



Federal Update for August 10 - 14, 2015



Senior Veterans Showcase Benefits of Sports during National Veterans Golden Age Games

More than 800 Veterans ages 55 and older are expected to compete in the 29th National Veterans Golden Age Games, Aug. 8-12 in Omaha, Neb. The official kick-off starts at 6:30 p.m., August 8 at the CenturyLink Center Arena.

Participants will compete in 14 events including swimming, cycling, horseshoes, bowling, field events and air rifles. Veterans also will participate in four exhibition events, including racquetball, 3-on-3 basketball, boccia and blind disc golf.

“When it comes to sports, age is just a number,” said Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA) Secretary Robert A. McDonald. “VA research and clinical experience shows that physical activity plays an integral role in maintaining good health, speeding recovery and improving overall quality of life. These games also serve as a way for participants to continue in local senior events in their home communities.”

The National Veterans Golden Age Games is sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs and hosted by the VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System. The health care system provides care for more than 55,000 Veterans from 101 counties in Nebraska, western Iowa and portions of Missouri and Kansas. The event is open to all U.S. military Veterans ages 55 or older who are currently enrolled for any VA care.

Elections | 2016 ► CVA vs. VoteVets | Veterans Issues

Battle lines have already been drawn on veterans issues for the 2016 election, and both sides are preparing for the long campaign ahead. On one side sits Concerned Veterans for America (CVA), a favorite of conservative lawmakers who have been pushing for expanded private care options for veterans and an overhaul of the Veterans Affairs Department bureaucracy. On the other is VoteVets.org, the left-leaning political activist group that has accused Republicans of working to privatize veterans health care regardless of the dire consequences. Both groups already are lobbying veterans organizations on the issue, even with the major party presidential candidates still in flux. Officials with both groups see VA reform as a key issue in that race as

well as in a number of local congressional contests, especially given the lingering scandals surrounding the department.

"This is a real opportunity to see where the veterans groups are, and whether they're willing to stand up and tell the public what they stand for," said Jon Soltz, co-founder and chairman of VoteVets. That's the only point the two groups agree on. VoteVets recently launched an effort to expose CVA as an advocacy arm of the far right, funded largely by the Koch brothers, well-known conservative activists. CVA officials have declined to respond publicly about where their group's funding comes from, other than to say "private donors," similar to other organizations working on veterans issues. "VoteVets is honest about being America's largest progressive veterans group, and supporting progressive policies," group officials said in a release. "CVA should be honest about representing the people who support dismantling programs that care for our elderly, our poverty-stricken, our children, and even our veterans."

CVA officials say those attacks are off-base attempts to distract from real reform efforts. While they blast VoteVets officials as partisan hacks, they bill themselves as nonpartisan advocates with a history of reaching out to both parties. They've been searingly critical of President Obama and the current VA administration, and are often cited by Republicans on Capitol Hill in arguments against department positions. But they also say they've been meeting with Democrats interested in reform efforts in recent months, in hopes of building a broader coalition to take action. In February, CVA officials released a four-month task force report on improving VA health care, including splitting off insurance functions from other veterans health services and making VA hospitals compete with private care providers for patients. Critics, including a number of prominent veterans groups, labeled that privatization a "third rail" in veterans politics; Pete Hegseth, CVA's chief executive officer, calls it choice. "The era of choice is coming," Hegseth said. "Veterans groups used to be able to say 'privatization' whenever that was discussed in the past.

But that panic button doesn't exist anymore. This election is going to be a referendum on whether you're pro-reform or status quo." An April Rasmussen Poll found that about two-thirds of likely voters say they're following VA issues closely, but only about one-third have a favorable view of the department's operations. Hegseth said internal CVA polling has shown the issue rising in importance, and officials hope to use that momentum to advance their reform plans. He expects legislation related to the changes to be introduced this fall, and the group has been meeting privately with other influencers on veterans issues to fight what they see as misperceptions of the plan. "This is not about vouchers or privatizing the system," he said. "This is about empowering veterans to get the best care they can, without dismantling the VA." Soltz (VoteVets) calls it indicative of a larger conservative effort to water down and outsource any government health care offerings. He promises to take that case to the veterans groups in coming months, and challenge them to push back against the effort. Even though veterans issues have been largely relegated to minor campaign talking points in recent presidential elections, major party candidates have been loath to upset the big veteran service organizations for fear of negative publicity.

In the 2012 campaign, Republican candidate Mitt Romney had to quickly back off a suggestion to offer vouchers to veterans in lieu of plussing up VA operations, after backlash from several prominent veterans advocates. But that was before the 2014 wait times scandals that forced the resignation of former VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, and a subsequent year of sparring over new outside care options between department officials and congressional lawmakers from both parties. "We're seeing a maturity on discussions of these issues," Hegseth said. "There are new pressures and new realities in 2016. And there's an expectation now that candidates will be able to speak on a deeper level on this. We dare someone to take a position against choice for veterans."

CVA will raise the issues before voters during its "Defend Freedom" tour through the rest of the summer. That effort already has included a town hall with presidential hopeful Marco Rubio in New Hampshire last month. Meanwhile, VoteVets already has endorsed 13 candidates for the 2016 cycle, and promises to highlight their positions on responsible VA reform for months to come. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | July 15, 2015 ++]

VA Accountability Update ► House Passes H.R.1994

The House on 29 JUL passed a bill that would make it easier to fire employees at the Veterans Affairs Department. Despite a veto threat from the White House and widespread opposition from federal employee advocates, lawmakers approved in a 256-170 vote the 2015 VA Accountability Act, which would give the VA secretary much more flexibility to demote and fire corrupt or poor-performing employees, not just top officials. The bill essentially would expand to the entire VA workforce the authority of the 2014 Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act, which made it easier to get rid of senior executives engaged in wrongdoing at the department.

Under H.R. 1994, the employee could file an appeal to the Merit Systems Protection Board within seven days of his or her removal. MSPB would have to rule within 45 days of the appeal filing. The legislation also would limit the amount of time an employee can be on paid administrative leave to 14 days in a one-year period. Due process for most of the federal workforce now requires that agencies notify employees within 30 days of an adverse action (including removal), and provide them with seven days to respond and an opportunity to defend themselves. The bill also would extend the probationary period for new VA employees from one year to 18 months, and allow the secretary to extend that even further. An amendment included in the bill offered by Rep. Dan Benishek (R-MI) would hold VA managers individually responsible for implementing recommendations from the inspector general on improving department operations, and would withhold performance awards from those who fail to do so. The bill now moves to the Senate. [Source: NAUS Weekly Update | Watchdog | July 31, 2015 ++]

VA Sexual Assault Care Update ► H.R.1607 Approved by House

Veterans who suffered sexual assault or other sexual abuse while in uniform would get help more easily from the Department of Veterans Affairs under a bill approved 27 JUL by the House. The Ruth Moore Act of 2015 (H.R.1607) would allow a statement by a survivor of military sexual trauma to be considered sufficient proof that an assault occurred. The House approved the bill by voice vote Monday night. The bill is named after Ruth Moore, a former Navy sailor who was raped twice by a superior officer nearly three decades ago. Moore, of Milbridge, Maine, was awarded more than \$400,000 in retroactive disability benefits last year after a decades-long battle with the VA.

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Chellie Pingree (D-ME) called it an important step to get the VA to make its benefits process easier and fairer for veterans like Moore who were sexually assaulted during their military service. Since starting work on the issue five years ago, Pingree said she heard from "countless veterans who've struggled for years to get disability benefits for (post-traumatic stress disorder) and other conditions that stem from their assaults." The survivors are men and women of all ages, from every branch of the service, Pingree said. "There are veterans who are suffering from PTSD because they were sexually assaulted, and they are not being treated fairly," she said.

Approval of the bill comes as the military struggles to combat sexual assault and members of Congress demand swift steps to protect whistle-blowers, including sexual assault victims who have faced retaliation from commanders or peers. Moore says her second rape occurred in retaliation for reporting the first rape.

Since the vast majority of sexual assaults in the military go unreported and even those that are reported are often not prosecuted, many survivors of military sexual trauma have found it hard to prove that an assault occurred. Current VA policy allows statements from a mental health professional or even a family member to be considered as evidence of an assault, although critics say the VA has been inconsistent in applying that policy. The Defense Department estimates that about 19,000 sexual assaults occurred in the military in 2010, but only 13.5 percent of those assaults were reported. Although military sexual trauma is the leading cause of PTSD among female veterans, the VA rejected about two-thirds of sexual trauma claims, according to the Service Women's Action Network, an advocacy group.

Moore was raped twice while she was stationed in the Azores islands in the late 1980s. She said she was discharged on a false mental illness diagnosis and never received proper treatment from the military for the sexual assault. Moore subsequently struggled with depression, anxiety disorders, homelessness and physical ailments tied to the incident, but was continually denied benefits. After contacting Pingree's office in 2010, Moore told her story to a TV reporter on the condition that her identity be concealed. She went public in 2012 and later agreed to lend her

name to Pingree's bill. The House approved the bill in 2013, but it was not taken up in the Senate. An identical bill (S.865) is sponsored in the Senate by Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT). [Source: The Associated Press | Matthew Daly | July 27, 2015 ++]

VA In Vitro Fertilization Update ► Sen. Tillis Actions Scuttles S.469

The hopes of veterans who need help starting a family as a result of injuries sustained in combat were dashed 22 JUL when Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) pulled a bill that would have allowed the Veterans Affairs Department to fund fertility treatments. Murray had planned to present her legislation to the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Wednesday afternoon but pulled it after Senate Republicans, led by Sen. Thom Tillis (RNC) added amendments that, among other things, questioned the funding for the initiative and would have prohibited the VA from working with Planned Parenthood and other organizations that provide fertility and abortion services. Planned Parenthood Federation of America has been under fire since the release of a video 15 JUL by the activist group Center for Medical Progress showing a doctor discussing the sale of tissues from aborted fetuses, as well as the process used to obtain intact tissue samples.

Murray called the amendments a "partisan attack on women's health," and said her bill, which passed the Senate in 2012 but failed in the House over funding concerns, would have ensured that the nation is doing "everything we can to support veterans who have sacrificed so much for our country." "I am so disappointed — and truly angry that Republicans on the Veterans Affairs Committee decided yesterday to leap at the opportunity to pander to their base, to poison the well with the political cable news battle of the day, and turn their backs on wounded veterans," she said. Tillis said the amendments were not intended "to kill in vitro fertilization." Rather, he said he has concerns about veterans who are waiting to receive medical care or are being denied care, including some of his constituents who have diseases related to exposure to contaminated water at Camp Lejeune, N.C. "At some point, it may make sense to add another half a billion dollars for this medical treatment that's been proposed by my colleagues on the other side of the aisle, but not until we're absolutely certain that the promises we've already made going to be fulfilled," said Tillis, a freshman congressman.

If it had passed both legislative bodies, the Women Veterans and Families Services Act would have expanded fertility services offered by the Defense Department, through Tricare, to severely injured troops, including those with fertility issues related to traumatic brain injury, and also would have lifted the ban on in vitro fertilization at VA medical centers. Under the legislation, spouses or surrogates of these troops and veterans also would have been eligible for services.

Paralyzed Veterans of America released a statement Wednesday expressing disappointment in the bill's demise and called Tillis's amendments histrionic political grandstanding. "As a result of

the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, many young service members have suffered grievous injuries from explosive devices that have made them unable to conceive a child naturally," the statement read. "If this country is to uphold its moral obligation to make whole those men and women who have been sent into harm's way and returned broken, then it is time for this legislation to be enacted." Tillis denied he is playing political games, citing a statistic that just 13 percent of Camp Lejeune water victims have had their claims approved by VA. "Shouldn't it be 50 or 60 percent?" he said. "I don't think it's political when you're trying to live within your means or political to make sure that the policies you're implementing actually work the way you intended." [Source: Patricia Kime | July 22, 2015 ++]

NDAA for 2016 Update ► Conference Committee Progress

Rank-and-file members of the conference committee ironing out differences between the House and Senate versions of the National Defense Authorization Act faced firsthand the wrath of Senate Armed Forces Committee Chairman Sen. John McCain (R-AZ). They also got a stark reminder this week of just how little power they have when it comes to the crucial decisions that will shape the final, compromise version of the annual defense policy bill. Six panel meetings for conference committee members to voice their concerns about the bill were scheduled, but all but one were canceled. Committee participants said that McCain rushed through that one closed-door session, in some cases responding to members with dismissive one-liners.

House Military Personnel Subcommittee Chairman Rep. Joe Heck (R-NV) is said to have given a spirited defense of the House bill's protections for military commissaries that he spearheaded as head of the House Armed Services Military Personnel Subcommittee. Earlier in the week NAUS Legislative Director Rick Jones met with Rep. Heck who agreed with the NAUS position on protecting Military Commissaries.

"'Thanks for the tutorial - moving on,' McCain told Heck, a brigadier general in the Army Reserves who served in Iraq, according to multiple people who took part in the meeting. Lawmakers and congressional aides say this year's NDAA conference process is still an improvement from the recent past, as it's the first official NDAA conference committee in three years. But an ambitious schedule for issue-specific meetings led to high expectations that have not been met, leaving some lawmakers with a sour taste." [Source: NAUS Weekly Update | July 17, 2015 ++]

Vet Benefit Legislation Update ► Clean Discharges for DADT LGBT

A group of Democratic lawmakers on 15 JUL proposed legislation that would give troops that were kicked out of the armed forces solely because of their sexual orientation the chance to

clear their record. The Restore Honor to Service Members Act, introduced by Sen. Brian Schatz (D-HI) and Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Reps. Mark Pocan (D-WI) and Charles Rangel (D-NY), was originally proposed in the last Congress and referred to the Senate Armed Services Committee but did not receive a vote.

"From the repeal of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' to the Supreme Court's historic ruling on marriage equality, we have made great strides in the fight to end discrimination. But there is still more work to be done to protect and promote full equality and ensure we help right our past wrongs," Schatz said in a statement. "Today, thousands of brave men and women who served our country are still denied the benefits and honorable service record they deserve," he added. "It's long past time we honor our commitment to all our service members and finally restore the dignity of gay and lesbian veterans who were unjustly discharged from our military."

An estimated 100,000 service members have been discharged from the military based on their sexual orientation. They may have left with discharge statuses of "other than honorable," "general discharge" or "dishonorable," depending on their circumstances. As a result, many of them may be disqualified from certain benefits and may not be able to claim veteran status. Other consequences include preventing some veterans from voting or making it more difficult for them to obtain civilian employment. "As a Korean War veteran, I understand how much this recognition means for our Service Members who faced discrimination. It is about time we pay proper tribute to the veterans who deserve to be honored for their valiant service to our country. Seeking redress for them is not only the right thing to do but also will correct historical injustice," Rangel said.

The bill has received the backing from several top interest groups, including Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, VoteVets.org and the Human Rights Campaign. The proposed measure also boasts around 20 co-sponsors in the Senate and 97 in the House. [Source: The Hill | Martin Matishak } July 16, 2015 ++]

VA ID Card Update ► Obama Signs H.R.91 Into Law

President Barack Obama on 20 JUL signed a bill from U.S. Rep. Vern Buchanan that will allow veterans nationwide to get a special, government-issued identification card. Buchanan, a Republican who represents the Bradenton and Sarasota areas of Florida, introduced the "Veterans Identification Card Act of 2015" earlier this year so veterans wouldn't have to carry around their military service records – such as the common form known as a "DD-214" – to prove their veteran status. Current records contain sensitive personal information such as veterans' Social Security numbers, leaving them at a higher risk for identify theft, Buchanan said. And while the Department of Veterans Affairs does offer some veterans – those in the VA health system, for example – ID cards, there is a large population of veterans who served honorably yet have no easy way to prove their military service.

The bill whipped through the House by a vote of 402-0 and the Senate by unanimous consent. The administration, however, wasn't thrilled with the measure. In Senate testimony, an administration official said that veterans can get their status noted on ID cards issued by state governments. Beyond that, the introduction of a new card issued by the VA could create confusion, the administration said. Even so, widespread support in Congress and from some veterans' groups boosted the bill's chances. It was signed into law Monday. "Every veteran – past, present and future – will now be able to prove their military service without the added risk of identity theft," Buchanan said in a statement. "It's the least we can do for the brave men and women in uniform who put it all on the line for us."

Currently, the military only issues ID cards for current servicemembers, retirees, and certain veterans with a 100% disability rating. The only option many veterans have to prove their service is a VA ID card used for health care (if eligible), or a state-issued drivers' license with a Veterans Designation (but not all states currently offer this). Many veterans who were not eligible for the above ID cards had a difficult time proving their military service, and often carried a DD Form 214, which contains personal information that should be kept secure (such as the veteran's SSN, birthday, etc.). Best practices for avoiding identity theft recommend leaving your SSN and other personally identifying information in a locked and secure place to avoid potential loss. The bill authorizes the VA to begin as soon as two months from now, but it may take longer. The VA is also authorized to charge individuals for the cost of the card (the price has not been set as of the publication date).

The new ID cards will only be valid for proving military service. The new cards cannot be used for benefits through the VA, or to access military installations or receive other military or veterans benefits. However, those who are currently eligible for benefits through the military or VA will continue to have them through their current methods. [Source: McClatchy DC & Military Wallet | Chris Adams & Ryan Guina | Jul 20, 2015 ++]

Summary of Veteran Related Legislation Introduced in the House and Senate since the Last Bulletin was Published

- **H.R.3040: DoD/VA Unofficial Info Use Guidelines.** A bill to require the Secretary of Defense, in consultation with the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, to develop guidelines regarding the use by the Secretaries of the military departments and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs of unofficial sources of information to determine the eligibility of a member or former member of the Armed Forces for benefits and decorations when the member's service records are incomplete because of damage to the records, including records damaged by a 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri. Sponsor: Rep Capps, Lois [CA-24] (introduced 7/13/2015).
- **H.R.3068: Restore Honor to Service Members Act.** A bill to direct the Secretary of Defense to review the discharge characterization of former members of the Armed

Forces who were discharged by reason of the sexual orientation of the member, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Pocan, Mark [WI-2] (introduced 7/15/2015). Related Bills: S.1766.

- H.R.3101: **POW Accountability Act**. A bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to review the list of veterans designated as former prisoners of war to identify discrepancies, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Johnson, Bill [OH-6] (introduced 7/16/2015).
- H.R.3113: **Empowering Our Veterans Act of 2015**. A bill to prohibit the Secretary of Veterans Affairs from obligating or expending funds for alternative energy generation projects unless specifically authorized by law, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Weber, Randy K., Sr. [TX-14] (introduced 7/16/2015).
- H.R.3122: **VALOR Act of 2015**. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to enter into a contract with a non-government entity for the conduct of biannual audits of Department of Veterans Affairs health care functions, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Hurt, Robert [VA-5] (introduced 7/21/2015).
- H.R.3183: **Veterans Choice Program Permanency**. A bill to amend the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 to expand and make permanent the Veterans Choice Program, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Jolly, David W. [FL-13] (introduced 7/23/2015).
- H.R.3200: **VA Flexibility in Appropriated Funds Usage**. A bill to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to transfer unobligated amounts previously made available to the Department of Veterans Affairs to the medical accounts of the Department to improve the furnishing of health care to veterans. Sponsor: Rep Brown, Corrine [FL-5] (introduced 7/23/2015).
- H.R.3216: **VET Act**. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify the emergency hospital care furnished by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to certain veterans. Sponsor: Rep Newhouse, Dan [WA-4] (introduced 7/27/2015).
- H.R.3234: **Failing VA Medical Center Recovery Act**. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to establish within the Department of Veterans Affairs an Office of Failing Medical Center Recovery, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Roby, Martha [AL-2] (introduced 7/28/2015).
- H.R.3236: **Surface Transportation and Veterans Health Care Choice Improvement Act of 2015**. A bill to provide an extension of Federal-aid highway, highway safety, motor carrier safety, transit, and other programs funded out of the Highway Trust Fund, to provide resource flexibility to the Department of Veterans Affairs for health care services, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Shuster, Bill [PA-9] (introduced 7/28/2015). Related Bills: H.Res388.
- H.R.3246: **Veterans Choice Funds Use**. A bill to provide for the temporary use of Veterans Choice Funds for certain programs, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Brown, Corrine [FL-5] (introduced 7/28/2015).
- H.R.3278: **Unclaimed Deceased Vet Internment**. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to ensure that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs is informed of the interment of

unclaimed deceased veterans, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Royce, Edward R. [CA-39] (introduced 7/29/2015).

- H.R.3312: **Grant Authorization for Vet Service/Resources Networks.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make grants for establishing coordinated networks of services and resources for veterans and their families. Sponsor: Rep Adams, Alma S. [NC-12] (introduced 7/29/2015).
- H.R.3365: **DoD/VA Reproductive Assistance.** A bill to improve the reproductive assistance provided by the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs to severely wounded, ill, or injured members of the Armed Forces, veterans, and their spouses or partners, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Larsen, Rick [WA-2] (introduced 7/29/2015).
- H.R.3373: **Whistleblower Complaints Review.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to review certain whistleblower complaints. Sponsor: Rep Lowenthal, Alan S. [CA-47] (introduced 7/29/2015).
- H.R.3374: **VA VOCREHAB Single Parent Participant Childcare Assistance.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the payment of childcare assistance to certain single parents who are participating in a Department of Veterans Affairs vocational rehabilitation program, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Lowenthal, Alan S. [CA-47] (introduced 7/29/2015).
- H.R.3419: **VA on Campus Childcare Services Grants to Educational Institutions.** A bill to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make grants to eligible educational institutions to provide child care services on campus. Sponsor: Rep Titus, Dina [NV-1] (introduced 7/29/2015).
- H.R.3423: **Agent Orange 1991 Act Amendment.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, and the Agent Orange Act of 1991 to extend the certain authorities of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs regarding associations between diseases and exposure to dioxin and other chemical compounds in herbicides. Sponsor: Rep Walz, Timothy J. [MN-1] (introduced 7/29/2015).
- S.1766: **Restore Honor to Service Members Act.** A bill to direct the Secretary of Defense to review the discharge characterization of former members of the Armed Forces who were discharged by reason of the sexual orientation of the member, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Schatz, Brian [HI] (introduced 7/15/2015). Related Bills: H.R. 3068.
- S.1775: **World War II Merchant Mariner Service Act.** A bill to direct the Secretary of Homeland Security to accept additional documentation when considering the application for veterans status of an individual who performed service as a coastwise merchant seaman during World War II, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Murphy, Christopher S. [CT] (introduced 7/15/2015).
- S.1797: **Connect with Veterans Act of 2015.** A bill to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a voluntary national directory of veterans to support outreach to veterans, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Heitkamp, Heidi [ND] (introduced 7/16/2015).

- **S.1856: VA Employee Suspension and Removal.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for suspension and removal of employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs for performance or misconduct that is a threat to public health or safety and to improve accountability of employees of the Department, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Blumenthal, Richard [CT] (introduced 7/23/2015).
- **S.1885: Improve Assistance to Homeless Vets.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the provision of assistance and benefits to veterans who are homeless, at risk of becoming homeless, or occupying temporary housing, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Blumenthal, Richard [CT] (introduced 7/29/2015).

[Source: <https://beta.congress.gov> & <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills> July 13, 2015 ++]

Tricare Pharmacy Copay Update ► House Will Accept Some Increases

The House on 30 JUL edged toward raising Tricare copays for prescription drugs as it wrangles with the Senate over ballooning costs that are draining the budget for military health care. The chamber is willing to support “modest” increases in beneficiary payments as part of the 2016 defense budget, according to a memo that Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, sent to House lawmakers about ongoing negotiations with the Senate. The memo was not released to the public.

The high cost of prescription drugs came to the forefront again this month when the Defense Department warned Congress of an unexpected \$2 billion shortfall in the Defense Health Program that has nearly depleted all funding for off-base health care. With political pressure mounting, Thornberry told the House that negotiators are accepting 30 percent of the increases proposed by senators. “The House is unwilling to accept 100 percent of the proposed increases first and foremost because the House believes it must keep faith with our military retirees and their families and that we should seek to make other improvements in Tricare before digging more deeply into the pockets of our servicemembers and retirees,” the memo says. The Senate has proposed annual increases that would raise the average copay for a 30-day generic drug prescription from \$8 to \$14 over the coming decade.

Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), who is heading negotiations for his chamber, and other senators have argued that runaway personnel costs need to be reined in because they are eating up the military budget and endangering warfighting and readiness. The Pentagon said this week that prescriptions for compound drugs, which are mixed specially for individual patients, increased 1,252 percent between 2012 and 2014. Jonathan Woodson, assistant secretary of defense for health affairs, wrote a letter to Congress earlier this month saying the costs have been so draining that the DOD runs the “real risk of exhausting funds needed to pay private sector care costs in late July 2015, which could also have negative spillover effects on the direct care system.”

But the House has been reluctant to raise prices for active-duty troops, military families and retirees, instead favoring a pilot program to see whether money can be saved by using a preferred network of retail pharmacies.

Thornberry told members that Congress passed reforms in recent years that are stabilizing costs, including measures to tie copays to cost-of-living adjustments and to send beneficiaries to less expensive mail-order pharmacies for generic drugs. Both chambers have named members to a conference committee now debating the issue in closed-door meetings as it hammers out the annual National Defense Authorization Act. The bill will set defense policy and could contain key reforms for health care and other benefits such as retirement pay. [Source: Stars and Stripes | Travis J. Tritten | July 31, 2015 ++]