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Legion encouraged by 2015 VA budget proposal

If the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) fiscal 2015 budget is approved, it will be one of the few federal agencies in the era of sequestration to see an increase in funding.

WASHINGTON (March 4, 2014) -- The Department of Veterans Affairs is asking Congress to approve a \$163.9 billion budget in fiscal 2015, an increase of about \$10.1 billion over the department's fiscal 2014 funding.

The 2015 budget would provide \$68.4 billion in discretionary funding, which includes \$56 billion for VA medical care, about \$1.6 billion to help end veterans' homelessness, and \$1 billion to create the Veterans Job Corps. The budget also includes \$95.6 billion for VA's mandatory programs, including disability compensation and pensions for veterans.

The funding would provide health care for 9.3 million enrolled veterans, 6.7 million patients, and about 97 million outpatient visits. It would also provide disability compensation for 1.5 million veterans or survivors, and vocational/educational benefits for another 1.2 million veterans.

In VA's ongoing war against its disability claims backlog, \$138.7 million would be allocated for the Veterans Claims Intake Program, which would continue to implement the paperless claims system and improve veterans' access to benefits information.

Looking ahead to fiscal 2016, the budget is proposing \$58.7 billion in advance appropriations for VA medical care programs.

Daniel M. Dellinger, national commander of The American Legion, said that advance appropriations need to be included for all VA programs. "We recognize the primary importance of VA's health care for our veterans, but we want to see all VA programs protected by advance appropriations, including benefits payments. That way, if our federal government decides to shut down again, America's veterans won't be left to worry about whether their benefits checks will show up on time."

A bill introduced by Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., the "Putting Veterans Funding First Act of 2013," would provide advance funding to all VA programs. The bill (H.R. 813) passed the House last September and awaits Senate action.

The total budget request of about \$1 billion for VA major (\$562 million) and minor (\$495 million) construction falls far short of The American Legion's recommendation of about \$6 billion annually for a decade – based on the recommendation of VA's own Strategic Capital Investment Planning program, which indicated that VA needed \$53 to \$65 billion for construction over a 10-year period.

Dellinger testified to Congress last year that The American Legion "is very concerned about the lack of funding in the Major and Minor Construction accounts.... Clearly, if this underfunding continues, VA will never fix its identified deficiencies within its ten-year plan."

More than \$7 billion in the budget would be used to expand and improve mental-health services for veterans, including treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and military sexual trauma. The funding would allow VA to continue its collaborative work on mental health with the Department of Defense and the Department of Health and Human Services.

Finding effective treatments for PTSD and traumatic brain injury (TBI) are a primary concern of The American Legion. It conducted a month-long survey in February for veterans suffering from one or both of these conditions. Results of this survey will be announced and discussed at a TBI/PTSD symposium the Legion is tentatively planning for the spring.

The \$1.6 billion budgeted to help homeless veterans would include \$500 million for the Supportive Services for Veteran Families program, and \$321 million for the Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program. This investment is intended to help achieve VA Secretary Eric Shinseki's goal of eliminating homelessness among veterans by the end of 2015.

Dellinger said he was encouraged by the overall increase in VA's budget increase, but that he would be weighing in with specific recommendations when he testifies in Washington on March 26 before a joint hearing of the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees.

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