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VFW WASHINGTON WEEKLY
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1. VA's eBenefits Portal Shut Down for Software Defect: VFW learned this week that on Wednesday, during a process to improve software supporting the joint VA and DOD benefits web portal eBenefits, VA discovered a software defect. During a limited timeframe, some veterans and service members who had registered and logged into eBenefits were able to see a combination of their information as well as personal information from other e-Benefits users. VA immediately shut down the eBenefits system in order to limit any further issues with personal information captured on the site. VA is in the process of identifying those that were affected, and plans to contact those veterans directly to offer proper credit monitoring. VA is also conducting a full review to be certain the underlying technological issues have been resolved before the system will be returned to normal operations. Check regularly with www.va.gov for updates on the situation.

2. Omnibus Bill Signed: The president is expected to sign into a law a \$1.1 trillion Omnibus Bill that Congress approved this week to fund the federal through fiscal year 2014. Of interest to the VFW and veterans' advocates:

- * Afghanistan: The legislation includes \$85.2 billion for military operations in Afghanistan, which is \$2 billion less than last year due to ongoing troop reductions. It also withholds money from the Afghan government "until certain conditions are met," to include the signing of a new bilateral security agreement.
- * Guantanamo Bay: The legislation prohibits the Administration from transferring detainees from the U.S. detention facility on Cuba to facilities in the U.S. It also prohibits money from being spent to modify U.S. facilities to house such detainees.
- * Military Pay: It authorizes the 1 percent pay increase for U.S. military personnel, plus sets troop levels for the year at 1,361,400 active-duty and 833,700 Reserve Component troops.
- * Military Retirees: It eliminates the 1 percent COLA penalty on Chapter 61 medical retirees and survivor benefits recipients, but not for approximately 800,000 working-age military retirees younger than age 62. More than a dozen individual pieces of legislation have been introduced in the House and Senate to remove the penalty on all retirees. According to VFW National Commander Bill Thien, the Omnibus Bill doesn't go far enough to protect the earned retirement benefit of all military retirees, and the VFW will continue to work hard to fix this injustice. You can help by contacting your representatives and senators today at <http://capwiz.com/vfw/issues/alert/?alertid=63054586>.
- * Military Sexual Assault: It provides \$157 million for the Pentagon's sexual assault prevention programs and \$25 million to expand a victims' counsel program for troops involved in rape or sexual assault cases.
- * Veterans Affairs: The modest increases to medical services and the Veterans Benefits Administration were overshadowed by large reductions in VA construction and medical facility accounts. See entry #2 below.

3. VA Appropriations Not Enough: The VFW and its three other co-authors on the Independent Budget expressed concern with the funding provided to the VA by the Omnibus Bill. The spending package provides only \$342 million for Major Construction, which is about \$800 million less than what the IB recommends for FY 2014, and billions less than what's truly needed for construction funding. Additionally, the bill would slash funding for Medical Facilities, reducing that account by nearly \$500 million. Along with AMVETS, DAV and PVA, the VFW appreciates the modest increases to Medical Services and the Veterans

Benefits Administration, as well as to Information Technology, but emphasizes that more must be done. The four organizations again call for the passage of the companion bills H.R. 813 and S. 932 to provide advance appropriations for all VA accounts. Currently, only the medical care accounts are funded through advance appropriations. The 28th edition of the Independent Budget is expected to be released next month. For the IB press release, go to <http://www.vfw.org/News-and-Events/Articles/2014-Articles/Veterans-Service-Organizations-Concerned-About-Omnibus-Appropriations-Bill/>. For the IB FY 2015 Critical Issues report, go to <http://www.independentbudget.org/>.

4. VA Subcommittee Discusses Surgical Implants: The House VA Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations held a hearing this week on issues surrounding VA surgical implants. The hearing was prompted by a recent GAO report entitled, "VA Surgical Implants: Shortcoming in Implant Purchasing and Tracking." VA is one of the largest purchasers of surgical implants, which include devices such as pacemakers and artificial joints, as well as biological products such as skin and bone grafts. The witness panels included representatives from GAO, VA, and subject matter experts. The main focus of the hearing was to address GAO's findings on VA purchasing deficiencies. Other issues addressed included VA's tracking of veterans who receive implants in case a device is recalled due to deficiency, and reported cases of skin graft vendors inappropriately participating in the application of their products. For more information, visit the VFW blog at: <http://thefvw.blogspot.com/2014/01/house-discusses-va-purchasing-for.html>

5. Armed Services Subcommittee Discusses LQA: The House Armed Services Readiness Subcommittee held a hearing Thursday to address the Living Quarters Allowance issue that impacts almost 700 DOD civilians working overseas, many of whom are veterans and VFW members. The issue is that a reinterpretation of civilian personnel regulations found them ineligible to receive LQA, but in order to request a waiver, they must first admit to the debt, even though they received LQA through no fault of their own. According to government witnesses, out of 602 Department of Army civilians, 534 of them have submitted waivers and/or requested hearings, and that 366 waivers have been approved. No evidence of fraud has yet been found. To the VFW, DOD should extend LQA payment eligibility until the current employee departs, and extend grandfather protections to those civilians no longer assigned overseas or who have since separated or retired from federal service. The witnesses said the highest amount owed was \$798,000, but they could not answer whether the department would seek reimbursement or waivers from previously assigned civilians.

6. Army Reserve is Hiring: The VFW attended a meeting Thursday with the Chief of the Army Reserve, Lt. Gen. Jeff Talley, and learned that they are short about 7,000 soldiers, especially in the mid-NCO and officer ranks. The Army Reserve, which is the largest single command in the military, is authorized 205,000 soldiers, but its current strength is only 198,000. He addressed a current study about potentially combining the Guard and Reserve, and said even though some efficiencies could be made, there was no appetite for it in Congress or the Pentagon. Army Reserve leadership is also supportive of VFW initiatives to lower the Reserve Component retirement age to 55 and to grandfather activation credit back to 9/11, but doesn't believe money exists to expand retirement benefits when the active-duty retirement system is under intense scrutiny and subject to change.

7. Korean War MIA Identified: The Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office announced the identification of remains belonging to Army Cpl. Billy M. McIntyre, 19, of Carter, Okla. On Dec. 7, McIntyre was reportedly killed in action while deployed along the eastern banks of the Chosin Reservoir in North Korea. He was a member of the 31st Regimental Combat Team, also known as Task Force Faith. Read more about his recover and identification at http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/news_releases/.

As always, we want to share your advocacy stories on the VFW Capitol Hill blog. To share your stories either fill out our online form by clicking here, <http://www.vfw.org/Forms/Capitol-Hill-Blog-Submissions/>, or simply email photos and stories directly to vfwac@vfw.org

To sign up new veterans' advocates to receive the Washington Weekly every Friday, click here: <http://capwiz.com/vfw/mlm/signup.htm>

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