



Congress Suggests Largest Budget Increase in 77 Years for VA in 2008

The House and the Senate have passed 2008 budget resolutions with an increase of \$6.6 billion over the 2007 level, the largest annual increase in Veterans Affairs healthcare spending in 77 years.

The \$6.6 billion increase was called for in the 2008 budget blueprints that came out of the House and Senate Budget committees and were passed by both houses of Congress in March. Both draft budget resolutions, which call for a total of \$43.1 billion in discretionary spending in 2008, will be debated in a House-Senate conference to iron out differences. The final version will then be sent to the House and Senate Appropriations committees for consideration when drafting annual spending bills.

The budget recommendation of \$43.1 billion out-funds the White House's 2008 request by \$3.5 billion and \$32 billion over five years. The resolution also sets budget levels for fiscal 2009 to 2012.

"This is by far the best veteran's budget in my 23 years working on Capitol Hill," said Dennis Cullinan, national legislative director for Veterans of Foreign Wars. "I have never seen a Congress apply such laser-like focus in moving VA funding so swiftly and well."

The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) is joining veterans groups in calling for the appropriators to agree to the \$6.6 billion increase to better meet the needs of veterans and men and women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

AFGE supports the budget blueprints also because they do not include the White House's proposed user fees and higher prescription co-payments, the President's plan condemned by AFGE and veterans groups.

AFGE remains concerned about the way VA uses its money on things such as illegal outsourcing. The union is asking lawmakers to include oversight language in the 2008 budget to ensure that VA spends money on necessities such as hiring enough nurses and doctors to care for veterans.

AFGE Seeks to Restore Bargaining Rights at VA

AFGE is working with lawmakers to fix a 1991 law to make it clear that the union can bargain over important workplace issues affecting employees and veterans.

The law, 38 USC 7422 which governs personnel issues at VA, allows VA employees to bargain and file grievances over working conditions except any matter concerning direct patient care. Increasingly, VA management is interpreting these exceptions very broadly to mean most workplace issues. This poses a big problem when it comes to patient safety. VA employees, for example, are not allowed to bargain over staffing ratios and mandatory overtime for nurses and doctors even though VA hospitals are severely understaffed.

The problem is getting worse now that VA managers are increasingly asserting 7422 themselves instead of requesting a 7422 ruling from the Under Secretary of Health as required by law.

“VA medical professionals have extremely limited collective bargaining rights in comparison to their counterparts in other federal agencies, state and local governments and the private sector,” said Alma Lee, AFGE National VA Council president. “As a result, nurses, doctors and other VA employees are experiencing increased job stress, low morale and burnout.”

AFGE maintains that Congress' intention was to allow flexibility in providing quality care in VA hospitals when it passed the law in 1991 to give bargaining rights to VA medical professionals. But VA is acting contrary to the intent of Congress.

AFGE is also seeking to restore the right of VA employees to go to court after exhausting the internal grievance process. This would give VA employees the same legal right as most federal employees covered under a different system of Title 5.

VA Illegally Outsources Cemetery Jobs

AFGE is calling for VA to immediately stop illegal direct conversions of federal jobs to contractors without job competitions at VA cemeteries in Colorado and New Mexico.

VA in February informed AFGE Locals 2241 and 2063 that it is contracting out maintenance jobs at Fort Logan National Cemetery, Colo., and Santa Fe National Cemetery, N.M. In both cases, the work is being performed by more than 10 federal employees. According to the 2006 Transportation-Treasury Appropriations law, direct conversions of federal jobs performed by more than 10 employees are prohibited with certain limited exceptions that are not relevant in this case. Outsourcing rules, known as Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-76, also prohibits direct conversions without a waiver from OMB.

AFGE has also received reports from other parts of the country that direct conversions of cemetery jobs have been a common practice for many years. Contracting out this national cemetery function works against veterans, many of whom are able to become self supporting because of these wage grade jobs. Similar work in the private sector

usually pays less than a living wage and leaves these veterans uninsured because of little or no benefits.

“We must insist that you cease and desist from further illegal contracting out and instead fulfill the demand for cemetery-related services through new [full-time employees] and overtime for current FTEs,” said AFGE General Counsel Mark Roth in a March 14 letter to Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs William Tuerk. “There are far better ways to spend VA funds and serve veterans' interests during difficult budgetary times.”

The union is asking lawmakers to hold VA accountable for its illegal acts.

AFGE Honors Veteran Members of Congress

AFGE was a lead union in a reception held to honor members of Congress who have served the nation in uniform.

The “Salute to Veteran Members of Congress” reception was organized by Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) and was held on April 25 at the Washington Court Hotel in Washington, D.C.

“To the Members of Congress who have so bravely served our country through military service, I thank you from the bottom of my heart,” AFGE National Treasurer Secretary J. David Cox told the gathering. “Back home, you and your distinguished colleagues in Congress continue to fight for adequate benefits and health care for others who have served. We also want to thank you for recognizing the dedicated federal employees who work in VA and military hospitals and benefits offices, as you have done at many recent hearings on veterans' issues.”

AFGE, a patron of the event, has worked closely with VVA on issues important to federal employees including privatization of federal work and funding of veterans' health care and benefits programs.