the VA says it needs. As a result, over the past 10 years, the VA has received billions less than what internal projections recommended; DAV estimates nearly \$8 billion less than needed. And investments in the VA's infrastructure have averaged between \$2 and \$3 billion annually, even though approximately \$60 billion is needed over the next 10 years.



Adding insult to injury are various gimmicks schemed up to try to paper over budgetary inadequacies. These go by such names as “projected savings,” “efficiencies,” “collections,” “carryovers” and “contingency funds”—but while they might make the numbers on a spreadsheet look better, they don’t actually do anything to help our nation’s veterans.

Without the resources to meet the needs of those it serves, the VA is forced either to ration care to current patients, or deny or delay entry into the VA medical system to new veterans. This is unacceptable.

America’s veterans need a long-term commitment to rebuild the VA—one that is backed by real resources. That has to start with Congress providing a funding stream that is both predictable and large enough to match the mission.

The good news is that this summer, Congress and the administration made a solid down payment of \$5 billion based on the additional \$17.6 billion the VA acknowledged it needs over the next three years. This investment is necessary to hire more medical staff, launch major infrastructure repairs and lease new facilities—all essential to ensuring the VA can serve the influx of veterans needing health care services.

Now, this down payment requires follow-through in appropriating the rest of the VA’s request. After all, if our government can pay for the wars it asks our troops to fight, it must find a way to pay—fully and honestly—for the treatment and services veterans need after they return home.

In addition, Congress should pass the bipartisan Putting Veterans Funding First Act, providing for advance appropriations of all VA operations, as is already done on the medical side. This will ensure that the VA knows its budget before the start of each fiscal year—improving management—and it will prevent cutoffs in benefits processing and payments to veterans that could occur in any future government shutdown. This bill has passed the House and Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committees. Now, congressional leaders should make it a top priority to enact this urgently-needed, non-controversial legislation during the lame duck session after the election.

When it comes to our veterans, elected officials often say all the right words, but all the great sentiments in the world won’t get a wounded veteran treatment for lost limbs, spinal cord damage, post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injuries. It’s time for our political leaders to match their words to their deeds, put their money where their mouths are, and guarantee realistic budgets and timely appropriations so the VA can, at long last, meet the needs of all veterans suffering due their service and sacrifice for our nation.

Ron Hope, a combat-wounded Vietnam War veteran, is national commander of nearly 1.3 million member DAV (Disabled American Veterans).