Defense Budget a Bad Deal for Retirees and Military Families

Apr 11, 2013

The Pentagon unveiled its budget proposal for fiscal year 2014 yesterday, outlining how the Obama Administration wants to fund the Department of Defense in the coming year. The national commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. immediately fired back at the proposal, which he says breaks faith with our military retirees and their loved ones.

"The VFW recognizes that the Pentagon has tough decisions to make about its budget, but the proposals in this year's budget breaks faith with our volunteers by further burdening our military retirees and our military families," said John E. Hamilton, who leads the 2 million-member VFW and its Auxiliaries. "The VFW has long believed that trying to find savings from health care accounts and military pay threatens to hollow out the all-volunteer force, and we will not sit idly by and let these kinds of cuts take place."

The proposed Defense budget for FY 2014 asks for a military pay raise of only one percent and asks for increases in TRICARE health care fees for military retirees and military families. At the 113th VFW National Convention, VFW members voted overwhelmingly to oppose any increases to TRICARE fees for retirees, and Hamilton said the VFW will continue to pressure the Pentagon and Congress to find savings through programs that do not affect military personnel, retirees or military families.

VFW officials also insisted that Congress must offer service members a reasonable pay raise comparable to the consumer price index.

"Our service members volunteer for a dangerous job with notoriously low pay, which is why the VFW believes a 1-percent pay raise simply doesn't cut it," said Hamilton. "We owe it to our brave men and women to at least offer a pay raise comparable to the civilian sector if we hope to recruit and retain the best and brightest to defend our nation."

During the budget roll-out, senior Defense officials acknowledged that they sought to develop a budget that minimally affected service members and their families, and the VFW was encouraged to see a 2-percent increase in the military personnel budget that included increases in housing allowances, subsistence allowances and continued investment in military transition, suicide prevention and sexual assault prevention.

The VFW also was pleased to see that the Administration sought to fully fund the military's Tuition Assistance programs in FY 2014. Services suspended enrollment in Tuition Assistance after budget sequestration took effect in March. In response, the VFW quickly mobilized to save the program as part of the FY 2013 budget resolution, generating more than 14,000 emails to Congress in only two days.

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"The VFW sees military Tuition Assistance as a critical professional development and military readiness tool, which is why we are encouraged to see the Administration's ongoing commitment to the program," said Hamilton. "Education is critical to building strong military leaders, and the VFW will hold the military accountable for continuing to support Tuition Assistance."

Defense officials recognized that the proposed budget sought to maintain American military posture to support global operations in support of the Global War on Terror and ongoing tensions on the Korean peninsula, and that further investments would prioritize forward-deployed service members and wounded warriors.

The VFW believes that military quality-of-life is inextricably linked to morale and military readiness. In the coming weeks and months, the VFW will continue to advocate for a responsible Defense budget that not only protects America's global interests, but also meets the needs of military personnel, retirees and their families.