

# Vets oppose bill that raises health care fees

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(AP) -- Health care fees for working-age military retirees would increase slightly under a defense bill unveiled Monday that drew fierce opposition from the 2.1 million-strong Veterans of Foreign Wars.

The Pentagon is reeling from health care costs that have jumped from \$19 billion in 2001 to \$53 billion in the latest budget request. Determined to slash expenses, President Barack Obama is seeking a boost in fees that have remained unchanged for 11 years.

The defense bill proposed by House Armed Services Committee Chairman Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Calif., goes along with a small increase in the next budget but limits long-term increases by linking them to cost of living adjustments for retirees.

The VFW, one in a network of powerful groups of retired officers and veterans, is resisting any increase, urging its members to contact lawmakers in a full-court challenge.

The military health care program, known as TRICARE, "is the cornerstone of a military retirement package that the armed forces must provide in order to entice someone to voluntarily give up 20 or more years of their youth to serve their nation," Robert E. Wallace, the executive director of the VFW, said in a May 4 letter to McKeon.

Joe Davis, a spokesman for the VFW, said Monday that the organization would mobilize its membership to fight any increase as the bill makes its way through Congress.

The Armed Services Committee will consider the defense bill on Wednesday in a certain marathon session; the committee had more than 600 amendments. The legislation rejects several of the cuts the administration and Defense Secretary Robert Gates envision as they look to slash \$400 billion in the next 12 years. Obama has asked for another \$400 billion in cuts, a task for Gates' likely replacement, CIA Director Leon Panetta.

The legislation includes several provisions calling for financial audits and takes steps to revive the extra engine for the next-generation F-35 fighter jet, an alternative that the administration strongly opposes.

"Proposing to cut defense spending by nearly \$500 billion in the coming decade without first conducting the necessary due diligence to determine what our nation's basic defense requirements (is) an invitation to other countries to challenge America's supremacy," McKeon said in a statement.

Overall, the bill comes close to the administration's request of \$553 billion for defense, \$118 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and \$18 billion for energy programs.

The legislation would prohibit the transfer of detainees from the prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to the United States and bar the use of taxpayer money to house Guantanamo detainees at other U.S. facilities. It also would require the defense secretary to certify to Congress prior to the transfer of any detainee to a foreign country.

"The administration deserves options, but allowing them to bring terrorists into our communities is a bridge too far," McKeon said.

Democrats are likely to challenge elements of the Guantanamo provisions as too restrictive for the administration during Wednesday's

work on the bill.

"They tie the president's hands in a time of war and weaken our values," Rep. Adam Smith of Washington state, the top committee Democrat, said in a statement.

Rep. Duncan Hunter Jr., R-Calif., will try to delay repeal of the ban on gays in military until all four service chiefs certify that the change won't hurt readiness or undermine the military. The law, in effect since last December, only requires certification from the president, defense secretary and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The health care fees also will generate debate in the committee. The current fees are \$230 a year for an individual and \$460 for a family. That's far less than what civilian federal workers pay for health care, about \$5,000 a year, and what most other people in the U.S. pay.

Obama is seeking a fee increase of \$2.50 per month for an individual and \$5 per month for families, which approaches the current price of a gallon of gasoline. Future increases starting in 2013 would be pegged to rising costs as measured by the national health care expenditure index produced by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, which projects 6.2 percent growth.

"Health care is eating the department alive," Defense Secretary Robert Gates said bluntly - two years ago.

The expense of health care rivals what the Pentagon shells out to buy fighter aircraft, submarines and high-tech weapons, and is about half of the \$118 billion that the Obama administration wants in the next budget for Iraq and Afghanistan.

McKeon, with the support of Smith, backs Gates' proposal to raise fees

for working-age retirees in the next budget. Under the defense bill, increases in 2013 and beyond would be tied to military retirees' cost-of-living adjustment, which this year was zero, not the health care index.

This provision overrides the work of the personnel subcommittee, which last week imposed a one-year prohibition on any increases.

Congress repeatedly has resisted Pentagon efforts to increase copayments or fees, arguing that members of the military and their families sacrifice far more than the average American, with a career that includes long and dangerous deployments overseas that overshadow civilian work.

Even as Washington wrestles with a ballooning deficit estimated at \$1.6 trillion and the demands of entitlement programs such as Medicare and Social Security, lawmakers are reluctant to raise health care costs for members of the military and retirees.

But this year, Gates singled out working-age retirees, such as those in their 40s who retired after some 20-plus years in the military, as individuals who could afford a small increase.

The Military Officers Association of America backs the one-year fee increase but strongly opposes any increase in 2013 and beyond linked to the health care expenditure index.

"We agree with those modest increases," said Kathy Beasley, a retired Navy captain and deputy director of government relations for the officers' group. The increased fees linked to the index, however, "erodes the retirement benefit package."

**More information:**

Military Officers Association of America: <http://www.moaa.org/>

House Armed Services Committee: <http://armedservices.house.gov/>

TRICARE: <http://www.tricare.mil/>

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