

Military Health Care

President Trump said 17 August 2020 that he rejected a proposal from the Pentagon to cut military health care by \$2.2 billion during the pandemic. The president tweeted his rebuke hours after Politico reported that Department of Defense officials were suggesting cutting health care over the next five years as part of Secretary Mark Esper's cost-cutting initiatives. "A proposal by Pentagon officials to slash Military Healthcare by \$2.2 billion dollars has been firmly and totally rejected by me," Trump tweeted. "We will do nothing to hurt our great Military professionals & heroes as long as I am your President. Thank you!" The Pentagon did not immediately return a request for comment.

In Esper's tweet, which was posted about an hour after Trump's, the defense secretary said he had yet to be briefed on the reported funding cuts, but he would not approve any cost-slashing proposals that would harm medical access for Defense Department personnel. "I have not directed nor approved any cuts to our military healthcare system in our future budgets," Esper wrote. "Furthermore, I will not allow any reduction that would harm access to quality medical care for our service members, their families, and our larger DoD community."

The proposed cuts come as a part of the second annual defense-wide review, an Esper-directed effort to strip billions of dollars from the Pentagon's so-called Fourth Estate, which are all of its entities that fall outside the military departments. Those funds, Esper has argued, would be better used to prepare troops for potential fights with power rivals such as China or Russia. Last year, the review identified some \$5.7 billion in Fourth Estate funding that officials proposed moving into the military departments in their proposed fiscal year 2021 budget, which Congress is now considering.

Under the proposal, the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness would need to save \$2.2 billion in military health, a number officials settled on after months of discussions during the cost-cutting review, a defense official told Politico. Two other senior defense officials told the news outlet that the effort was rushed and would impact the 9.5 million active-duty personnel, military retirees and their families who depend on the military health care. Esper and his deputies reportedly argued that the private health care system can fill in the gap of the budget cuts.

The military health system runs hundreds of facilities worldwide and operates Tricare, which allows members to receive civilian health care outside of the military network. Pentagon spokesperson Lisa Lawrence told Politico that the system continually assesses how it can most effectively align its assets in support of the National Defense Strategy. "The MHS will not waver from its mission to provide a ready medical force and a medically ready force," Lawrence said. "Any potential changes to the health system will only be pursued in a manner that ensures its ability to continue to support the Department's operational requirements and to maintain our beneficiaries' access to quality health care."