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VFW WASHINGTON WEEKLY
March 7, 2014

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1. VFW Advocates Take Message to Hill: As part of our March National Legislative Conference over 400 VFW leaders took to the hill and met with their members of Congress on critical issues facing veterans, service members and their families. Dropping off our 2014 Advocacy in Action booklet, entitled "Our Nation Is Still at War" and our 2014 Legislative Priority Goals, advocates explained in detail the VFW's position on a variety of issues including VA funding, access to disability benefits, military quality-of-life programs, economic opportunity, and health care. Other critical concerns included ending sequestration, passing advance appropriations for all VA accounts and in-state tuition for veterans using GI Bill benefits. Key legislators on the House and Senate VA Committees were just a few who had one-on-one meetings with VFW members from their states. To read more about the meetings on the Hill to include twitter feeds from congressional offices, visit our blog at: <http://thevfw.blogspot.com/2014/03/live-updates-vfw-advocates-storm-hill.html>
For our Advocacy booklet, click here: http://www.vfw.org/uploadedFiles/VFW.org/VFW_in_DC/OnTheHill%20cover_2014%20WEB.pdf

For the 2014 Legislative Priority Goals: <http://www.vfw.org/VFW-in-DC/National-Legislative-Service/>

2. Defense Budget Hits Troops Hard: DOD's FY 2015 budget request further reduces troop strengths and military compensation and benefits. The reason is because current budget agreements have forced the Pentagon to reduce spending by \$487 billion over 10 years, an amount that's doubled by sequestration, which further jeopardizes readiness and modernization programs and the continued viability of the all-volunteer force. VFW National Commander Bill Thien said the VFW will redouble its efforts to work with Congress and the administration to end the sequester and help bring financial stability to a military that is still at war. Key personnel actions proposed in the \$496 billion FY 2015 defense request are:

- * Further drop the active Army from its post-9/11 high of 570,000 soldiers to 440,000, a number sequestration could lower 420,000. Lower the Army National Guard from 358,000 to 335,000, and the Army Reserve from 205,000 and 195,000, again numbers sequestration could further lower to 315,000 and 185,000, respectively.
- * Reduce the active Air Force from 327,600 to 310,900, and Reserve from 70,400 to 67,100.
- * The Marine Corps is on pace to draw down to 182,000 Marines, a number that could go to 175,000 if the sequester continues.

- * A 1 percent military pay increase for everyone below the pay grade of O-7, and to limit future pay increases, which could recreate the double-digit, military-civilian pay gap of a decade ago.
- * Housing allowances would be gradually reduced from 100 percent of costs to 95 percent, but payments would be grandfathered for troops in their current assignments. It also appears that enlisted BAH reductions are disproportionately more than
- * Create a TRICARE for Life enrollment fee for new enrollees equal to a half percent of retiree pay in 2015, and increase it to 2 percent by 2019, plus additional increases to pharmaceutical copayments, which would impact military dependents as well as retirees. DOD would also merge the three TRICARE Prime, Standard and Extra programs into one, which would create new enrollment fees and increased copayments.
- * Slash the current \$1.4 billion in appropriated support to military commissaries down to \$400 million, which could increase prices and the current 5 percent surcharge. DOD estimates that such decisions would lower overall commissary savings from 30 percent to 10 percent, which could close some smaller U.S. stores.

3. VA Budget Released: This week, the President released his FY 2015 budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs. The \$163.9 billion dollar proposal includes mandatory funding for programs such as disability compensation and pension, as well as discretionary funding for VA medical care, to include advanced appropriations. The amount represents a 6.5-percent increase over FY 2014 funding, but falls more than \$4 billion short of what is recommended by The Independent Budget, which the VFW co-authors with AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans and Paralyzed Veterans of America. The VA budget request includes:

- * \$7.2 billion for mental health programs
- * \$238 million for readjustment counseling
- * \$229 million for TBI programs.
- * \$173 million to continue implementation of VBMS for claims processing.
- * \$1.6 billion for veterans' homelessness programs
- * \$403 million for women veteran programs, and
- * \$562 million for major construction and \$495 million for minor construction projects

While we appreciate the increases offered by the Administration's budget for FY 2015 and for advance appropriations for FY 2016, we have serious concerns regarding the lack of commitment to infrastructure funding which we believe will undermine VA's ability to deliver those services. For the VFW press release, click here: <http://www.vfw.org/News-and-Events/Articles/2014-Articles/Veterans-Groups-Urge-Congress-to-Strengthen-VA-Budget/> For a complete look at the Independent Budget's funding requirements for VA, click here: <http://www.independentbudget.org/>

4. VA to Cover Full Semester for VRAP Students: This week, VA announced that they have taken steps to extend payments for those participants using the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program (VRAP). VRAP was passed as a part of the Veterans Opportunity to Work Act of 2011 and was specifically designed to cover veterans who are not eligible to receive GI Bill educational benefits. Current enrollees will now receive payments to cover them from April 1, 2014 through the conclusion of their enrollment semester or term or through June 30, 2014, whichever is earlier. For more information on the VRAP program, please go to: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/03/05/covering-veterans-retraining-assistance-program-participants-through-june>

5. Take the Military Family Survey: Blue Star Families has asked VFW to help distribute their 2014 Military Family Lifestyle Survey to active-duty, Guard, Reserve and veteran families. The survey is now available online at <http://tiny.cc/2014VFW>. The data collected provides real-time feedback from military families on issues ranging from operations tempo to pay and benefits, stress, caregiving and employment.

6. Korean War MIA Identified: The Defense POW/MIA Office announced the identification of Army Pfc. Donald C. Durfee, 19, of Painesville, Ohio. In November 1950, Durfee was assigned to Company M, 31st Infantry Regiment, 31st Regimental Combat Team, when his unit was attached by Chinese forces on eastern side of the Chosin Reservoir in North Korea. Durfee was

reported killed in action on Dec. 2, 1950. He was buried yesterday in Rittman, Ohio.

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/), <http://www.vfw.org/Forms/Capitol-Hill-Blog-Submissions/>, or simply email photos and stories directly to vwac@vfw.org.

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

If you no longer wish to receive e-mail from us, please click [here](#).

