

Veterans' Call-to-Action on Healthcare Funding: New Independent Budget Urges the Administration and Congress to Invest \$54.6 Billion

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WASHINGTON — Four of the nation's leading veterans service organizations are urging the new Administration and Congress to invest \$54.6 billion, an increase of \$3.6 billion over last year, to adequately meet veterans' healthcare and benefits needs.

The recommendation is contained in *The Independent Budget* (IB)—www.independentbudget.org—a full picture of veterans' needs and funding recommendations, by veterans for veterans.

"We urge President Obama to adopt *The Independent Budget's* recommendations when his first budget is released later this year. We need sufficient, timely and predictable funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical and benefits system to ensure that those who have served and sacrificed get all the services they have earned and deserve," said Randy L. Pleva, Sr., national president of Paralyzed Veterans of America. "It's good for veterans. It's good for the economy. It's good for America."

The Independent Budget—an annual comprehensive budget and policy document co-authored by AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Paralyzed Veterans of America, and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)—includes recommendations of \$46.6 billion for health care, \$575 million for prosthetic research, \$1.6 billion for benefits processing, and nearly \$2 billion for major and minor construction. To deliver sufficient, timely and predictable resources in the future, the *IB* recommends that Congress convert veterans' healthcare funding to an advance appropriations process. This will ensure that VA will always have access to its funding on time.

As our nation faces the worst economy in over 70 years, the *IB*, recommends that Congress appropriate ample funding to address the significant backlog of infrastructure needs facing the VA medical system. This investment not only secures the future of VA health care and benefits delivery, it also provides new job opportunities for people and companies hit hard

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by the economic downturn.

One of the *IB*'s principal concerns is that VA is backing away from a capital infrastructure blueprint by leasing inpatient services around the country.

"Leasing facilities may help with outpatient care, but we want Congress to ensure the VA's new program does not lead to a widespread leasing program that replaces critical inpatient capacity," said VFW national commander Glen M. Gardner, Jr., a Vietnam veteran from Round Rock, Texas. "Forcing disabled veterans to travel great distances because their local VA medical center dropped inpatient care is not the proper way to care for America's veterans."

The *IB* also highlights the importance of dealing with the backlog of veterans' benefits claims, with the equivalent of the entire population of Delaware waiting for their claims to be completed. Recommended improvements include better use of electronic information systems to speed up claims processing. Given the significant difficulties facing many veterans and their families as a result of the current economy, rapid approval of their benefits will provide much-needed help to deal with the hardships associated with unemployment and loss of health insurance.

"The VA must commit to improving the accuracy and timeliness of the benefits delivery system. Adequate staffing levels, along with proper training and greater accountability for claims workers and better use of technology are essential," said DAV national commander Raymond E. Dempsey. "It is unacceptable that America's veterans have to wait months—or years, in some cases—to receive the benefits they've earned."

For the past 23 years, the *IB* has been a blueprint for the resource requirements for VA. According to last year's *IB*, President George W. Bush's 2009 budget was short by \$3 billion in key areas such as healthcare, prosthetics research, benefits processing and the construction of new hospitals and clinics. And the 110th Congress, after testimony from the co-authors of the *IB*, closed this gap.

"For more than two decades, *The Independent Budget* has served as a voice of advocacy for American veterans by providing the White House and Congress with a roadmap for funding the Department of Veterans Affairs. At no time in our history has the need of the returning veteran been so great, the service of the VA so critical, and the recommendations of *The Independent Budget* so relevant as they are today. The full implementation of *The Independent Budget* recommendations will ensure the sufficient, timely and predictable funding so crucial to delivering the health care and other benefits our veterans have earned. The honorable and selfless service of our American heroes deserves no less," said AMVETS national commander John C. Hapner.