

House budget plan leaves veterans spending intact

By Rick Maze
rmaze@militarytimes.com

The budget plan drafted by House Republicans has drawn criticism for its proposed cuts to Medicare and other domestic programs — but it would leave veterans spending virtually untouched in 2013 and beyond.

The House passed its version of the 2013 Veterans Affairs Department budget, totaling \$134.6 billion, on March 29 by a 228-191 vote, with only Republicans supporting it.

The plan would cut the White House's request by \$1 billion for the Veterans' Job Corps program announced by the White House in February. The money was cut after VA officials were unable to give lawmakers details about how it would be spent.

Over five years, the Republican budget would provide \$1.5 trillion for VA, \$16.6 billion more than the Obama request.

Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, said the plan is "a clear recognition by the House that we have a surge of military coming home this decade, and guarantees their needs are being met."

The plan is the work of Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis. It is only a spending guide; it is not binding and applies only in the House. But its spending caps will be used by House committees as they begin writing detailed policy and appropriations bills.

Overall, the House plan would cut spending \$19 billion below the discretionary caps for 2013 agreed to last year as part of the Budget Control Act of 2011. It would restore \$8 billion in discretionary spending that had been cut from the defense budget, which means domestic programs actually would face \$27 billion in cuts next year.

The House plan also would avoid sequestration — the \$1.2 trillion in automatic, across-the-board cuts scheduled to go into effect in January because Congress failed last year to agree on a deficit reduction plan — by ordering \$261.5 billion in savings over 10 years, plus other budget cuts that include a federal pay freeze and a 10 percent reduction in the federal workforce over three years. Details would be decided by House committees — with the armed services and veterans' affairs committees exempt.

Iraq veteran Jon Soltz, founder and chairman of the Democratic-

leaning group VoteVets.org, charged that Ryan's budget ignored veterans. "Looking at the nearly 100-page document, the word 'veteran' doesn't appear once.

Not once," Soltz said.

However, Soltz apparently was looking only at Ryan's 100-page Path to Prosperity plan, which does not mention veterans

because it proposes no changes to veterans' programs.

The actual budget resolution, House Concurrent Resolution 112, mentions veterans 41 times,

including year-by-year spending details and full funding of the White House request for VA benefits, health care, construction and cemetery programs. It also includes \$54.5 billion in advance funding of 2014 VA health care programs. □