

Lawmaker warns about benefit upgrades

A key lawmaker warned groups pressing for increases in military benefits that tight budgets will force a choice between devoting a little money to several things or a lot of money to one dramatic improvement. The caution from Rep. Susan Davis (D-CA), chairwoman of the House Armed Services Committee's military personnel panel, came March 21 after a congressional budget expert outlined the difficulty lawmakers will face in finding money for improvements in benefits. The wish list from the Military Coalition, a group of more than 30 military-related organizations, includes improving National Guard and reserve retirement benefits, allowing concurrent receipt of retired pay and disability compensation to all those eligible for both benefits, and an end to the offset in military survivor benefits for those who also receive dependency and indemnity compensation from the Veterans Affairs Department. Davis said the Armed Services Committee is hunting for a way to raise money for such items but warned it is unlikely there will be enough for all of them. She asked the groups whether they prefer to see modest gains in several areas or all available funds spent on one issue.

Association representatives at the hearing said they were not ready to make that choice, but were ready to compromise if needed. "I am confident we could get a consensus," said Steve Strobridge of the Military Officers Association of America, one of the groups in the coalition. Davis raised the funding issue after Sarah Jennings, an analyst in the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, explained that paying for increases in retired pay and survivor benefits is more complicated than just finding room in the budget for additional spending by cutting things like ships or aircraft. Jennings said the committee can try to cut spending on similar programs from within the defense budget, but reducing benefits for some people to pay for benefits for others is not something Davis seemed willing

to consider. New benefits could be paid for by raising taxes, but tax hikes fall under the House Ways and Means Committee, which would have to consent to help. Defense-owned assets also could be sold, although Jennings said this often does not raise much money. In 2008, Congress ordered the sale of some of the military's stockpile of cobalt, but this produced just \$10 million, not enough to cover the \$6 billion needed to eliminate the offset in survivor benefits; the \$4.5 billion to fully fund concurrent receipt for all disabled retirees; or the \$1 billion to make retroactive a 2008 change that gives credit toward earlier retirement checks for reservists mobilized for 90 days or longer since Sept. 11, 2001.



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