



Slash in DOH pandemic response budget questioned

BY WENDELL VIGILIA

VICE President Leni Robredo yesterday questioned the Department of Budget and Management's decision to reduce the Department of Health's proposed pandemic response budget for 2022, saying it does not make sense at all to punish the DOH for having unspent funds last year when other agencies can be tapped to assist it.

Robredo said the solution is not to reduce the DOH's budget but to look for other agencies to help the department handle its pandemic response programs to increase absorptive capacity.

"You'll be surprised because at a time like this when we're in the middle of a pandemic, why will you reduce the budget for important activities or programs like those of the Department of Health, the RITM (Research Institute for

Tropical Medicine). That's what I can't understand because we need it now, we have the money but we can't spend it," Robredo said in Filipino on her weekly radio program.

Last Thursday, Health Secretary Francisco Duque III said the DOH had proposed a P73.99-billion budget for COVID-19 response next year but the DBM approved only P19.68 billion.

He said this is why there is also no budget for allowances and benefits of healthcare workers under next year's DOH proposed budget, noting that P50.4 billion of the original proposed amount would have covered hazard pay, special risk and meal allowances, accommodation and transportation, and life insurance.

Duque said the budget for the

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health workers' special risk allowance (SRA) will be funded under the P405-billion, yet-to-be approved Bayanihan 3 law.

But Robredo said the item will be funded if there is a surplus in the government's revenue, which means that it is not a spending priority.

At least 4 percent of next year's budget or about P241 billion was allocated for COVID-19 response, including P45.4 billion to cover COVID-19 vaccine booster shots of 93.798 million fully-vaccinated Filipinos who might need to be inoculated again next year.

Robredo lamented that the RITM, the country's first molecular laboratory which was the first to conduct COVID-19 tests, suffered a P170-million reduction in its proposed budget for 2022, from P393 million to P223 million.

"Why would they do this? This is the most needed function now and you would cut its budget? I don't understand," she said. "It seems that there's so much disconnect at the top (Executive)."

Robredo also questioned the government's move to lift the travel ban on 10 countries starting today, saying the decision should at least be backed by data amid the surge in the number of COVID cases in the country.

"I hope all of our policies are data-driven. I don't know why we're removing restrictions when our cases keep on increasing. In fact, other countries remain very strict," she said.

Presidential spokesman Harry Roque has said that despite the lifting of travel restrictions, travelers from the 10 countries still have to comply with strict quarantine rules.

Sen. Nancy Binay is pushing for the inclusion of the healthcare workers' SRA in the 2020 proposed national budget rather than in the proposed Bayanihan 3.

In an interview with dzBB on Sunday, Binay said if the SRA funds are in the national budget, health workers are assured they would get the benefits because the proposed 2022 will definitely be passed before the year ends.

In contrast, there is no assurance as to when the

Bayanihan 3 law will be passed by Congress, she said.

The House of Representatives passed on third and final reading the Bayanihan to Arise as One Act or Bayanihan 3.

Senate majority leader Juan Miguel Zubiri earlier said the Senate was cold to the passage of Bayanihan 3 and would rather include the allocation for Bayanihan 3 in the 2022 national budget.

The DBM earlier said that it can only provide P100 billion to P150 billion for Bayanihan 3.

Binay also said next year's proposed budget for the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict can be slashed and the amount added to the RITM's budget.

Binay said they can look at government agencies' unobligated funds and pour them to the DOH.

Sen. Juan Edgardo Angara, Senate finance committee chair, has scheduled on Wednesday the first briefing of the Development Budget Coordinating Committee on the proposed 2022 National Expenditure Program.

The DOH said it has released P14.3 billion for the benefits for healthcare workers, from both public and private health facilities catering to COVID-19 patients.

In a statement, the DOH said the P14.3 billion cover the periods Sept. 15 to Dec. 19, 2020 and Dec. 20 to June 30, 2021.9.5

For Period 1, P6.4 billion has been disbursed for the active hazard duty pay for 384,159 healthcare workers and SRA for 306,314 healthcare workers.

For the meals, accommodation, and transportation (MAT) allowances, it said 103,096 healthcare workers have received their MAT worth P990.9 million.

For Period 2, P6.9 billion worth of SRA was had been disbursed for SRAs of 379,117 healthcare workers and 32,281 healthcare workers were covered with life insurance worth P16 million.

The DOH also reported P570 million worth of checks has been released to 24,034 healthcare workers as COVID-19 sickness and death compensation. — *With Raymond Africa and Gerard Naval*