

# *House Appropriations Committee*

*Chairman Rodney Frelinghuysen*

Website address: <http://appropriations.house.gov/>

## **Minibus #1 Summary: The Fiscal Year 2019 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Conference Report – Division C**

*Bill ensures important resources are available for our troops, veterans, and military families*

The Fiscal Year 2019 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations portion of the first minibus will help continue to rebuild the military; fund the housing, training, and equipping of our military personnel; and ensure resources for military families. The bill also provides robust funding for veterans' benefits and programs.

In total, the legislation provides \$98.1 billion in discretionary funding – \$5.3 billion above the fiscal year enacted 2018 level. This includes \$921.4 million in Overseas Contingency Operations funding.

Within this total, discretionary funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is increased by \$5 billion – 6.2 percent – over the fiscal year 2018 level, including funding to increase access to services for veterans, and to increase oversight and accountability within the department.

The bill provides critical resources for the men and women of our Armed Services and their families – a top priority of this Congress. Those who serve and fight for our freedom every day must have the necessary tools and support to do their jobs, and the peace of mind that their families are well-cared for. Just as importantly, the bill funds programs and services for our veterans – providing the highest dollar amount ever – to continue our commitment to our brave men and women after they leave active service.

### **Bill Highlights:**

**Oversight and Accountability** – The legislation strengthens oversight and accountability at the Departments of Defense (DOD) and VA to ensure taxpayer dollars are being used fully to benefit our service members and our veterans. Several provisions are included to keep these agencies on track and to address problems that have wasted money and hurt critical services.

Some of these oversight provisions include: requiring rigorous reporting on the status of VA claims processing, requiring an ongoing GAO review of the development of the VA electronic health record, requiring quarterly VA reporting and Committee investigative staff review of the conversion of the VA financial management system, requiring quarterly briefings on large construction projects that are managed outside of VA, limiting funding transfers between construction projects, limiting changes in the scope of construction projects, and restricting certain spending actions without notification to Congress.

The bill also includes funding for oversight offices in VA, as requested, to protect whistleblowers and provide increased accountability through investigation of poorly performing managers and instances of

inferior patient care. These offices will support the Secretary's authority to fire or demote poorly performing employees and to recoup pay, benefits, and awards in cases of malfeasance.

**Military Construction** – The bill provides a total of \$10.3 billion for military construction projects – an increase of \$241 million, or 2.4 percent, above the enacted fiscal year 2018 level. In addition to this amount, \$921.4 million is provided in OCO funding for projects in countries with ongoing U.S. operations and the European Deterrence Initiative. These funds will provide for the construction of facilities to enable our military to fight current and emerging threats, to support increased troop levels, and to sustain services for military families. This includes operational facilities, training facilities, hospitals, family housing, National Guard readiness centers, barracks, and other important resources. In total, 174 military construction projects across the country and overseas receive funding in the bill.

- **Military Family Housing** – The bill provides \$1.6 billion to fund construction, operation, and maintenance of military family housing for fiscal year 2019. This is \$173 million above the fiscal year 2018 level and the same as the budget request. The funding will ensure quality housing is sustained for all 1.4 million military families currently served by the program.
- **Military Medical Facilities** – The bill includes \$352 million for construction and alterations for new or existing military medical facilities. This funding will allow for continued support and care for 9.8 million eligible beneficiaries, including our wounded troops abroad.
- **DOD Education Facilities** – The bill includes \$267 million for essential safety improvements and infrastructure work at four DOD Education Activities facilities located within the U.S. and overseas.
- **Guard and Reserve** – The bill includes \$465.3 million for construction or alteration of Guard and Reserve facilities in 20 states and territories, the same as the budget request.
- **NATO Security Investment Program (NSIP)** – The bill provides \$171 million, the same as the budget request, for infrastructure necessary for wartime, crisis, and peace support and deterrence operations, and training requirements. The funds will support responses to the challenges posed by Russia and to the risks and threats emanating from the Middle East and North Africa.
- **Guantanamo Bay** – The legislation continues language to prohibit the closure of the Guantanamo Bay Naval Station and a provision to prohibit funding for any facility within the U.S. to house detainees.

**Veterans Affairs (VA)** – The legislation includes a total of \$208.8 billion in both discretionary and mandatory funding for VA, an increase of \$12.1 billion above the fiscal year 2018 level. This funding will help address many of the problems currently facing VA, and provide for better and increased access to care for our veterans.

Discretionary funding alone for VA programs in the bill totals \$86.5 billion, an increase of \$5 billion above the fiscal year 2018 level and the highest dollar amount ever for the VA. Approximately \$70.7 billion of this discretionary total was provided last year via advance funding in the fiscal year 2018 Appropriations bill.

These additional funds will provide resources for important priorities within the VA, such as health care access, suicide prevention outreach, claims processing, homeless prevention and care, opioid addiction, rural health, and medical research.

**VA Medical Care** – The bill funds VA medical care at \$72.3 billion – providing for approximately seven million patients to be treated in fiscal year 2019. Within this total, funding includes: \$8.6 billion in mental health care services; \$206 million in suicide prevention outreach activities; \$589 million for traumatic brain injury treatment; \$7.5 billion in homeless veterans treatment, services, housing, and job training; \$400 million for opioid abuse prevention; and \$270 million in rural health initiatives.

- **VA “Mission Act” Funding** – The bill includes a \$1.75 billion increase in additional discretionary funding above the already provided advance appropriations to support ongoing health care programs, as well as programs authorized in the VA MISSION Act, such as community care, support for caregivers of veterans, and other medical services. This amount is sufficient to support these programs for fiscal year 2019 as scored by the Congressional Budget Office.
- **VA Electronic Health Record** – The bill contains \$1.1 billion for the new VA electronic health record system. This will ensure the implementation of the contract creating an electronic record system for VA that is identical to one being developed for DOD. These two identical systems will ensure our veterans get proper care, with timely and accurate medical data transferred between the VA, DOD, and the private sector.
- **Disability Claims Processing Backlog** – Reducing the disability claims backlog is essential to ensuring adequate compensation and care for the more than 450,000 veterans still wading through the VA bureaucracy to get a final decision on their claims. The bill will help speed this process and get these veterans the decisions they are awaiting by providing \$46 million above the 2018 level for the Veterans Benefits Administration, which will be used for hiring additional claims staff, digital scanning of health records, and overtime pay. The bill also includes \$14 million above the 2018 level for the Board of Veterans Appeals to reduce the backlog of appeals. In addition, the bill continues rigorous reporting requirements to track each regional office’s performance on claims processing and appeals backlogs.
- **Construction** – Major and minor construction within the VA is funded at \$1.8 billion. In addition, \$2 billion is provided for infrastructure repair, with the funding allocated to major and minor construction and non-recurring maintenance. Within the additional \$2 billion in infrastructure funding, \$750 million is targeted to seismic corrections at VA facilities nationwide.
- **VA Mandatory Funding** – The bill fulfills mandatory funding requirements such as: veteran disability compensation programs for 5.3 million veterans and their survivors; education benefits for almost one million veterans; and vocational rehabilitation and employment training for almost 150,000 veterans.
- **Advance Appropriations** – The bill contains \$76 billion in advance fiscal year 2020 funding for veterans’ medical programs – the same level as the President’s request. This funding will provide for medical services, medical support and compliance, and medical facilities, and ensure that our veterans have continued, full access to their medical care needs. The bill includes \$123 billion in advance funding for VA mandatory benefit programs, as requested in the President’s budget.

**Arlington National Cemetery** – The bill includes an additional \$33.6 million for planning, design, and construction of the Southern Expansion at the Cemetery.

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