

The Independent Budget Critical Issues Report for Fiscal Year 2015

Introduction

As the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) continues to face the growing demand being placed on its health-care and benefits systems, it is incumbent upon Congress, the Administration, and veteran stakeholders to ensure that VA has all of the tools necessary to effectively meet those demands. This commitment must be accomplished in the face of continued pressure to control federal spending. However, it cannot be emphasized enough that meeting the needs of veterans of every generation is a solemn obligation and responsibility that cannot—and should not—be minimized.

The Independent Budget is a comprehensive budget and policy document created by veterans for veterans. This year marks the 28th year of *The Independent Budget*. We—AMVETS (American Veterans), DAV (Disabled American Veterans), Paralyzed Veterans of America (Paralyzed Veterans), and Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW)—proudly co-author *The Independent Budget*. In anticipation of the release of the *Independent Budget for Fiscal Year 2015*, we offer this Critical Issues Report to outline some of the greatest challenges facing VA and all parties affected by the actions of VA.

The four co-authors, *The Independent Budget* veterans service organizations (IBVSOs), believe that our mandate has remained steadfast over the years: to ensure that VA provides—

- competent, compassionate, and consistently high-quality health care to all eligible veterans and to their eligible families and survivors;
- timely and accurate delivery of all earned benefits to veterans, dependents, and survivors, including disability compensation, pensions, education, housing assistance, and other necessary supports; and
- dignified memorial services to all eligible veterans, preserving our national cemeteries as shrines to those lost in or following service to our nation.

This Critical Issues Report is intended to be a reference and an instrument to inform and educate not only VA and its veteran stakeholders but also the general public, the Administration, and Congress about the most pressing issues affecting VA health care and benefits, and their timely and accurate delivery, as well as a variety of memorial services. These issues make up some of the greatest concerns facing VA and the veterans community, and our recommendations for improvements are provided in an effort to assist veterans in gaining and keeping access to services and benefits in a delivery system created solely for them.

We submit this report in the hope that legislators and VA policymakers will consider and incorporate our recommendations in developing legislation and making policy changes affecting VA in FY 2015 and beyond, and for developing advance appropriations in VA health care for FY 2016. We believe that by capitalizing on the strong foundation this Critical Issues report provides VA will be better able to improve its benefits and services and achieve operational excellence.

As our nation's government continues to be plagued by numerous fiscal and monetary challenges, especially in light of the pressures created via sequestration, continued efforts to reduce federal spending, and partisan gridlock, the IBVSOs are justifiably apprehensive about the future of VA funding and its potential effects on the vast array of programs that serve veterans. Ultimately, *The Independent Budget* co-authors strongly believe that veterans and their families who are served by VA should not be forced to sacrifice the health care and benefits that were promised to them and that they so clearly have earned.

In order to retain the valuable but costly progress made in these areas over the past several years, the IBVSOs will not support any backsliding on the outlay of funds needed for investment in essential VA programs and infrastructure. If the nation expects to continue to attract and retain willing and talented candidates to serve in the military, we must commit to providing the earned benefits and health-care services to those men and women who have made selfless sacrifices for the nation. We must emphasize that freedom is expensive not only to achieve but to sustain, and this cost is often life altering and may be life ending.

Our veterans have always stepped forward when we needed them to do the tough jobs, often in the worst conditions imaginable, and while making numerous personal sacrifices and enduring physical and emotional pain. Veterans have paid their dues in full. It is time that those sacrifices be repaid in kind.