



## Federal Update for March 30 – April 3, 2015



### ***Hundreds of Disabled Veterans to Attend Winter Sports Clinic***

Washington – More than 300 disabled Veterans are hitting the slopes this week at the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic in Snowmass Village, Colorado. The Clinic, sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and DAV (Disabled American Veterans), is the largest adaptive event of its kind in the world and will take place from March 29 through April 3.

“This Clinic is an excellent example of how VA uses a holistic healthcare model to provide every Veteran with physical and mental treatment options that work for them,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald, who will attend events on April 2. “Through sports and other forms of recreation therapy, we can greatly improve the quality of life for many of our nation’s heroes.”

The Clinic teaches Veterans with disabilities about adaptive Alpine and Nordic skiing. It also introduces them to a number of other adaptive recreational activities and sports. Now in its 29<sup>th</sup> year, the clinic is an annual rehabilitation program open to U.S. military Veterans with traumatic brain injuries, spinal cord injuries, orthopedic amputations, visual impairments, certain neurological problems and other disabilities, who receive care at a VA medical facility or military treatment center.

“This event teaches some of our most profoundly wounded veterans to challenge themselves to overcome the obstacles they face as a result of their service to our nation,” said DAV National Commander Ron Hope, who twice participated in the event after losing his arm in the Vietnam War. “Veteran participants are able to rediscover abilities and opportunities that they may have thought were taken from them when they were hurt.”

During the six-day event, Veterans also learn rock climbing, scuba diving, snowmobiling, curling, sled hockey and self-defense. For more information, visit [www.wintersportsclinic.org](http://www.wintersportsclinic.org).

## ***VA Makes Gains in Faster Disability Claims Processing***

Washington – The federal initiative to provide timely decisions on disability payments to Veterans has crossed a major milestone in its final sprint to eliminate the backlog of Veterans' benefits claims.

The major transformation effort to apply new technology and process solutions has paid off at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). It reduced its inventory of backlogged claims from a high of 611,000 claims in March of 2013 to fewer than 200,000 this week, while at the same time improving decision quality.

“Make no mistake, we’re not slowing down short of the finish line,” said Under Secretary for Benefits Allison Hickey. “Our goal is to eliminate the claims backlog by the end of 2015 – meaning all Veterans will receive timely and accurate decisions on their disability claims.” Hickey credited a combination of factors for the 67-percent drop in backlog: first, the extra hours of work put in by dedicated benefits claims processors across the nation, who have worked evenings, Saturdays and Sundays to drive the backlog down; as well as procedural efficiencies backed by powerful automation tools and paperless claims processing. In addition, she cited the transformation of Veterans Benefits Administration’s training and quality assurance programs resulting in steady increases in the accuracy of decisions.

Just a few years ago, claims processors handled 5,000 tons of paper annually, an amount equivalent to 200 Empire State Buildings. In less than two years, VA converted claims processing to a 21<sup>st</sup> Century digital environment where claims for VA benefits and services can be submitted and processed, and benefits delivered, online.

Veterans increasingly are filing claims electronically from the start at <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov>. Veterans can submit their applications online, upload their supporting documentation, and check the status of their claim through a multi-channel Web portal boasting nearly 60 self-service features.

## ***VA Announces New Grants to Help End Veteran Homelessness***

WASHINGTON – Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald today announced the award of nearly \$93 million in Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) 3-year grants that will help approximately 45,000 homeless and at-risk Veterans and their families. The grants will be distributed to 24 non-profit agencies in 15 communities, with \$30 million in awards being distributed to the Los Angeles area.

“The Department of Veterans Affairs is committed to using evidence-based approaches such as SSVF to prevent homelessness and produce successful outcomes for Veterans and their families,” said Secretary McDonald. “This is a program that works, because it allows VA staff and local homeless service providers to work together to effectively address the unique challenges that make it difficult for some Veterans and their families to remain stably housed.”

Under the SSVF program, VA is awarding grants to private, non-profit organizations and consumer cooperatives that provide services to very low-income Veteran families living in – or transitioning to – permanent housing. The grants announced today will provide additional resources to the fourth year operations of the SSVF program.

“With the addition of these crucial resources, communities across the country continue an historic drive to prevent and end homelessness among Veterans,” said Matthew Doherty, Acting Executive Director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. “The SSVF program gives Veterans and their families the rapid assistance they need to remain in permanent housing or get back into permanent housing as quickly as possible.”

Through the homeless Veterans initiative, VA committed more than \$1 billion in FY 2014 to strengthen programs that prevent and end homelessness among Veterans. VA provides a range of services to homeless Veterans, including health care, housing, job training and education. More information about VA’s homeless programs is available at [www.va.gov/homeless](http://www.va.gov/homeless). Details about the SSVF program are online at [www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf.asp](http://www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf.asp).

## **DoD 2016 Budget Update ► 2011 BCA Impact**

As expected, both the House and Senate acted on their respective budget resolutions in late MAR. On 25 MAR the House adopted a budget that would cut \$5.5 trillion in federal spending and balance the budget in nine years. The Senate followed by adopting its budget in the middle of the night on Thursday night/Friday morning. The Senate's budget would cut \$5.1 trillion and balance the budget in ten years. Upon finishing their budgets both the House and the Senate have recessed for two weeks and will return to work on April 13th. Both budgets approved \$96 billion in the war budget, which is supposed to be money spent for American military action overseas, specifically in Afghanistan and any other military actions, including fighting against ISIS. However, members see this as a way of boosting the defense budget without violating the Budget Control Act (BCA) of 2011. That legislation is what implemented "sequestration," the mandatory cutting of federal spending every year in order to try and achieve a balanced budget.

If Congress were to add money to DoD's base budget it would violate the requirements of the BCA, which would require that 60 members of the Senate vote for it because of Senate rules. That could not be achieved so putting more money in the war budget, which is not counted under the BCA, is the way they are getting around the requirements of the law. That money, of course, will have to be borrowed and added to the national debt since there is no will to raise taxes to pay for it. Both budgets now need to go to a conference committee to try and work out

the differences so they can come up with a single budget. This will allow the Republican majority in Congress to pass legislation later in the year to repeal Obamacare and they will only need a majority in each house of Congress to do so. While President Obama is sure to veto such legislation, it sets up a major issue for the presidential campaigns for next year.

At the risk of making this even more confusing, it needs to be stated that these budgets are not laws – they are merely part of the mechanism Congress uses to pass legislation. In order to actually increase spending for the Department of Defense Congress will need to work out a deal with President Obama later in the year. [Source: TREA News for the Enlisted | March 30, 2015 ++]

## **Commissary Funding ► Proposed \$300M Cut | Death Spiral**

The Defense Department proposal to cut funding for its commissaries would cause hardship for service members and threaten the livelihood of tens of thousands of civilian workers, according to the American Federation of Government Employees. "The cut is a badly-disguised attempt to put the commissaries into a death spiral," Beth Moten, the legislative director for AFGE, wrote in a letter to the leaders of the Senate and House Armed Services personnel subcommittees 20 MAR. The proposed \$300 million cut for fiscal 2016 would force the commissary to reduce hours of operation and increase costs for service members, according to Moten. The end result would be the "Walmartizing" of the commissary workforce, she wrote. "The commissaries and exchanges are an earned benefit treasured by military families and an important contributor to their quality of life," Moten wrote. "Commissaries would no longer be a convenient bargain for military families." Christensen said.

Customers rate their satisfaction with benchmarks such as convenience of store location and hours, frequency of sales and promotions, variety and selection of merchandise, courtesy and helpfulness of staff, layout and cleanliness of stores, availability of merchandise, ability to provide brand names, website satisfaction, call center satisfaction, and speed of checkout process. ACSI does not provide scores for those individual benchmarks for each retailer. Navy Exchange Service Command and Marine Corps Exchange stores are not included in the ACSI surveys, because they are smaller retailers. ACSI also surveys customers of large supermarkets, but the Defense Commissary Agency is not included in those. However, defense officials subscribe to the ACSI for all the exchange systems and for the commissary agency, and pay for surveys.

None of the exchange services have received information about their results from DoD. Defense officials declined to provide scores for the other exchange services or for DeCA. However, one source said the Marine Corps Exchange score is 70. VanAmburg said a change was made this year in the survey methodology, which may factor into AAFES' drop in score. Previously, only customers with landlines were surveyed. This year, DoD provided email contacts for the random sampling, which resulted in more active-duty members being surveyed

and also allowed ACSI to survey AAFES customers overseas for the first time. As a result, this year survey respondents were split roughly evenly between active-duty members and retirees, whereas before the percentage of active-duty troops was smaller — about 10 percent. "ACSI data show that younger people are harder to please than older folks, which likely explains the drop in score for AAFES," VanAmburg said.

AAFES spokeswoman Julie Mitchell said the exchange service conducts its own survey, using CFI Group Inc., that includes many more customers — 43,000 — "to provide statistically relevant results." CFI Group uses similar protocols to those used by the ACSI. In a CFI survey that concluded in late September, six weeks before the ACSI survey results were released, AAFES scored 80, one point higher than 2013, Mitchell said. The latest ACSI survey also was conducted during the same timeframe in which AAFES was rolling out its new website, which had a number of problems in its initial launch phase. In the ACSI, AAFES is classified as both a department/discount store and an Internet retailer — and one benchmark measure for all retailers is website satisfaction.

The Marine Corps Exchange also conducted a survey that measures the same factors as the ACSI, in September, surveying 5,090 customers at 17 exchange locations. Its officials announced 23 FEB that their Customer Satisfaction Index increased by one point, to 80. Navy Exchange Service Command officials also conducted a Customer Satisfaction Index survey, of nearly 13,500 customers around the world, and officials said the score reached a new high of 86. "Once you reach a score of 80, it is exponentially harder to increase your score," said Robert Bianchi, NEXCOM chief executive officer, in a release. "So I am thrilled and honored that our customers continue to rate us even higher year after year. Our score of 86 is among the highest recorded for retailers in studies using the same methodology." [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | February 27, 2015 ++]

## **Sequestration Update ► 2016 Spending Plans | Keep Caps in Place**

Pentagon planners have built a strong coalition among defense lawmakers against keeping sequestration spending caps on the military next year. But their firepower doesn't seem to stretch far past a small handful of Capitol Hill hearing rooms. On 17 MAR, as the military service secretaries and chiefs railed against the dangers of sequestration to anxious House Armed Services Committee lawmakers, Republicans from the House Budget Committee unveiled their fiscal 2016 spending plans — which keep the caps in place. The juxtaposition showed that for all the dire warnings coming from defense officials and supporters, congressional leaders appear content to move ahead with reapplying the unpopular federal budget caps, which would spark spending trims that could stretch across every military base and unit.

The budget committee proposal would give \$617 billion for the Defense Department's "base budget," but would also add tens of billions more in temporary overseas contingency funding to

cover some shortfalls caused by the \$523 billion sequestration spending cap. Budget Committee Chairman Rep. Tom Price (R-GA) called that plan a "responsible" approach to ensuring national security without allowing out-of-control government spending. But defense leaders have warned that any plan that keeps sequestration in place will have devastating effects on military missions and readiness, and have repeatedly implored Congress to find some way to undo the 2011 Budget Control Act that mandates the funding squeeze.

- Army Secretary John McHugh called sequestration "an enemy at home" as dangerous as any overseas threat facing the services.
- Navy Secretary Ray Mabus said the caps mean fewer ships, fewer resources and reduced flexibility.
- Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said sequestration "is going to place American lives at risk, both at home and abroad."

The White House requested \$561 billion in base defense spending next year, \$38 billion above the sequestration caps. Total defense spending is less than the Price plan, with only \$51 billion in war funding, but White House and Pentagon officials have insisted their plan is better suited for the long-term health of the military. The White House proposal — and alternatives floated by House and Senate hawks, which add several billion to that total — is based on a repeal of sequestration, something for which neither Democratic nor Republican leaders have offered any new compromises to fix. Several armed services committee members asked whether they or Pentagon planners were to blame for that lack of progress, signaling that almost four years of lobbying by both groups has done little to sway politician's intent on reining in federal spending. "Our colleagues don't seem to understand what we're concerned about," said Rep. Mike Rogers (R-AL). "They're not hearing that the sky is falling." Rep. Mike Turner (R-OH) put it more bluntly: "The more we talk about sequestration in this room, the less we win."

Lawmakers did find a temporary compromise to the budget caps over the last two fiscal years, and leaders from the armed services committees insist they're still hopeful that a longer-term solution can be found before the caps resume in effect this October. But representatives on 17 MAR said that will require better explanation of the national security risk to all of Congress. Pentagon officials indicated that they've laid out the danger as clearly as they can. "Missions will take us longer, it will cost us lives and create more injuries," Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond Odierno said. "We're mortgaging our future to barely meet today's needs." The proposal that Republicans floated Tuesday got an initially lukewarm reception from the Pentagon's top money manager.

Defense Department Comptroller Mike McCord told a conference of defense industry officials in Washington Tuesday that it was a short-term, makeshift solution to the problem. While the proposed budget and its expanded overseas contingency operations money might get DoD through the next fiscal year, it will not resolve the uncertainty for Pentagon planners who will be unsure moving forward whether "we are going to live with the law, get what we want or

have all of our money shoved into OCO." "It really almost guarantees we won't have an efficient way to plan for [fiscal] 2017," McCord said. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | March 17, 2015 ++]

## ***POW/MIA Recoveries***

"Keeping the Promise", "Fulfill their Trust" and "No one left behind" are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II (73,515) Korean War (7,855), Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,656), 1991 Gulf War (5), and Libya (1). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home. For a listing of all personnel accounted for since 2007 refer to <http://www.dpaa.mil/> and click on 'Our Missing'. If you wish to provide information about an American missing in action from any conflict or have an inquiry about MIAs, contact:

- Mail: Public Affairs Office, 2300 Defense Pentagon, Washington, D.C. 20301-2300, Attn: External Affairs
- Call: Phone: (703) 699-1420
- Message: Fill out form on <http://www.dpaa.mil/Contact/ContactUs.aspx>

### **Vietnam**

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency has announced the identification of remains belonging to servicemen who had been missing and unaccounted for from the Vietnam War:

- Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Edwin E. Morgan, 6252nd Combat Support Group, lost over Laos on March 13, 1966.
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### **Korea**

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency has announced the identification of remains belonging to servicemen who had been missing and unaccounted for from the Korean War:

- Army Sgt. Wallace J. Dawson, Company L. 3rd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division, lost in South Korea on Feb. 14, 1951.

### **World War II**

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency has announced the identification of remains belonging to servicemen who had been missing and unaccounted for from World War II:

- 2nd Lt. Harry B. McGuire Army Air Forces, 718th Squadron, 449th Bomber Group, 15th Air Force, lost over Italy on Jan. 30, 1944.
- 2nd Lt. Edward F. Barker Army Air Forces, Headquarters Squadron, 8th Air Service Group, lost over Papua New Guinea on Sept. 30, 1944. [Source: <http://www.dpaa.mil/> | Mar. 30, 2015 ++]

## ***Agent Orange | C-123 Aircraft Update ► Justice Denied***

“It is an outrage that the VA, in effect, is continuing to deny these veterans justice,” said John Rowan, National President of Vietnam Veterans of America. “These VA bureaucrats attempting to delay justice ought to be relieved of their duties so that they can no longer abuse veterans with their tactic of ‘delay, deny, until they die.’ There is no excuse for why these worthy veterans are still not being treated with the appreciation and the respect their service warrants.” Rowan praised Wes Carter, the leader of the C-123 Veterans Association, for his spunk and spirit: “You’ve got to keep on keeping on,” Rowan urged, “and VVA will be at your side to convince the VA hierarchy that to continue to delay justice is to deny justice.”

For over five years, retired Air Force Reserve Major Wes Carter has led the fight of his life: to get the Department of Veterans Affairs to acknowledge that the C-123 Provider military cargo planes which transported Agent Orange to and from Vietnam had, in fact, been contaminated with dioxin. A number of reputable scientists and epidemiologists at federal agencies have gone on record, endorsing Carter’s stance that these craft remained hazardous to the health of the 2,100 crew members, flight nurses, and maintenance workers who serviced them between 1972 and 1982. “Yet the VA, in all its wisdom, maintained that these men and women who had been exposed to Agent Orange ought not be eligible to receive the same healthcare and disability compensation benefits that boots-on-the-ground veterans of Vietnam receive,” Rowan noted.

“VVA has long supported Major Carter in his quest for justice,” Rowan said. “When the Institute of Medicine (IOM) concluded, in a study funded by the VA, that the planes were actively contaminated when Air Force Reservists flew them, we were as pleased as Wes Carter, who exulted, ‘We won!’ The IOM report was released in January 2015, yet Major Carter and those who have been sickened with maladies the VA concedes are associated with exposure to Agent Orange have still not received the justice they deserve. Why? Because a few bad actors in the office of Public Health & Environmental Hazards at the VA continue their attempts to delay justice despite the conclusive report by the IOM.” [Source: PR Newswire | March 23, 2015 ++]