

Introduction

As we live our busy, diverse lives, and with military service being viewed as the domain of a tiny and shrinking fraction of the population of the United States, important contributions made by service members and veterans to our safety, security, and our social fabric could be minimized, or even ignored. In fact, the very foundations of our way of life were laid and reinforced in large part by the minutemen, militiamen, doughboys, dog soldiers, and marines who have been called to serve in dangerous times and hazardous places here and around the world, Iraq and Afghanistan being only the most recent of those wrenching experiences. Since 1973, military service has been completely voluntary, but millions of veterans alive today were conscripted to serve and served with honor. Today's volunteer military service members still follow their example of service, loyalty, and sacrifice. Also, the constant presence of our service members and veterans as leaders and active participants in the economic, political, and social evolution of our nation is a primary reason we enjoy the stature that comes from being a world leader.

Over the past 237 years, service members, reservists, and guardsmen have shouldered the burden and borne the sacrifice of defending this country on behalf of all its citizens. Even now that military service is voluntary and constitutes some likeness to employment, serving is not a “job”; it is a calling. Therefore, veterans and service members are the proper beneficiaries of the promises and support, given in exchange for that service, of a grateful nation. Veterans’ “benefits” are purchased through an individual’s sacrifice (sometimes physical, sometimes emotional, sometimes invisible). Their benefits should not be adversely affected by political gamesmanship or inattention by elected leaders. The promises made to those who took the solemn oath to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic,” must be repaid in good faith and full measure.

With the concerns and issues of these individuals ever-present in our minds, the co-authors of *The Independent Budget*—AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Paralyzed Veterans of America (Paralyzed Veterans), and Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW)—offer our budget and programmatic recommendations. These recommendations are based on our studied expertise and direct experience in assessing the cost to care for America’s veterans in fiscal year 2015 and beyond. Through this document the co-authors assume an independent and long-standing responsibility to illuminate and consolidate specialized benefits, health care, infrastructure, education, employment, training, and internment programs. In this work we hope the Administration, Congress,

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and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will collectively address the challenges faced by veterans and their families and, in particular, our recommendations to mitigate those concerns. We also recommend a detailed budget that we believe will enable VA and other agencies to fulfill the promises made with the funding necessary to meet the needs of our veterans.

Beyond the federal budget itself, in considering the many challenges facing transitioning veterans, we believe perhaps the most daunting barrier for veterans of all ages is underemployment or unemployment. Newer transitioning veterans, fully experienced in a variety of valuable military occupational specialties, face some outright obstacles, including the often-redundant process of securing various licenses and credentials across a range of technical and professional fields required by states and some professions. The wounded, injured, and ill are at an even more significant and tragic employment disadvantage and need our special attention to accommodate their employment goals. *The Independent Budget* veterans service organizations (IBVSOs) urge American employers to commit to the employment of veterans and to make special efforts to accommodate employment needs of those wounded, injured, or ill. This *Independent Budget* makes employment one of our signal priorities in the coming year.

In formulating our programmatic, policy, and budget recommendations, the IBVSOs consider not only ongoing and evolving needs, but also the prospect that hundreds of thousands of American service personnel and new veterans will be utilizing these benefits they so clearly earned and will be entering the postservice employment environment over the next several years. As leaders in the national veterans service organization community, *The Independent Budget* partners pledge our loyalty to them and to all veterans to help secure for them the assistance and support they need to repatriate, rehabilitate, recover, and find gainful employment, in order to share the fruits of the liberty they helped secure for us all.

Table 1. VA Accounts FY 2015 (Dollars in Thousands)					
	FY 2014* Appropriation	FY 2015** Administration	FY 2015 Independent Budget (IB)	FY 2016*** Advance Approp.	FY 2016 /B Advance Approp.
Veterans Health Administration (VHA)					
Medical Services	43,597,000	45,015,527	49,287,449		50,777,292
Medical Support and Compliance	6,033,000	5,879,000	6,107,179		5,951,504
Medical Facilities	4,957,000	4,739,000	5,715,072		5,739,709
Subtotal Medical Care, Discretionary	54,587,000	55,633,527	61,109,700		62,468,505
Medical Care Collections	3,064,000	3,174,000			
Total, Medical Care Budget Authority (including Collections)	57,651,000	58,807,527	61,109,700		62,468,505
Medical and Prosthetic Research	585,664		611,000		
Total, Veterans Health Administration	58,236,664		61,720,700		
General Operating Expenses (GOE)					
Veterans Benefits Administration	2,465,490		2,509,112		
General Administration	415,885		426,526		
Total, General Operating Expenses (GOE)	2,881,375		2,935,638		
Departmental Admin. and Misc. Programs					
Information Technology	3,703,344		3,785,923		
National Cemetery Administration	250,000		260,000		
Office of Inspector General	121,411		123,011		
Total, Dept. Admin. and Misc. Programs	4,074,755		4,168,934		
Construction Programs					
Construction, Major	342,130		2,800,000		
Construction, Minor	714,870		831,000		
Grants for State Extended-Care Facilities	85,000		250,000		
Grants for State Veterans Cemeteries	46,000		48,000		
Total, Construction Programs	1,188,000		3,929,000		
Other Discretionary	158,784		161,166		
Total, Discretionary Budget Authority (including Medical Collections)	66,539,578		72,915,438		

*Amounts for health care for FY 2014 were included in the FY 2013 Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act approved in March 2013.

**Amounts for health care for FY 2015 were included in the FY 2014 Omnibus Appropriations Act approved in January 2014.

***Advance appropriations amounts for health care for FY 2016 will be included in the Administration's Budget Request, expected to be released in March 2014.

