

2014 Legislative Priorities

Federal Government Reform

*VA (including extending advanced appropriations to the remaining discretionary & mandatory programs)

*DoD

*National Debt & Spending

Veteran Unemployment

****Veteran Anti-Discrimination (HR 2654/S 1281)**

Currently the unemployment of young vets is 30% and rising. The media portrayal of returning vets contributes to the discrimination of hiring these individuals. Many employers see them as "dangerous vets" with PTSD and other negative perceptions such as mental illness and violence. Leadership and technical experience gained from military services can bring great value to the civilian workplace. Our veterans deserve full and fair consideration for employment opportunities as they arise. We need to raise awareness among employers of veterans and veterans' issues; give veterans experiencing employment and housing discrimination legal recourse to pursue their claims; ensure that an individual's military or veteran status will not be used against them in seeking employment, housing, or educational opportunities. No one who has served and sacrificed for this country should be penalized for it.

VA/DoD Health Care and Mental Health

***Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) & Post Traumatic Stress (PTS) - Recognition & Treatment**

More than 2 million U.S. service members have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001, with many individuals having served several tours of duty. Numerous gaps remain in recognizing, diagnosing, treating, and rehabilitating some less-visible injuries, such as mild-to-moderate TBI, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other post-deployment health and mental health issues. The DOD and VA need to continue cooperating to improve their responses to at-risk combat veterans, including improvements in basic primary medical care that can readily identify active duty personnel and veterans who are struggling and at risk, and develop early interventions for observed potential mental or emotional problems, including prevention of suicide in this population.

***Toxic Wounds - Recognition & Treatment**

While no definitive conclusions were made, the IOM report noted that service in Iraq and Afghanistan might be associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular and respiratory problems mainly because of high ambient concentrations of particulate matter. Further, the IOM recognized in its report the possibility that cumulative exposure to combinations of combustion products in burn pit emissions raises the potential for associated health outcomes. The IBVSOs recommend that, at a minimum, the DOD and VA act on the recommendations provided in the IOM report to determine and address the long-term health effects resulting from airborne hazards. (Fort McClellan Health Registry Act HR 411)

Veterans Benefits

***Protect Earned Retirement and Health Care Benefits**

Despite growing pressure on the Administration and Congress to rein in federal spending, they must ensure that VA health-care and benefits programs receive adequate funding to meet the demands of veterans.

While *The Independent Budget* veterans service organizations (IBVSOs) understand that the Administration and Congress have voiced opposition to any sequestration cuts that could impact VA in the near term, the future for VA funding remains much less clear. We know that VA, similar to all other federal agencies, is under pressure to constrain spending in the coming years as a result of growing federal debt and annual deficits. However, this philosophy ignores the fact that VA still must meet rising demand for health-care services for veterans of past conflicts as well as those who have

served our national interests over the past decade in Iraq and Afghanistan.

***VA Claims & Appeals Backlog**

In March of 2013, the backlog reached an all-time high of over 611,000 claims. In August it was just over 502,000, a drop of over 109,000 claims in roughly 140 days. By the end of this year, we expect to have eliminated most claims over a year old.

The VBA must remain focused on creating a claims-processing system that is carefully designed to decide each claim right the first time. Congress must support the VBA in finishing the transformation process currently under way, while continuing to hold the VBA accountable through aggressive oversight. The VBA must continue to work in an open, transparent, and collaborative manner with veterans service organization stakeholders involved in assisting veterans filing claims. The VBA must commit to implementing a fully digital claims system, which will require that legacy paper files be converted to digital data as quickly as feasible.

Women Veterans & Service Members

***Military Sexual Trauma (MST) Prevention and Treatment**

The VA reports that 23% of women veterans have experienced sexual trauma since their time of service.

***Women in Combat Implementation**

The number of women now serving in our military is unprecedented in U.S. history, and women have played extraordinary roles in Afghanistan and Iraq, including serving in female engagement teams and other hazardous duties. Responding to the unique post-deployment health-care needs of women and the significant increases in the number of women is a daunting challenge for VA. The current rate of enrollment of women in VA health care has doubled in the past decade and constitutes the most dramatic growth of any subset of veterans. For these reasons the IBVSOs encourage VA to concentrate on improving services and treatment programs for women and to continue research initiatives for women veterans to ensure they have access to high-quality comprehensive medical care at all VA facilities. By 2020 the VA estimates that women will constitute 10% of the veteran population. These challenges need to be addressed with urgency. VA should continue to improve its health-care delivery model and expand programs for the treatment of the unique post-deployment health needs of women veterans, and Congress should continue to monitor VA's actions to improve women's health.

National Guard & Reserve Service Members

***On-going Transition between State and Federal Service**

***Veteran Status**

Homeless and Rural Veterans

***Full continuum of Care for Homeless Veterans (employment training, housing, legal aid)**

***Access to Physical and Mental Health Care and other benefits**

POW/MIA Recovery/Identification % Cemetery Affairs

*** Continue Oversight of DPMO & Mortuary Affairs Operations**

***Increase Veterans Burial Benefits**

Service-Related Death. VA will pay up to \$2,000 toward burial expenses for deaths on or after September 11, 2001. VA will pay up to \$1,500 for deaths prior to September 10, 2001. If the Veteran is buried in a VA national cemetery, some of all of the cost of transporting the deceased may be reimbursed.

Non-service-Related Death. For deaths on or after October 1, 2011, VA will pay up to \$700.00 toward burial and funeral expenses (if hospitalized by VA at time of death), or \$300 toward burial and funeral expenses (if not hospitalized by VA at time of death), and a \$700.00 plot-interment allowance (if not buried in a national cemetery). For deaths on or after December 1, 2001, but before October 1, 2011, VA will pay up to \$300.00 toward burial and funeral expenses and a \$300.00 plot-interment allowance. The

plot-interment allowance is \$150.00 for deaths prior to December 1, 2001. If the death happened while the Veteran was in a VA hospital or under VA contracted nursing home care, some of all of the costs for transporting the Veteran's remains may be reimbursed. An annual increase in burial and plot allowances, for deaths occurring after October 1, 2011, begins in fiscal year 2013 based on the Consumer Price Index for the preceding 12-month period.

Veterans Treatment Courts

***Increase the number of and access to Veterans Treatment Courts Nationally**

***Enhance Resources to Address Mental Health and Substance Abuse Issues**

Honor and Remembrance

***Establish the National Desert Storm War Memorial in Washington D.C.**

H.R. 503 - National Desert Storm and Desert Shield War Memorial Act - Authorizes the National Desert Storm Memorial Association to establish a commemorative work on federal land in the District of Columbia to commemorate and honor those who, as members of the armed forces, served on active duty in support of Operation Desert Storm or Operation Desert Shield.