Serving America’s Veterans: Congress Takes First Step in the Appropriations Process

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On the eve of Veterans Day, Congress took a major step in supporting the nation’s 22.3 million veterans by passing the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations, or MilCon—VA, bill with overwhelming bipartisan support.

The first of 12 appropriations bills to pass both chambers of Congress in 2015, the Senate version provides $82 billion in discretionary funding for U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and Pentagon construction projects. The fiscal year 2016 bill provides about $8 billion more than the fiscal year 2015 level.

Political insiders expect the president to support the bill, and many believe the bill will be used as a vehicle to move an omnibus spending bill through Congress later this year to avoid a government shutdown.

“This bipartisan bill ensures that our veterans, active duty military and their families have the support that they deserve,” Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Thad Cochran of Mississippi said in a press release. “It is our duty to meet our obligation to the men and women who have risked their lives to defend our nation.”

One of the main goals of the bill is to reform and improve the efficiency of the VA. In June, The New York Times reported that the number of veterans on waiting lists for a month or more for care at VA facilities was 50 percent higher than it was the previous year, despite presidential and Congressional efforts to reduce wait time.

According to the VA, it has made substantial progress in reducing wait times by decreasing the number of claims pending for more than 125 days from 611,000 in 2013 to about 76,000 claims in 2015.

The Senate version of the MilCon—VA appropriations bill builds off this progress by providing additional funding that would allow the VA to hire hundreds of new claims processors with the goal of making sure all veterans receive care as soon as it is needed.

An amendment added to the Senate version of the bill, which was introduced by Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire, would require the Government Accountability Office to perform random, periodic audits to ensure that veterans receive timely access to medical care.

Affecting more than 57,000 veterans each night, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and
Urban Development, homelessness is another important issue for the veteran population. To keep veterans off the streets, the Senate appropriations bill provides the full fiscal year 2016 and 2017 presidential budget requests for VA homelessness assistance programs and homeless veteran treatment costs. The bill also mandates the VA to report homelessness rates among veterans to Congress.

The Senate bill encourages federal-state collaboration when it comes to the construction of National Guard facilities. The bill mandates the director of the National Guard to streamline the process by which it works with its state partners to acquire land.

There are also several amendments attached to the Senate bill that would fund specific projects in certain states, such as funding for a 15-bed drug and alcohol clinic at the Huntington VA Medical Center in West Virginia, which would make it the first facility of its kind in a VA hospital.

Other amendments are broader in nature, such as an amendment made to the Senate bill that would allow VA doctors and other health care providers to recommend medical marijuana to patients who live in one of the 23 states where it is now legal.

The MilCon—VA bill also addresses the construction of military bases. It provides $7.7 billion for military construction projects within and outside the United States, including funding for projects related to the construction and maintenance of military family housing and medical facilities.

While Congressional divisions seem to remain the norm, lawmakers were able to reach across party lines to help ensure the needs of veterans were met before Congress adjourned to celebrate Veterans Day.

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