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LEGISLATIVE DIVISION UPDATE

Both chambers of Congress were in session this week. Both chambers will resume consideration of the fiscal year (FY) 2017 budget proposal released by President Obama last month. [The House will be on recess next week for a district work period.]

OTHER ACTIONS

National Veterans Day Poster Contest

Every year the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) National Veterans Outreach Office, in conjunction with the Veterans Day National Committee, publishes a commemorative Veterans Day poster. The poster is selected from artwork submitted by artists nationwide and is distributed to VA facilities, military installations, and across our nation. It also serves as the cover of the official program for the Veterans Day Observance at Arlington National Cemetery.

Anyone may enter their artwork to the competition. Posters must represent veterans from all branches of service and reflect the diversity of our veteran and military population in terms of race, gender, and disability status. The Committee may select a particular submission but ask the artist to make modifications to the original design. Additional changes may be required prior to printing. Submissions are not restricted to “humancentric” presentations, such as a joint color guard. Imagery of American icons, monuments or scenery can qualify, for example, the American flag.

Submit electronic versions as .jpg images or PDF files by email to vetsday@va.gov or send copies of artwork on a CD with artwork files to:

Veterans Day National Committee
Department of Veterans Affairs
ATTN: Micheal Migliara (002D)
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

To view examples of past winning submissions visit this [website](#). The deadline for submissions is 15 April 2016. A selection committee will convene in May 2016 to review submissions and make a final selection. Questions – contact the Veterans Day Coordinator at vetsday@va.gov.

LEGISLATIVE DIVISION UPDATES

On February 11, Deputy Director Dean Stoline and Assistant Director Warren Goldstein held a meeting with Joe Dallas Lim Millado, Senior Policy Advisor for Representative Gus Bilirakis (FL) to discuss **H.R. 303**, the *Retired Pay Restoration Act* (Concurrent

Receipt). The Congressman is currently strategizing to get H.R. 303 through Congress this year.

On February 22, Assistant Director Warren Goldstein and National Executive Committeeman (NEC) Frank McCurdy (CO) held a meeting with The Normandy Group who represents the Adams County Colorado officials. They were in town meeting with Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to discuss the VA hospital in Aurora, located in Adams County.

On February 23, Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation (VA&R) Director Lou J. Celli, Jr. and Legislative Assistant Director Warren Goldstein attended a Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing entitled, *Fiscal Year 2017 Budget for Veterans' Programs and Fiscal Year 2018 Advance Appropriations Request* in which The American Legion submitted oral and written testimony. The purpose of this hearing was to examine the details behind VA's FY 17 budget request and determine how the department would use its budget to improve the quality, efficiency and timeliness of services to veterans while increasing accountability and transparency across the department. The hearing can be found at: <http://www.veterans.senate.gov/hearings/fiscal-year-2017-budget-for-veterans-programs-and-fiscal-year-2018-advance-appropriations-request>.

On February 23, Assistant Director Warren Goldstein attended a House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations (O&I) hearing entitled, *"Persian Gulf War: An Assessment of Health Outcomes on the 25th Anniversary."* The purpose of the hearing was to examine the VA's treatment of and health outcomes for veterans with Gulf War Illness (GWI). February 28, 2016, marks the 25th anniversary of the end of the Persian Gulf War.

On February 25, Assistant Director Warren Goldstein attended a House Committee on Veterans' Affairs markup hearing of the following veterans' legislation:

H.R. 4591: *To authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to enter into agreements with certain health care providers to furnish hospital care, medical services, and extended care to veterans.* This bill would allow the Veterans Affairs Department to enter into agreements with outside health care providers to offer hospital care, medical services and extended care to veterans when needed based on such factors as the veteran's medical condition, travel involved or the nature of care necessary. It would direct the VA to establish a process to certify providers it deems eligible for the program, the authority for which would sunset after five years.

- **H.R. 4591**: Amendment by Rep. Jeff Miller (FL): *Veterans Health Care Agreements/Nursing Facilities Revenue Cap*
- Amendment that would increase the annual revenue cap for provider eligibility from \$11 million to \$27.5 million for skilled nursing care facilities.
- **Adopted** by voice vote.

- **H.R. 4591**: Amendment by Rep. Mark Takano (CA): *Veterans Health Care Agreements/Compliance Requirement*
- Amendment that would strike an exception from compliance with the Labor Department's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs' federal contracting requirements.
- **Rejected** 10-13.

The American Legion Supports this bill.

H.R. 4336: *Women Airforce Service Pilot Arlington Inurnment Restoration.* Direct the U.S. Army to ensure that the cremated remains of individuals who served as Women's Air Forces Service Pilots, who die on or after the date the bill would pass, are eligible for interment in Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors.

The American Legion's National Security Commission is examining this topic and is considering developing a resolution to address an official position.

H.R. 4063: *Jason Simcakoski PROMISE Act.* Require the Department of Veterans Affairs to implement changes designed to better monitor opioid use by patients, including expanding its opioid safety initiative to include all of its medical facilities, using state information to help track opioid prevalence and updating the patient record system to flag a history of substance abuse.

The bill also would direct the VA and the Department of Defense to jointly convene an advisory committee to review guidelines on the use of opioids in treating veterans and identify options to augment the drugs' use with other care regimens to minimize the risk of dependence.

The American Legion Supports this bill.

H.R. 4129: *Jumpstart VA Construction Act,* which would direct the VA to partner with unspecified non-federal entities on previously authorized major medical construction projects, with the goal of jumpstarting progress on approved projects.

The American Legion Supports this bill.

H.R. 1769: *Toxic Exposure Research Act of 2015* Direct the Veterans Affairs Department to designate one of its existing medical facilities as a national center for research on health conditions of the descendants of veterans exposed to toxic substances during military service.

The bill would direct the Defense Department to conduct a declassification review to determine what information can be made public about incidents in which at least 100 members of the Armed Forces were exposed to a toxic substance that resulted in at least one case of a related disability.

The American Legion Supports this bill.

H.R. 3484: *Los Angeles Homeless Veterans Leasing Act of 2015,* which would authorize the VA to enter into leases at its West Los Angeles campus for properties to house homeless veterans or their families, as well as offer support services such as vocational training, legal aid, child care and medical care.

The American Legion Supports this bill.

H.R. 4590: *Fiscal Year 2016 Department of Veterans Affairs Seismic Safety, Construction, and Leases Authorization Act*, which would authorize various VA projects, including retrofitting for earthquake preparedness and the construction of outpatient clinics and research spaces throughout the country. For each project specified in the bill, the VA would be required to submit justification and expense forecasts

- **H.R. 4590**: Amendment by Representative Mike Coffman (CO): *Medical Facility Projects/Pershing Hall Sale*

- Amendment which would allow the Department of Veterans Affairs to sell Pershing Hall in Paris, France and subsequently eliminate the Pershing Hall Revolving Fund. Money in the fund would go to the department's construction of major projects.

- **Adopted** by voice vote.

- **H.R. 4590**: Medical Facility Projects/Vote to Report
- Authorize specified construction projects, including seismic corrections to veterans facilities and for the construction of outpatient clinics and research locations throughout the country. For each project specified in the bill, the VA would be required to submit justification and expense forecasts.

- **Ordered reported favorably to the full House** (as amended)

The American Legion Supports this bill.

These measures will now advance to the full House for consideration.

On February 26, Assistant Director Jeff Steele and Assistant Director Matthew Shuman, along with Veterans Employment & Education Assistant Director Dan Smith, attended a meeting at the White House in reference to the Yale Law Schools finding in regards to what the VA's authority with for profit institutions of higher learning.

On February 29, Assistant Director Matthew Shuman conducted a meeting with the Legislative Director and Legislative Assistant for Rep. Donovan (NY). This meeting focused on servicemember/veteran access to the TWIC Card. They are attempting to create legislation that would give veteran preference and create an expedited system for servicemember/veterans to obtain the TWIC card and seek employment in the maritime industry post separation.

On February 29, Deputy Director Dean Stoline and Assistant Director Warren Goldstein attended a Congressional meeting with Jenell Biggs, Senior Legislative Assistant for Rep. Matt Salmon (AZ) to discuss the American Legion's Legislative priorities as they relate to servicemembers, veterans, and their families.

On February 29, Deputy Director Dean Stoline and Assistant Director Warren Goldstein held a meeting with Joe Dallas Lim Millado, Senior Policy Advisor for Representative

Gus Bilirakis (FL) to discuss H.R. 303, the *Retired Pay Restoration Act* (Concurrent Receipt). The congressman is currently strategizing to get H.R. 303 through Congress this year.

On February 29, Deputy Director Dean Stoline and Assistant Director Warren Goldstein attended a Congressional meeting with Jordan Kaye, Legislative Director for Rep. Ron DeSantis (FL) to discuss veterans' healthcare legislation that the Congressman will be introducing. Rep. DeSantis will be introducing veterans legislation as it relates to service dogs for veterans suffering from severe posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

On March 3, Assistant Director Warren Goldstein and Assistant Director Matthew Shuman conducted a meeting with the Military Legislative Assistant for Sen. Moran (KS). The meeting served as a meet & greet and allowed us to discuss his legislation that would create a pilot program aimed at assisting servicemembers and veterans in starting a business by turning their GI Bill education benefit into capitol.

On March 4, Assistant Director Warren Goldstein and Assistant Director Matthew Shuman conducted a meeting with the Defense Fellow for Sen. Tillis (NC). The meeting served as a meet and greet and also allowed the Legion offer our support to the senator who has the 2nd largest military population in the U.S.

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 **38** 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 114th 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 **8** cosponsors, with the addition of Sen. Lisa Murkowski (AK) on February 24.

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 03-04-2016

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 9 RESOLUTION 21

SENATE JOINT

Rep. Steve Womack (R-AR-3) [Sponsor] Sen. David
Vitter (R-LA) [Sponsor]

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry (R-NE-1) Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-
UT)

Rep. Kevin Cramer (R-ND-At Large) Sen. Lindsey
Graham (R-SC)

Rep. Bill Johnson (R-OH-6) Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-AL)

Rep. David Roe (R-TN-1) Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-IA)

Rep. Marsha Blackburn (R-TN-7) Sen. John Cornyn
(R-TX)

Rep. Walter Jones (R-NC-3) Sen. Dean Heller (R-NV)

Rep. Steve Palazzo (R-MS-4) Sen. Deb Fischer (R-
NE)

Rep. Scot DesJarlais (R-TN-4) Sen. Lisa Murkowski
(R-AK)

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 Smth (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)
Rep. Dan Newhouse (R-WA-4)

Most recent addition to list of cosponsors in the Senate.

Week ending 3/4/2016
NATIONAL SECURITY

1. The U.S. Uniformed Services Blended Retirement System

The Fiscal Year 2016 National Defense Authorization Act provides our military forces with a modernized retirement plan built for retirement. In 2018, service members can get automatic and matching Thrift Savings Plan contributions in addition to mid-career compensation incentives and annuities for life. If individuals enter service after December 31, 2017, they would automatically be enrolled into this program. Service members and civilians who joined after December 31, 2005 but before January 1, 2018 will have a choice between the Blended Retirement System or remain in the current system. If service members entered service prior to January 1, 2006, he or she will be grandfathered and remain in today's current retirement system.



Blended Retirement
System Infographic



FAQ for BRS.docx

For more information, please read:

2. Southwest Border Security

A GAO report published on March 1, 2016, concluded that the southwest border continues to be vulnerable to illegal activity. In 2015, DHS apprehended over 331,000 illegal entrants and made over 14,000 drug seizures. DHS used a variety of resources to help secure the border to include personnel, technology, and tactical infrastructures. The GAO report discussed DHS's effort to

deploy resources on the southwest border and developing performance goals and measures for achieving border security. Overall, GAO recommended that DHS strengthen its management of technology plans and programs and establish milestones and time frames for the development of border security goals and measures. DHS generally agreed and has actions underway to address the recommendations.

For the full report, visit: <http://www.gao.gov/assets/680/675522.pdf>

3. POW/MIA Update

Army Pfc. James M. Smith, 19, of Abbeville, Georgia, will be buried March 9, 2016 in Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington, D.C. In February 1951, Smith was assigned to Company K, 38th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division, and was supporting the South Korean Army in attacks against the Chinese People's Volunteer Forces (CPVF). On February 12, the CPVF counterattacked and forced the South Korean Army units to retreat, leaving American forces to fight alone. After the battle, Smith was reported missing in action. In April and May of 1953, the U.S. Army Quartermaster Graves Registration Companies conducted searches of the battlefields associated with Smith's unit, but no remains associated with him were located.

In 1953, during prisoner of war exchanges known as "Operation Little Switch" and "Operation Big Switch," no repatriated American service members were able to provide any information regarding Smith's whereabouts. A military review board amended his status to deceased in 1953. Between 1990 and 1994, North Korea returned to the United States 208 boxes of commingled human remains, which when combined with remains recovered during joint recovery operations in North Korea, account for 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 vicinity where men captured from Smith's unit were believed to have died.

4. UPDATE: Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve

Coalition nations which have conducted strikes in Iraq include the United States, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Jordan, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Coalition nations which have conducted strikes in Syria include the United States, Australia, Bahrain, Canada, France, Jordan, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom. Since the last update, the following strikes have occurred.

Strikes in Syria: 7 total

- 2 strikes on ISIL tactical units and vehicle near Hawl
- 1 strike on ISIL security headquarters near Raqqah
- 3 strikes on ISIL tactical units, buildings, and mortar positions near Manbij
- 1 strike on ISIL tactical unit, destroying a fighting position near Mar'a

Strikes in Iraq: 14 total

- 1 strike on ISIL headquarters near Qaim
- 1 strike suppressing an ISIL artillery piece near Albu Hayat
- 1 strike on ISIL tactical unit near Beiji
- 3 strikes struck ISIL tactical unit, destroying vehicles and fighting positions near Fallujah
- 1 strike destroyed a vehicle near Habbaniyah
- 3 strikes struck an ISIL vehicle bomb making facility, tactical unit, vehicles, and assembly areas near Mosul
- 2 strikes on ISIL tactical units near Ramadi
- 2 strikes destroyed ISIL fighting positions near Sinjar

5. Pentagon Budget: Proposed Acquisitions

For the upcoming fiscal year, the Pentagon has requested \$582.7 billion which will primarily be used to obtain new equipment. For instance, the Pentagon is requesting the following:

- 63 F-35's for \$10.1 billion
- 2 F/A-18 Hornet fighter jets
- \$759 million for 2 MQ-4C Tritons
- \$2.2 billion to buy P-8A Poseidons
- \$3.2 billion for 2 Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyers
- 1 America-class amphibious assault ship
- \$5.2 billion for 2 Virginia-class attack submarines
- 2 littoral combat ships
- \$3.1 billion for 15 KC-46A Pegasus refueling tankers
- 11 C-130J's
- \$1 billion to buy 36 Black Hawk helicopters
- \$1.1 billion for 52 Apache attack helicopters
- \$735 for 2,020 Joint Light Tactical Vehicles
- allotted money to upgrade the existing A-10 Thunderbolt's

VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION

Health Policy Unit

For the week of February, 29, 2016, Ed Lilley, Team Leader for Health Policy, responded to (19) emails, (9) calls, and (1) letter from veterans.

On Tuesday, March 1, 2016, Ed Lilley, Team Leader for Health Policy, participated in a conference call with fellow members of the National Advisory Committee Executive Committee's Partnership Subcommittee. The Partnership Subcommittee provides advice and counsel to the Executive Committee and collaborates with the Recommendations, Recruitment & Membership Subcommittees. The Partnership Subcommittee reviews VA, VHA and VISN Strategic Plans in order to identify mechanisms whereby VAVS and the NAC can plan specific initiatives and programs to support these strategies for the welfare and benefit of Veteran Patients cared for by VA. For the upcoming NAC meeting in May, the Partnership Subcommittee is working on (4) recommendations on VAVS for the VA Secretary.

In February 2016, Roscoe Butler, Deputy Director for Health Care was approved to sever on a National Advisory Committee to guide and advise the development of the first national America's Health Rankings State of Veterans' Health Report.

The Committee is comprised of approximately 15 members to include: Capt. Kathy Beasley, Director of Government Relations Military Officers Association of America; Michael Birnbaum, Senior Vice President UnitedHealth Center for Health Reform and Modernization; Dr. Robert Bossarte, Director, Epidemiology Program U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; Keith Boylan, Deputy Secretary, Veterans Services California Department of Veterans Affairs; Roscoe G. Butler, Deputy Director for Health Care, Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Division, The American Legion; Cmdr. René Campos, Deputy Director, Government Relations Military Officers Association of America; Tom Eckstein, Owner/Principal Arundel Metrics; Carlos Fuentes Senior Legislative Associate, Veterans of Foreign Wars; Dr. Theresa Jackson Santo Public Health Scientist, U.S. Army Institute of Public Health; Jose Silva, Veteran Healthcare Advocate Program Manager, Texas Veterans Commission; Dr. Jerry Sullivan, General Manager, Medicare and Federal Channels, Government Programs Optum Behavioral Health Solutions Terri Tanielian, Senior Social Research Analyst RAND Corporation; Dr. Barbara Van Dahlen Founder and President Give an Hour; Anne Yau Vice President, Grants and Programs United Health Foundation; Dr. Carla Zelaya Epidemiologist National Center for Health Statistics Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Texas Health Institute Program Staff: Dr. Dennis Andrulis, Senior Research Scientist; Nadia Siddiqui, Director of Health Equity Programs; Anna Stelter, Graduate Research Intern and Dr. Matthew Turner, Senior Health Policy Analyst.

On March 2, 2016, the Committee conducted its first Inaugural Web Meeting meeting which was held from 11:00 am – 2:00 pm.

On Wednesday, March 2, 2016, Ed Lilley, Team Leader for Health Policy, participated in the Committee for PACT Advancement's conference call, which reviewed four action plans in areas of Role Clarity, Team Training, Communication, and Morale for VHA's Patient Aligned Care Teams. The Committee was asked to further review the actions plans and determine what the next steps should be and the Committee will reconvene on Wednesday, April 6, 2016.

On Wednesday, March 2, 2016, Ed Lilley, Team Leader for Health Policy, participated in the VA's Memorial Benefits Chat on Facebook with representatives from the National Cemetery Administration and the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS). The chat allowed veterans and their families from around the world ask questions pertaining to their Memorial/Burial Benefits. Ed compiled a list of questions that stood out (or are not commonly asked) as well as the answers provided by VA and shared it with the VA&R Commission's National Cemetery Committee. The chat will remain available and VA will periodically answer veterans and family members' questions and can be accessed here: https://www.facebook.com/TAPS4America/videos/10153560875362991?utm_source=February%20Event%20Reminder&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=ExploreVA.

On Thursday, March 3, 2016, Ed Lilley, Team Leader for Health Policy, participated in the VAVS Quarterly National Teleconference for the Executive Committee of the National Advisory Committee. The call was hosted by Tony Burtley, Voluntary Service Specialist for VA's Central Office, and heard updates from Sabrina Clark, Director of the Voluntary Service Office, Susan T. Haidary, National Stakeholder Manager, and Ginny Hoover, another Voluntary Service Specialist for VACO. Mary Jo Munnely, Lead Staff Specialist from VACO, also addressed the Committee and reported that the VA is moving forward on most of the recommendations given at the 2015 National Advisory Committee Meeting.

For the week of February 26 and March 04, 2016

Rebecca Davila, Assistant Director for TBI & PTSD Programs responded to (1) emails, (1) calls, and (2) letters from veterans.

On Saturday, February 20, 2016 Rebecca Davila, Assistant Director for TBI & PTSD Programs facilitated the Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Committee Meeting that convened during The American Legion's 2016 Washington Conference. Members listened to various speakers present on topics such as the 2015 American Legion PTSD/TBI survey data, suicide rates among service members and veterans, programs for military and veteran caregivers under the direction of the Veteran of Affairs and Elizabeth Dole Foundation, and barriers to researching medicinal cannabis for veterans diagnosed with treatment resistant PTSD diagnosis.

On Wednesday, February 24, 2016, Rebecca Davila, Assistant Director for TBI & PTSD Programs and Roscoe Butler the Deputy Director for Health Care, Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation delivered (25) of The American Legion's 2015 System Worth Saving Executive Summary to the House Veterans' Affairs Committees, (1) executive summary to Nancy Patricia D'Alesandro Pelosi, Minority Leader of the United States House of Representatives, and Republican Paul Ryan (WI-1).

Wednesday, February 24, 2016, Rebecca Davila, Assistant Director for TBI & PTSD Programs and Roscoe Butler the Deputy Director for Health Care, Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation along with the Association of VA Psychologist Leaders (AVAPL) convened at the Disabled American Veterans National Service and Legislative Headquarters to discuss Veteran Affairs mental health services and the impact of CHOICE.

On Thursday, February 25, 2016, VA&R Health Policy Staff briefed National American Legion Auxiliary

leadership on the roles and responsibilities of the Health Policy Unit including: our System Worth Saving Program, our TBI/PTSD Program, Women Veterans Program, assistance we provide veterans and their families on burial benefits, and our success in the Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS) Program.

On Thursday, February 25, 2016, Rebecca Davila, Assistant Director for TBI & PTSD Programs received a program overview from the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain overview at the Disabled American Veterans National Service and Legislative Headquarters.

On Monday, February 29, 2016 Rebecca Davila, Assistant Director for TBI & PTSD Programs along with Warren Goldstein, Assistant Director for Legislative Affairs, conducted a phone conference with Brian Anderson, Co-founder of Veterans Alliance located in Holiday, Florida. Brian Anderson requested that The American Legion partner with other him and other veteran service organizations to push the Promise Act through Congress.

On Wednesday, March 02, 2016 Rebecca Davila, Assistant Director for TBI & PTSD Programs attended Leader Pelosi's Women's History Month reception at the U.S Capitol to honor women veterans.

On Friday, March 04, 2016 Rebecca Davila, Assistant Director for TBI & PTSD Programs drafted thank you letters for the speakers that presented at the TBI/PTSD committee meeting and forwarded the TBI/PTSD speaker presentations to various individuals requesting an update.

For the week of February 29-March 4, 2016, LaRanda Holt, Assistant Director of Women and Minority Veterans, responded to 4 emails and 3 calls from veterans.

On Monday, February 29, 2016, LaRanda Holt, Assistant Director of Women and Minority Veterans, had a meeting with Shurhonda Love, Assistant National Legislative Director for the DAV. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the potential in having a collaboration between the two organizations.

On Wednesday, March 2, 2016, LaRanda Holt, Assistant Director of Women and Minority Veterans, attended Leader Pelosi's Women's History Month reception at the U.S Capitol to honor women veterans, where Dr. Jill Biden and Michelle Obama were in attendance.

On Thursday, March 3, 2016, LaRanda Holt, Assistant Director of Women and Minority Veterans, met with Denise Rohan, National Commander's Representative for Legislative Commission, discussing the women's veterans survey and possible focuses. Rebecca Davila and April Commander on the VA&R staff were also joined apart of the discussion.

On Monday, February 29, and Tuesday, March 1 (no access), April Commander, Assistant Director for Healthcare listened in on teleconference with the CoC Meeting (held in Dallas), to discuss where VHA will be in the next 20-30 years.

On Wednesday, March 02, 2016 April Commander, Assistant Director for Healthcare attended Leader Pelosi's Women's History Month reception at the U.S Capitol to honor women veterans.

On Thursday, March 3, April Commander, Assistant Director for Healthcare attended the GWIRP meeting at the IOM to discuss vision and mission/get updates on 3 research programs that are currently underway...Spinal Cord Injury, Tick-Borne Disease, and Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis Research Programs.

This week I responded to 3 emails, 1 phone call, and 1 letter.

Claims Unit

Department Service Officer School:

Over 130 American Legion accredited representatives arrived for the annual Washington, DC DSO School. Presentations by VA, NVLSP, and Abbvie will be provided during the three day training.

Veterans Benefits Committee:

William Smith, Chairman, Patrick Rourk, Vice Chairman, Ralph Bozella, Chairman, VA&R Commission, and Zack Hearn participated in a teleconference on February 11th. Topics of the conference call included:

- DSO School
- Washington Conference
- Regional Office Action Review
- VA appeals inventory

VBA 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 **82,532**; reduced inventory **60%** from 884K peak in July 2012 to **355,530** – **31%** lower than FY14; claim quality at **90%**; issue quality at **96%** and above **98%** in 7 of 8 categories where we measure quality – several above **99%** – one at **97.2%**

3.

Average days a Veteran is waiting for a claims decision (pending) is **91** days – a 191-day reduction from a peak of 282 days in March 2013; average days to complete is **128** days – a 59-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 **330K compensation claims** in electronic inventory – only **27K** pension and DIC in paper, completed nearly **4.3M** rating decisions and over **2.4M** claims in VBMS

6.

Enabling Veterans to file claims online through eBenefits – over **5.4M** 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: over **1 in 4** Veterans submit their dependency requests online – **more than 63 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 **92%** from peak of **15.3K** to **1.2K**; inventory by **56%** from peak of **36.4K** to **16.1K**; reduced Survivors' Dependency and Indemnity Compensation backlog by **78%** from peak of **8.8K** to **2K**; inventory by **46%** from peak of **19.1K** to **10.2K**; improved DIC timeliness by **102 days** from peak of **182** to **79 days** while maintaining **99%** accuracy

12.

Provided **\$60B** to send **1.5M** Veterans and dependents to school under the Post-9/11 GI Bill since

2009; last month processed reenrollment claims in **average of 5.9 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 **3.6 days at 98.7% accuracy**

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

The Military Review Boards Section continued with its duties in providing assistance in regards to military discharge upgrades and corrections to military records. 34 phone calls took place while 25 emails were received and 37 emails were sent out. Five discharge upgrade packages were sent out this week as well. On Monday, March 7, the section will be arguing a case before the Army Discharge Review Board.

Gerardo Avila, Deputy Director, MEB/PEB & DoD submitted one application (DD Form 293) to the Discharge Up Grade Board and two applications (DD Form 149) for the Board for Correction of Military Records on behalf of applicant. Participated in a teleconference between NVLSP and the Department of Minnesota DSO Jeremy Wolfsteller. Jeremy is trying to develop a partnership with law firms in Minnesota where they can assist veterans with their discharge upgrades or disability compensation appeals pro bono. NVLSP currently has a national program with firms that provide such services, Jeremy would like to piggyback on their program. The purpose of the teleconference was to gather facts and establish guidelines. Assisted 15 veterans/servicemembers by answering questions about the discharge upgrade boards, IDES and VA disability compensation benefits.

Board of Veterans Appeals Unit (BVA)

During the week ending February 26, 2016 the Board of Veterans' Appeals reached dispositions on **230** American Legion represented appeals. Of those dispositions 63.9% of the denials were overturned with outcomes favorable to the veteran. In **58** cases, the Board granted benefits outright after considering The American Legion's arguments. In **89** 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, **47 (20.4%)** were outright denials.

Also during this period, the American Legion Appeals Unit reviewed, prepared written Informal Hearing Presentations (IHP), and/or orally argued **196** 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 285 phone inquiries during this period. The appeals representatives conducted four (4) Central Office Hearing during the week.

Insurance, Pension and Debt Management

The VA&R VA Insurance unit began review and processing of 108 applications for new insurance coverage, of which 7 were for Supplemental insurance for totally disabled veterans in the Service-Disabled insurance program, along with 45 disability and settlement claims on veteran's VA policies. Further case development included 17 phone calls with veterans, family members and VSOs, 54 insurance inquiries / transactions, and 57 veteran insureds were contacted by mail on their policies, insurance options and action deadlines. There were also 26 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 14 new claims for Veterans or Death pensions, along with reviewing and preparing 294 case actions for support of on-going pension benefits. Casework included processing 152 additional transactions and case inquiries to VA, and 29 phone contacts with claimants and VSOs, along with 2 personal contacts.

The VA&R Pension office in St. Paul processed 153 new claims for Veteran's pensions and Death pensions, and presented supporting casework material on 89 claims already in progress, while also processing 169 inquiries and pension transactions, and 224 rating review audits. Contacts with claimants and VSOs amounted to 172 calls and e-mail contacts, and 2 Appeals were handled for the week ending March 2, 2016

Benefits Delivered at Discharge (BDD)

The Western BDD Office reviewed 22 claims with 198 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 5 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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Week Ending 3/3/2

NATIONAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION COMMISSION

TOPIC 1: ECONOMY

In the first half of 2009, more than 600,000 laid-off workers were applying for Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits each week. Today, initial UI claims have been below 300,000 for a solid year. The last time this happened was in December 1973, more than four decades ago. Today's streak caps six years of tremendous progress in the U.S. labor market and demonstrates our labor market's exceptional durability.

While the uninterrupted low initial UI claims of the last year are a remarkable achievement, it is important to point out that lower UI claims are not *always* better. The existence of a robust Unemployment Insurance program for workers who lose a job through no fault of their own is intended to be a core feature of our safety net. Unemployment Insurance provides a crucial lifeline to these laid-off workers, reducing their likelihood of experiencing a sharp drop in living standards as they search for a new job. At the same time, it increases their likelihood of maintaining their spending on consumer necessities, which is good for their local economy.

However, in today's labor market – which is very different from the labor market of 1935 when UI was first introduced – many workers fall through the cracks. Even in the last decade, UI coverage has eroded. In 2015, just 70 percent of layoffs resulted in Unemployment Insurance claims (calculated by taking the ratio of the sum of initial UI claims in 2015 to the total number layoffs in the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey data in 2015). In 2004/2005 – when the unemployment rate averaged 5.3 percent, as it did in 2015 – 78 percent of layoffs resulted in UI claims. This 8 percentage point decline in just a decade is substantial.

That is one reason the president's FY 2017 budget proposes a suite of reforms to strengthen and modernize the UI program, including changes to ensure that UI benefits are available to more workers who need them. For example, the budget requires UI coverage for part-time workers; newer labor market entrants; certain low-income and intermittent earners; and those who must leave a job due to compelling family reasons like domestic violence, family illness or to move with a spouse. It also includes a \$5 billion modernization fund to incentivize states to, among other things, make additional

improvements in their UI programs' coverage – for example, to extend coverage to temporary employment services workers. These updates to the UI system will help insure that fewer workers in our constantly changing labor market fall through the cracks of this key component of the safety net.

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			
	JAN 2015	JAN 2016	JAN 2015	JAN 2016	JAN 2015	JAN 2016
Gulf War-era II veterans						
Unemployed	219	179	191	138	27	41
Unemployment rate	7.9	5.7	8.3	5.3	6.2	7.9

National unemployment rate is 4.9 percent (January 2015). Gulf War II veterans unemployment rate is 5.7 percent. Currently, the unemployment rate for Gulf War II women veterans is 7.9 percent (up from 4.6 percent in December).

TOPIC 2: MEETINGS

On Monday, February 29, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with the Executive Director of Rosie’s Network. The Rosie’s Network is a non-profit founded by military spouses whose mission is to promote America’s military family-owned businesses to the public by making it easy to find them. Registration on the network is free. Rosie’s Network is interested in partnering with The Legion on their community veteran business showcase events.

On Tuesday, March 1, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with First Data to discuss the future of the Coalition for Veteran-Owned Small Businesses and ways in which we can work together going forward. First Data also invited the Legion to attend the Launch of the Center of Excellence for Veteran Entrepreneurship. Syracuse University is hosting the event which will feature a *Fireside Chat* with Frank Bisignano, Chairman and CEO at First Data; Barb Carson, Associate Administrator, Office of Veterans Business Development, SBA; and Dr. Mike Haynie, Vice Chancellor and Executive Director of the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF).

On Wednesday, March 2, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with DC’s U.S.VETS office to discuss their program and the challenges that remain in assisting homeless veterans and their families. U.S.VETS has a transitional facility that houses 85 homeless veterans on a nightly basis.

On Monday, February 29 – Friday, March 4, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division (along with their Department of Colorado leadership) participated in a Career Fair, visited an American Job Center, spent a day at the Department of Labor’s National Veterans Training Institute, and met with the Garrison Commander and Soldier for Life Program at Fort Carson in Denver, Colorado.

TOPIC 3: SMALL BUSINESS

Each year, more than 250,000 Post-9/11 veterans are returning home and transitioning into civilian life after service and continue to serve as leaders in our communities and our economy. In fact, one-quarter of this new generation of veterans are interested in starting or buying their own business,

demonstrating the kind of entrepreneurial spirit that makes America work. To support these heroic individuals and put their unique skills and commitment to best use, the federal government has a role to play in empowering them to succeed in the private sector – especially in terms of federal contracting. And a number of agencies do – including the Department of Veterans Affairs Administration, which engages with veteran-owned small businesses and sees the benefits of increased veteran involvement.

However, these veteran businesses won't be talking about rebuilding our nation's infrastructure through competing for federal contracts, because the Department of Transportation's Small Business Contracting Program doesn't put veteran small businesses on a level-playing field when competing for contracts. That's a real problem of missed opportunities for veteran-owned businesses, and missed opportunities to put veteran-owned firms on the front lines in our battle to rebuild our infrastructure. The undeniable fact is that today some companies get a preference when doing business with the government transportation agencies while veterans do not. We know 10 percent of federally funded infrastructure projects are set aside for certain small businesses, but our veterans are excluded from competing at all. *That's not fair.*

That's why Congressman Fitzpatrick introduced, and the [House passed](#), the bipartisan *Fairness to Veterans for Infrastructure Investment Act*: a simple, yet powerful, update to current law. This measure allows Veteran-Owned Small Businesses to compete in an existing infrastructure small business program known as the disadvantaged business enterprise (DBE) program. This straightforward legislation is critical to both the shared goals of creating and sustaining jobs for our veterans and rebuilding our nation's infrastructure.

Connecting veteran-owned businesses to the contracting power of the federal government opens the door for increased production, the hiring of additional staff – often times veterans themselves – and opens doors to national opportunities. Fairness to Veterans would level the playing field for more than 380,000 veteran-owned construction firms across the nation. And it's not just construction firms that will benefit. In fact, there are a variety of industries involved, such as personnel, administration, engineering, landscaping, utilities and IT, so this is an issue that affects all veteran-owned small businesses.

Our veterans are the most highly skilled workforce in America's history – the product of rigorous training, an iron-clad commitment to teamwork and the remarkable ability to succeed where others might fail. And so as veterans transition out of service and back home, we know they're ready to help rebuild our infrastructure across the country. Veteran-owned businesses in states like California, Georgia, New York, and Texas - the states with the most veteran-owned firms in the nation - are waiting for this opportunity. Veteran small businesses in Alabama, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia - states with the highest per capita veteran business population - want a fair shot at transportation contracts. And what is also clear is that veteran-owned businesses in every single state stand to benefit from a level playing field if Congress is willing to fight for them.

Due to the positive impact of this bill the 2.3 million members of The American Legion support it. And why a bipartisan super-majority of the House of Representatives supports it. Now it's time for the Senate to take action. We cannot in good conscience continue to stand idle while our veterans are precluded from this federal program. The *Fairness to Veterans for Infrastructure Investment Act* is a 'no cost to the tax-payer' update of existing legislation that redresses the exclusion of veteran small businesses when the framework of the DBE program was originally drafted. This Congress recently passed a highway bill that authorizes hundreds of billions of dollars of new infrastructure projects. That money is getting ready to be spent in every single state. We can't let veterans be left behind.

Let's salute all our veteran-owned small businesses and empower them to rebuild America by taking up the *Fairness to Veterans for Infrastructure Investment Act* in the Senate and sending it to the president's desk as soon as possible.

TOPIC 4: VETERAN HOMELESSNESS

Listed below is an open letter to the Grantees of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program from the Deputy Secretary, Sloan Gibson. The letter was sent out on Tuesday, March 1.

“The GPD Program has been providing community-based transitional housing with supportive services since 1994. The Department is grateful for the efforts of all our community partners who have worked for years to address the challenges facing veterans experiencing homelessness. As VA and our Federal and community partners advance towards the goal of preventing and ending veteran homelessness, and the landscape of needs and services change, it is important to make certain that the housing resources in each community are best-suited to ensuring that homelessness among veterans is rare, brief and non-recurring.

“VA expects all grantees to work in partnership with local continuums of care and VA Medical Centers to make data-informed decisions regarding the types of housing interventions and approaches that will best enable your community to swiftly and directly resolve homelessness among veterans. One innovation that we encourage grantees to pursue, which aligns with Housing First principles, is the utilization of GPD beds as Bridge Housing. The Bridge Housing model is transitional housing used as a short-term stay when a veteran has been offered and accepted a permanent housing intervention, but access to that permanent housing is still being arranged. VA strongly supports GPD grantees examining the existing local housing resources and needs and, as appropriate, requesting a change of scope to convert a portion of their existing beds to Bridge Housing.

“Through enhanced performance expectations, VA has seen continued improvements in GPD Program housing outcomes with more than 15,500 exits to permanent housing in fiscal year 2015. However, even with these improvements, we know we need to continue to strengthen all parts of our homeless services continuum to resolve homelessness quickly. VA believes that all grantees should be taking steps to lower barriers to entry, reduce lengths of stay, and improve exits to permanent housing. I urge all grantees to consider how the suggestions outlined in this letter could be best be incorporated into your programs, and expect that we will see continued progress on our path to transformation. Your agency’s compassionate service to our Nation’s heroes is commended, and we look forward to a continued partnership in this time of transition”.

TOPIC 5: EMPLOYMENT

The American Legion and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce teamed up February 19 to present an employment forum and Job Fair. “The relationship between the Legion and the Chamber is one that has been a cornerstone,” said Eric Eversole, president of Hiring Our Heroes. “The American Legion has a long history of serving veterans and their families. The Chamber has a history of serving businesses in those same communities. Together, we look at thoughtful, innovative ways to connect veterans where they are struggling the most.”

Part of the Hiring Our Heroes Job Fair series, the day’s events were designed to help veterans, service members and their spouses find meaningful careers in the civilian workforce, expand their networks and gain the tools necessary to stand out throughout the hiring process. “This was a great opportunity for businesses and veterans to connect and explore the meaningful employment opportunities that exist here in the national capital region,” said Eversole. “Sometimes traditional hiring fairs are not enough.”

The first part of the day featured workshops on LinkedIn, personal branding and financial literacy. Sarah Worley, the Chamber’s Hiring Our Heroes senior manager, shared her LinkedIn expertise with job seekers. The workshop was designed to help veterans and others maximize their use of the tool, Worley said. “Many people aren’t on the site, and some have never even heard of LinkedIn. It is a challenge because they are missing out on an opportunity to build their personal brands and market themselves on a digital level. In this day and age, it is crucial that they do so.”

A strong emphasis on networking helped less familiar participants understand the benefits of using the website effectively, while more-versed attendees shared other vital resources and tips they learned along the way. The senior manager said she is always excited to teach the workshop to job seekers looking to gain a competitive edge over their peers. “Now they can really stand out. If recruiters can’t

find you on LinkedIn, they won't even consider you — your resume goes to the no pile. I want every veteran that was at the workshop today to go to the yes pile, because now they know how to create a robust profile," she said.

Worley believes the Job Fair/workshop dynamic the Legion and Chamber created really steps outside the box, benefitting frustrated job seekers. The opportunity to polish and use the skills they have been refining during their job searches seemed to tremendously benefit participants. "Eighty percent of jobs are found through networking," Worley said. "If today's attendees take advantage of the resources provided and reach out to our partners — all these people that are committed to their success — they are going to find that next great opportunity."

Following the morning workshops, attendees were able to mingle with each other and prospective employers during a luncheon. "This event really gave me a chance to make contacts with people I normally would not have been able to meet," said job seeker Francisco Browne. "I even got the chance to sit next to the Department of Labor's assistant secretary during lunch." Special guests including Mike Michaud, the Department of Labor's Assistant Secretary and Verna Jones, the Legion's Executive Director – they addressed more than 90 job seekers and nearly 40 employers before kicking off the afternoon's interactive roundtable style Job Fair. The smaller roundtables gave prospective employers opportunities to engage attendees in a more personal manner, creating a relaxed atmosphere where veterans felt comfortable practicing their pitches and seeking job opportunities. "I like that this event took more of a casual approach, as opposed to regular job fairs where there are just lines of tables," said Browne.

TOPIC 6: CAREER FAIR

This week, work continued on The American Legion's upcoming hiring events to be staged in Arlington (TX), Dayton (OH), Detroit, Fort Bliss (TX), Fort Sam Houston (TX), Germany, Joint Base Dix-McGuire-Lakehurst (NJ), New York, Orlando, Patrick Air Force Base (FL), 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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Week Ending: 3/4/16