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Dems want to add to military money

By Tom Squitieri, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Senate Democrats will push President Bush to add up to \$8 billion a year to the White House's war-spending bill to pay for more troops than Bush wants and more generous support for families and businesses affected by the war, former presidential contender Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., said Tuesday.

Kerry told reporters he will try to attach the proposal to the \$82 billion supplemental appropriations bill Bush proposed Monday, chiefly for the costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. "It's the right thing to do for Congress to stand by military families," Kerry said.

"Getting our troops and their families what they need and deserve has always been a Democratic priority, and the first bill we introduced this Congress reflects the commitment of Sen. Kerry and the rest of the caucus to stand with our troops," Sen. Harry Reid, the Democratic leader, said of the package.

Reid said the measure to increase benefits and the size of the force is one of the party's top 10 bills this year.

The White House had no comment on the proposal.

The Army is temporarily increasing its size by 30,000 troops under an earlier Bush administration plan; Kerry wants to double that with another 30,000 troops and wants the increases made permanent. The Army has about 494,000 soldiers. Kerry's plan also would more than triple Bush's proposed addition of 3,000 troops to the Marine Corps, adding 10,000 Marines. The Marine Corps stands at 175,000 troops.

Washington has been fighting for years over the proper size of the armed forces, but the Iraq war has sharpened the argument amid criticism that the Bush administration

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has too few troops in Iraq.

Kerry also proposes:

- Extending military health insurance to all members of the National Guard and Reserve, whether mobilized or not. The so-called part-time troops of the Guard and Reserve get full military health coverage only while they're on active duty or if they're willing to pay the cost themselves.
- Expanding post-traumatic stress disorder help to all veterans who need it, not only to those just back from combat.
- Allowing troops to make penalty-free withdrawals from IRA accounts for expenses associated with deployments.
- Creating a tax credit for small businesses that make up the difference in lost wages for reservists.
- Letting families of troops killed in combat remain in military housing for up to a year, instead of six months.
- Creating a line on federal tax forms to allow contributions to help wounded vets.

Kerry said Congress could pay for the proposals by slowing deployment of an anti-missile defense system and by ending programs to develop battlefield and "bunker buster" nuclear weapons.

Another option would be trimming tax cuts for individuals earning \$300,000 or more or couples earning \$600,000 or more, he said.

Kerry and Bush are in general agreement on a larger death benefit for servicemembers. Last month, the Bush administration proposed an increase in the tax-free "death gratuity" for servicemembers who die in combat zones, to \$100,000 from \$12,420.

The government would also increase the amount of life insurance available to all servicemembers to \$400,000 from \$250,000. For troops in combat zones, the government would pay the premiums on the extra \$150,000 of insurance.

Kerry would extend the benefits to all servicemembers, not just those in combat zones.

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