

Obama Pushes Veterans Jobs Programs

Kevin Freking, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In an effort to cut the unemployment rate among veterans, President Barack Obama is calling for a new conservation program that would put veterans to work rebuilding trails, roads and levees on public lands.

The president also will seek more grant money for programs that allow local communities to hire more police officers and firefighters.

"Let's get more cops on the beat, let's get more rangers in the parks, let's get more firefighters on call, and in the process, we're going to put more veterans back to work," Obama said Friday at a fire station in Arlington, Va., that was one of the first to respond to the attack on the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001.

"They've already risked their lives defending America. They should have the opportunity to rebuild America," he said.

The efforts, which Obama first announced in his State of the Union address last week, are particularly geared to those veterans who served after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a group experiencing an unemployment rate of 9.1 percent, according to the government's jobs report for January.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said the Civilian Conservation Corps that operated during the 1930s could be viewed as a model for what the administration will try to accomplish through its "Veterans Jobs Corps." He said that the administration will propose spending \$1 billion over five years that would be used to put an estimated 20,000 veterans to work restoring habitat and eradicating invasive species, among other activities.

"When one looks back at the legacy of the Civilian Conservation Corps, we take great comfort that those who take on these kinds of activities will leave a lasting legacy for the United States," Salazar said.

The backdrop of presidential politics is also playing a role in the Obama administration's new efforts. Several states that will be heavily contested in November have a significant military presence. Veterans will be evaluating specific ways the next White House administration intends to help them.

Communities that hire veterans to work as police and firefighters will be given preference in the grants competition. Obama will also seek to increase spending for the grants programs. He is proposing an additional \$4 billion for the Community Oriented Policing Services program, or COPS. He will propose an additional \$1 billion for the firefighter grants.

The administration will also propose a training program designed to help veterans

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wanting to start their own small businesses.

With GOP lawmakers stressing the need to cut government spending, it remains to be seen how far the proposals will go in a deeply divided Congress. Many conservatives have in the past voted to cut spending for the COPS program, while Obama is calling for a major expansion.

Obama said the end of the war in Iraq could help finance the work programs.

"Congress should take the money that we're no longer spending on war, use half of it to pay down our debt, and use the rest to do some nation-building here at home," he said.

Rep. Jeff Miller, the Republican chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, voiced skepticism. He said he wanted the administration to work with Congress on getting businesses to hire more.

"Short-term spending and temporary programs have failed and are not the solution," Miller said.

Congress also has been focusing on the problem of unemployment among veterans. A House subcommittee on Thursday examined the unemployment rate for those who serve in the National Guard or Reserves. Witnesses estimated that about 1 out of every 5 returning guardsmen is unemployed.

Theodore Daywalt, CEO and president of a jobs board called VetJobs, told lawmakers that veterans who totally separate from the military are for the most part finding work, even in today's economic environment.

"But if a veteran remains active in the National Guard, they are having a difficult time finding meaningful employment due to the constant call-ups and deployment schedules," Daywalt said in his written testimony.

Daywalt said some employers have become wary of hiring someone who is called up for as many as 24 months at a time. And the difficulty in finding work has led some guardsmen to volunteer for second or third deployments. He also predicted that the unemployment problem for guardsmen and reservists could get worse as the military downsizes because it will result in more competition when openings do occur.

About 160,000 troops leave active duty annually, and some 95,000 members of the National Guard and Reserves join them. The Labor Department already operates some jobs programs to help troops with the transition to civilian life. For example, there are employee workshops that help vets with advice on job searches and labor market conditions. The department also provides grants to states that in turn hire workers to conduct job training workshops and reach out to employers on behalf of vets.

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