

FY09 VA Budget Proposal A Good Start; VFW Calls on Congress To Improve It

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WASHINGTON — The national commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. is calling the president's budget proposal for the Department of Veterans Affairs a good start, and is now asking Congress to improve upon the funding and policy package. He is also urging Congress to make sure that the VA receives its funding before the government's new fiscal year begins on Oct. 1.

"Overall, we are pleased with the recommended \$1.7 billion increase in discretionary funding," said George Lisicki, a Vietnam combat veteran from Carteret, N.J. "However, we point to serious funding shortfalls in critical areas such as medical research and construction, and will work with Congress to see that these programs are fully funded so that no veteran is denied service."

Under this budget package funding for major and minor construction covering everything from veterans' hospitals to regional offices would be cut almost in half. In addition, research funding for the signature wounds from the war – such as Traumatic Brain Injuries and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – and research for prosthetics, burn treatment, blind rehabilitation, and other vital areas would be reduced by \$38 million. Lisicki said the VFW demands that funding for these programs be fully and expeditiously increased to reflect the true costs of war, and the nation's obligation to her defenders in their time of need.

The VFW also vehemently opposes a recommendation for separate legislation to create annual enrollment fees – ranging from \$250 to \$750 – for nonservice-connected disabled veterans in Categories 7 and 8, and to increase their pharmacy copayment fees from \$8 to \$15 per 30-day supply per prescription. Lisicki said this would place an intolerable burden on many veterans in need of care, some of whom would be unable to afford the fee increases.

"Our nation is at war and the VA is a valuable partner in that fight," said Lisicki, who leads the largest organization of war veterans in the country. "The administration's proposal is a good start; now it is the responsibility of Congress to ensure the final budget is approved on

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time, and to guarantee that the final amount is what is needed to care for our veterans of past, present and future."