

President Releases 2018 Budget Request

VFW against penalizing veterans to pay for VA improvements

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WASHINGTON – The president’s federal spending plan for fiscal year 2018 adds more troops, aircraft, ships and ammunition to the military services. At the Department of Veterans Affairs, the budget provides for a number of program enhancements, as well as extends the veterans Choice Card program for a decade. The national commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. said there is much to like about the administration’s budget request, but he said proposals to financially penalize disabled veterans to pay for VA program enhancements is a nonstarter.

“The VFW fully supports all efforts to rebuild the military, to make our troops more ready to deploy, and to make them more lethal in all environments,” said VFW National Commander Brian Duffy. “We also fully support all initiatives that would increase a veteran’s access to care, but we are absolutely against forcing wounded, ill and injured veterans to pay for improvements elsewhere within the VA.”

The Defense Department’s \$639 billion request is \$52 billion above mandatory budget caps, which reflects the reality of a military that remains totally engaged in the global war on terrorism, plus all the new worldwide threats that have emerged since the Budget Control Act was passed in 2011. Regarding troop strength and military compensation, the president would increase overall end strength by 56,000 personnel, as well as increase military pay by 2.1 percent, housing by 3.2 percent, and the rations allowance by 3.4 percent. The plan would also extend the government’s Thrift Savings Program match for enlisted personnel beyond 26 years of service, as well as boost military construction and enhance family support programs, such as child care and spouse employment assistance.

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More details are still being sought regarding an initiative to merge the military's eight Tricare health care plans into two, as well as recommended increases to pharmacy copayments, annual enrollment fees for military retirees younger than 65, and the initiative to link future enrollment fee increases to private sector medical inflation.

The 6 percent increase to VA's discretionary funding, up to \$82.1 billion, is also welcomed. It would increase community care, long-term care, mental health and gender-specific care, and expand services to help end veteran homelessness. What is concerning, Duffy explained, is that the administration is proposing to end Individual Unemployability (IU) benefits for certain severely disabled veterans who are unable to work due to their service-connected disabilities, as well as to reinstitute an initiative to round down cost-of-living disability pay increases, something the VFW opposed in the past and continues to strongly oppose.

The VFW national commander said his organization supports increased funding for the VA and for extending the Choice Program, but that the VFW is against extending the mandatory funding authorization that created the Choice Program three years ago.

"The continued failure of Congress to eliminate sequestration is forcing the administration to propose cuts to veterans benefits and cap GI Bill expenditures in order to expand the Choice Program under mandatory spending instead of including the much-used program in the VA's discretionary community care account," explained Duffy.

"The FY 2018 budget process has just begun," he said. "We will now work with the administration and Congress to secure a quality budget for military and veterans' programs in order to fulfill our nation's first obligation to provide for a strong national defense, and to care for the men and women who answer the call to serve."

Read the new budget request [here](#).