

American Legion blasts Trump budget as 'stealth privatization' of VA

By: [Leo Shane III](#), May 26, 2017 (Photo Credit: Evan Vucci/AP)

WASHINGTON — Officials from the American Legion on Friday slammed the White House's fiscal 2018 budget proposal as “a stealth privatization attempt” of veterans services and an “unacceptable” attack on veterans benefits.

“The administration's budget for (Veterans Affairs) would effectively lower the earnings of our most vulnerable veterans by reducing or eliminating disability payments from veterans who are the most in need,” Legion National Commander Charles Schmidt said in a statement.

“This plan breaks faith with veterans.”

The comments are the latest shot from veterans groups at what President Trump has billed as a veteran-friendly budget, one that includes a nearly 6 percent increase in discretionary spending and a \$54 billion boost in defense funding above congressionally mandated budget caps.

But outside advocates have been critical of the details, saying many provisions in the budget could undermine the promised goals of fixing VA and Defense Department operations.

Earlier in the week, officials from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, the Military Order of the Purple Heart and Vietnam Veterans of America all voiced opposition to plans to “round down” cost-of-living increases for veterans benefits and end Individual Unemployability payments for retirement-age beneficiaries.

The two proposals combined are designed to save more than \$3 billion, money that administration officials have said will be used to offset the cost of an expansion of the VA's Choice Card program, which allows veterans to seek medical appointments with private-sector physicians at taxpayers' expense.

But officials from Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America questioned that plan, saying VA officials have focused too much attention and funding on the embattled Choice program.

Legion officials took their criticism even further.

“We are alarmed by the cannibalization of services needed for the Choice program,” Schmidt said in his statement. “It is a ‘stealth’ privatization attempt which The American Legion fully opposes.

“Choice should not be advanced to the detriment of cost-of-living increases for veterans.”



[Military Times](#)

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VA officials have been wary of the “privatization” term since Trump’s election. During his campaign, candidate Trump repeatedly promised to make it easier for veterans to seek outside care if they so choose. Critics called that a step toward dismantling VA, a charge Trump supporters denied.

VA Secretary David Shulkin has repeatedly promised not to privatize VA services, but also said the department must find a balance between providing specialized care to veterans and using community resources for routine medical needs.

Earlier in the week, he defended the benefits trims as tough but necessary moves for his department to provide fiscally responsible services to a growing number of veterans.

“There are always hard decisions that have to be made,” he said following a House Veterans’ Affairs Committee budget hearing. “Sometimes that means you have to adjust current programs to support the growth of other benefits. That’s what we’re seeing here.”

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