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Money for Defense in House Stimulus Package

The House released details of its economic stimulus package last week. According to the summary, the \$825 billion package is the “first crucial step in a concerted effort to create and save 3 to 4 million jobs, jumpstart our economy, and begin the process of transforming it for the 21st century with \$275 billion in economic recovery tax cuts and \$550 billion in thoughtful and carefully targeted priority investments with unprecedented accountability measures built in.”

Of the \$825 billion, about \$8.8 billion would go to the Defense Department. That includes:

- \$350 million for research into using renewable energy to power weapons systems and military bases;
- \$3.75 billion for new construction of hospitals and ambulatory surgical centers;
- \$455 million in renovations to medical facilities;
- \$2.1 billion for repairs to military facilities;
- \$1.2 billion for new housing construction;
- \$154 million to improve troop housing;
- \$360 million for new child development centers;
- \$400 million for new construction to support Guard and Reserve unit;
- \$4.5 billion for the Army Corps of Engineers for environmental restoration, flood protection, hydropower and navigation infrastructure; and,
- \$300 million to clean up closed military installations

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) would receive \$950 million for medical facilities and \$50 million to make monument and memorial repairs at veterans' cemeteries.

CQ Today reports that according to House sources, the Defense Department and VA will be able to determine what projects have the highest priority and can be built the fastest and then execute them with the appropriated funds.

Since House Democrats have signaled their intention of sending a final bill to President Obama by Feb. 13, it is expected that the Ways and Means Committee will mark up the measure this week.

However, the Senate's schedule is not so clear.

Senate Finance Committee leaders have yet to release any details about their proposal; therefore, differences between their version and the House version are unknown. Additionally, the Senate has not scheduled any committee mark ups on their bill.

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif) said she doesn't expect the Senate's stimulus package to be identical to the House legislation but that they "tried to minimize the differences going in."

Casey: Two More Years before Balanced Army

AUSA hosted over 25 key congressional staff members from House and Senate offices as well as the defense oversight committees at its Institute of Land Warfare breakfast held in suburban Washington last week.

The featured speaker, Army Chief of Staff Gen. George W. Casey, Jr., told the almost 400 attendees that "we still have two tough years ahead" in putting the Army back in balance. Gen. Casey described balance as meeting the Army's end strength goals and meeting its targeted growth of the active force by 2010.

"We have to increase the time soldiers spend at home," he said in his address. "One to one [one year deployed and one year back home] was okay at the start," but repeated deployments are taking a toll.

In addition, more time at home allows for more training in areas other the counterinsurgency warfare. Casey said with two years at home, soldiers and units could spend a rotation at a combat training center and also conduct a mission rehearsal exercise before deploying again. It also would give the Army time to equip the unit.

Calling it "a large accomplishment," Casey said, "We going to complete modular organization" of the Army in seven years. Also by 2011, "we will complete our re-stationing" under base realignment and closure and returning soldiers, their families and civilians from Europe and Korea. Casey said those moves will affect about 380,000 soldiers, family members and Department of the Army civilians.

Over the same time frame, the Army will have implemented its force generation model which calls for the active force to be available for a year-long deployment and then spend two years at home. For the reserve components, they would be available for a year-long deployment and would then spend four or five years at home. "We are just coming to grips with an Army that operates on this model. It affects recruiting, training."

"We have to get our force [trained and ready] for full spectrum operations."

For the future, Casey sees the Army as a service that is versatile, expeditionary, agile, lethal, sustainable and interoperable in an era of persistent conflict.

New VA Secretary Confirmed

President Barack Obama's pick to be the new Secretary of Veterans' Affairs (VA) was confirmed by the Senate shortly after the Inauguration.

Former Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki, USA, Ret., told the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee at his confirmation hearing last week that the VA will be people-centric, results driven and forward looking.

Drawing on his experience as chief of staff, Shinseki pledged to transform the VA while realizing that such change "is always challenging, particularly with organization with complex missions and long history." In his written testimony he said he saw a transformed VA as a department that adopted best practices, was known for the excellence of its service and set standards for other organizations.

Shinseki said veterans "are clients, not just customers. They are the sole reason we exist." In answer to a question, he added that the more than 200,000 VA employees "should treat our veterans with respect and dignity" and come "to work with a passion."

He said he would measure results by meeting timelines, quality of care or service and consistency of performance. "Success also includes cost effectiveness.

Among the immediate issues he said he would address is presenting to the Congress a realistic budget for 2010 and implementing the new GI Bill provisions by August.

On the backlog of disability claims cases, Shinseki said, "I don't understand why six months is what we live with." He promised that asking veterans to "take a number" and wait six months for claims adjudication is not his vision for the department. There are about 840,000 unprocessed claims.

He also told the committee that he plans to meet soon with Defense Secretary Robert Gates to smooth the transition of care for service members leaving the military system for the VA, a top priority for AUSA. "I intend to go after this. It seems to me that the technology is there." He added in answer to several senators' questions that the two departments also would look at better ways of cooperating in caring for amputees and in mental health.

It also means a more pro-active department addressing issues of this war, including caring for more women veterans "without playing catch-up."

"There's nothing that builds trust faster than performance ... and delivering on commitments," he said.

One topic raised at the hearing was the inclusion of \$375 million in the fiscal 2009 spending bill that would fund enrollment of "Priority 8" veterans. Priority 8 veterans are those who earn more than \$30,000 a year and have no service-related injuries. There are approximately 265,000 such veterans who were barred in January 2003 from enrolling for benefits.

Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Miss) asked Shinseki how he planned to enroll the Priority 8 veterans when doing so would more than double the number of veterans in the system. "To move twice as many people into the system is going to be more demanding to the taxpayers than I think some people realize," said Sen. Wicker.

Gen. Shinseki said that he needed time to familiarize himself with the number of eligible veterans and look at the budget before he could comment further. While supporters say all veterans deserve benefits, other argue that including less-urgent cases jeopardizes quality and detracts from the

treatment of higher-priority veterans. Expect this issue to be raised when Shinseki testifies before Congress again.

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