

**Honorable Phil Roe
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
House Administration Funding Hearing
1310 Longworth House Office Building
February 16, 2017
Topic: COMMITTEE BUDGET FOR 2017
Up to 5 Mins.**

Thank you Chairman Harper and Ranking Member Brady for the opportunity to discuss the Committee on Veterans' Affairs budget for the 115th Congress.

Ranking Member Tim Walz joins me here today.

We have submitted our funding request forms for 2017 per your Committee's guidance.

As you know, the Committee has oversight of the entire Department of Veterans Affairs, various programs serving veterans at the Departments of Labor and Defense, Arlington National Cemetery and our overseas cemeteries, as well as other matters.

VA is the second largest federal agency, employing over three hundred and sixty thousand people with a budget just south of 180 billion dollars this fiscal year.

In fact, over the last 10 years VA has seen budgetary growth of nearly \$100 billion and employee growth of nearly 140,000. To put that in perspective, the number of employees added to the VA Roles in just the last 10 years is roughly equivalent to the population of my home town of Clarksville, Tennessee!

Needless to say, oversight of such a vastly growing department is critical. Ensuring effective stewardship of taxpayer dollars is essential. Waste of those dollars is unacceptable.

Recognizing this, Congress more than doubled the budget for the VA Inspector General over the last 10 years. Although the VA IG's additional scrutiny is necessary and welcome, it is no substitute for effective congressional oversight.

Just before I became chairman I was stunned to learn that the budget for our committee was slightly lower in 2016 than it was 10 years ago. Further, even with a much appreciated increase last Congress, the committee's budget ranks 20th out of the 23 House committees. A cursory review of House committee budgets relative to the size of the federal agencies they oversee shows an imbalance with respect to our committee, one I am hoping you will help to remedy.

We owe it to veterans and taxpayers to ensure VA is making marked progress regarding veterans' access to healthcare; wait times at hospitals and clinics; the efficient operation of the Choice program and any successor program; the backlog of disability claims; the on-time and under-budget delivery of hundreds of millions worth of annual procurements, including construction projects; and myriad other issues.

To accomplish the mission, the committee needs the requisite staff expertise. On the majority staff we currently have four investigators. With additional resources the committee could hire an Information technology investigator to oversee VA's \$4.5 billion annual I-T budget. In the very near future VA must make multi-billion investments either by upgrading existing legacy systems, purchasing new systems, or some combination of the two. Having the staff expertise to guide the committee's oversight on this topic is crucial.

The Committee also needs an additional healthcare investigator and senior health policy expert. With more than 1,700 sites of care nationwide, numerous whistleblower complaints, and major reform of the health care system on the horizon, these skill sets are critical to our oversight and legislative efforts.

Accordingly, we are requesting a \$500,000 increase in the committee's annual personnel budget. Relative to the size of the primary agency the committee oversees and its massive growth in recent years, I hope we can all agree this is a modest investment to make.

Finally, at this time we are not requesting additional resources for committee travel or equipment needs. With the budget allotted for travel the committee has independently been able to conduct spot investigations of whistleblower complaints at various VA facilities across the country. These investigations are essential in establishing an accurate picture of events on the ground relative to what we're being told here in Washington DC.

Ours is a small Committee tasked with a humbling responsibility: Making sure we keep the promise to our nation's warriors and their families.

Mr. Chairman, you have my assurance that we will continue to account for, and stretch, every dollar afforded us as we meet and exceed the expectations placed upon us.

But my humble request of you, the Ranking member, and the Members of this Committee, is that we build on the oversight success of the veterans' committee last congress with these small, but important, additions to our budget that I have outlined.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I know Mr. Walz will have more to say on the work we've done together and what we plan to accomplish this Congress.

I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.