

Lawmakers push for big VA budget increase

By Rick Maze - Staff writer

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Despite plans to give the Veterans Affairs Department a 7 percent budget increase at a time when most federal spending is frozen, key congressional committees are pushing for even bigger veterans budgets.

They just can't agree on how much more to give.

At the low end, Democrats on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee are recommending a \$380 million increase in the \$56.9 billion VA budget proposed by the Obama administration. At the high end, Republicans on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee are recommending a \$2.6 billion increase. Democrats on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee fall in between, proposing a \$571 million increase over the administration budget.

Republicans on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee have not yet released their recommendations on the 2011 budget.

The recommendations are being sent to the House and Senate budget committees, which are responsible for drawing up a 2011 federal budget guideline, known as a concurrent budget resolution, that sets spending levels for various federal agencies and revenue targets to be used in preparing tax-related legislation. The resolution, while not legally binding, is used as a guide as Congress works on annual agency budgets.

It is unclear whether the budget committees will go along with the idea of giving an even bigger increase to VA, while other federal agencies would get no increase under the Obama administration plan after adjusting for inflation.

In appealing for extra money, the veterans' committees are saying that scrimping on care for combat veterans unwise given the sacrifices being made in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Caring for veterans is an ongoing cost of war," Democrats on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee said in their March 4 recommendations to the House Budget Committee.

"Our recommendations are for stronger funding to help disabled veterans train for new careers, provide support to family caregivers, and invest in medical and prosthetic research," said Sen. Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee chairman.