

THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET

A Budget for Veterans by Veterans

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JOINT STATEMENT OF

**THE CO-AUTHORS OF THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET:
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS**

BEFORE

THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ON

**THE PRESIDENT'S FISCAL YEAR 2024 BUDGET AND 2025 ADVANCE
APPROPRIATIONS REQUESTS FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

MAY 17, 2023

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and members of the Committee, the co-authors of The Independent Budget (IB)—DAV (Disabled American Veterans), Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)—are pleased to present our views regarding the President's funding request for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, including advance appropriations for FY 2025.

Earlier this year, on February 13, the Independent Budget Veterans Service Organizations (IBVSOs) released comprehensive recommendations for VA's FY 2024 and FY 2025 advance appropriations. The Independent Budget Veterans' Agenda for the 118th Congress: Budget for FY 2024-2025 and Critical Issues, a copy of which is attached to this testimony, includes our detailed estimates of the level of funding required to meet the full veteran demand for VA services, benefits, and programs, as well as critical issues for the 118th Congress. In today's testimony, we will discuss why Congress should provide the department full funding per the IB's recommendations or VA's budget proposal.

The recent House-passed bill, H.R. 2811, the Limit, Save, Grow Act of 2023, ties future government spending with debt ceiling reform and could reduce spending on veterans' programs. House majority leaders have stated veterans programs would be "protected" regardless of the plan, but these assurances are subjective and the IBVSOs remain on guard and are ready to oppose any reductions to veterans programs. The plan would also rescind unused Covid-19 funding, which VA estimated to be about \$2 billion. These resources were factored into VA's FY 2024 budget proposal as a carryover and would result in a shortfall if the bill was enacted. Additionally, we urge Congress to remember that veterans with significant disabilities depend upon many other federal services and supports outside of the VA that protect their disability civil rights, employment support, affordable accessible housing, as well as provide benefits that help their families and caregivers. Our responsibility as a nation is to ensure that those who have already sacrificed so much for our way of life are not forced to do so again.

Rather than retreating against notable progress, our goal is to support and build upon significant advancements in veterans care and benefits that have occurred in recent years. Reducing VA funding levels could jeopardize VA's ability to implement many of the life-saving benefits Congress has recently passed. With the support of allies in Congress and multiple presidential administrations, veterans advocates around the country have successfully helped identify and solve problems that have plagued VA for years. By addressing the harm from military toxic exposure, reducing claims backlogs, curtailing VA hiring delays, and reducing unacceptable appointment wait times, significant progress has been made in strengthening the VA system. However, these advancements would be eroded if they are not resourced properly.

For example, reducing the VA budget to FY 2022 funding levels would have an immediate, negative effect on the delivery of care and benefits across the entire VA enterprise. According to VA, in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), it could result in up to 38,000 doctors and nurses being laid off. The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) may have to cut nearly 1,200 staff dedicated to processing veteran claims and the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA) would likely need to eliminate 175 positions, which could result in approximately 25,000 fewer appeals heard annually. The reduced funding levels for VHA, VBA, and BVA alone would set our collective hard work back a decade and force veterans once again to fight for the care and benefits they have earned. Policy proposals to roll back existing care and benefits to reduce federal costs would cause even further harm.

Reducing VA funding levels coupled with policy proposals that shrink benefits for veterans, simply to save money on the backs of veterans is intolerable. The veterans, families, and caregivers we represent have seen the true cost of war, and it is unacceptable to ask them to pay the bill. We respectfully ask that this Committee ensure any degradation of services offered through VA is stopped in its tracks and that you will continue to honor the promise made to the men and women who served our country by continuing your long-standing bipartisan support of those who have borne the battle. Reducing VA funding levels would affect millions of ill and injured veterans across the country and we look forward to working with you to make sure this does not happen.

That said, the IBVSOs are encouraged by the Administration's recent proposed FY 2024 budget for the VA and believe much of it accurately reflects the rising need for health care and benefits by those who served, their families, caregivers, and survivors. We know this Committee will

carefully examine all areas of the Administration's proposal and hope you will use the IB proposals as it prepares its own recommendations. While the President put forth a strong budget, a few areas where we feel the Administration missed the mark are VA medical research, health care infrastructure, and funding for the BVA.

VA's Medical and Prosthetic Research program generates discoveries that significantly contribute to improving the health of veterans and all Americans. The Administration requested \$938 million in FY 2024 compared to the \$980 million recommended by the IB. Our recommendation covers the cost of inflation and increased investments to address COVID-19, veterans' health disparities, clinical trial access, and veterans' mental health needs. It also allows continued support for groundbreaking programs, like the Million Veteran Program, and VA's participation in the Cancer Moonshot initiative featuring oncology treatment improvements for the nation's veterans. The value of cutting-edge research has never been demonstrated more clearly than over the past three years, and as a national leader, VA must continue to aggressively grow this program.

Meanwhile, the VA health care system has faced significant challenges and undergone historic reforms in recent years to improve veterans' access to timely and high-quality health care. While VA has received increased funding levels to support the veterans' health care system and an increasing number of veterans are seeking VA care, the lack of resources for facilities management and modernization, sufficient health personnel to meet the demand for care and benefits continue to negatively impact accessibility. VA's aging infrastructure not only causes many veterans to wait too long and travel too far for care but also potentially endangers the health and lives of veteran patients and VA personnel.

As the Administration noted in its press release announcing its proposed FY 2024 VA budget, the median age of a VA hospital is nearly 60 years compared to just 13 years in the private sector. The \$3 billion figure the Administration proposed for major construction falls well short of the \$5.1 billion the IBVSOs believe is necessary just to keep up with the department's most pressing construction needs. We urge Congress to correct this deficiency by providing adequate annual appropriations for VA construction and consider additional supplemental appropriations as necessary to ensure VA's facilities remain safe.

Finally, for FY 2024, the IBVSOs recommend approximately \$325 million for the BVA, an increase of roughly \$40 million over the FY 2023 appropriations level, which we believe accurately reflects current services with increases for inflation and federal pay raises, as well as needed staffing increases to address the hearings backlog and additional Honoring our PACT Act (P.L. 117-168)-related work. We believe the Administration's projected figure of \$291 million from all sources is insufficient and would prevent the Board from achieving its planned outcomes for the coming fiscal year.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our views on the Administration's budget request for VA. We firmly believe that Congress should substantially increase—not decrease—VA's funding for FY 2024, or veterans will be forced to wait longer for care, whether they seek it at VA or in the community, leaving unfulfilled the promises made to them.