

Congress unhappy with DoD, VA health records progress

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House lawmakers plan to hold back millions in dollars of technology funding from Defense and Veterans Affairs department planners until Congress is convinced they are making progress on developing a way to share electronic medical records.

At an April 9 hearing, members of the House Appropriations Committee approved a fiscal 2015 budget plan that would hold back 75 percent of VA's requested record system upgrade funds, contingent on the two departments proving that they are close to a seamless medical record system for troops and veterans.

Rep. John Culberson, R-Texas, chair of the committee's military construction and veterans affairs panel, said that similar language is planned for the defense appropriations and defense authorization bills set for May. Pentagon planners won't get their full technology request until lawmakers are satisfied they're addressing the shared records issue.

"If they want their money, they're going to have to earn it," he said.

Frustration with the military/veterans records systems has been rising on Capitol Hill since early 2013, when department leaders announced they would abandon plans for a single system that could track individuals from boot camp through their VA care. The price tag for that effort would have approached \$30 billion.

But lawmakers noted that the departments had already spent more than \$1 billion and several years on the joint system before changing plans, calling into question whether a seamless lifetime military medical record would ever be possible.

Defense and VA officials have repeatedly worked to assure Congress that the departments already are sharing significant amounts of medical information, including a common display format for basics like patient prescriptions, past physician visits and check-up information.

Pentagon officials have promised that having a separate records system from the VA won't prevent them from sharing files seamlessly. Military medical officials are in the process of seeking proposals for a new multibillion-dollar records system, one that may include elements of the existing VA system.

Rep. Sam Farr, D-Calif., blamed most of the confusion surrounding the issue on the Pentagon's "unwillingness" to adopt the established VA records system, but said he's hopeful the withheld funding plan can force a change.

President Obama promised lifetime electronic medical records for service members back in 2009, as part of a host of promised reforms to veterans services. Rep. Sanford Bishop Jr., D-Ga., said that after years of frustration, he hopes the funding plans "have finally gotten the two departments' attention, and I expect to see some real progress on this soon."

The House budget proposal for VA would provide about \$65 billion in discretionary funding in fiscal 2015, about \$1.5 billion above this fiscal year but about \$400 million less than what administration officials had

requested.

That would include about \$173 million in funding to continue work on the department's Veterans Benefits Management System and \$20 million more for digitizing veterans' paper medical records.

Officials said those funds are needed to help VA stay on track with the plan to eliminate its disability benefits claims backlog in 2015.



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A graphic with a red background. At the top, the word 'OVERHAULING' is written in large, bold, black letters. Below it, 'RETIREMENT PAY' is written in white, bold letters. Underneath that, in smaller white text, it says 'A Military Times special report'. At the bottom left, the hashtag '#DOD retirement' is written in white. On the right side, there is a stack of US dollar bills, including \$20 and \$100 bills.



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