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Military health on radar for Musgrave

Representative fights raising insurance costs

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After joining forces in February to encourage the president to reduce wasteful spending, U.S. Republican Rep. Marilyn Musgrave and Democrat Rep. Mark Udall have teamed up again — this time to ask the president to not make up for budget shortfalls by raising health insurance costs for military service members and veterans.

The president's budget proposes increasing deductibles and enrollment fees for TRICARE, the Department of Defense's health care program.

"The congresswoman is interested in saving; it's just a matter of setting priorities," said Aaron Johnson, spokesman for Musgrave. "One priority is keeping promises to men and women in uniform."

MONDAY

April 10, 2006

TRICARE provides four separate health plans, including Prime, Standard, Extra and TRICARE for Life. Under Bush's proposal, the Prime plan would go up 41 percent for lower-level, retired, enlisted veterans, double for senior enlisted veterans, and triple for retired officers.

Harry Campbell, commander of Post 1781 of the Fort Collins Veterans of Foreign Wars, said many people eligible for TRICARE already have a limited income.

"That's a huge jump," Campbell said of the increases. "It's really a shame to try to squeeze more juice out of a lemon that's pretty much dry."

Bush's proposal is an example of the misguided priorities of the administration, said Lawrence Pacheco, spokesman for Udall.

"Every person who wants to serve in the military is in need. When benefits are in jeopardy, that could have a potential effect on recruitment,"

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Pacheco said. "We shouldn't be balancing the budget on the backs of people who are serving the country."

Part of the impetus for the proposed fee hikes might be the result of state governments and private companies passing on their costs, Johnson said. States that don't want to pay for state employees' health care encourage the employees to stay on TRICARE. Some private employers have similarly dropped their company health plans for retired military members, knowing TRICARE is available. Increasing the

premiums and fees could then help cover the growing number of people using TRICARE.

Campbell said he'd like to see U.S. representatives give up their retirement pensions to cover the costs. Both Pacheco and Johnson suggest looking at frivolous programs in the budget that can be cut to pay for service members' health care.

The bipartisan message is particularly powerful, Pacheco said.

"Certainly, having Ms. Musgrave and Congressman Udall together pushing this initiative sends a message that people on both sides of the aisle are opposed to it and the administration should rethink its policy," Pacheco said.