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Historic Veterans' Affairs budget passed by Senate

Largest budget ever funds crisis hotline and addressing housing issues for veterans

SALEM – The largest budget in Oregon history for the Department of Veterans' Affairs will go to Gov. Kate Brown for her signature.

House Bill 5039 – which passed the Senate on a bipartisan vote today – establishes a \$509.9 million budget for the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs. That's a \$69.5 million increase – 15.8 percent – over the agency's current biennial budget. The bill also honors the voters' will – as expressed through passage of Measure 96 last year – by allocating \$18.7 million from the Lottery Fund to veterans' services.

"This is the largest investment our state has ever made in services to veterans, and I am proud to be part of it," said Sen. Betsy Johnson (D-Scappoose), who carried the bill in the Senate. "This is a much-needed increase in funding for services for the men and women who have sacrificed so much for the good of our great nation. It will help them secure housing and have access to other services that we owe them. It is essential for us to take care of our veterans and this budget is a great step forward in that direction."

The funding also will be supplemented by an additional \$2.5 million for veterans' mental health care services through the Oregon Health Authority budget. The Legislature also is providing another anticipated \$2.5 million in support for capital investments at Oregon's two veterans' homes. Those investments will be allocated in separate bills.

Connecting veterans to the services they need and deserve will continue to be an emphasis next biennium. House Bill 5039 doubles current support for County Veteran Service Officers and National Service Organizations. "On the ground support" services provide needed outreach to

veterans about the benefits they have been promised and they have earned. Funding is continued for the Veterans' Suicide Prevention Hotline, where phones are answered for veterans by veterans. Trained peers are uniquely positioned to assist fellow veterans in crisis. Referrals also are available for veterans' housing and homelessness issues.

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