

WisDems: Proposed federal spending bill could lead to cuts in veterans' medical care, benefits, job trainings

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MADISON, Wis. — Yesterday, the La Crosse Tribune detailed how Derrick Van Orden's vote to subject the VA to devastating budget cuts would threaten health care and benefits of nearly 44,000 veterans in Wisconsin's 3rd District.

While Van Orden attempted to sidestep responsibility for the catastrophic budget cuts, the repercussions of his vote are clear. Under the indiscriminate spending reductions included in House Republicans' so-called "Limit, Save, Grow Act," the VA budget would be slashed by 22%, resulting in fewer medical appointments, longer wait times to receive benefits, and reduced access to services like employment and housing support for veterans.

La Crosse Tribune: [Proposed federal spending bill could lead to cuts in veterans' medical care, benefits, job trainings](#)

Fewer medical appointments and backlogged benefits could be a reality for veterans in the Coulee Region and nationwide, according to a report from the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Nearly 44,000 veterans in Wisconsin's 3rd Congressional District — which covers much of western Wisconsin from Chippewa Falls to Platteville and Stevens Point — could be affected by across-the-board funding reductions in the House of Representatives' spending bill.

The VA department released a fact sheet on how the House Republican spending bill would affect veterans' operations for fiscal year 2024. The budgetary change

will lead to staff reductions, fewer medical treatments and job training services, the fact sheet stated.

Congressional Republicans passed a spending bill that sets the fiscal year 2024 top line at \$1.471 trillion, equal to the fiscal year 2022 level, while exempting defense spending from a reduction.

Under the assumption that funding for defense in 2024 will at least match the current baseline level of \$885 billion, non-defense funding would total \$586 billion, which is 22% lower than the currently enacted level of \$756 billion.

Despite the claims from the department, U.S. Rep. Derrick Van Orden, R-Prairie du Chien, supported the legislation and said on Twitter: "There are zero cuts for vets."

In an interview with the Tribune, Van Orden affirmed his statement and added that Congress just approved the top line budget levels but does not tell departments how to spend the money.

"The secretaries of these departments are solely responsible for how these monies are applied," Van Orden said in an interview. "So if the Secretary of Veterans Affairs or the Secretary of Transportation wants to prioritize the bureaucracy over the safety of the rails or the medical care for our veterans, that's on them, not me."

Because there is no specific language in the House-passed measure to exempt veteran funding from the reduction, the Veterans' Affairs assumed a full, 22% cut for fiscal year 2024 compared with 2023 funding, an estimated reduction as high as \$29.7 billion.

Under the proposal, the Veterans Benefits Administration stated it would have to eliminate more than 6,000 staff, increasing the disability claims backlog by an estimated 134,000 claims.

"Forcing veterans and their surviving loved ones to wait longer for the benefits they have earned, including pensions, life insurance, GI Bill educational support and employment services," the department stated.

More than 80,000 jobs would be cut from the Veterans' Health Administration leading to 30 million fewer medical appointments for care, including wellness visits, cancer screenings, mental health services and substance use disorder treatment, the fact sheet stated.

The proposed spending reduction would mean 4,200 fewer veterans experiencing or at risk of homelessness would receive job training, counseling and job readiness services provided through the Department of Labor's Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program.

The proposal would eliminate funding for Housing Choice Vouchers for as many as 50,000 veterans, putting them at greater risk of homelessness, according to the fact sheet.

The House Republican bill includes a rescission for unspent COVID-19 relief funds, about \$2 billion from the veterans' department.

House Democrats introduced an amendment to the bill that would exempt VA funds from the relief money rescission, but the amendment failed in committee. Under the amendment, the relief funding would remain available through September 2024.