

THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET

Veterans Agenda for the 114th Congress

Policy Recommendations for Congress and the Administration



The Independent Budget for the 114th Congress



PROLOGUE

The contributions made by our veterans to the growth and development of the United States are part of the basic fabric of the nation. In fact, the very foundations of the American way of life were, in large part, hewn by individuals who at some point in their lives served in the United States armed forces. Unlike the environment in which today's voluntary force serves, during our nation's infancy military service was a highly accepted and even expected obligation of citizenship. Then and now the leadership and determination of service members and veterans to set by example and serve as influential frontrunners in all areas of American society—economic, political, social, and moral—we are able to enjoy the stature as the leader of the global community of nations.

Our service members, on behalf of all our citizens, share a long history of shouldering the burden and bearing the sacrifice of defending this country. For this reason, our veterans and military service members have been the beneficiaries of the promises and support of a grateful nation after serving. Veterans "benefits" have been purchased by an individual's sacrifice and therefore should not be diminished by politics or any dereliction of duty by Congress or the Administration. The promises made to our service members, who stepped forward and selflessly raised their right hands as part of a solemn oath to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic" must be faithfully upheld and fulfilled.

Through this publication, the four *Independent Budget* co-authors—American Veterans, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars—have had the longstanding responsibility of illuminating and consolidating for the Administration, Congress, the Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Defense, and the American people, the highly specialized benefits, health care, infrastructure, education, employment, training, and memorial concerns and challenges being faced by our service members and veterans, along with consensus recommendations to address these concerns.

INDEPENDENT BUDGET AUTHORS

INDEPENDENT BUDGET AUTHORS

The four coauthoring organizations have worked in collaboration for 29 years to produce *The Independent Budget* to honor veterans and their service to our country. Throughout the year each organization works independently to identify and address legislative and policy issues that affect the organizations' memberships and the broader veterans community.

AMERICAN VETERANS (AMVETS)

Since 1944, American Veterans (AMVETS) has been preserving the freedoms secured by America's armed forces, and providing support for veterans and the active military in procuring their earned entitlements, as well as community service and legislative reform that enhances the quality of life for this nation's citizens and veterans alike. AMVETS is one of the largest Congressionally chartered veterans service organizations in the United States, and includes members from each branch of the military, including the National Guard and Reserves.

DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS

The Disabled American Veterans (DAV), founded in 1920 and chartered by Congress in 1932, is dedicated to a single purpose—empowering veterans to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity. This mission is carried forward by ensuring that veterans and their families can access the full range of benefits available to them; fighting for the interests of America's injured heroes on Capitol Hill; and educating the public about the great sacrifices and needs of veterans transitioning back to civilian life. DAV members also provide voluntary services in communities across the country.

PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

Paralyzed Veterans of America (Paralyzed Veterans) is the only congressionally chartered veterans service organization dedicated solely for the benefit and representation of veterans with spinal cord injury or disease. For nearly 70 years, it has ensured that veterans receive the benefits earned through their service to our nation; monitored their care in VA spinal cord injury units; and funded research and education in the search for a cure and improved care for individuals with paralysis.

As a partner for life, Paralyzed Veterans also develops training and career services, works to ensure accessibility in public buildings and spaces, provides health and rehabilitation opportunities through sports and recreation, and advocates for veterans and all people with disabilities. With more than 70 offices and 34 chapters, Paralyzed Veterans serves veterans, their families, and their caregivers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE U.S.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. (VFW), founded in 1899 and chartered by Congress in 1936, is the nation's largest organization of combat veterans and its oldest major veterans service organization. Its 1.5 million members include veterans of past wars and conflicts, as well as those who currently serve in the active, Guard, and Reserve forces. Located in 7,900 VFW Posts worldwide, the VFW and the 600,000 members of its Auxiliaries are dedicated to “honoring the dead by helping the living.” They accomplish this mission by advocating for veterans, service members, and their families on Capitol Hill as well as state governments; through local community and national military service programs; and by operating a nationwide network of service officers who help veterans recoup more than \$1 billion annually in earned compensation and pension.

Individually, each of the coauthoring organizations serves the veterans community in a distinct way. However, the four organizations work in partnership to present this annual budget request to Congress with policy recommendations regarding veterans' benefits and health care, as well as funding forecasts for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

SUPPORTERS

African American Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Association
African American War Veterans of the U.S.A.
Air Force Association
Air Force Sergeants Association
American Coalition Filipino Veterans
American Ex-Prisoners of War
American Federation of Government Employees (National VA Council)
American Foundation for the Blind
American Military Retirees Association
American Military Society
American Psychiatric Association
American Psychological Association
American Society of Nephrology
American Thoracic Society
American Veteran Alliance
American Veterans for Equal Rights
American WWII Orphans Network
Armed Forces Top Enlisted Association
Association of American Medical Colleges
Association of the United States Navy
Blinded Veterans Association
Combined Korea-US (KORUS) Veterans Association
Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service
Easter Seals
Fleet Reserve Association
Gold Star Wives of America, Inc.

Jewish War Veterans of the USA
Louisiana Veterans Coalition
Lung Cancer Alliance
Marine Corps League
Military Officers Association of America
Military Order of the Purple Heart
Minnesota Department of Veteran Affairs
National Alliance for Eye & Vision Research
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Association for Uniformed Services
National Association of American Veterans, Inc.
National Association of State Head Injury Administrators
National Association of State Veterans Homes
National Association of Veterans' Research and Education Foundations
National Coalition for Homeless Veterans
National Disability Rights Network
National Gulf War Resource Center
Navy Seabee Veterans of America, Inc.
Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs
P-47 Thunderbolt Pilots Association
The Sergeant Thomas Joseph Sullivan Center
United States Coast Guard Chief Petty Officers Association
US Federation of Korea Veterans Organizations
VetsFirst, A program of United Spinal Association
Vietnam Veterans of America

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INTRODUCTION

The Independent Budget for Fiscal Year 2016 has been revamped in an effort to make it more user-friendly and to make clearer its intent and recommendations. Additional changes include the following:

- New additions will be released biennially at the beginning of each new Congress.
- Priority issues and recommendations will be highlighted at the beginning of each new edition.
- Unlimited additional policy recommendations/issue briefs are released as needed throughout the new two-year cycle.
- Budget recommendations are released as a stand-alone document.
- Recommendations are found at the beginning of each article.
- Articles are presented in summary/issue brief format.

Although the look and feel of *The Independent Budget* is fresh and new, our mandate remains resolute—to ensure that the Department of Veterans Affairs provides—

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

In formulating our policy and program recommendations, *The Independent Budget* veterans service organizations (IBVSOs) consider not only the ongoing and evolving needs of our current veterans, but also the needs of the hundreds of thousands of American men and women who in the near future will be applying for and utilizing the benefits they so dearly earned. As leaders in the veterans service organization community, the IBVSOs (American Veterans, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars) have shared their combined expertise in formulating policy recommendations for nearly 30 years for the benefit of those fighting to protect the rights and earned benefits of all American veterans.

This policy document, then, is meant not only to serve as a wide-ranging reference focused on all issues important to veterans, but also to be an educational tool for the use of the Department of Veterans Affairs and all veteran stakeholders, as well as the American people, Congress, and the Administration. The IBVSOs hope that our joint recommendations included within these pages serve as seeds for improving the lives of veterans, as well as providing some hard-earned positive support for the many challenges facing our veterans, including transitioning to civilian life, recovering from injuries, obtaining a living wage from employment, and securing a comfortable retirement.