

Independent Budget Releases FY 2018 Report

VFW, DAV and PVA recommend an 8.3-percent increase for veterans medical care funding

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WASHINGTON — The three Independent Budget co-authors are recommending an 8.3-percent increase in veterans medical care funding. In their fiscal year 2018 budget recommendation [report](#) for the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, Disabled American Veterans (DAV) and Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) co-authors also include recommendations for advance appropriations for medical care for FY 2019. The Administration has yet to release its budget request for FY 2018, which is normally presented the first week of February, but such a delay is not unusual in the first year of a new Administration.

Highlights of the new Independent Budget [report](#) include recommending:

- \$88.9 billion in overall discretionary budget authority for VA, approximately a 10 percent increase over FY 2017;
- \$76.9 billion for veterans medical care funding for FY 2018, a \$5.9 billion, or 8.3 percent increase over FY 2017;
- \$82.8 billion for veterans medical care for FY 2019 advance appropriations, a 7.6 percent increase over the IB's FY 2018 recommendation;
- \$3.1 billion for the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), a \$278 million, or 9.7 percent increase over FY 2017;
- \$2.5 billion for VA construction programs to repair, renovate, expand and replace VA's aging infrastructure, a \$1.5 billion increase over FY 2017;
- \$713 million for medical and prosthetic research, a \$38 million, or 5.6 percent increase over FY 2017, as well as an additional \$75 million to support the Million Veteran Program.

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The IB [report](#) warns of a potential funding crisis that could arise before the end of FY 2017, and will exist in FY 2018 if VA does not address the new community care demand it has fostered without necessary resources. Last year's advance appropriation request for FY 2018 medical care, which was approved unchanged by Congress, remains woefully inadequate to meet the ever-increasing demand for services both inside and outside the VA health care system, a fact acknowledged by VA officials.

Additionally, the effects of sequestration and arbitrary budget caps are beginning to have a significant negative impact on VA's ability to adequately provide veterans services and benefits, which would be further complicated if the hiring freeze is not lifted for all VA positions. The IB co-authors call on Congress to eliminate or provide exceptions to these measures to ensure that VA, and the veterans it serves, have access to the resources necessary to meet all their needs.

One budget area of grave concern to the veterans groups is the Major, Minor and State Home Construction programs that have growing backlogs of critical infrastructure projects. VA currently has more than 24 Major construction projects that are either partially funded or funded through completion, but in which construction is incomplete. Of those, VA will need to invest more than \$3.5 billion to complete them all. There is also a backlog of State Home Construction Grant priority group 1 requests that now tops \$650 million, but only about \$90 million is available in the current fiscal year to address them. Congress has made significant reforms to how VA's construction programs will be managed; however, without significant new investments, veterans will begin to lose access to critical medical and long term care services they have earned and deserve.

The three IB veterans service organization co-authors are also focusing on addressing the backlogs of claims and appeals. Although pending claims for disability compensation have gone down significantly over the past four years, the claims backlog started creeping back up last year, and the appeals backlog has grown alarmingly. They recommend an increase of \$278 million for VBA to hire additional personnel to focus on the claims and appeals backlogs, as well as to improve delivery of vocational rehabilitation services. While continued emphasis on automation and reform are necessary, unless VBA is provided additional resources, veterans will continue to wait too long to get their earned benefits.

The co-authors also called for greater investment in VA's medical and prosthetics programs, as well as supporting VA's Million Veteran Program of longitudinal research. The new funding would be used to expand research on emerging conditions prevalent among newer veterans, as well as continue VA's inquiries into chronic conditions of aging veterans from

previous wartime periods, with focus on research into post-deployment mental health concerns, including PTSD, depression, anxiety, and suicide; gender-specific health care needs of women veterans; and advancements in prosthetic systems to replace lost limbs or activate paralyzed nerves, muscles, and limbs. VA's medical research programs are absolutely critical to delivering the highest quality of care, in the safest manner, which is vital to the health of our nation's veterans.

For more than 30 years, the three Independent Budget co-authors have presented budget and policy recommendations to Congress and the Administration. These recommendations — which are supported by 27 other health, family, military, and veteran service organizations — are meant to inform Congress and the Administration of the needs of all veterans, and to offer substantive solutions to address the many health care and benefits challenges they face. This independently-developed budget serves as the veterans groups' benchmark for properly funding the Department of Veterans Affairs to ensure the timely delivery of quality health care and accurate and appropriate benefits.

View the full budget report at www.independentbudget.org.

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About the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW): The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. is the nation's largest and oldest major war veterans organization. Founded in 1899 and chartered by Congress in 1936, the VFW is comprised entirely of eligible veterans and military service members from the active, Guard and Reserve forces. With nearly 1.7 million VFW and Auxiliary members located in more than 6,500 Posts worldwide, the nonprofit veterans service organization is proud to proclaim “NO ONE DOES MORE FOR VETERANS” than the VFW, which is dedicated to veterans' service, legislative advocacy, and military and community service programs. For more information or to join, visit our website at VFW.org.

About DAV: 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; assisting them with employment; and educating the public about the great sacrifices

and needs of veterans transitioning back to civilian life. DAV, a non-profit organization with nearly 1.3 million members, was founded in 1920 and chartered by the U. S. Congress in 1932. Learn more at www.dav.org.

About Paralyzed Veterans of America:: Paralyzed Veterans of America is the only congressionally chartered veterans service organization dedicated solely for the benefit and representation of veterans with spinal cord injury or disease. For 70 years, Paralyzed Veterans has ensured that veterans have received the benefits earned through their service to our nation; monitored their care in VA spinal cord injury units; and funded research and education in the search for a cure and improved care for individuals with paralysis. With more than 70 offices and 34 chapters, Paralyzed Veterans serves veterans, their families and their caregivers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. (pva.org)