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Published Monday, July 28, 2003

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VA Seeks Money, Gets Void Promises

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WASHINGTON -- Veterans say they have fresh evidence that Congress cannot be trusted.

It comes in the form of broken promises and a 2004 spending bill that the House passed Friday, which could heap new problems on a struggling Department of Veterans Affairs.

"This is a betrayal," said Rick Jones, legislative director for AMVETS.

During budget debates this spring, House Republican leaders answered a barrage of criticism from veterans by promising to increase funding for VA health care by \$1.8 billion over the amount President Bush had requested. On Friday, the House recanted, passing a spending bill that doesn't include the extra money.

The House also rejected a \$250 enrollment fee and higher drug co-payments for low-priority veterans at a potentially steep cost. Top VA officials said that could doom efforts to eliminate waiting lists and hurt the department's ability to function.

"They will suffer, no question about it. . . . The question becomes, will there be an increase in our budget or will the waiting lines become longer?" VA Secretary Anthony Principi said in an interview last week.

The bill passed 316-109.

(Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite, R-Brooksville, voted against the measure. Rep. Adam Putnam, R-Bartow, and Rep. Dave Weldon, R-Palm Bay, voted for it.)

The Senate hasn't taken up its version of the spending bill. Regardless of the outcome, veterans said Friday's actions illustrate the need to make funding increases for VA health care mandatory and automatic. Vets say congressional flip-flopping must end.

Rep. Mike McIntyre, a fiscally conservative Democrat from North Carolina who voted against the spending bill, agreed.

"Our veterans should not be subject to the whims of the current political climate," McIntyre said.

A 'MESSY PROCESS'

Putnam said he wanted an increase in health-care spending for veterans, but he argued that creating a new entitlement with guaranteed funding, such as Medicare, is not the solution. He said Congress has provided big increases for VA health care



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under the Republican House, averaging \$1.6 billion a year since 1998.

The House bill would raise health-care spending by \$1.4 billion, or 6 percent, but critics said that wouldn't keep pace with inflation and an estimated 9 percent increase in veterans entering the system.

A bill supported by the largest veterans groups would make annual increases automatic, based on health care needs. Congress would be shut out.

Putnam said that would be irresponsible.

"No one wants to deal with the messy process that is the legislative branch of government," Putnam said. But, he said, that process works.

It was very messy last week.

The House and Senate last spring provided for a \$3.2 billion health-care increase to \$29 billion for the VA in a nonbinding 2004 budget resolution. But the House on Friday passed a bill that approves only a \$1.4 billion increase as part of legislation that also funds the Department of Housing and Urban Development and a number of independent agencies.

Veterans, Democrats and some Republicans complained they were duped. Rep. Christopher Smith, Republican of New Jersey and chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, tried to add the \$1.8 billion Friday, but his GOP colleagues blocked it.

"This is a very significant need, especially when we're in Iraq," Smith said.

Seven Florida Republicans -- Reps. Putnam, Brown-Waite, Cliff Stearns, Katherine Harris, Mark Foley, Jeff Miller and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen -- wrote to House Speaker Dennis Hastert of Illinois on Thursday to protest that Republicans were backing out of a deal.

"We hope our words were not just empty promises," they wrote.

Brown-Waite, who circulated the letter, voted against the final bill, calling the backpedaling "shameful." Miller joined her and Ros-Lehtinen abstained. The rest voted for the bill. But all of them sided with GOP leadership on a key procedural motion that doomed Smith's amendment, with an aide explaining it was politically dangerous to vote against party leadership on procedural questions.

House leaders, such as Rep. C.W. "Bill" Young, a Florida Republican, argued Congress doesn't have more money. He is chairman of the Appropriations Committee, which agreed on the \$1.4 billion increase earlier last week.

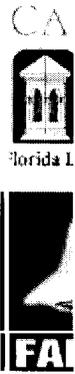
"The level of funding we provided is more than adequate," said John Scofield, spokesman for Young's committee.

Rep. James Walsh, the New York Republican who chairs the appropriations subcommittee that funds the VA, promised to work with the Senate to find more money. Harris, one of the Florida protesters, said through an aide that Walsh's pledge helped ease her mind.

BUT THAT'S NOT ALL

Critics say the difference is actually more than \$1.8 billion because of other decisions the House made.

The VA had assumed it would be allowed to collect a new \$250 enrollment fee and a drug co-payment increase from \$7 to \$15 for the highest-income veterans who don't have service-connected disabilities. The goals were to raise money with the fees



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and save additional money by prompting 1.2 million veterans to exit the system because it would become more expensive.

Veterans oppose the new fees and co-payments, which the House eliminated without adding money to compensate.

If those decisions stand, a VA official said, the department would have a gap of at least \$500 million.

Last week, Principi announced the VA would start filling prescriptions written by non-VA doctors for veterans on waiting lists for more than 30 days as of Friday. That was expected to help reduce backlogs, but the House bill could change some of the VA's assumptions.

"If we don't get that money, I'm highly confident that the waiting list is going to be next to impossible to eliminate," said Mark Catlett, VA's principal deputy assistant secretary for management.

Dennis Cullinan, legislative director of Veterans of Foreign Wars, said lawmakers wouldn't be able to knock veterans' health care off balance or renege on promises if funding was automatic. Vets intend to hammer that argument.

"We're bitterly disappointed," he said.

Last modified: July 28, 2003 12:00AM

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