

VFW Calls President's Budget for Veterans a Good Starting Point

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The White House released its fiscal year 2014 budget proposal this morning, outlining how the Administration intends to fund veterans' programs across the federal government in the coming year. The national commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. appreciates proposed increases in veterans' funding across the board, but raised lingering concerns about the ability of the federal government to meet the needs the veterans' community.

"The VFW is pleased that the Administration continues to make veterans' programs a national priority and we appreciate that the President understands that our nation has asolemn obligation to care for our wounded, ill and injured veterans after they come home from war," said John E. Hamilton, who leads the 2 million-member VFW and its Auxiliaries. "This budget is a good starting point, but even with this year's proposed increases in funding for veterans' programs, the VFW remains concerned that VA will not be able to adequately provide services to veterans as the wars draw down and the Pentagon plans to shrink the active duty force, driving more veterans to seek out care and earned benefits."

The proposed budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs in FY 2014 is \$152.7 billion, which includes \$86 billion in mandatory benefits such as disability compensation and pension. The remaining \$66 billion is in discretionary funding, primarily for the Veterans Health Administration, which represents a 4 percent increase over last year's discretionary budget. However, the proposal still falls more than \$2 billion short in areas like major construction and medical research, as recommended by the *Independent Budget*, which the VFW co-authors with AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans and Paralyzed Veterans of America.

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

The VFW national commander said he was also pleased to see the budget focus on issues like reducing the disability claims backlog, improving access to health care resources, mental health, gender-specific care, transition assistance and information technology. The continued investment in technology is critical to solving the disability claims backlog as VA moves closer to a fully-automated disability claims process.

However, Hamilton also said that Congress must consider substantially increasing funding for medical and prosthetic research, medical facilities and major construction to ensure that VA can keep pace with an ever-increasing demand on its services and ever-evolving needs of the veterans' community such as unknown environmental exposures and other potential hazards of the war zone.

"Now that our troops are coming home, VA will need to be prepared to care for these men and women for decades to come," said Hamilton, a Marine Corps Vietnam Veteran who earned three Purple Hearts during his time in service. "VA must have efficient facilities in order to provide a continuum of quality care. VA cannot do this with facilities and resources predating my time in uniform."

The Administration's proposed budget also included an increase to Department of Labor funding for Veterans Employment and Training Service, or VETS, which is responsible for helping veterans transition into the civilian workforce. The proposal for VETS in FY 2014 is \$300 million, which is nearly a 13 percent increase from 2013. The increased funding would allow VETS to deliver transition and employment services, like the redesigned military transition assistance program, or TAP, to an anticipated influx of nearly one million new veterans in the coming years.

"The VFW has long expressed concerns that transitioning veterans need all the resources we can muster to help them find meaningful careers after the military," said Hamilton. "We are happy to see that the Administration did not forget the key role VETS plays in ensuring veterans can find these kinds of careers when they return home."

The VFW will now work with the Administration and Congress in the coming days and months to secure a quality budget for veterans' programs, keeping America's promise to care for our heroes when they return home. VFW's advocacy efforts kick off tomorrow, when the VFW is scheduled to appear before the House Veterans Affairs Committee to discuss the FY 2014 VA budget.