

# NEWS RELEASE

**AIR FORCE SERGEANTS ASSOCIATION**

P.O. Box 50, Temple Hills, MD 20748-0500

1-800-638-0594 or 301-899-3500

FAX: 301-899-8136



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## **AFSA APALLED BY VA'S \$1 BILLION HEALTH CARE SHORTFALL**

**AFSA Headquarters (June 24, 2005)** – Yesterday, as a result of a routine budget review, the Veterans Administration admitted that the 2005 VA health care budget is \$1 Billion short, and that VA dollars were being diverted from funds appropriated for other purposes within the VA system. On several occasions during the past year, AFSA and other veterans' service organizations (VSOs) have questioned Administration claims that projected VA health care budget levels would be adequate. As recently as April, VA Secretary James Nicholson denied VSO claims in saying, "I can assure you the VA does not need emergency supplemental funds in FY 2005 to continue to provide the timely, quality service that is our goal."

AFSA Executive Director Richard M. Dean said of the \$1 billion shortfall, "This is an unconscionable situation, particularly for a country at war. Earlier this year, this association reminded Congress that the VA must have the resources necessary to meet its mission both in peacetime, and in war. It is critical that this nation support our military personnel who have fought in previous wars, and those who are fighting the Global War on Terrorism. The VA must be funded to care for our nation's veterans, especially those returning home from battle."

Key committee leaders responded differently. House VA Committee Chairman Representative Steve Buyer, R-IN, minimized the problem by saying the VA can meet this year's health care costs by drawing on "spare funds" and money from other operations, including building construction. In contrast, Senator Larry Craig, R-ID, Chairman of the Senate VA Committee was angry. He said he let Secretary Nicholson know he was not pleased. Craig vowed to quickly hold hearings and said of Nicholson, "I am certain he is going to take serious steps to ensure that this type of episode is not repeated." Secretary Nicholson deflected the criticism in a written statement by saying, "Working with our partners in Congress, I'm confident the VA's budget will continue to provide world-class health care to the nation's veterans."

AFSA has communicated a very strong message to both committees urging their support for an emergency supplemental appropriations bill to make up the shortfall. Executive Director Dean said of the Administration's response, "This VA 'recovery' plan of "robbing Peter to pay Paul" by diverting funds from other necessary accounts is just plain irresponsible. AFSA members urge Congress to clean up this VA mess now!"

