

# Veterans committee leaders all open to VA cuts

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The top leaders of the House and Senate veterans' affairs committees are willing to cut funding for the Veterans Affairs Department in hopes of averting across-the-board cuts in federal spending.

"We believe no constituency better understands the challenge America faces, and no constituency is better suited to, again, lead by example by putting country first," says a rare joint letter signed by the four top Democratic and Republican members of the veterans' committees.

The letter to the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction is dated Oct. 14 but was not made available until Monday. It is signed by Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee chairwoman; Sen. Richard Burr, R-N.C., the Senate's committee's ranking Republican; Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., the House Veterans' Affairs Committee chairman; and Rep. Bob Filner, D-Calif., the House committee's ranking Democrat.

Murray is also the Senate chairwoman of the 12-member joint committee, known as the "supercommittee," that is empowered to make recommendations by Thanksgiving on how to cut \$1.2 trillion or more in federal spending. The letter avoids the irony of Murray writing a letter to herself by having the veterans' committee message sent to the entire joint committee rather than to the House and Senate co-chairs.

Miller said in a statement Monday that he remains committed to veterans' programs.

"We all have a responsibility to America's veterans to ensure that the benefits they have earned remain intact and that their needs remain a priority," Miller said. "We also have a responsibility, however, to ensure that during these tough economic times, we provide to the Joint Select Committee information that is pertinent to its decision-making process in a transparent and bipartisan manner."

No specific cuts were recommended by the four lawmakers, but they attached a list of all of the reductions made in veterans' benefits since 1980 as part of other deficit reduction packages and a separate one-page list of ongoing initiatives to reduce expenses.

Past budget-cutting efforts have included modest increases in copayments for veterans receiving treatment and prescription drugs for health problems not directly related to military service; making veterans wait until the first day of the following month after

approval of benefits claims for payments to begin; raising fees for using the veterans' home loan guarantee program; and verifying income through the Internal Revenue Service for veterans or survivors receiving pensions for low-income people.

"In past times of fiscal restraint, thoughtful and measured areas of budgetary savings found within veterans' programs have advanced on a bipartisan basis," the joint letter says. "We recommend that the select committee refer to these lists when making the difficult decisions ahead."