

Congress eyes vet benefit changes

By Alice Hrnicek

Attention to the needs of Vietnam-era veterans is being readjusted as reflected in the 1980 Veterans Administration budget submitted by President Jimmy Carter to Congress on Jan. 22.

The budget proposes legislation to provide psychological counseling for Vietnam-era veterans and their families and to extend eligibility for educational benefits by two years for educationally-disadvantaged veterans, according to VA administrator Max Cleland.

At a record-high \$21 billion, the budget request also asks Congress to approve a 7.8 percent increase in VA compensation payments to service-disabled veterans, continued funding for high priority research into the causes of alcoholism and a \$1.3 million fund increase for full operation of new rehabilitation research and development centers.

Further legislation urges the authorization of treatment for certain psychiatric, alcohol and drug dependent veterans in community programs on a contract basis.

Proposed compensation increases for disabled veterans would be into effect Oct. 1, with an added 1980 cost of \$498.4 million. Compensation is paid to nearly 2.7 million service disabled veterans and survivors of deceased veterans.

Glad about it

"If I were a disabled veteran, I'd be real happy to hear about it," said Les Steffens, president of the UNL Student Veteran Organization.

The increase is going to help disabled veterans going to school, he said. Because there are no provisions to increase compensation to non-disabled veteran students, the disabled will be aided more.

In response to the call for continued funding for research into the causes of alcoholism, Steffens said he is unsure whether veterans have more or less problems of that type.

The President recommended to Congress a record 5.6 billion for VA medical care in 1980. He has requested a three-year increase of 5,598 in VA medical jobs. VA is asking for new appropriations for medical and cemetery construction and replacement of VA medical centers in a number of cities across the United States.

"Some argue that they are not efficient enough to pay for themselves. A lot of veterans could receive equal or better treatment at a regular hospital and have the government subsidize the costs," Steffens said.

Concerned people

"On the other hand," he added, "some feel that VA hospitals employ people more concerned with the veteran, more attuned with the problems a veteran has."

The "Target" system, which will be installed in 56 VA hospitals in 1979, will speed up the processing of compensation, pension and education benefits.

"Anything they can do to insure that these checks get where they're supposed to be on time is a good thing," he said.

According to Cleland, the largest dollar growth among veterans programs in the new budget is in income security for veterans. Payments to disabled veterans will total \$12.25 billion, one billion dollar more than in 1978.

"I think it's justified," said Steffens. "The feeling among veterans is that some benefit is warranted. They gave their time and effort in a situation they didn't necessarily want to be in. We do need this."

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