

The New York Times

June 24, 2009

Bill Seeks to End Delays in Veterans' Care

By [JAMES DAO](#)

The House approved legislation on Tuesday that is intended to prevent delays in federal financing for veterans' health care programs, a problem that has disrupted services provided by the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) for decades, officials say.

The bill, which has been a major lobbying priority of veterans' organizations in Washington, would allow Congress to appropriate funds for health care programs one year in advance.

Officials say that for 19 of the last 22 years, the department's budget has been approved late, usually because of fiscal wrangling on Capitol Hill. As a result, veterans' groups and officials say, the directors of veterans' health care centers and clinics have often been unable to proceed on time with new services, staff expansions or renovations.

"Our veterans pay the price with fewer doctors, longer waiting times and more restricted access for the six million veterans using V.A. health care," said Representative Bob Filner, Democrat of California and chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

Under current rules, if a new budget is not in place by the start of the federal fiscal year on Oct. 1, the Department of Veterans Affairs is required to operate on its previous year's budget. Often, those budgets have lacked money to pay for even existing programs because of inflation, contractual increases and growing caseloads.

Programs have often been postponed or canceled while hospitals and clinics await their new budgets, officials said.

"If there were scheduled pay raises, we wouldn't have sufficient funds to maintain the status quo, because the pay raise would have to be paid," said Bob Perreault, a former director of veterans' health centers in Atlanta, Philadelphia and Charleston, S.C. "That means we would not buy equipment and not do maintenance projects."

Veterans' groups say the problem has become more troubling as caseloads have grown with veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"When you have a flat-line budget, you can't treat the new people coming into the system, which leads to rationing," said Peter Dickinson, a consultant to Disabled American Veterans, an advocacy group.

A similar bill sponsored by Senator Daniel K. Akaka, Democrat of Hawaii and the chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, has bipartisan support and is expected to pass the full Senate.

[President Obama](#) has endorsed the idea of advance appropriations for veterans' health care. In testimony before the House veterans committee in March, Veterans Affairs Secretary [Eric Shinseki](#) said: "The care our veterans receive should never be hindered by budget delays. I share the president's concern as well as his support for advance appropriations as a way to provide uninterrupted care."

In addition, the House Appropriations Committee approved a bill that appropriates \$48.2 billion for veterans' medical care in the 2011 fiscal year.