

## Federal budget could change health benefits for veterans

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At a time when thousands of young men and women are serving overseas, area veterans and lawmakers are shocked that cuts to veterans benefits would be considered at home.

But that's what has been going on in Washington, according to U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, an Evanston Democrat whose district includes most of Des Plaines.

Schakowsky has been alerting veterans for the past few weeks that changes in the federal Department of Veterans Affairs' budget could spell the end of health care for thousands of Illinois veterans.

Other veterans could find themselves paying a \$250 yearly enrollment fee to belong to the VA system, along with higher prices for prescription drugs and doctor visits.

"That's just a lot of money for a lot of veterans. It's just an awful time to be doing that," Schakowsky said.

Veterans affairs officials acknowledge some veterans may experience changes to their health benefits. But Leo Mackay, veterans affairs deputy secretary, says those changes would enable an overtaxed system to still take care of those veterans who need it most.

And U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, a Highland Park Republican and a veteran himself, said he expects the final budget to reflect restored benefits.

"I think veterans will get some good news," Kirk said.

What's at stake

That cuts were even considered is worrisome to Schakowsky and local veterans.

Schakowsky and U.S. Rep. Danny Davis, a Chicago Democrat, recently unveiled a study that showed more than 65,000 veterans from Illinois could face cuts in their benefits under President Bush's proposed 2004 budget.

Of those 65,000 veterans, an estimated 36,000 enrolled in Veterans Administration hospitals could be denied benefits or forced to drop out, according to the study.

"It is unimaginable that a plan to reduce veterans' benefits would even be contemplated at a time when hundreds of thousands of active duty soldiers are risking their lives," Schakowsky said.

Steven Schaefer, a Des Plaines Vietnam veteran who is commander of Veterans of Foreign Wars 4th District that includes most of the Northwest suburbs, couldn't agree more.

The so-called Priority 8 veterans already have been frozen out of receiving benefits from

Veterans Administration hospitals, Schaefer said.

Priority 8 veterans are those who don't have service-related disabilities, and whose income exceeds the federal government's cutoff to be eligible for public housing.

Schakowsky said that under the proposed federal budget, enrollment in VA hospitals would end for Priority 8 veterans. That could cut off 173,000 veterans nationwide, including 7,160 in Illinois and 4,000 in the Chicago area.

For those Priority 7 and Priority 8 veterans already enrolled, there would be a \$250 annual enrollment fee.

The so-called Priority 7 veterans also don't have service-related disabilities, and their incomes are below the federal government's cutoff for public housing. There would also be an increase for co-payments for doctor visits and prescription drugs.

Schaefer said there are countless veterans who could be affected by this.

They include the 75-year-old World War II veteran who never tried until recently to sign up for VA benefits, and the 45-year-old Gulf War veteran who just recently learned he has post-traumatic stress disorder.

Schaefer said veterans health benefits are always the first to go if money is tight.

"If they can't take care of the veterans they have now, what are they going to do with people who are overseas now," Schaefer asked. "They're quick to ask people to serve, but we're the first ones cut."

Mackay said his department fully supports the president's initial budget, even though the cuts are difficult.

While there are changes to the health care system, Mackay said the overall \$63.6 billion in spending for veterans' programs is up by \$3.3 billion.

The changes in the system will allow the government to take care of the neediest veterans -- those injured in the line of duty.

Priority 1 veterans are considered the most in need since they have been injured during service, and many are unable to work. Schaefer, who was injured in Vietnam, is a Priority 1 veteran.

"We have more demand than we have resources," Mackay said. "We're almost a victim of our success."

He said it is an effort to make sure the system doesn't fall apart under the stress of treating more and more veterans. They'll review these changes each year.

His department reports that 4.5 million veterans were treated through their system each year. Another 160,000 veterans across the country are on a waiting list for treatment.

"Our system has been stretched," he said.

Mackay said the Priority 7 and Priority 8 veterans typically have other medical options.

What's next

The president's budget passed the House by a 215-212 vote in March. Schakowsky said she voted against it, as did 12 Republicans.

Kirk said he voted for the budget because it contained many things he supported. He says the vote was taken before lawmakers knew how much would be needed for Iraq.

"We want to make sure that, number one, soldiers in the field have what they need," Kirk said.

Now that lawmakers have a better idea about what the current conflict will cost, they'll likely adjust Bush's tax-relief package, in part to restore veterans benefits. Kirk said he's confident that the Senate version of the budget will bring back the benefits.

The budget now is in a conference committee where both versions will be reconciled. The new version will go back to the House and Senate for approval.

Schakowsky is encouraging any veterans with questions about VA benefits to call her Chicago district office. That number is (773) 506-7100.

Veterans: Revised budget may restore benefits