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LEGISLATIVE DIVISION UPDATE

Congress has other significant work to accomplish before it recesses for the year. Both chambers have produced their own versions of legislation to address the country's transportation system, and the House is trying to reconcile differences before passing a version that can be supported. Meanwhile, the Senate is debating legislation that would direct the EPA and Army Corps of Engineers to rewrite a rule governing the waters covered under the Clean Water Act.

CONGRESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015 Signed by the President

HR 1314, the *Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015*, passed the House on October 28 by a vote of 266-167. In the wee hours of the morning of October 30, the Senate voted to approve the measure by a 64-35 recorded vote. The bill was signed into law by the President on November 2, enacting the measure as **Public Law (P.L.) 114-74**.

The agreement suspends the debt limit until March 15, 2017, and it partially rolls back the sequester of discretionary spending scheduled for Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 and FY 2017 to increase caps for those two years by a total of \$80 billion, split equally between defense and non-defense spending. It requires additional funding through the war-related Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) account for both years, as well.

It also prevents a huge increase in Medicare Part B premiums for about thirty percent of the beneficiaries in 2016 and keeps the Social Security disability insurance trust fund solvent until 2022. It includes \$79.9 billion in mandatory spending cuts and revenue increases to offset the bill's costs, and would reduce the deficit by \$497 million according to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO). Revenue offsets include increased premiums companies must pay to the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation and the sale of oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve.

The agreement was negotiated with the president by Speaker John A. Boehner (OH), as one of his last acts before he leaves Congress on October 30.

Provision of interest to the Legion were outlined in last week's Weekly Report.

LEGISLATIVE DIVISION UPDATES

On November 2, Legislative Director Ian de Planque and Assistant Director Warren Goldstein attended a House Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing entitled *VA Relocation Program*. The purpose of the hearing was to receive testimony from subpoenaed witnesses on the alleged misuse of Department of Veterans relocation programs and incentives. The hearing can be found at: <http://veterans.house.gov/hearing/testimony-of-subpoenaed-witnesses-on-the-department-of-veterans-affairs-alleged-misuse-of>

On November 3, Legislative Assistant Director Jeff Steele attended a House Veterans' Affairs Economic Opportunity subcommittee hearing entitled *Examining VA's*

Information Technology Systems that Provide Economic Opportunities for Veterans. Veterans Employment & Education Division Assistant Director Davy Leghorn testified on behalf of The American Legion. Our testimony, along with video of the hearing, can be found here: <http://veterans.house.gov/hearing/examining-va-s-information-technology-systems-that-provide-economic-opportunities-for>.

On November 4, Legislative Assistant Director Jeff Steele attended an event sponsored by *The American Conservative* titled the Summit on Realism & Restraint: A New Way Forward for American Foreign Policy. Panelists and speakers discussed conservative alternatives to the interventionist and isolationist camps in Washington, and how a revival of realism and restraint can improve America's prospects. Video of the event has been archived here: <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/a-new-way-forward-for-american-foreign-policy-2/>

On November 4, Deputy Director Dean Stoline and Assistant Director Warren Goldstein held Congressional Meet and Greet meetings with legislative staffers from the offices of Reps. Kathleen Rice (NY), Beto O'Rourke (TX), and Tim Walz (MN) to discuss issues and concerns affecting veterans.

On November 5, Deputy Director Dean Stoline and Assistant Director Warren Goldstein held a follow-up meeting with Mike Wakefield, Legislative Assistant for Rep. Mike Coffman (CO) to discuss the Guard and Reserve Act.

Update on Flag Amendment Bill

On January 7, **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."*

Staff from the Legislative Division has met with staff of Sen. Orrin Hatch (UT) to discuss the re-introduction of the flag protection amendment in the 114th Congress. Sen. Hatch has long been a champion of the amendment. Our efforts finally came to fruition on July 30, when Sen. David Vitter (LA) introduced **Senate Joint Resolution (S.J. Res.) 21**, prior to the August district work period.

In addition to Rep. Womack and the five original co-sponsors of the House joint resolution there are now a total of **36** cosponsors. 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 11-6-2015

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)

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)

NATIONAL SECURITY

1. Cuts in Readiness Funding; Second NDAA Go Around for 2016

House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mac Thornberry (R-Texas) said there would be pain for important programs when cutting \$5 billion from the National Defense Authorization Act.

A total of \$250 million was taken from the Army's readiness increase and close to \$200 million from the Air National Guard's readiness increase, according to a document obtained by Federal News Radio. A \$100 million increase to DoD's technology offset initiative — announced last year to beef up the United States' technological superiority to adversaries — was erased in order to cut the deficit.

The bill will also cut \$230 million from the Air Force's new Long Range Strike Bomber, the funds are saved from money that was not used because of a delay in the award of the contract. The almost \$60 billion contract was awarded to Northrop Grumman last week.

Other cuts include a \$50 million reduction in the purchase of short and medium range anti-ballistic missile systems and a \$30 million reduction in the purchase of SM-3 1B anti-ballistic missiles.

House and Senate authorizers and appropriators were forced to cut \$5 billion from the defense authorization bill after the White House and Congress reached a budget deal that raised both the domestic and defense sequestration caps for the next two years.

The agreement allowed for \$545 billion in defense base budget spending and another \$59 billion in overseas contingency operations spending (OCO). OCO is meant for emergency war funding and is not applicable to sequestration caps.

The total adds up to \$607 billion, \$5 billion short of the originally approved \$612 billion in the defense authorization bill.

A majority of the cuts came from reductions not previously carried in the defense bill. Those include \$103 million in classified programs, cuts in F-15 modifications and a delay in the Next Generation Jammer development program. Other savings in the category came from civilian full-time equivalent targets.

About \$1 billion of the cuts came from funds Congress added to the bill, which the President did not request in his budget. Those include the readiness increase cuts, the technology offset cut and \$70 million in basic research spread over the military services.

Another \$700 million of the cuts came from increases to reductions in the bill. A majority of that number came from fiscal year 2016's share of planned DoD headquarters streamlining. Other reductions came from the Distributed Common Ground System-Army, common computer resources and F-18 modifications.

More than \$1 billion was able to be cut through fuel rate adjustments because of the drop in fuel prices. Also, the OCO fund saved \$125 million from the defunct Syria train and equip program.

The American Legion position on this matter can be found here: <http://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/4726/2015N035.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

2. U.S. Navy Maintains Presence in South China Sea

The commanding officer of a U.S. Navy destroyer that challenged China's territorial claims in the South China Sea last week spoke for the first time of his ship's encounters with Beijing's navy Thursday. Cmdr. Robert C. Francis Jr. told reporters that the USS Lassen patrolled with about six or seven miles of Subi Reef in the Spratly Islands, well within the 12-mile territorial limit claimed by China.

Francis said the crew of a Chinese destroyer that shadowed the Lassen for several days contacted the ship with a standard "query" about what the Lassen was doing. Francis said his crew replied that it was operating in international waters in accord with international law. But the Chinese pressed the matter, he said, by repeating the query over and over.

Francis said the Lassen has had about 50 "interactions" with Chinese military planes and ships on his patrols in the South and East China Seas since May. The commander described that amount of contact as routine. Francis said that the Chinese destroyer that had been shadowing the Lassen past the artificial islands turned away.

Recently, Defense Secretary Ash Carter and his Malaysian counterpart, Hishammuddin Hussein, were aboard Francis' ship USS Theodore Roosevelt to watch fighter jets take off and land. Carter's visit drew extra attention because of the ship's location, about 150 miles to 200 miles from the Spratlys, and the tensions surrounding China's reclamation work, which Adm. Harry Harris, head of U.S. forces in the Pacific, has likened to building a "great wall of sand" with the potential for confrontations to escalate into armed conflict.

The U.S. contends that under international law the artificial islands built by China are high seas. That means they are not eligible for the 12-nautical-mile zone granted to maritime features such as naturally formed islands capable of sustaining human habitation or economic life. The American Legion position can be found at the following link: <http://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/4730/2015N040.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

3. Presidents of China and Taiwan Hold Meeting for First Time

Chinese president, Xi Jinping, has agreed to meet the president of Taiwan, Ma Ying-jeou — the first meeting between the leader of Taiwan (Republic of China) and the leader of the People's Republic of China. The historic encounter, scheduled to take place on neutral ground in the city-state of Singapore on Saturday, will be described by both sides as a milestone in cross-strait relations. But it also seems to be an implicit acknowledgment by Mr. Xi that the Chinese effort

to woo Taiwan with economic benefits alone has been unsuccessful — and that Beijing’s dream of unification with the island is as distant as ever, despite a long courtship.

Mr. Xi is breaking with long-established policy by agreeing to meet Mr. Ma. But it is unclear how much further the Communist leadership is able or willing to go to win over the 23 million people of Taiwan, who polls show are uninterested in unification and increasingly anxious about the self-governing island’s dependence on the much larger Chinese economy.

In many ways, the Communist Party’s approach to Taiwan has mirrored its policies in volatile Chinese territories like Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang, where it opens its checkbook to distribute economic benefits but refuses to compromise on political matters.

But Taiwan is different — beyond Beijing’s rule — and the problem that China faces there is an example of the limits of its heavy reliance on trade and investment to project influence overseas. Even as it has assumed the role of a global power, its one-note focus on economic relations has sometimes backfired, with resentment against Chinese investment simmering from Southeast Asia to Africa.

The American Legion positions on this matter can be found at the following links:

<http://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/3601/2014N002.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> and

<http://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/4729/2015N038.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

4. POW/MIA Update

Army Cpl. Robert V. Witt, 20, of Bellflower, Calif., was buried Oct. 30 in Whittier, Calif. In late November 1950, Witt was assigned to 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 31st Regimental Combat Team (RCT), 7th Infantry Division, historically known as Task Force Faith. The 31st RCT was deployed east of the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea, when it was attacked by overwhelming numbers of Chinese forces. On Dec. 1, 1950, remnants of the 31st RCT began a fighting withdrawal to more defensible positions near Hagaru-ri, south of the reservoir. On Dec. 2, 1950, Witt was reported as missing in action.

In 1953, during the prisoner of war exchanges historically known as “Operation Little Switch” and “Operation Big Switch,” repatriated U.S. soldiers told debriefers that Witt had been captured during the battle and died from malnutrition. His remains were not among those returned by Communist forces in 1954, however.

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 Witt was believed to have died. Additionally, in July 2000, a joint U.S./Democratic People’s Republic of Korea team excavated a burial site near Hwaong-Ri Village, North Korea, and recovered human remains.

To identify Witt's remains, scientists from DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, including mitochondrial, Y-chromosome short tandem repeat, and autosomal chromosome DNA analyses, which matched his brother.

Today, more than 7,800 Americans remain unaccounted for from the Korean War. Using modern 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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For Week Ending 11/6/2015

VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION

Health Policy Unit

For the week of November 2, 2015, Edward Lilley responded to (19) emails, (5) calls, and (2) letters from veterans.

On Friday, October 30, 2015, Edward Lilley, Team Leader for Health Policy attended a Veteran's Choice Program update with Health Net Federal Services' Program Officer, Donna Hoffmeier and Ramsey Sulayman, their Public Affairs Manager for Government Relations. Mr. Lilley was joined by representatives from the Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Paralyzed Veterans of America. According to Ms. Hoffmeier, the VA needs to have a formalized policy on Choice referrals because when a backlog does occur with scheduling, it is usually due to the informal consult process that has VA sending several health issues or diagnoses for one veteran, although only one of the issues or diagnoses is actually requiring an appointment through Choice.

On Monday, November 2, 2015, Edward Lilley, Team Leader for Health Policy, attended the DC VA Medical Center's quarterly Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS) meeting. The meeting was facilitated by Stephanie Burns, Chief of Voluntary Service, and featured updates from Brian Hawkins, Medical Center Director. One of the major updates included the retirement of the facility's Chief of Staff and the facility's Hawk Eye Program was recognized as a best practice and is being shared with other facilities. The Hawk Eye Program is a rapid-cycle improvement team initiated to ensure that this VA Medical Center provides excellent customer service.

From Tuesday November 3 –Wednesday, November 4, 2015, Edward Lilley, Team Leader for Health Policy & National Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS) Deputy Representative attended the VAVS National Advisory Committee's Executive Committee Fall meeting. The purpose of the Committee is as follows:

1. Act as the governing body of the VAVS NAC in the interim period between Annual Meetings.
2. Be supportive of the NAC's primary objective of advising VA on how to coordinate and promote volunteer activities within VA facilities and matters relating to volunteerism.
3. Be apprised of programmatic issues pending within Voluntary Service and Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Headquarters since the 2014 Annual Meeting and to hold discussion on any appropriate advisory actions necessary.
4. Plan EC supportive actions to ensure follow-up on issues or business items from the 2014 Annual Meeting.
5. Provide an opportunity for VAVS NAC EC to hear from and have face-to-face time with VA senior leadership.

6. Receive an update from the James H. Parke Memorial Foundation Board concerning the Youth Scholarship program.
7. Receive an update from VAVS Partners, Inc. concerning the Annual Meeting.
8. Assess the 2014 Annual Meeting, finalize plans for the 2015 Annual Meeting, and address site selection for the 2016 Annual Meetings.
9. Review and address submitted Recommendation intended for the 2015 Annual Meeting and prepare a report on same for all NAC National Representatives.
10. Receive reports from the: Recommendations Subcommittee, Volunteer of the Year Nomination Subcommittee, Recruitment Subcommittee, and Membership Subcommittee.
11. Update the NAC Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) as deemed necessary.
12. Discuss, as a group, any area within the VAVS program in need of additional progress.

During the meeting, it was reported that The American Legion provided a total of 7,638 volunteers in 2015 (down 253 from 2014) and served a total number of 856,649 hours (down 311 from 2014) which save the VA approximately \$19.7 million.

On Thursday, November 5, 2015, Edward Lilley, Team Leader for Health Policy participated in a conference call with Judge Margaret Bartley, Judicial Conference Co-Chair; Stacey-Rae Simcox, Esq., Director of the Veterans Advocacy Clinic at the Stetson University College of Law; and Zachary M. Stolz, Attorney for Veterans Law at Chisholm Chisholm & Kilpatrick, to discuss the plenary session on the issues with Disability Benefits Questionnaires for the 2016 Judicial Conference.

On Friday, November 6, 2015, Edward Lilley, Team Leader for Health Policy participated in a conference call with Judge Margaret Bartley, Judicial Conference Co-Chair; and Jeremy Bedford, Case Management Attorney at The Veterans Consortium Pro Bono Program, to discuss the breakout session on the issues with Blast Injury Claims for the 2016 Judicial Conference.

For the week of November 2-6, 2015, LaRanda Holt responded to 6 emails and 13 phone calls.

On Friday, November 6, 2015, LaRanda Holt, Assistant Director for Women and Minority Veterans, attended a Women Veterans' Invisible No More Expo in Baltimore, MD. The expo was giving women veterans the opportunity to get job opportunities, network with other veterans, receive benefits information, assist them with claims, as well as free legal advice. LaRanda Holt with Carol Baker was joined with other organizations and VSOs, who gave information and awareness to women veterans.

On November 4 - 6, 2015, Roscoe Butler, Deputy Director for Health Care attended The American Legion Department of New York Medical Facility Visitation Task Force Training. The purpose of the training is to train task force members how to conduct VA Medical Center site visits and town hall meetings. In 2014, The Department of NY approved resolution no. 6, The Dept of New York Annual Report of VA Medical Facilities and other Healthcare Facilities. The Dept. of NY program is modeled after the System Worth Saving program.

Claims Unit

National Headquarters staff attended a hearing conducted by the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs (HVAC) pertaining to the relocation of several senior executives within the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) on November 2, 2015. Acting Under Secretary for Benefits Danny Pummill, Philadelphia VA Regional Office Director Diana Rubens, St. Paul VA Regional Office Director Kimberly Graves, Baltimore VA Regional Office Director Antoine Waller, and Los Angeles VA Regional Office Director Robert McKenrick were subpoenaed to attend the hearing after failing to appear for a hearing in October 2015 to discuss the relocations of the directors within VBA; additionally, former Under Secretary for Benefits Allison Hickey was invited to appear but opted not to attend the hearing.

Repeatedly, HVAC Chairman Jeff Miller questioned Ms. Rubens and Ms. Graves regarding the nature and justification for the relocations. Both VA employees may be pursued criminally, they elected to exercise their Fifth Amendment protections. After refusing to answer any of the Committee's questions, they were excused from the hearing.

During the hearing, Mr. Pummill acknowledged that the transfer of employees within the Senior Executive Service (SES) corps is being re-evaluated. After spending copious amounts of money on relocation packages, VA has suspended the Appraised Value Option (AVO) for relocation; AVO is a home purchasing program that drew scrutiny after the cost associated with relocating Ms. Rubens.

Although it appeared Mr. McKenrick was coerced into moving to the Los Angeles VA regional office (VARO) from the Philadelphia VARO within the VA Office of Inspector General report released in September 2015, he indicated that he was not pressured during the hearing. While Mr. McKenrick stated he was not pressured, Mr. Waller did indicate feeling pressured after initially indicating a willingness to move to the Philadelphia VARO. Philadelphia and St. Paul VAROs have similar missions and product lines that would have been a logical progression in his career; however, Ms. Rubens opted to seek the relocation from her position as Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits without posting the position for consideration by others.

Mr. Pummill also revealed that VBA will not eliminate the backlog by the end of 2015. Former VA Secretary Eric Shinseki had previously promised the elimination of the backlog by the end of the year; Mr. Pummill predicted a backlog of approximately 70,000-80,000 claims by the end of the year.

Board of Veterans' Appeals:

Lou Celli and Zachary Hearn met with leadership at the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA) on November 3, 2015, to discuss allowing trial attorneys with the American College of Trial Lawyers (ACTL) represent veterans with The American Legion as power of attorney before the BVA as a pilot program. Following over 12 months of studying the impact and implementation of the program, final steps are being taken to allow the experienced trial lawyers to represent veterans on a pro-bono basis. Mr. Celli has contacted senior leadership within ACTL to update

them on the steps, and the proper forms to allow for the representation has been forwarded to its leadership.

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

Gerardo Avila, Deputy Director MEB/PEB & DoD, represented one applicant during his personal appearance before the Discharge Board at the Navy Yard. submitted 3 applications to the Board for Correction of Military Records (DD Form 149), submitted 4 applications to the Discharge Upgrade Board (DD Form 293), assisted 2 Service member file their Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) claims with the department of Veteran Affairs, and assisted 18 service members/veterans by answering questions about VA benefits, discharge upgrades, and corrections to military records.

Board of Veterans Appeals Unit (BVA)

During the week ending October 30, 2015 the Board of Veterans' Appeals reached dispositions on **112** American Legion represented appeals. Of those dispositions **81.2%** of the denials were overturned with outcomes favorable to the veteran. In **26** cases, the Board granted benefits outright after considering The American Legion's arguments. In **65** 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, **16 (14.3%)** were outright denials.

Also during this period, the American Legion Appeals Unit reviewed, prepared written Informal Hearing Presentations (IHP), and/or orally argued **192** 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 242 phone inquiries during this period. The appeals representatives conducted four (4), including one (1) walk-in, Central Office Hearings 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 4 were for Supplemental insurance for totally disabled veterans in the Service-Disabled insurance program, along with 48 disability and settlement claims on other veteran's VA policies. Further case development included 31 phone calls with veterans, family members and VSOs, 64 further insurance inquiries or transactions, and 53 veteran insureds were contacted by mail on their policies, insurance options and action deadlines. There were also 33 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 15 new claims for Veterans or Death pensions, along with reviewing and preparing 300 case actions for support of on-going pension benefits. Casework included processing 29 additional transactions and case inquiries to VA, and 10 phone contacts with claimants and VSOs.

The VA&R Pension offices in St. Paul processed 166 new claims for Veteran's pensions and Death pensions, and presented supporting casework material on 180 claims already in progress,

while also processing 168 inquiries and pension transactions, and 226 rating review audits. Phone contacts with claimants and VSOs amounted to 158 calls and e-mail contacts, and 1 Appeal handled for the week ending November 4, 2015.

Benefits Delivered at Discharge (BDD)

The Western BDD Office reviewed 17 claims with 243 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 7 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 27 pieces of VA correspondence.

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NATIONAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION COMMISSION

TOPIC 1: ECONOMY

On Wednesday, November 4, Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen told Congress that the Fed could raise its key interest rate at its next meeting in December. It would be the first rate hike -- known as "liftoff" -- in almost a decade. Yellen expressed optimism that the U.S. economy is getting stronger. She cited improvements in the job market, consumer spending and also said the things keeping inflation low -- cheap oil prices -- are temporary. "At this point, I see the U.S. economy as performing well," Yellen told the House Financial Services Committee. Even the global economy is holding up better than many thought.

The Fed held off raising rates off their historic lows near 0 percent in September because of the global economic slowdown that sent the stock market plunging in August. There have been some signs of stability since the summer. She argues that raising rates sooner rather than later would allow the Fed to gradually raise rates. If the Fed waits too long, it may be forced to raise rates quickly -- which may spook stock markets. "It's been a long time that interest rates have been at zero," Yellen admitted. "Markets and the public should be thinking about the entire path of policy rates over time...that will be a very gradual path."

Yellen's comments come after the Fed did not raise interest rates last week, but it did scale back its concerns about how much the global economic slowdown will be a drag on the U.S. economy. In September, the Fed noted that the global slowdown might "restrain" U.S. economic growth. But last week the Fed only said it was "monitoring" the global economy -- a toned down message. Yellen and other Fed officials have repeatedly said this year that they believe there will likely be a rate hike in 2015. The Fed only has one last meeting in December before the year ends.

Markets are taking Yellen and the Fed seriously. Investors now believe there's a 58 percent of a December rate hike, according to CME Group. Stock market investors are not excited about a rate hike -- the Fed's near-zero interest rate policy has been a big reason stocks have enjoyed a 6-year bull market upswing. Rate hikes historically have been known to cause volatility in stocks. The Dow was up Wednesday morning before Yellen's comments on rate hikes, then it slid into negative territory.

A key development that could help make or break the case for a December rate hike is the October jobs report, which comes out Friday. A good jobs report would help support the case for a rate hike at the December 15-16 meeting.

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	
	SEP 2014	SEP 2015	SEP 2014	SEP 2015	SEP 2014	SEP 2015
Gulf War-era II veterans						
Unemployed	159	147	111	122	49	25
Unemployment rate	6.2	5.0	5.3	5.0	10.0	5.0

National unemployment rate is 5.1 percent (September 2015). Gulf War II veterans unemployment rate is 4.7 percent.¹ Currently, the unemployment rate for Gulf War II women veterans is 5 percent (the same percentage in August).

TOPIC 2: MEETINGS

On Monday, November 2, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division attended the Defense One Summit. At the 3rd annual Defense One Summit, top global security officials from the military and beyond gathered to discuss how they are keeping up with threats that stretch from the battlefield to the homeland as well as our economic and budget status for our Armed Forces. Speakers at the event included: Ben Rhodes, Deputy National Security Advisor; James Clapper, Director, National Security; Representative Mac Thornberry (TX); Nick Rasmussen, Director, National Counterterrorism Center; General Mark Milley, Chief of Staff, U.S. Army; and Andrew Hallman, Deputy Director of CIA.

On Tuesday, November 3, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division had a second conference call with Mallory DeMaio, Director, NYServes, to continue our discussion on how our organizations can collaborate on serving/providing meaningful services to veterans and their families in New York City. NYServes is New York City's first coordinated network of public, private, and non-profit organizations working together to serve veterans and their families.

On Tuesday, November 3, the National Veterans Employment & Education had a conference call with the Coalition for the Homeless (DC) to discuss homeless individuals (including veterans) in the Washington, DC area. The programs and services in the DC area have improved since the VA's push to end veteran homelessness. The city aims to exit 68 veterans from shelter per month, a goal that at times exceeded during the spring and early summer: 110 in April, 67 in May, and 76 in June, 52 in July. Part of ending veteran homelessness is setting a "functional zero," meaning the number of transitional beds available matches the number of people in need (people in transitional housing are considered homeless). In DC, that number is 160.

TOPIC 3: LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

¹ U.S. Department of Labor. *Economic News Release: Employment Situation Summary, January 2012.*

On Tuesday, November 3, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division testified at the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs regarding an oversight hearing entitled, "Examining VA's Information Technology Systems that Provide Economic Opportunities for Veterans." We provided feedback on the timeliness and accuracy of GI Bill claims through the Long Term Solution (LTS), along with VA's new Veteran Employment Center (VEC) and the management of the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Program.

TOPIC 4: EMPLOYMENT UPDATE

Werner Enterprises is extending its Professional Truck Driver Apprenticeship Program from 12 to 24 months, after getting approval from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The extension allows eligible veterans who have the Post-9/11 GI Bill to receive up to \$22,555.20 of their tax-free education benefits while driving for Werner in addition to their normal pay. The program was initiated by Werner and approved by the Department of Labor and VA in 2006. Extending the apprenticeship program is another opportunity for Werner to support and thank our country's veterans for their service. It will help veterans gain financial stability as they transition out of the military and into a new career path as a professional driver. Werner has hired more than 6,000 veterans since 2012 and more than 300 veteran spouses since May 2013, the company stated. Werner made a pledge in 2012 under the White House campaign Joining Forces to hire 1,000 veterans per year for the next five years. This year, Werner pledged to hire 2,200 veterans and 200 veteran spouses

TOPIC 5: VETERAN HOMELESSNESS UPDATE

After months of construction, a new shelter designed for Oklahoma City's most vulnerable homeless people is open. The new 20-unit WestTown Apartments housing center is located at the nonprofit Homeless Alliance's WestTown Resource Center in northwest Oklahoma City. The center is designed to house homeless veterans and chronically homeless people who wouldn't fare well in a single-bedroom apartment or other housing situations. The shelter's bedrooms are similar to those found in a college dorm. Each has a bed, a private bathroom, a dorm-style refrigerator, sink and microwave. Many of the furnishings were donated through an Amazon.com wish list the Homeless Alliance set up earlier this year, said Homeless Alliance director Dan Straughan. Straughan said the center helps fill a gap in the services that are available to Oklahoma City's homeless population. The Homeless Alliance and other homeless outreach groups have worked for years to place homeless people into apartments. But some people have addictions, mental illnesses or developmental issues that would make living alone in an apartment difficult.

Homeless veterans might also have issues stemming from post-traumatic stress or traumatic brain injury, he said. In those cases, a shelter might be a better option. Now that the center is open, advocates from the Homeless Alliance and other groups, including the Oklahoma City Housing Authority, are starting to discuss options for further expanding housing services for chronically homeless people and homeless veterans, Straughan said residents began moving into the shelter in September, and Straughan said he expects it will be full in the next few weeks. People who live at the shelter have easier access to their case workers at the nonprofit's resource center. They can also eat meals at the day shelter and meet with primary care doctors on site. Although the shelter has only been open a few weeks, residents are already beginning to make it their own, said Homeless Alliance spokeswoman Kinsey Crocker. Shortly after they moved in, two residents

bought a used coffee maker at a nearby thrift store and set up a coffee bar in the shelter's day room, she said. "They are kind of making it a home," she said.

The outside of the building is accented with corrugated metal panels painted by Oklahoma City-area artists. David Horton, a 45-year-old Oklahoma City painter, was one of those artists. He got involved with the shelter when he got a call from Kyle Golding, curator of the studio 1219 Creative, about a project the studio was working on. The project struck a chord with Horton. When he was 15, Horton's mother died by suicide and Horton ended up homeless. He eventually graduated from high school and went to college, and now works as a radiology technician at OU Medical Center in Oklahoma City. The project brought back memories of a time in his life he would have been happier to forget, he said. "It was pretty emotional," he said. Although Oklahoma City has several homeless shelters, the new Homeless Alliance shelter is the first to focus specifically on people with barriers keeping them out of traditional housing. A city the size of Oklahoma City needs about 100 beds for those people, Straughan said. The new shelter provides the first 20. "We're going to eat that elephant one bite at a time," he said. "This is that first bite."

TOPIC 6: CAREER FAIR

This week, work continued on The American Legion's upcoming hiring events to be staged in Flint (MI), Huntsville (AL), Iselin (NJ), Uncasville (CT) and Washington, DC. 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.

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