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## Stingy Congress finds funds for veterans' health care

By Jacqueline Klimas

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Congress has grown increasingly stingy with its spending, but the Senate didn't hesitate this week to bust the budget by tacking on an extra \$35 billion to pay for enhanced health treatment for veterans.

It's the latest sign that veterans, along with Social Security beneficiaries, are two of the last remaining sacred cows for Capitol Hill.

"The veterans organizations have a large political influence, partly because there's so many of them — there are tens of millions of veterans," said Chris Edwards, editor of DownsizingGovernment.org at the Cato Institute. "People who are retired are often a very powerful political group because they have the time for political activism."

The vote for veterans stands in contrast with the difficulty Democrats had in rounding up the votes for an extension of federal unemployment benefits earlier this year. That bill barely cleared a GOP filibuster, and only after Democrats found budget gimmicks to pay for the extension.

The new veterans bill, meanwhile, passed with just three dissenting votes.

While the unemployment extension was about half the cost of the veterans bill, it would've only helped about 3 million people.

The Congressional Budget Office said 8.4 million vets already get health care from the VA, and another 8 million are eligible but aren't enrolled. The budget agency said it was impossible to predict how many of those 8 million would sign up, but combined with existing vets, the bill means "a significant number of veterans could receive new and expanded health care benefits."

It will cost \$35 billion for a three-year pilot program, the CBO said. But if the program were extended over the full decade, the cost could be much higher. The agency said the estimates are "highly uncertain."

The CBO said it expects more veterans to use the VA if they can see outside doctors.

Sen. Bernard Sanders, Vermont independent, said it's the country's responsibility to take care of veterans who risked their lives, regardless of cost.

"If you think it's too expensive to take care of our veterans, then don't send them to war," he said on the Senate floor last month.

An overwhelming majority of senators on both sides of the aisle voted for a bill that would let veterans seek care outside the VA if they faced long waits and lived more than 40 miles from a Veterans Affairs facility. Only three GOP senators voted against the measure.

Veterans and active-duty military have largely been a protected group in recent budget cuts. During the government shutdown, Congress made sure that active-duty service members would continue to be paid while other government employees waited it out without the guarantee of backpay. And when vets did face cuts to the cost-of-living adjustment in the December budget deal, lawmakers quickly acted to undo the cuts for all veterans and anyone already in the service after pressure from veterans service organizations.

Maya MacGuineas, CEO of the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, said it's understandable that lawmakers want to help veterans, both because of the political benefit for the lawmaker and because of the sacrifices veterans have made for the country. She said, however, that if Congress was serious about fixing problems at the VA, it would find a way to financially offset the changes.

"This is a country that's facing huge fiscal challenges and everything that isn't paid for is very vulnerable. If something is a priority, you need to figure out how to cover the costs," she said. "It's not easy, but it's certainly not rocket science."

John Hudak, a fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institute, said veterans are only an untouchable group when people are paying attention, such as now when new information about the problems at the VA are in the news every day.

"It's very hard when attention is being focused on what matters for these groups for people to say no, for people to up and argue for budget cuts," he said. "When people aren't looking, there are politicians who have no problem cutting budgets for these groups."

Mr. Edwards said the high cost and the uncertainty in the CBO estimate may suggest Congress is moving too quickly to fix problems without a clear idea of what's wrong.

"The CBO clearly says this is a wild guess that they're making at the cost so that is one which is really rare," he said. "For me, that's one caution that Congress should not be rushing to spend tens of billions more unless they really know what they're doing."