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***If Veterans don't help Veterans, who will?***

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## LEGISLATIVE DIVISION UPDATE

The Senate returned on Monday from its long weekend recess – which included the Martin Luther King Jr. Day holiday. One item on their agenda is a House-passed bill (**H.R. 4038**, the *American Security Against Foreign Enemies Act of 2015*) that would require Syrian and Iraqi refugees to undergo a more rigorous government-certified vetting process before being allowed into the United States.

## OTHER ACTIVITIES

### *Licenses from 5 States Banned at DOD Bases*

On January 20, the Department of Defense (DOD) announced that DOD installations will no longer accept driver's licenses from Minnesota, Illinois, Missouri, New Mexico, and Washington as proof of identity. The ban, which also includes licenses from American Samoa, is a consequence of the REAL ID Act of 2005.

The REAL ID Act grew out of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Congress tightened up driver licenses issuance processes and documentation needed to get a driver's license. Compliant licenses must have specific security features to prevent tampering, counterfeiting, or duplication of the document. The licenses also must present data in a common, machine-readable format.

The REAL ID Act affects only access control policies where individuals are required to present an identification document for accessing federal facilities, entering nuclear power plants, or boarding federally regulated commercial aircraft. The federal REAL ID Act implementation rules allow for exceptions; for example, life or safety issues such as medical emergencies and situations in which physical access is necessary to apply for benefits are two exceptions.

Those attempting to gain physical access to DOD installations must show an alternate form of identification, such as a passport. Servicemembers, family members, DOD employees and federal employees with the DOD common access card, DOD uniformed services identification and privileges cards, federal personal identification verification cards, or transportation workers' identification credentials are not affected as these cards are authorized in DOD policy to facilitate physical access to installations.

## LEGISLATIVE DIVISION UPDATES

On January 14-15, Deputy Director Dean Stoline traveled to Indianapolis, Indiana, to present information to the Department of Indiana 2016 Legislative Seminar on Friday, January 15. The seminar was part of the 2016 Mid-Winter Conference. He presented material on The American Legion's Legislative Priorities for the Second Session of the 114th Congress which will be delivered to the Hill during the 2016 Washington Conference next month, and the Legion's goals for 2016 on Capitol Hill. He also spoke on how the Department of Indiana can effectively advocate on Legion issues and how to

use grassroots techniques to accomplish its legislative goals both on Capitol Hill and in the state capitol in Indianapolis. PNC Miller organized the program which was attended by Department Commander Lowry; Department Adjutant Dagley; Department Vice Commanders Brannon, Hanger, Martin, and Ward; the Department Strategic Planning Committee; the Department Legislative Council; and the Department Legislative Committee.

On January 15, Legislative Assistant Directors Warren Goldstein and Matt Shuman held a Congressional Meet and Greet session with Sergeant Major Dewayne Blackmon, Defense Fellow and Chris Bonnett, Legislative Assistant from Representative Tim Walz's (MN) office to discuss issues and concerns affecting veterans as well as supporting **H.R. 4251** entitled the *Guard and Reserve Equal Access to Health Act* sponsored by Rep. Mike Coffman (CO).

On December 15, Legislative Assistant Director Matthew Shuman and Veterans Employment & Education Deputy Director Mark Walker had a meeting with Jessica Schwartz, Kyle Hill and James Moore, staffers for Rep. Steve Israel (NY) about **H.R. 3970** *Housing Our Hero's Act*. This bill aims to create a pilot program to purchase houses for homeless veterans.

On January 19, Legislative Assistant Director Warren Goldstein along with Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation (VA&R) Assistant Director for TBI and PTSD Programs Rebecca Davilla, Media and Communications Assistant Editor Andrea Dickerson, and Veterans Employment and Education (VE&E) Assistant Director Dan Smith, visited the Boulder Crest Retreat located in Bluemont, Virginia. The Boulder Crest Retreat is open to combat veterans, veterans, and their families. The retreat focuses on providing veterans who suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and their families with the rest, reconnection, and recharging they deserve so they can learn to live in the present and to focus on their future.

On January 20, Legislative Assistant Director Matthew Shuman and Veterans Employment & Education Assistant Director Dan Smith conducted a meeting with the Legislative Director for Rep. Grace Napolitano (CA) about **H.R. 3114**, her legislation that would fund a program that allows the Army Corps of Engineers to hire veterans.

On January 21, Commander Barnett, Legislative Director Ian de Planque, Deputy Director Dean Stoline, Assistant Director Warren Goldstein and Assistant Director Matthew Shuman attended the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing where Secretary McDonald testified about MyVA. The hearing was entitled "VA's Transformation Strategy: Examining the Plan to Modernize VA." Secretary McDonald was the only witness at the hearing, presenting information on VA's MyVA plan to improve managerial alignment and customer relations within VA. The American Legion submitted testimony for the record for the hearing, noting that VA had forged forward with this plan with an Advisory Commission with multiple academic and corporate partners, but only one rotating seat for Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), diminishing the input role of the actual veteran customers of VA. Several members of

the Committee noted VA must improve their responsiveness to veteran concerns and noted VA would not be successful moving forward on any plans without “buy in” from the VSOs.

On January 21, Legislative Assistant Directors Warren Goldstein and Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation (VA&R) Deputy Director of Health Care Roscoe Butler held a Congressional Meet and Greet meeting with Michelle Zook, Constituent Liaison for Veterans Services, and Charles Klug, Legislative Assistant from Rep. John Ratcliffe’s (TX) office to discuss issues and concerns affecting veterans in Rep. Radcliffe’s district as well as supporting **H.R. 4251** entitled the *Guard and Reserve Equal Access to Health Act* sponsored by Rep. Mike Coffman (CO).

#### Update on Flag Amendment Bill

On January 7, 2015, **House Joint Resolution (H.J. Res.) 9** was introduced by Rep. Steve Womack (AR). This legislation is a proposed constitutional amendment to protect the American flag from physical desecration. Its text states simply: *“The Congress shall have power to prohibit the physical desecration of the flag of the United States.”* In addition to Rep. Womack and the five original co-sponsors of the House joint resolution there are now a total of **37** cosponsors.

Staff from the Legislative Division met with staff of Sen. Orrin Hatch (UT) to discuss the re-introduction of the flag protection amendment in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress. Sen. Hatch has long been a champion of the amendment. Our efforts finally came to fruition on July 30, 2015, when Sen. David Vitter (LA) introduced **Senate Joint Resolution (S.J. Res.) 21**, prior to the August district work period. The Senate measure now has **7** cosponsors, with the addition on January 12 of Sen. Deb Fischer (NE).

Additional cosponsors continue to be sought for both measures. [A listing of all cosponsors for both flag amendment bills is attached to the end of this report.]

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For Week Ending 01-22-2016

**HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 9**

Rep. Steve Womack (R-AR-3) [Sponsor]  
Rep. Jeff Fortenberry (R-NE-1)  
Rep. Kevin Cramer (R-ND-At Large)  
Rep. Bill Johnson (R-OH-6)  
Rep. David Roe (R-TN-1)  
Rep. Marsha Blackburn (R-TN-7)  
Rep. Walter Jones (R-NC-3)  
Rep. Steve Palazzo (R-MS-4)  
Rep. Scot DesJarlais (R-TN-4)  
Rep. Bob Latta (R-OH-5)  
Rep. Rob Bishop (R-UT-1)  
Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL-1)  
Rep. Michael Simpson (R-ID-2)  
Rep. Patrick Tiberi (R-OH-12)  
Rep. Ralph Abraham (R-LA-5)  
Rep. Tim Huelskamp (R-KS-1)  
Rep. Frank LoBiondo (R-NJ-2)  
Rep. Daniel Lipinski (D-IL-3)  
Rep. Brad Ashford (D-NE-2)  
Rep. Mark Amodei (R-NV-2)  
Rep. John Kline (R-MN-2)  
Rep. Jason Smith (R-MO-8)  
Rep. David Young (R-IA-3)  
Rep. Adrian Smith (R-NE-3)  
Rep. Joe Wilson (R-SC-2)  
Rep. Steve King (R-IA-4)  
Rep. Charles Boustany (R-LA-3)  
Rep. Brian Babin (R-TX-36)  
Rep. Pete Olson (R-TX-22)  
Rep. John Duncan (R-TN-2)  
Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-NJ-11)  
Rep. John Fleming (R-LA-4)  
Rep. David Rouzer (R-NC-7)  
Rep. Tom Cole (R-OK-4)  
Rep. Vicky Hartzler (R-MO-4)  
Rep. Bill Flores (R-TX-17)  
Rep. Greg Walden (R-OR-2)  
Rep. Pete Sessions (R-TX-32)

**SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION 21**

Sen. David Vitter (R-LA) [Sponsor]  
Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-UT)  
Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC)  
Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-AL)  
Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-IA)  
Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX)  
Sen. Dean Heller (R-NV)  
Sen. Deb Fischer (R-NE)

**Week ending 1/22/2016**  
**NATIONAL SECURITY**

**1. Air Force Drones are Crashing More Frequently as Mysterious Problems Emerge**

A record number of Air Force drones crashed last year, which has put added strain on the U.S. military's fleet of robotic aircraft for the demand of counterterrorism missions. Specifically, the Reaper drone had a surge in mishaps involving electrical failures causing the drones to lose power and drop from the sky. Thus far, investigators have deemed the issue to be a faulty starter-generator. As of 2015, there have been a total of 20 drones destroyed or sustained at least \$2 million in damages. Furthermore, there has been an acute shortage of pilots for the drones, resulting in the Air Force offering retention bonuses of up to \$125,000. Currently, the demand for airborne surveillance has caused the Air Force to contract out drone missions to private companies.

**2. Hearings and Meetings**

This week staff from the National Security Division attended a cybersecurity conference call with the Department of Homeland Security's Stop. Think. Connect Campaign. The campaign is a national public awareness campaign aimed at increasing the understanding of cyber threats and empowering the American public to be safer and more secure online. The Department of Homeland Security launched this program on October 4, 2010 in conjunction with National Cyber Security Awareness Month. Recently, veterans were authorized access to the Federal Virtual Training Environment (FedVTE). The FedVTE is a free online, cybersecurity training system for government personnel and veterans. FedVTE contains more than 800 hours of training on topics such as ethical hacking and surveillance, risk management, and malware analysis. The American Legion is the campaign's first VSO partner and would like to continue the partnership by providing current cybersecurity information and collaborating on issues deemed important by the Legion.

Furthermore, on January 21, 2016, the National Security Division attended the "Trends in Military Technology and the Future Force." In attendance were General Paul J. Selva, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Michael O'Hanlon, Senior Fellow and Director of Research, Foreign Policy, The Brookings Institution. The discussion focused on military modernization and the defense budget moving forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In specific, General Selva stressed the importance of modernizing the B-52, nuclear enterprise, and submarines. Questions were raised such as, did North Korea dismiss the B-52 show of force over South Korea? The General replied, "The flyover was not taken lightly by the North Koreans." Moreover, the question of whether the United States can be challenged militarily, in which the General stated that, "Russia and China could quickly be on par." The General's closing remarks expressed that the United States will not fight on its shores and in order to fulfill this philosophy the U.S. must be able to keep and expand its presence throughout the world.

Finally on January 21, 2016, Freddy Gessner, Deputy Director of the National Security Division attended the MSO/VSO Quarterly Meeting at the Association of the United States Army Headquarters. Stephen D. Austin, Assistant Chief of Army Reserve provided a summary on the Army Reserve. Since 2015, the Army Reserve's end strength has decreased from 202,000 to 198,000 and is projected to be around 195,000 by 2017. Furthermore, funding for the Reserve

continues to trend down, creating a risk to the operational capability. This loss of funding will continue to impact readiness, training, equipping, installation support, and personnel. Major General Michael Smith, Deputy Chief of Army Reserve, discussed the Army Reserve Ambassador Program. This program was established in 1998 for private citizens to promote awareness of the Army Reserve and the identified goals and objectives of the Chief of the Army Reserve. The individuals are influential volunteers, carrying a protocol status equivalent to a major general and have significant ties to their communities. Each state and territory has at least one Army Reserve Ambassador (ARAs), totaling 82 ARAs and 24 Ambassador Emeritus.

### **POW/MIA Update**

Army Sgt. Robert C. Dakin, 22, of Waltham, Mass., was buried on Dec. 12 in his hometown. On Dec. 12, 1950, Dakin was assigned to Company L, 3rd Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division, and was declared missing in action when his unit was attacked by enemy forces near the Chosin Reservoir during a heated battle. A military board later amended his status to deceased when no information was available pertaining to his loss.

Between 1990 and 1994, North Korea returned to the United States 208 boxes of commingled human remains, which we now believe contain the remains of at least 600 U.S. servicemen who fought during the war. North Korean documents included in the repatriation indicated that some of the remains were recovered from the area where Dakin was believed to have died.

In June 1999 and July 2001, remains were recovered in Kujang County, North Korea, and in October 2000, additional remains and personal effects were recovered along the Kuryong River, North Korea.

To identify Dakin's remains, scientists from DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory used circumstantial evidence and two forms of DNA analysis, including mitochondrial DNA, which matched maternal references, and autosomal DNA, which matched two sisters.

Today, more than 7,800 Americans remain unaccounted for from the Korean War. Using advances in technology, identifications continue to be made from remains that were previously turned over by North Korean officials or recovered by American teams.

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## **VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION**

### **Health Policy Unit**

I returned to TAL on 18 Jan 16 to VA&R as Asst. Dir. for Healthcare. Since my return, I have been assigned to perform VA site visits for June, September, and October 2016. Additionally, I have been assigned to represent TAL at the Commission on Care and MyVA Advisory Committee. My first meeting will be held on 1 Feb 2016 (two day event), followed by a meeting on 8 Feb 2016.

For the week of January 18, 2016, LaRanda Holt responded to 10 emails, 7 phone calls, and 0 letters.

LaRanda Holt, Assistant Director of Women and Minority Veterans has worked on the final stages of completing an updated Women Veterans brochure. She has reached out to Veteran Affairs' Women Veteran Program Managers in the following areas:

- Baltimore, Maryland
- Wilmington, Delaware
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Martinsburg, WV
- Hampton, VA

In addition, she is working on the next women veteran survey and event for the year of 2016.

For the week of January 18, 2016, Ed Lilley responded to (14) emails, (14) calls, and (0) letters from veterans

On Tuesday, January 19, 2017, Ed Lilley, Team Leader for Health Policy, attended a meeting with members of the National Advisory Committee's (NAC's) Executive Committee in order to discuss the recommendations the NAC intends to make to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

On Wednesday, January 20, 2016, Edward Lilley, Team Leader for Health Policy attended the Judicial Conference Committee meeting. The purpose of this committee is to plan for The Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims Bar Association's 2016 Judicial Conference at the Newseum on April 14 and 15, 2016. The purpose of the CAVC Bar Association is to promote the effective practice before the Court, to provide a forum for discussion of practice issues, to develop suggestions for pertinent system improvements, and to keep its members informed of developments affecting those who assist veterans.

#### **1. Report: VA San Diego failed to monitor, treat veteran**

On January 12, 2016, The Military reported on a Veterans Affairs Inspector General report faults within the Veteran Affairs San Diego Healthcare System in failing to care for patient with Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) and Post-traumatic Stress (PTSD), which resulted in a suicidal death at a California gun range. This report came after several reports in the VA healthcare facilities. According to a VA Office of Inspector General report released Jan. 5, the VA doctors



treating former Marine Sgt. Jeremy Sears did not follow department guidelines for prescribing opioid medications and ignored his request to discontinue using the painkillers. Officials at the San Diego Medical Center said they largely concurred with the IG's recommendations and have taken steps to improve outreach and care at the facility.

<http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/benefits/veterans/2016/01/12/report-va-san-diego-failed-monitor-treat-veteran/78697512/>

## 2. Congressional delegation again opposes regional VA leader

On January 16, 2016, The Washington Post reports on Mississippi congressional delegation which still opposes the new appointment of an Executive to oversee veterans' hospitals and clinics in Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. The four congressmen and two senators said Friday that they met with Veterans Affairs Secretary Bob McDonald Tuesday. They oppose plans to name Skye McDougall to direct the South Central Veterans Health Care Network. That Jackson-based organization oversees 10 veterans' hospitals and associated clinics.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/congressional-delegation-again-opposes-regional-va-leader/2016/01/16/367e21fc-bc9d-11e5-85cd-5ad59bc19432\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/congressional-delegation-again-opposes-regional-va-leader/2016/01/16/367e21fc-bc9d-11e5-85cd-5ad59bc19432_story.html)

## 3. Arlington reaches a milestone in housing homeless military veterans

On January 14, 2016, The Washington Post released an article of Arlington County ending homelessness for military veterans. After almost a decade of effort, Arlington County was ecstatic to make the proclamation in the national effort to house people who have no place to live. Arlington is the second jurisdiction in the country to show it has no more homeless veterans than it can house in any given month, said Adam Gibbs, spokesman for Community Solutions. The D.C.-based nonprofit group is the organizer of the national effort to end homelessness, which the Obama administration launched in 2010. Seventy-five communities are participating.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/arlington-reaches-milestone-in-housing-homeless-military-veterans/2016/01/14/65866f78-bad5-11e5-99f3-184bc379b12d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/arlington-reaches-milestone-in-housing-homeless-military-veterans/2016/01/14/65866f78-bad5-11e5-99f3-184bc379b12d_story.html)

4. On Tuesday, January 12, 2016, An audit of the Veterans Health Administration's private health care program books finds the department failed to spend \$1.9 billion – or 40 percent – of the \$4.8 billion designated for non-VA care in fiscal 2013. Also, from Oct. 1, 2013, through March 31, 2015, medical center administrators overestimated the funds they needed to pay for outside care for veterans by \$543 million, leaving that amount unavailable for patient care, according to a new Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General report.

<http://www.militarytimes.com/story/veterans/2016/01/12/va-failed-spend-19-billion-designated-health-care-report-finds/78701854/>

5. On Thursday, January 15, 2016, an article in the *Montgomery Advertiser* reported that veterans seeking urgent care at the VA hospital in Montgomery spent too much time in the emergency room, according to a federal government audit. The inspector general for Veterans Affairs reviewed the Montgomery facility in September 2014 and found non-mental health patients spent an average three-and-a-half hours in the emergency room, and mental health patients spent twice that long. The Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System (CAVHCS) did not meet the Veterans Health Administration's "timeliness measures," according to the audit released Thursday, January 15.

The American Legion will be visiting the Montgomery VAMC for a System Worth Saving Site Visit from February 9-11, 2016.

<http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2016/01/15/audit-says-vets-waited-too-long-emergency-rooms/78817670/>

6. Reported on January 11, 2016, the VA Medical Center in Martinsburg (VAMC) is in the midst of a nurse shortage (as with most VA's). "We currently have 345 registered nurses on staff right now. Last fiscal year, we lost 31 nurses, 25 of those for retirees," said Sandra Sullivan, acting associate director, Patient Care Services, VAMC. Nearly 35,000 veterans from 22 counties within the four-state area are currently receiving care at the VA. "What I see in our profession is just an aging population," Sullivan said. Sixty percent of the nurse workforce is between the ages of 45 to 65. Officials at the VA said the nursing shortage was partly caused by baby-boomer aged nurses retiring. "There are a lot of nurses coming into the field. A lot of nurses stayed in the field, and we're just seeing a lot of nurses get to the retirement age," Sullivan said. Retirement rates have increased from 2.5 percent in 2012, to 7 percent in 2015. Overall, there was a 12.7 percent loss rate that was directly related to retirements. Jan Lorber is set to retire after being in the profession for 16 years. "We're up and going, and we're at that retirement age, and we want to move on, and we need the youth to come in and fill the gap behind us," said Jan Lorber, nurse recruiter, VAMC. Some of the younger nurse population, like Katie Miller, said it's all about making a difference in someone's life. She has worked at VAMC for four years. "You feel like you really made a difference in someone's life, and here you feel like these people have done so much for you in the past that you're finally able to give back and do something for them," she said. A younger generation is stepping up, and officials said there's no shortage of applicants, but the challenge lies within filling the gap for specialized fields in the profession. "It's my turn to take over the role that they've completed, and one day I guess I'll be in their shoes," Miller said. Officials with the medical center said they anticipate this trend to continue. Nurses are encouraged to apply.

<http://www.your4state.com/news/news/nurse-shortages-at-va-medical-center-in-martinsburg-linked-to-retirees>

#### 7. Strategies to Reverse the New Nursing Shortage (this affects nursing staff within the VA system as well (no date))

There is no simple description of the status of the nursing workforce shortage - present and future. Discussion surrounding this issue is complex and interrelated. It is not possible to isolate single factors or solutions. Rather, a systems perspective review gives the greatest depth and understanding of the relationships between multiple variables. It is critical to include the systematic issues in education, health delivery systems and the work environment. Further, the impact of reimbursement, legislation, regulation and technological advances must also be considered. Failure to consider the relationships among these aspects limits the full appreciation of the nursing workforce shortage complexity.

The Tri-Council is an alliance of four autonomous nursing organizations each focused on leadership for education, practice and research. While each organization has its own constituent membership and unique mission, they are united by common values and convene regularly for the purpose of dialogue and consensus building. The Tri-Council's diverse interests encompass

the nursing work environment, health care legislation and policy, quality of health care, nursing education, practice, research and leadership across all segments of the health care delivery system. Member organizations believe the alliance captures the collectivity of nursing's social, political, professional and moral authority nationally and internationally to influence and provide stewardship within the profession of nursing. These organizations represent nurses in practice, nurse executives and nursing educators.

### **THE NEW NURSING SHORTAGE**

Today's nursing shortage is very real and very different from any experienced in the past. The new nursing shortage is evidenced by fewer nurses entering the workforce; acute nursing shortages in certain geographic areas; and a shortage of nurses adequately prepared to meet certain areas of patient need in a changing health care environment. As a result, there is a growing realization that the supply of appropriately prepared nurses is inadequate to meet the needs of a diverse population - and that this shortfall will grow more serious over the next 20 years.

The actual size of the nursing shortage is difficult to quantify. Registered nurses currently comprise the largest number of health care professionals in the United States. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor and from studies within the nursing profession indicate there has been a steady increase in nurses entering the profession that would appear to be sufficient to fill nursing jobs. Indeed, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics, growth in actual job demand for nurses dropped during the years 1992 to 1997 to an annual average of 2.7 percent. This compares with a 3.6 percent annual average job growth rate for the previous six years. During roughly the same time period (1992-96) surveys within the nursing profession show that the number of registered nurses employed in nursing practice rose annually by an average of 3.4 percent culminating in an employment rate of nearly 83 percent of the registered nurse population in 1996.

### **NUMBERS ARE DECEPTIVE**

Traditional employment statistics are deceptive and inadequate to measure the scope of what is actually taking place in health care. Research indicates that the standard dynamics of supply, demand and need with regard to nursing have been altered by variations in health delivery systems, Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement and even by regional and local customs and culture. How care is delivered, where it is delivered and how it is paid for are issues that directly impact the need for nursing services. Moreover, the increasing age of the general population and the growing need for management of chronic disease conditions suggest that the overall requirement for nursing services will increase.

The current, aging nursing population and the declining number of nursing professionals in the academic pipeline indicate that the nursing shortage will only grow more serious as time ensues. The National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) reports that the number of individuals taking the NCLEX exam each year has declined consistently since 1994. The American Organization of Nurse Executives (AONE) reports that in areas where the most acute shortages seem to exist, some hospitals are closing units, diverting patients, and canceling surgeries because there are not adequate numbers of professional nursing personnel.

## **DISTURBING FUTURE TRENDS**

One of the most critical problems facing nursing and the nursing workforce is the aging of nurses and nursing faculty. The present average age of employed registered nurses is 43.3 years, with registered nurses who are less than 30 years old representing only 10 percent of the total working nurse population.

According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), nursing school associate professors and assistant professors are an average age of 52 and 49 years. These figures track with the average age of medical school professors, 45 percent of whom were age 50 to 59, and with pharmacy professors, 46 percent of whom were age 50 to 59 at the time of the survey. However, this comparison does not hold true with regard to new doctoral recipients within the health sciences and other fields. In 1996, the average age of new doctoral recipients within nursing was 45 years. According to the National Research Council and the National Opinion Research Center, the average age of new doctoral recipients was 34 in all fields, 39 in the health sciences, and 44 for education majors. The aging of nursing faculty will impact the capacity of nursing schools to educate sufficient numbers of registered nurses to meet future demand.

These numbers do not address the skills, capabilities and educational mix that are required to meet health care needs today and for the foreseeable future. Enrollments in all basic RN preparation programs have declined each year for the last five consecutive years. According to the National League for Nursing (NLN), between 1995 and 1999, the number of programs of most types has increased in the United States. Despite this overall growth in the total number of nursing programs (from 3,137 to 3,220 or 2.6 percent), the number of students enrolled in and graduating from nursing programs has declined with the exception of a 4 percent increase in doctoral programs. Consistent with enrollment declines, an overall decline in graduations from all types of programs was 13.6 percent between 1995 and 1999. The clear trend is toward an increase in the number of programs occurring simultaneously with a decrease in the number of enrollments and graduations from those programs.

The National Advisory Council on Nurse Education and Practice (NACNEP) has recommended that by 2010 at least two-thirds of all registered nurses hold baccalaureate or higher degrees. Presently, only 32 percent of registered nurses are prepared at the baccalaureate level and an additional 10 percent educated at the master's level or above. NACNEP projects that only 36 percent of the total registered nurse population in 2010 and 37 percent in 2020 will have a baccalaureate degree as their highest level of preparation.

Based on these and other statistics from the National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses, the Division of Nursing within the Bureau of Health Professions predicts that demand for full-time equivalent RNs will begin to exceed supply by 2010. The gap is expected to grow wider in ensuing years - particularly if nothing is done to promote the retention of older and more experienced nurses.

## **FOCUS ON THE WORKPLACE**

Constant change in the health system challenges the notion that one nurse can be all things to all people. Nurses with varied education and practice competencies bring different skills to patient care, and they must be able to practice to the fullest potential of these capabilities. To compete as attractive professional destinations, practice environments must recognize and reward these

differences by defining nurses' roles, and by utilizing and compensating nurses according to their different educational preparation and competencies.

The nature of the care environment in which they practice is another significant contributing factor to the difficulty in recruiting and retaining registered nurses. Although low pay rates continue to be cited by nurses as a professional drawback, surveys indicate that the leading factors given for turnover in the nursing profession are workplace issues. A 1999 study by William Mercer, Inc. found the primary reason for nurse turnover is "increased market demand" exacerbated by underlying causes such as "dissatisfaction with the job, the supervisor or career prospects." The second most cited reason for turnover in the nursing profession according to Mercer was "workload and staffing." These are fundamental problems that stand separate from the issues related to the supply and demand for nursing services. Unless issues related to the care environment are addressed, strategies to increase the overall supply of nurses will not be successful.

## **STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE**

The Tri-Council recognizes that others have voiced concerns about the nursing shortage and that many organizations have identified gaps, made recommendations and implemented strategies to address nursing workforce issues. Many of these recommendations are relevant today.

However, in order to encourage the development and deployment of nursing personnel with skills appropriate to the health care system, the public, policy makers and the profession must engage in ongoing long-term workforce planning, regardless of the perceived or real pressures related to the short-term demand for nursing services. Without measures to reverse the trends discussed above, the nation is in danger of experiencing serious breakdowns in the health care system. Strategies to recruit and retain are costly and must be done with some assurance that these efforts will be accompanied by specific strategies to overcome workforce issues that discourage long-term commitment to a career in nursing. Therefore, the following recommendations are made to address a number of concerns.

## **EDUCATION**

- Develop career progression initiatives to:
- Move nursing graduates through graduate studies more rapidly;
- Identify the range of options available beyond the entry-level role such as faculty, researcher and administrator.
- Institute an education and practice system to promote more equitable compensation in the health care community based on a better understanding of the educational preparation required for different health care roles.
- Support health care employers to create and sustain staff development programs and lifelong learning for continued competence.
- Reach out to youth (ages 12 to 18) through counselors, youth organizations, schools and other outlets to promote recruitment of a younger, more diverse population of nursing students.

## **WORK ENVIRONMENT**

- Implement specific strategies to retain experienced nurses in the provision of direct patient care, such as:

- Introducing greater flexibility into work environment structure and scheduling programs;
- Rewarding experienced nurses for serving as mentors and/or preceptors for new registered nurses;
- Implementing appropriate salary and benefit programs.
- Create a partnership environment that advances the practice of nursing by:
- Establishing appropriate management structures within the health care system;
- Ensuring adequate nurse staffing; and
- Providing nurses with sufficient autonomy over their practice in all settings.
- Redesign work to enable an aging workforce to remain active in direct care roles.

## **LEGISLATION AND REGULATION**

- Advocate for increased nursing education funding under Title VIII of the Public Health Service Act and other publicly funded initiatives to improve the capacity and resources for education of an appropriate nursing workforce.
- Advocate for better identification of registered nursing services within Medicare, Medicaid and other reimbursement systems.

## **TECHNOLOGY, RESEARCH AND DATA COLLECTION**

- Investigate the potential for using technological advances to enhance the capacity of a reduced nursing workforce.
- Support workforce planning by the Division of Nursing and other public or private organizations to develop models for health workforce planning that consider both the need and demand for nursing services.
- Promote consistent data collection at the national, state and local level to account for variations at each level to enable appropriate workforce planning for registered nurses.

<http://www.aacn.nche.edu/publications/position/tri-council-shortage>

## **Claims Unit**

### **Veterans Benefits Administration Statistics:**

1. Completed **1.4M** claims in FY15 – nearly **67K** more than last year – highest ever in our history – sixth year in a row of more than **1M** claims; fourth year in a row we set new records again!
2. Reduced backlog **87%** from a peak of 611K in March 2013 to historic lows – currently **79,957**; reduced inventory **59%** from 884K peak in July 2012 to **360,915**– **30%** lower than FY14; claim quality at **90.3%**; issue quality at **96%** and above **98%** in 7 of 8 categories where we measure quality – several above **99%** – one at **97.4%**
3. Average days a Veteran is waiting for a claims decision (pending) is **94** days – a 188-day reduction from a peak of 282 days in March 2013; average days to complete is **136** days – an 82-day reduction from FY14
4. Increased claim productivity per FTE by **25%** since 2011 and issue productivity per FTE by **81%** since 2009 – helped mitigate effects of a **132%** increase in workload (2.7M medical issues in 2009, **6.35M** medical issues in 2015); added estimated **1.8M+** Veterans to compensation rolls since 2009 (**1.2M** net), and **28%** more Veterans and Survivors to compensation and pension caseload (from **3.9M** to **5M**)

5. Went from touching **5,000 tons of paper annually** to processing **99.8% of disability compensation claims electronically**, with **334K compensation claims** in electronic inventory – only **27K** pension and DIC in paper, completed over **4.1M** rating decisions and over **2.37M** claims in VBMS
6. Enabling Veterans to file claims online through eBenefits – over **5.3M** registered users, **212M** contacts with Veterans in FY15 (**96%** online) – **211%** increase over FY14 – vs. **9M** contacts (majority by phone) in 2009
7. Expediting Veterans claims: **54%** of receipts in FY16 Q1 were Fully Developed, up from **3%** in 2012; received over **2.8M** completed exam templates from VHA in FY15
8. Dedicated non-rating workforce completed **3.1M non-rating end products** in FY15 – **15%** more than the 2.7M completed in FY14 – and **71%** more than FY11
9. More automation: **1 in 4** Veterans submit their dependency requests online – **more than 64 percent** of these receive payments in **under 1 day**; automatic burial allowance payments to surviving spouses within **6** days (down from **190**)
10. Appeals actions increased **30%** from 135K in 2011 to **176K** in FY15; held appeal rates steady amidst increased production – nearly **1.4M** completed claims in FY15, **11-12%** (historical rate) appealed, **4-5%** reached Board of Veterans Appeals, **1.2%** decided in Veteran's favor, often based on additional evidence
11. Reduced Veterans Pension backlog by **93%** from peak of **15.3K** to **1K**; inventory by **54%** from peak of **36.4K** to **16.8K**; reduced Survivors' Dependency and Indemnity Compensation backlog by **79%** from peak of **8.8K** to **1.8K**; inventory by **47%** from peak of **19.1K** to **10.1K**; improved DIC timeliness by **103 days** from peak of **182** to **78 days** while maintaining **99%** accuracy
12. Provided **\$59B** to send **1.5M** Veterans and dependents to school under the Post-9/11 GI Bill since 2009; now processing reenrollment claims in **average of 9.7 days** at **99.8% accuracy**
13. Over **2.4M** total loans on the books; guaranteed a record **631K** loans in FY15 (**44%** more than FY14) totaling **\$153B** and helped **90K** Veterans avoid foreclosure, while maintaining the lowest foreclosure rate (**1.39%**) in the industry for **25 of the last 30 consecutive quarters**
14. Paying insurance death claims in an average of **2.5 days** at **99% accuracy**
15. Paid over **\$1.1B** in VR&E benefits to more than **104K** Veterans in FY15

### **Department Service Officer School**

The annual Department Service Officer (DSO) School will be conducted February 17-19, 2016, at the Washington Hilton. As of January 11, 2016, 105 individuals have made their reservations for DSO School.

Beyond the scheduled training conducted by the National Veterans Legal Services Program, on February 17<sup>th</sup>, attendees will listen to presentations from the following individuals:

- Scott Blackburn (MyVA)
- Laura Eskanazi (Board of Veterans' Appeals)
- Ron Burke (National Work Queue)



## **Regional Office Action Review**

Zachary Hearn and Ron Abrams are in St. Petersburg, Florida, to conduct a Regional Office Action Review (ROAR) of the VA regional office (VARO) from January 11-14, 2015. The St. Petersburg VARO was selected based upon the high inventory of appealed claims within the facility. The department adjutant and DSO have been notified of the visit. Upon return from the VARO, an after action report will be completed to be used for the annual report.

## **House Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

A hearing was conducted by the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs on January 12, 2016. The hearing discussed the implementation and success of the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS); VBMS was conceptualized in 2009 after former VA Secretary Eric Shinseki called for a modernization of the claims processing system. VBMS is used in each VA regional office and the Board of Veterans' Appeals. Though it has increased efficiencies in the process, it has been plagued with difficulties. National Headquarters staff have monitored the implantation and struggles with VBMS and provided written testimony addressing the aforementioned difficulties to the committee.

Committee Chairman Jeff Miller (FL) presided over the hearing. VA Deputy Under Secretary for Field Operations Beth McCoy's testimony revolved around the need for VBMS to be dynamic in order to meet the evolving demands of veterans claims. Additional VA executives accompanying her were Director of the VBMS Program Management Office Dawn Bontempo, Assistant Deputy Chief Information Officer Steven Schliesman, and Director of Compensation Service Thomas Murphy. The aforementioned provided testimony supporting Deputy Under Secretary McCoy's assertion that VBMS was ever changing and evolving, to ultimately justify the copious amounts of tax-payer dollars invested in this project since inception. Also, testifying was Director of Information Technology Valerie Melvin for the GAO and Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Evaluations Brent Arronte of the VA. Melvin and Arronte questioned the reliability of the claims statistics provided by Ms. McCoy. Ms. McCoy raised the VA's proposal to close veterans appeals, to ultimately clear out the appeals backlog. Committee Chairman Miller and several other members of the Committee voiced their opposition to this proposal.

## **Veterans Benefits Administration Statistics:**

1. Completed **1.4M** claims in FY15 – nearly **67K** more than last year – highest ever in our history – sixth year in a row of more than **1M** claims; fourth year in a row we set new records again!
2. Reduced backlog **87%** from a peak of 611K in March 2013 to historic lows – currently **80,415**; reduced inventory **59%** from 884K peak in July 2012 to **364,493** – **30%** lower than FY14; claim quality at **90.3%**; issue quality at **96%** and above **98%** in 7 of 8 categories where we measure quality – several above **99%** – one at **97.4%**
3. Average days a Veteran is waiting for a claims decision (pending) is **95** days – a 187-day reduction from a peak of 282 days in March 2013; average days to complete is **124** days – a 57-day reduction from FY14



4. Increased claim productivity per FTE by **25%** since 2011 and issue productivity per FTE by **81%** since 2009 – helped mitigate effects of a **132%** increase in workload (2.7M medical issues in 2009, **6.35M** medical issues in 2015); added estimated **1.8M+** Veterans to compensation rolls since 2009 (**1.2M** net), and **28%** more Veterans and Survivors to compensation and pension caseload (from **3.9M** to **5M**)
5. Went from touching **5,000 tons of paper annually** to processing **99.8% of disability compensation claims electronically**, with **337K claims** in electronic inventory – only **27K** pension and DIC in paper, completed over **4.1M** rating decisions and over **2.35M** claims in VBMS
6. Enabling Veterans to file claims online through eBenefits – over **5.3M** registered users, **212M** contacts with Veterans in FY15 (**96%** online) – **211%** increase over FY14 – vs. **9M** contacts (majority by phone) in 2009
7. Expediting Veterans claims: **54%** of receipts in FY16 Q1 were Fully Developed, up from **3%** in 2012; received over **2.8M** completed exam templates from VHA in FY15
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12. Provided **\$59B** to send **1.5M** Veterans and dependents to school under the Post-9/11 GI Bill since 2009; now processing reenrollment claims in **average of 9.7 days** at **99.8% accuracy**
13. Over **2.4M** total loans on the books; guaranteed a record **631K** loans in FY15 (**44%** more than FY14) totaling **\$153B** and helped **90K** Veterans avoid foreclosure, while maintaining the lowest foreclosure rate (**1.39%**) in the industry for **25 of the last 30 consecutive quarters**
14. Paying insurance death claims in an average of **2.5 days** at **99% accuracy**
15. Paid an estimated **\$1.2B** in VR&E benefits to nearly **100K** Veterans in FY15

### **Board of Veterans' Appeals:**

During the first full week of the new year (January 4-8, 2016), the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA) unit submitted 191 claims. Teams I & II led the production with 67 and 63 claims respectfully. The BVA unit still has 3 appeals representatives in training and VA&R leadership anticipates a very strong year from this unit.

### **Military Evaluation Board/Physical Evaluation Board (MEB/PEB)**

Despite a shortened work week due to the honoring of Dr. Martin Luther King on January 18 and the closing of the DC office due to inclement weather on Friday January 22, the DOD Review Board Section had a productive week. 18 phone calls came into the office inquiring about

discharge upgrades. 36 emails were received regarding discharge upgrades while 44 emails were sent out. Also two applications were mailed to Veterans seeking discharge upgrades and three completed applications were sent into the Army and Air Force Boards respectively for Veterans seeking upgrades to their discharge status. The American Legion is currently preparing for two upcoming hearings, in February and March, for the Army Discharge Review Board with more cases likely to come in. Section also conducted one in person conversation for a Veteran seeking to upgrade an RE Code.

The DOD discharge upgrade section also spoke via telephone to a distressed Veteran, who could not access VA benefits due to a negative discharge, and put the Veteran in touch with counseling services in their local area.

### **PMC/DMC:**

#### **VBA After Action Report**

Submitted by: Philadelphia VA Regional Office Narrative: Philadelphia and Wilmington State of the Regional Office Briefing for Congressional Staffers from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware.

The Philadelphia Regional Office hosted a meet and greet session and Regional Office tour to staffers from the offices of Congressmen and Senators within the Philadelphia and Wilmington office jurisdiction. A teleconference line was offered to include participants unable to come to the office. There were 9 participants in the office and 10 on the teleconference line. The Philadelphia Regional Office Director provided a briefing on the state of the Regional Office to include addressing Office of Inspector General Reports, data and statistics on performance, information regarding outreach events, and the way forward for the Regional Office.

Questions and topics raised by the staff members during the discussion included the following:

- ? Request for background and information relating to the September 2015 OIG report
- ? Performance Awards and Bonuses – What types of awards are given to employees? (i.e. yearly performance, on the spot/cash awards, making a difference awards)
- 2 What are the possibilities around additional staffing for out-based employees co-located at VA Medical Centers (example provided was the VSR stationed at the Lebanon VAMC being overworked, long lines)
- ? Have clearer communications been improving employee morale in Director Rawls' first month on station?
- ? What is one thing upon Director Rawls' arrival to Philadelphia/Wilmington shocked her compared to other Regional Offices
  - o What things can she fix while she is here?
- ? What is the process for filling vacant leadership positions?
  - o Does the OPM process work? Does the VA receive the quality of candidates that we need?
  - o How can we attract quality candidates?

Questions and topics raised by the staff members were answered by the District Director, RO Director, and leadership to the attendee's satisfaction.

The conversation closed with Director Rawls reviewing some of the key items that she plans on focusing on while she is in Philadelphia and Wilmington, to include employee morale and training, improving the Non-Rating workload inventory and timeliness, Appeals control time, and improving outreach events. Director Rawls also asked the participants for their help in two

focused areas. The first was with respect to Veterans homelessness. She asked that their offices assist in the identification of homeless Veterans, as timely identification is often difficult. The other request was for assistance with respect to outreach events. Director Rawls asked that the Congressional offices invite VA to participate in events that they feel would be beneficial to Veterans and beneficiaries, in addition to sharing any ideas for ways to improve what outreach VA is currently doing, to make the events more attractive and successful. At the closure of the briefing, eight of the in-person participants stayed for a tour of the Regional Office.

**BDD:**

Combined the Western and Eastern BDD offices reviewed a total of 43 claims with 366 claimed conditions. LaKeisha Bracey will once again be responsible for conducting Track I of DSO school which will happen the week prior to Washington Conference.

**DoD/Discharge Upgrades:**

The news release below pertains to Vietnam veterans and applying for a discharge under the Hagel memo. The Department of Defense has not been following the guidelines established as it pertains to releasing monthly stats on how many people apply and are granted or denied. After the lawsuit DoD has stated that they will comply and start providing the monthly reports.

(Wash., D.C.) Last week, the U.S. District Court in Connecticut approved a settlement in Vietnam Veterans of America et al v. Dept. of Defense et al., a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit brought by the National Veterans Council for Legal Redress and Vietnam Veterans America against the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD). The veterans groups sought records regarding implementation of a September 2014 directive by then-Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel requiring that military record correction boards give “liberal consideration” to applications by veterans with PTSD who had received an other-than-honorable or other bad discharge and later seek to have their discharge status upgraded. Under the settlement, DOD agreed to release statistics on a quarterly basis for the next two years concerning PTSD applications and adjudications by each board and each service branch.

“Vietnam Veterans of America has long held that thousands of Vietnam veterans suffering from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder were wrongfully discharged with bad paper,” said John Rowan, VVA National President. “The overwhelming majority of them were not malingerers. They were not cowards. They served honorably and well and did what was asked of them. But they were suffering from what is now known as PTSD at a time when PTSD was not an accepted mental health diagnosis. This settlement will help veterans and the public ensure that the record correction boards faithfully implement Secretary Hagel’s instruction and enable many of these veterans to get a modicum of the justice denied them for so long.”

“Nearly two years ago, NVCLR and my brother Conley Monk helped bring a class-action lawsuit against the Department of Defense to hold its record correction boards accountable,” said Garry Monk, Executive Director for the National Veterans Council for Legal Redress. “For decades, these boards denied upgrades to veterans with less than honorable discharges when these men and women had service-related PTSD. We welcomed the Hagel Memo and believe this settlement will allow the public to monitor the military’s compliance with its command. We

now need the Department of Defense to make a serious and coordinated effort to reach out to veterans to make sure our troops know where they can find help to apply for an upgrade and remove the lifelong stigma of a bad paper discharge.”

“The court order approving this settlement requires DOD to disclose, on a quarterly basis and for the next two years, the number of PTSD applications received by each Army, Navy, and Air Force record correction or discharge review board, as well as the number of applications approved and denied and their docket numbers,” said Prof. Michael J. Wishnie, Director of the Veterans Legal Services Clinic at Yale Law School, which represented the plaintiffs in the suit. “For the first time, this will allow veterans, their advocates, and the public to know whether DOD is fulfilling its twin obligations under the Hagel Memo to conduct a vigorous campaign of outreach to eligible veterans and to give ‘liberal consideration’ to the discharge upgrade applications the boards actually receive.”

The Hagel Memo is available here. “Unfinished Business: Correcting ‘Bad Paper’ for Veterans with PTSD,” a November 2015 report that analyzes information previously released as a result of this lawsuit and which was prepared for VVA and NVCLR by Sundiata Sidibe and Francisco Unger of the Veterans Legal Services Clinic, is available here.

### **Board of Veterans Appeals Unit (BVA)**

During the week ending January 15, 2016 the Board of Veterans’ Appeals reached dispositions on **217** American Legion represented appeals. Of those dispositions **77.4%** of the denials were overturned with outcomes favorable to the veteran. In **64** cases, the Board granted benefits outright after considering The American Legion’s arguments. In **104** cases, The American Legion was able to point out errors in the development of the veteran’s claims which mandated corrective action under the law. Of the total number of dispositions, **41 (18.9%)** were outright denials.

Also during this period, the American Legion Appeals Unit reviewed, prepared written Informal Hearing Presentations (IHP), and/or orally argued **223** veteran’s appeals. These claims included originals, remands, as well as specialty cases (Advance on Docket, Independent Medical Opinions, Court Remands, etc.). The unit handled telephone inquiries and provided consultations with veterans, VSO’s, and Congressional Offices. The administrative team fielded 239 phone inquiries during this period. The appeals representatives conducted seven (7) Central Office Hearing during the week.

### **Insurance, Pension and Debt Management**

The VA&R VA Insurance unit began review and processing of 77 applications for new insurance coverage, of which 3 were for Supplemental insurance for totally disabled veterans in the Service-Disabled insurance program, along with 50 disability and settlement claims on other veteran’s VA policies. Further case development included 24 phone calls with veterans, family members and VSOs, 59 further insurance inquiries or transactions, and 57 veteran insureds were contacted by mail on their policies, insurance options and action deadlines. There were also 32 direct contacts with VA personnel in regards to correcting or having additional actions taken on veteran’s accounts.

The Philadelphia VA&R Pension unit processed 5 new claims for Veterans or Death pensions, along with reviewing and preparing 197 case actions for support of on-going pension benefits. Casework included processing 172 additional transactions and case inquiries to VA, and 19 phone contacts with claimants and VSOs, along with 2 personal contacts.

The VA&R Pension office in St. Paul processed 140 new claims for Veteran's pensions and Death pensions, and presented supporting casework material on 98 claims already in progress, while also processing 175 inquiries and pension transactions, and 140 rating review audits. Contacts with claimants and VSOs amounted to 151 calls and e-mail contacts, and 10 Appeals were handled for the week ending January 20, 2016

**Benefits Delivered at Discharge (BDD)**

The Western BDD Office reviewed 22 claims with 230 issues. Each claim required reviewing the rating, C&P examination, and Service Treatment Records. Additional research was required on some cases. The BDD office also received 8 phone calls from Veterans and Department Service Officers throughout the country requesting the status of claims or had questions concerning a rating. The office provided an update to the status of the claim or provided options concerning the rating. One Veteran visited the office. The office received and reviewed 32 pieces of VA correspondence.

**Louis J. Celli Jr., Director**  
**Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation (VA&R) Division**  
**(202) 263-2983**  
**Week Ending 1/22/2016**

## NATIONAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION COMMISSION

### TOPIC 1: ECONOMY

[Turmoil in global markets](#) has been good for mortgage rates. China's slowdown and cratering oil prices have created volatility in the markets and spurred investors to flee to safety in government bonds. Demand for safe assets pushed bond yields lower, and the yield on the benchmark 10-year Treasury note fell below 2 percent this week. The movement of the 10-year Treasury is one of the best indicators of whether mortgage rates will rise or fall. When yields go down, rates tend to go down.

According to the latest data released Thursday, January 21, by Freddie Mac, the 30-year fixed-rate average fell for the third week in a row, sinking to 3.81 percent with an average 0.6 point (points are fees paid to a lender equal to 1 percent of the loan amount). It was 3.92 percent a week ago and 3.63 percent a year ago. The 15-year fixed-rate average dropped to 3.1 percent with an average 0.5 point. It was 3.19 percent a week ago and 2.93 percent a year ago. The five-year adjustable rate average slid to 2.91 percent with an average 0.5 point. It was 3.01 percent a week ago and 2.83 percent a year ago.

The Freddie Mac mortgage rate survey had difficulty keeping up with market events this week. The 30-year mortgage rate dropped 11 basis points to 3.81 percent, the lowest rate in three months. This drop reflected weak inflation - 0.7 percent CPI inflation for all of 2015 - and nonstop financial market turbulence that is driving investors to the safe haven of Treasuries. However, the survey was largely complete prior to Wednesday's Treasury rally that drove the yield on the 10-year Treasury below 2 percent, down 29 basis points since the end of 2015.

Meanwhile, as rates dropped, more homeowners sought to refinance their mortgages causing applications to rise, according to the latest data from the Mortgage Bankers Association. The market composite index - a measure of total loan application volume - grew 9 percent from the previous week. The refinance jumped 19 percent, while the purchase index dropped 2 percent. The refinance share of mortgage activity accounted for 59.1 percent of all applications.

HOUSEHOLD					DATA	
Table A-5. Employment status of the civilian population 18 years and over by veteran status, period of service, and sex, not seasonally adjusted						
[Numbers in thousands]						
Employment status, veteran status, and period of service	Total		Men		Women	
	DEC 2014	DEC 2015	DEC 2014	DEC 2015	DEC 2014	DEC 2015
Gulf War-era II veterans						
Unemployed	162	131	124	93	38	38
Unemployment rate	6.9	5.7	7.0	5.9	6.6	4.6

*National unemployment rate is 5.0 percent (December 2015). Gulf War II veterans unemployment rate is 5.7 percent.<sup>1</sup> Currently, the unemployment rate for Gulf War II women veterans is 4.6 percent (down from 7.2 percent in November).*

## **TOPIC 2: MEETINGS**

*On Tuesday January 19*, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with the Small Business Administration's Office of Veterans Business Development to discuss their role in the Legion's Winter Conference and VA's proposed rule change to 38 CFR 74 that was open to public comment.

*On Tuesday January 19*, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with the National Veteran Owned Small Business Association (NAVOBA) to discuss the possibility of cross promotion of our organizations and increase the number of veteran small business owners in the Legion's membership.

*On Tuesday February 19*, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division attended a walk-through event of the Boulder Crest Retreat. This retreat is the nation's first privately-funded rural wellness center dedicated exclusively to our nation's combat veterans and their families. They are committed to improving the physical, emotional, spiritual and economic wellbeing of this remarkable community of heroes, and ensuring they have the opportunity to succeed in their new mission - a life of passion, purpose and service - here at home.

*On Wednesday February 20*, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division participated on conference calls for Hiring our Heroes events in Austin (TX) and Cleveland (OH).

*On Wednesday February 20*, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with staff from Representative Grace Napolitano's (CA) office to discuss H.R. 3114. If enacted, the bill would direct the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, using available funds, to develop a Veterans' Curation Program to hire veterans and members of the Armed Forces to assist in carrying out curation and historic preservation activities.

*On Thursday February 21*, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division participated on conference calls for Hiring our Heroes events in San Antonio and St. Paul (MN).

*On Thursday February 21*, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division attended the DOL-VETS Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee on Veterans' Employment, Training, and Employer Outreach (ACVETEO) is chartered to assess the employment and training needs of veterans, and their integration into the workforce; to determine the extent to which the programs and activities of the Department of Labor are meeting such needs; to assist the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans Employment and Training (ASVET) with outreach to employers, related to the advantages of hiring veterans; and to make recommendations with respect to training and employer outreach activities positioned to advance the employment situation of veterans.

## **TOPIC 3: SMALL BUSINESS UPDATE**

The American Legion will be hosting a Small Business Roadmap to Success Workshop for veteran small business owners on February 23 and 24, from 8:30am to 3:00pm, at the Washington Hilton Hotel, located on 1919 Connecticut Ave., NW DC, 20009. The workshop consists of two-days of 'best practices' seminars and multiple Business Networking Sessions during breakfast and lunch receptions. Attendees will not only have

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Labor. *Economic News Release: Employment Situation Summary, November 2015.*

the chance to listen to successful small business owners discuss their secrets to success, but also meet various government agencies and large contractors who are looking for veteran small businesses to work with and purchase from. This event is free for veterans, service members, spouses, National Guard and Reservists.

*To register, go the link below:*

<http://www.eventbrite.com/e/small-business-roadmap-to-success-tickets-20743439185>

#### **TOPIC 4: VETERAN HOMELESSNESS**

An ambitious plan by Mecklenburg County and the city of Charlotte to house more than 200 homeless veterans last year exceeded its benchmark, helping 374 veterans find affordable places to live. With an estimated 40 veterans left to be housed, it's the closest the county has come to ending veteran homelessness in recent memory. Unlike past campaigns that tried to do the same, the program links together two local governments, various charities and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to tackle an issue that one official said is beginning to trend downward. Officials launched the campaign on Veterans Day in 2014 to meet first lady Michelle Obama's. The goal then was to house 204 veterans in Mecklenburg County. That number jumped as organizers compiled a registry that lists, by name, each homeless veteran officials and volunteers were able to find. Among the program's milestones was the opening of, a 20-unit housing complex in west Charlotte where 17 low-income veterans now live with their families.

"No one who has worn the uniform for our country should be living on our streets, and we've got to realize that," said Mary Gaertner, neighborhood program coordinator with the city's neighborhood and business services.

Last year, two North Carolina cities - Fayetteville and Winston-Salem - succeeded in ending homelessness for military veterans. Raleigh and Durham expect to celebrate that milestone in the coming months. Charlotte could be next: "The goal of ending veterans' homelessness is very close," Gaertner said. That won't eliminate all homelessness, but it shows that the city, county and VA's new system ensures "any new episodes of homelessness are rare, brief and non-recurring," she said.

In other news, The American Legion General Leonard E. Wood Post 162 delivered to Ariel 'AJ' Luna, Director of Veteran Services at Bergen County Division of Veterans Services, 76 new backpacks, stuffed with winter clothing, toiletries and food certificates, to be distributed to 125 local homeless veterans. The goal of the post was to help the homeless veterans experience a less severe winter. Items were donated by local veterans organizations, schools, churches and community members during the Operation Backpacks for Homeless Veterans in Bergen County drive.

#### **TOPIC 5: EMPLOYMENT**

New allegations surfaced that it is common practice at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) bypasses veterans' preference for professional positions by allowing the union to write into contract hiring preferences for current employees. The only jobs explicitly reserved for veterans at the VA are janitors, or "housekeeping aides," according to a Daily Caller News Foundation analysis of data from USAjobs.gov. The VA is able to meet its hiring goals by offering veterans janitorial jobs, while maintaining a profitable union giveaway that favors current government employees for the majority of open positions.



According to the Daily Caller, the VA is currently advertising for 3,000 positions, some of which require multiple people each. Only about 50 job ads, seeking approximately a few hundred workers, are accepting applications exclusively from veterans. Out of those positions, all but a few pay only \$13 an hour. Simultaneously, more than a thousand vacancies, many with no special skill requirements, were being advertised as open only to current civil servants.

Housekeeper is the mostly frequently advertised position, which allows the department to keep veteran employment numbers high. Meanwhile, job postings with higher pay and no toilet-cleaning involved, like “motor vehicle operator,” \$67,000 secretary, and \$40,000 supply clerk, are reserved for current union members.

An undated American Federation of Government Employees union document produced during the Bush administration said “58 percent of all blue collar employees at the VA have veterans’ preference status” and do jobs such as “housekeeping, laundry, plant operations, grounds maintenance and food services.” The union which represents the majority of VA workers said it did not have updated numbers. But given that one-third of employees overall at the VA are veterans, blue-collar jobs have a far higher portion of veterans than white-collar ones.

It is important to note that all VA employees who have engaged in high-profile instances of manipulation, incompetence and theft have been non-veterans. By contrast, many of the whistleblowers who have been fired from the VA, seemingly out of retaliation, have been veterans.

Veterans hire veterans and veterans will do the right thing in service to their own. Not only is veterans’ preference a federal mandate it should be a moral imperative considering the recent string of high profile scandals that have rocked VA’s leadership. It is time to put veterans back in charge of the agency whose sole mission is to care for veterans.

## **TOPIC 6: CAREER FAIR**

This week, work continued on The American Legion’s upcoming hiring events to be staged in Austin, Cleveland, Glendale (AZ), Houston, San Antonio, St. Paul (MN), and Denver. The mission of The American Legion's National Employment & Education Commission is to take actions that affect the economic well-being of veterans, including issues relating to veterans' education, employment, home loans, vocational rehabilitation, homelessness and small business.

Joseph C. Sharpe, Jr., Director  
Veterans Employment & Education Division  
202.861.2700 ext. 2989  
Week Ending: 1/22/16