



## Federal Update for April 1 - 5, 2013



### ***DoD 2014 Budget***

For the first time in four years, the Senate passed a budget resolution (S. Con. Res 8) outlining spending limits and priorities for the next fiscal year. Among other things, it envisions repealing the Medicare payment formula that now requires a 27-percent cut in Medicare and TRICARE payments as of Jan. 1, 2014. On issues directly affecting the military and veterans community, the resolution included provisions concerning:

- Expanding eligibility for concurrent receipt of military retired pay and VA disability compensation;
- Ending the deduction of VA survivor benefits from Survivor Benefit Plan annuities;
- Protecting VA benefits from COLA cuts, including the “chained CPI” suggested by many COLA critics;
- Extending VA health care coverage to qualifying dependent children until age 26; and
- Improving veterans’ access to health care in rural areas.

MOAA applauds the efforts of multiple senators who worked to include the latter provisions in the budget resolution. But it’s important to understand it will be an uphill battle to get these changes into law. First, most were included in “contingent reserve fund” provisions. That means the sponsoring senator would like to see it happen, but it would have to be done on a budget-neutral basis — meaning something else must be cut to pay for it. That’s why Congress hasn’t done these things in the past — unwillingness to make the offsetting cuts. Second, the House-passed budget resolution reflects dramatically different budget priorities than the Senate’s. Given those dramatic differences, the likelihood of House and Senate leaders reaching a compromise seems slim. What’s different this year is a recent law change to suspend congressional salaries if each chamber failed to pass a budget resolution. They’ve each done that now,

so their pay is safe. There was no penalty if they failed to agree. [Source: MOAA Leg Up 29 Mar 2013 ++]

## **VA Appeals Update**

A federal judge lashed the Department of Veterans Affairs last week for denying veterans certain due-process rights while seeking benefits. He also threatened penalties against the embattled federal agency, saying "it seems that sanctions may be needed to motivate VA in the future. The unwarranted denial of benefits means real-world consequences to veterans," wrote S. Jay Plager, a U.S. circuit judge and veteran of the Navy. "Promises of hypothetical relief do not pay for food or provide needed medical care." By design, the VA is supposed to be veteran-friendly. Officers considering veterans' claims are expected to point out documents they might be missing and help them receive any money they are entitled to, including disability payments and pensions. But in 2011, the agency instituted a new rule: Stop giving veterans a hand through the bureaucracy if their appeals are not in the region where they originally filed the claim. In other words, a veteran from New Jersey who appeals a denial in St. Petersburg may not get help from an agency appeals judge.

When veterans advocates challenged the rule, the VA promised the federal court it would stop enforcing it immediately. But it did not. In 2012, a whistle-blower inside the agency tipped off attorneys for the veterans advocates that the VA was still using the rule, which led to Plager's order. "That's a pretty big deal for the court to come in and sanction a government agency," said Matthew Hill, an Orlando attorney on the board of the National Organization for Veterans' Advocates, or NOVA, which challenged the VA. Sanctions are not guaranteed. Plager ordered the VA to make its case. The VA did not respond to an interview request, but issued a statement. "The Department of Justice represents VA in this matter, and our counsel's office is working with them to ensure an appropriate response to the court's order," a spokesman said.

It is unclear exactly how many veterans were affected by the rule, where they appealed their claims and whether they lost their benefits because they were denied due process. The VA keeps all of that information. But a Washington, D.C.-based attorney representing NOVA compiled a list of 60 cases just from March 2012 in which VA appeals judges cited the rule. The judges, he said, appeared not

to realize the rule had been nixed. The harsh lecture from Plager was modest vindication for critics of the troubled agency. A steep backlog of claims has drawn greater attention in recent months, as veterans return from Iraq and Afghanistan and find themselves at the back of a long line of World War II veterans, Korean War veterans and others. More than 1 million veterans are waiting for decisions on their claims or appeals nationally, the VA reports. More veterans are waiting on the St. Petersburg office, which handles Florida claims, than any other in the country. [Source: Sun Sentinel | Ben Wolford | 25 Mar 2013 ++]

## **Cyber Guard Update**

Legislation introduced in the Senate would create National Guard cyber response teams in every state and territory. The Cyber Warrior Act of 2013, S. 658, establishes cyber and computer network incident response teams, known as Cyber Guards, significantly expanding the Guard's cyber mission. The bipartisan bill was introduced 22 MAR by Sen. Roy Blunt (R-MO), Sen. Chris Coons (D-DE), Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-LA), Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT), Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA), Sen. David Vitter, R-LA), and Sen. Mark Warner (R-VA) . The Cyber Guards would be to cyber attacks what the civil support teams and other homeland response units are to responding to weapons of mass destruction. They would provide a scalable response in support of the governors or the defense secretary, depending on the response needed to a cyber emergency.

“Cyber attacks are at the top of the threats that could affect every aspect of our national and economic security,” Senator Gillibrand said. “Terrorists could shut down electric grids in the middle of winter, zero-out bank accounts, or take down a stock exchange causing an unimaginable amount of disruption and harm. Meanwhile, our military and homeland cyber defense forces are thousands short of the need identified by our leaders. We must ensure that we can recruit and retain talented individuals who can protect our nation’s cybersecurity at home and abroad.” Senator Vitter said, “Cyber-attacks remain one of the highest threats to the United States, and there is no excuse for us to not be completely prepared with resources and personnel. Our legislation will help ensure that many of our states, including Louisiana, can continue developing capabilities and cyber response effectiveness.” The Cyber Warrior Act will ensure that in the first hours and days after a devastating cyber attack, our local responders will have the same

support of the National Guard for response and recovery that they do when a hurricane strikes.

The 2013 World Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, which listed cyber attacks and espionage as the first among the risks facing the U.S., states that, “We judge that there is a remote chance of a major cyber attack against U.S. critical infrastructure systems during the next two years that would result in long-term, wide-scale disruption of services, such as a regional power outage.” Yet our government lacks enough cyber experts. According to Alan Paller of the SANS Institute, the Pentagon alone is short by about 10,000 cyber experts with only 2,000 currently in place. There is also a shortfall of both capability and capacity at the federal, state, and local levels to prepare, respond, and mitigate the effects of cyber events. In today’s economic environment, many of the top computer network operations and information technology (CNO/IT) specialists are choosing to work in the private sector, attracted by financial incentives, entrepreneurship trainings and flexibility. To remain competitive, the Department of Defense acknowledges that it must develop new and innovative ways and receive the tools needed to recruit and retain cyber warriors. The Department of Defense Strategy for Operating in Cyberspace states that “the demand for new cyber personnel is high, commensurate with the severity of cyber threats. DoD must make itself competitive if it is to attract technically skilled personnel to join government service for the long-term. Paradigm-shifting approaches such as the development of Reserve and National Guard cyber capabilities can build greater capacity, expertise, and flexibility across DoD, federal, state, and private sector activities.”

The Cyber Warrior Act of 2013 would place Cyber Guards in each state and territory, which could provide a scalable response. This National Guard unit can be activated by the Governor or Secretary of Defense depending on the response needed. These cyber teams would combine Active Guard and Traditional Guard Members, leveraging Members’ private sector IT experience. The use of the Guard would also support the goal of retaining the cyber trained military personnel who would otherwise leave the service. As with any Guard unit, the legislation would allow Governors to call up their Cyber Guard to address a local cyber emergency, boosting the capacity to protect computer networks in the homeland where the military may not play a role. The bill would also allow Governors to get the Guard to help train State and Local Law Enforcement and

other Cyber Responders in cyber security, and help them develop sound best practices that allow more cohesive interaction with Federal-level responders. Finally, the legislation would require the Secretary of Defense to report on the following ways to attract and retain more cyber warriors. [Source: NGAUS Washington Report 26 Mar 2013 ++]

## ***Walz Applauds President's Call for Innovative Brain Research***

Mankato, MN – Today, Congressman Tim Walz applauded President Obama's announcement of a new research initiative designed to revolutionize our understanding of the human brain and help find ways to treat, cure, and prevent debilitating brain disorders such as Alzheimer's, TBI, and epilepsy.

"Disorders of the brain can be absolutely devastating, not only to the person afflicted, but to their friends and family as well," said Walz. "We as a nation must do all we can to ensure our scientists and researchers have the tools they need to find ways to prevent, treat, and cure these disorders. Doing so will create a better future for us, our children, and our grandchildren, and I'm pleased the President took this important step today."

The Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies (BRAIN) Initiative, announced by the President today, will accelerate the ability of scientists and researchers to produce dynamic pictures of the brain that show how individual brain cells and complex neural circuits interact at the speed of thought.

"The proposed BRAIN (Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies) initiative will coordinate basic science with imaging technologies to address fundamental biological processes related to brain disorders such as Alzheimer's disease," said Dr. Ronald Petersen, Director of the Mayo Clinic's Alzheimer's Disease Research Center and Chair of the National Alzheimer's Project Act.

This brain-mapping will further our understanding of how we record, process, use, store and retrieve information and will shed light on the complex links

between brain function and behavior and should be seen as an encouraging step for Minnesotans affected by Alzheimer's.

"For the 200,000 Minnesotans living with Alzheimer's and their care partners, it's encouraging to see the federal government take this step," said Susan Spalding, Executive Director of the Alzheimer's Association Minnesota-North Dakota. "Dedicating funding as well as the time and efforts of our scientific community will be critical as we move toward a future without this disease."

"As a daughter of a woman who lost her life to this devastating disease I am grateful that the President has come forward to release this new initiative. We need to do something to stop this disease. I watched as my mother (Isabel), an educator, slipped away from us. This initiative offers us some hope, where we have had none," said Anne Heinemann Holland, of Rochester, Minnesota.

## ***Rep. Tim Walz visits Faribault to promote employment for veterans***

By CRISTETA BOARINI [cboarini@faribault.com](mailto:cboarini@faribault.com) | Posted: Thursday, April 4, 2013 11:30 am

Making his second trip to Faribault since re-elected to Minnesota's redrawn First District, Rep. Tim Walz (D-Mankato) visited a locally owned UPS branch on Thursday to promote hiring veterans in the Faribault community.

"Our veterans are not victims, they are heroes," Walz said. "They shouldn't be guaranteed jobs when they get home, but they should at least be guaranteed the opportunity."

As part of an initiative called "I Hire Veterans" started by the bipartisan Congressional Veterans Jobs Caucus, Walz presented local UPS franchise owners Dave and Pat Macrunnels with a decal to post in the storefront window, showing the city that UPS is a veterans-friendly establishment.

"Being a veteran and able to provide for my family gives me a great sense of pride," Dave Macrunnels said. "I am pleased to have Congressman Walz visit our family business."

Macrannels was drafted in 1972 and is a retired Army reservist. Walz, a veteran of the National Guard, presented Macrannels with a commemorative coin signifying along with the decal as part of a time-honored military tradition.

For the first time since before the recession, unemployment is below 10 percent, Walz said. But, he also noted, that rate could still be better. "Southern Minnesota is starting to get a higher concentration of veterans," Walz said. "Supporting veterans' jobs is not just a good thing morally, but also economically. We paid for their training with tax dollars. And statistics show the longer veterans are without a job, the higher their costs of mental healthcare are."

Walz's visit to Faribault comes shortly after his introduction of a new bill in the House of Representatives to re-examine records of more than 30,000 veterans who could have been misdiagnosed with personality disorder rather than PTSD. A sister bill was brought to the Senate by Minnesota's Sen. Amy Klobuchar.

"Minnesota does a better job than other states when it comes to taking care of our veterans, and I don't just say that out of bias," Walz said. "What with Beyond the Yellow Ribbon, and our local governments and businesses in the community coming together, Minnesota has been focused longer and has supported veterans better."

## ***Vet Gun Control Update***

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs said it will not comply with the provision of New York's new gun control law requiring mental health providers to report potentially dangerous individuals to state authorities. The Secure Ammunition and Firearms Enforcement Act calls on doctors and therapists to alert county health officials to patients they deem "likely" to engage in conduct that will result in serious self-injury or harm to others. Once notified of potentially harmful individuals, the state will check their names against a new state database of licensed gun owners. If there's a match, local law enforcement will be authorized to remove weapons if their owner does not voluntarily surrender them. Mark Ballesteros, spokesperson for the Department of Veterans Affairs, said in an email statement that "federal laws safeguarding the confidentiality of veterans' treatment records do not authorize VA mental health professionals to comply with this NY State law." Veterans determined mentally incompetent to handle

their own affairs by the VA are reported to the federal National Instant Criminal Background Check database. While the background-check database will be used under the New York law to screen firearms sales, the information on veterans' mental health is not included in the data viewable by states, according to the VA.

The VA provides health care for more than half of returned U.S. veterans from the Iraq and Afghan wars. New York is home to nearly a million veterans; Suffolk and Nassau counties on Long Island and Erie County in the western part of the state rank among the top counties nationally for share of residents who have served in the armed forces. Asked about the VA's statement at an 11 MAR cabinet meeting, Gov. Cuomo suggested that providers have discretion in whether or not to report patients. "You know, I really don't know the specifics, but first of all what the law says is it leaves it totally up to the mental health provider if they want to come forward or not - totally up to them," he said. The bill's language, however, makes it clear that mental health providers "shall" report potentially dangerous patients. The state Office of Mental Health, Division of Veterans' Affairs and Division of State Police did not respond to questions about the VA or the SAFE Act. Cuomo was a driving force behind the SAFE Act, which was introduced and passed by the Legislature without public debate in the wake of the massacre at a Newtown, Conn., elementary school. When he signed it in January, the governor said that the law's mental health reporting requirement was "common sense."

Some mental health providers and advocates argue that the law could increase the stigma surrounding mental illness, heightening barriers to obtaining needed care and deterring many of those who most need help from seeking it out - paradoxically, leaving the mentally ill and the public less safe. For veterans and active-duty military members, who already face serious cultural obstacles to receiving care and suffer higher rates of suicide, especially with firearms, than the general population, these concerns are all the more acute. "There is a chilling effect on people getting care, and we're particularly concerned about veterans," said John Richter director of public policy at the state Mental Health Association. "We have a hard enough time getting veterans in for PTSD. Veterans are a prime example of someone who would have a disincentive to go." A 2011 report by the RAND Corporation on New York veterans' needs, commissioned by the state Health Foundation, found that more than one in five veterans returned with post-traumatic stress disorder or major depression - rates two to four times higher than the general population for major depression, and eight times higher for

PTSD. Yet only a third of surveyed veterans with a mental health need sought care, often driven away by fears about the confidentiality of their treatment and the possibility of losing respect from colleagues and supervisors. RAND concluded that barriers to treatment - and the view that seeking mental health care was undesirable - needed to be moved aside to improve services and enrollment. Some providers fear these forces keeping veterans away from care will now be exacerbated by the SAFE Act. "A lot of them are not getting treatment because they want to avoid stigma and the labeling," said Connie Przepasniak, a licensed mental health counselor in Buffalo and member of the board of directors of the Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition and the Veterans One-Stop Center of Western New York. In the past, she worked as a counselor for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. "In my experience, a lot of veterans that I've worked with have some kind of a weapon on them, just in terms of self-protection," she said. "And I think it's going to prevent them from seeking mental health treatment." Mental health professionals have in the past had an array of options in dealing with patients who share thoughts of suicide or harming others, including involuntary hospitalization and warning potential victims, as well as reporting to law enforcement. But once the law goes into effect, care providers who encounter suicidal or otherwise dangerous patients will have no choice but to report.

Mental Health Association chapters across the state, as well as National Association of Social Workers New York State, the New York State Psychiatric Association and the New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitative Services, Inc. have expressed concerns about the bill's possible effects on New Yorkers with mental illnesses. Jim A., a two-tour veteran of Afghanistan and Iraq, did seek out mental health services when he returned for good. (He asked that his last name not be used to protect his privacy.) At the Albany Stratton VA Medical Center in Albany, doctors diagnosed him with PTSD. But while he actively sought care, he said he can also see fellow veterans holding back on getting mental health treatment because of the reporting requirement. "I can't talk to someone about my level of disconnect for fear of my information being shared when I go to buy a rifle," he said, putting himself in another veteran's shoes. "The sharing of information is a huge concern because, hey, if I want to get a new gun, I better not see the doctor. I better figure this out here by myself." [Source: New York World | Curtis Skinner | 12 Mar 2013 ++]

## ***SBA Vet Issues Update***

Small businesses rejected from a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs contracting program are waiting more than four months for a response to their appeals. Lawmakers and veterans' advocates have criticized the agency in the past year, saying it hasn't helped small, veteran-owned companies win work through the preferential bidding program as Congress intended. While the VA has sped up processing for first-time applicants, it is taking an average of 128 days for small firms to get final decisions on their requests for reconsideration, according to agency statistics released at a congressional hearing 18 MAR. The agency has a "backlog of legitimate companies trying to get certified," Representative Mike Coffman, a Colorado Republican, said. "While the VA's intent may be in the right place, its regulatory actions have put many veterans at a disadvantage." Coffman is chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, which held the hearing with the House Small Business subcommittee on contracting.

The program is supposed to boost contracting opportunities for former U.S. troops, many of whom served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Without completing the verification process, companies aren't able to win VA work reserved for veteran-owned businesses. Thousands of small businesses have been rejected by the agency since it stepped up efforts in 2011 to prevent ineligible firms from getting work under the preferential bidding program. The long review process has resulted in millions of dollars in lost contracts for some companies and has forced some veteran owners to fire workers as they wait for approval, said Davy Leghorn, the Washington-based assistant director of the American Legion's economic division. "In some cases, businesses lose already-awarded contracts, resulting in layoffs," Leghorn testified. "The American Legion cannot stress enough how detrimental this process can be for veterans and their families." The VA has gotten much faster at approving initial applications from veteran-owned small businesses, said Tom Leney, director of the VA's Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization. It took an average of 46 days for those decisions in February, compared with more than 130 days at some points in 2011, Leney testified. "We have overcome many of the challenges and vulnerabilities," he told lawmakers. The VA program has more than 5,000 veteran-owned small businesses and has helped distribute more than \$3.8 billion in contracts to those firms, Leney said. A 2010 law requires the VA to do more to ensure veterans

control their companies. The stricter process followed reports of fraud in the program, including cases where veterans were “fronting,” or claiming to manage companies that were run by other people.

The Government Accountability Office, Congress’s investigative arm, criticized the VA for drafting a strategic plan for agency’s verification efforts without including details about its goals. “One long-term objective is establishing and sustaining a ‘best-in-show’ operation,” the GAO said in a report 18 MAR. “But VA’s strategic plan does not define such an operation or provide any criteria or associated metrics to determine what has been achieved.” The VA’s certification is becoming increasingly important because larger contractors and other federal agencies view it as a stamp of approval as they consider veteran-owned firms for work, said Marc Goldschmitt, a Reston, Virginia-based consultant and veteran who has helped business owners with the verification process. The result is that a snub from the program “reaches well outside the VA,” Goldschmitt said. [Source: Bloomberg | Kathleen Miller | 19 Mar 2013 ++]

## ***VA Fraud Waste & Abuse Update***

Thousands of veterans are waiting for government help ranging from benefits approvals to education and job training, and the VA's inability to stop \$2.2 billion in errant payments in 2012 only short changes those vets still waiting in line. Already saddled with long waits and a massive backlog of beneficiary claims, the Department of Veterans Affairs is also struggling to manage its money properly, handing out an astounding \$2.2 billion in mistaken payments last year. And despite increased attention from the agency’s internal watchdog and its fiscal managers, the VA’s percentage of errant payments actually jumped substantially from 2.65 percent in 2011 to 3.4 percent in 2012, according to the department’s own fiscal records. To put the figure into perspective, the VA's improper payments amount to more than half the money the Navy was asked to cut from its budget as part of the sequester. The improper payments mean less money was available for deserving veterans, many who remain languishing in the system awaiting help on everything from medical care to education and job training. The VA, the second largest federal agency, insists it is making progress, noting the costs of the erroneous payments dropped in 2012 by \$200 million even as the percentage of mistakes rose. But it also acknowledges the department remains

years away from getting a handle on the core problems that have plagued its payment systems.

“Although much has been accomplished at VA to control improper payments, much more remains to be done,” the department says in its most recent fiscal statement to Congress. A report released 15 MAR by the VA’s internal watchdog, the inspector general, paints a portrait of an agency still struggling to create systems that will catch erroneous payments before they are sent and to comply with a federal law known as the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Act (IPERA). “VA did not comply with four of seven IPERA requirements in FY 2012,” the inspector general noted. In fact, one major office in the VA, the Non-VA Care Fee program that covers veterans’ medical expenses outside the VA system, had an erroneous payment rate of about 12 percent last year, well above the 10 percent limit set by the IPERA law. VA official blamed the high-rate of mistakes on an antiquated payment system that is “manual nature” and significantly “decentralized.”

One silver lining was that three other programs that had been above the red-flag 10 percent level for mistaken payments in 2011 fell below that level in 2012, though only slightly. Still, the inspector general report found widespread concerns for worry, including whether the numbers the VA is currently reporting are even accurate. For instance, the watchdog said:

- The Veterans Benefit Administration, a large office inside the VA responsible for determining payments for medical, death and retirement benefits, “used methodologies that were not statistically valid to estimate improper payments for two of its three reported programs.”
- Auditors were unable to determine the error rate for the VA’s pension program because “because VBA combined the Compensation and Pension programs in reporting on improper payment rates
- The VBA did not properly account for some of the monies it tried to recover from improper payments.
- The VA was late in filing two required IPERA-related reports to Congress and had to correct a third report because of errors.

The inspector general has spent significant time pressing the VA to improve its financial management, especially on the issue of erroneous payment. One reason is that once a mistaken payment is made, the VA's ability to recover the money is substantially constrained, both by law and capability. Of the \$2.2 billion in improper payments in 2012, VA was only able to recover less than one percent, or \$18.6 million, after the fact and it stopped just \$11.1 million in improper payments before they were sent. The erroneous problems are the latest problem to hamper the much-maligned and overburdened VA. Over the last six months, the Washington Guardian has highlighted numerous other problems, including:

- President Obama has failed to make good on his promise to eliminate a backlog of benefits claims at the VA. As of Nov. 5, the day before Obama won re-election, 558,230 of the 820,106 veterans seeking disability coverage had their claims pending for more than the 125-day target. That's a whopping 68.1 percent, or nearly double the 36 percent backlog rate in the summer of 2010.
- VA officials took trips to conferences in the vacation Mecca of Orlando, Fla., that cost taxpayers more than \$6 million.
- The VA wasted more than \$5 million buying encryption software it never used.
- An audit found veterans at the VA's Memphis hospital had been left waiting an average of 10 hours for emergency room admission, with little done by management to improve the situation

The VA says it is taking the erroneous payment problem seriously, forming a task force governed by its Chief Financial Officer last year that has already held several summits "to increase our knowledge of improper payments – types of improper payments, what types are avoidable, what types aren't, and root causes." "These actions will set the stage for our work in the coming years," it added. [Source: Washington Guardian | John Solomon | March 18, 2013 ++]

## ***Homeless Vets Update***

On a winter's day at Fort Snelling, it's not hard to hear the soldiers' ghosts. As the wind whips through the cracks and broken windows, their voices can be heard in cavernous Building 210, the old quartermaster stables, where horses for cavalry officers were kept. Or in Building 211, with its high beams and wide doors where

grease-stained GIs, most likely smoking and probably swearing, once toiled fixing tanks during World War II. All but abandoned for decades, five military buildings on what is known as Fort Snelling's Upper Post are scheduled to be rehabbed. The buildings, which date to the turn of the 20th century and saw service from the Spanish-American War to World War II, will be repurposed to combat one of the military's most nagging of contemporary issues: homelessness. Plans call for 58 affordable apartments for homeless veterans and their families. "It's a perfect fit," said Andrew Michaelson, who will be the project manager for the nonprofit that will run the development. "To put homeless vets in a place like this, with its military history, it's a hand-in-glove fit."

The Fort Snelling plan is part of a larger effort by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to address two goals: End veteran homelessness and reduce its inventory of vacant and underutilized properties. The VA has entered into agreements to provide more than 3,000 units of permanent and transitional housing for veterans at 25 VA Medical Center campuses nationwide, and another 1,000 units are pending or underway. The \$15 million plan is to construct 58 apartments in the five buildings on 6 acres, which sit west of Hwy. 55 adjacent to the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport. The land and the buildings won't be sold but will be managed and leased by a St. Paul-based nonprofit developer of housing services, CommonBond. Construction is expected to start this summer and be complete by the summer of 2014. Three-quarters of the cost will be paid for from private investment leveraged through housing and historic tax credits. A veteran with anything other than a dishonorable discharge will be able to apply for housing. These won't be homeless shelters, but permanent housing. Multi-bedroom units are expected to appeal to veterans with families and a growing number of female homeless veterans who may have children.

Many of the buildings were constructed at the turn of the 20th century to house infantry, cavalry and artillery units garrisoned at the post for the Spanish-American War and the Philippine-American War. During World War I, Fort Snelling became a processing center for thousands of Minnesota recruits. Once known as "the country club of the Army" for its lavish swimming pools and polo matches, Fort Snelling was officially decommissioned as an active-duty military post in 1946. The VA took over some of the properties and various other groups, including the Boy Scouts, have divvied up the rest over time. With many windows boarded and the paint on trims blistered by weather and neglect, the buildings up

for rehab look tired. But most remain structurally sound, a testament to the construction standards and the military demands of the day. The slate roof on one of the old horse stables, built in 1909 after all, was supposed to last only 100 years. “The brick and even the roofing for its age, as an engineer, I’m impressed with how well it’s held up,” said Steve Challeen, chief engineer of the Minneapolis VA. Building 227, which was built in 1904 and served as housing for noncommissioned officers, for instance, would certainly qualify in real estate parlance as a “fixer-upper.” Two wooden additions droop with fatigue and will be removed. A metal door has long lost its steps to the ground. But with basic upgrades, including adding an American with Disabilities Act-compliant restroom, it will become a two-bedroom duplex.

CommonBond plans on retaining much of the historic integrity of the structures. The design of the exterior of the one-time tank garage will have what look like garage doors. An old hayloft will be converted into office and lab space. But given its proximity to the airport, the design will include noise-mitigation measures. There have been few objections to the plan. When the VA sought public comments, an 89-year-old man who identified himself as a onetime acting first sergeant, e-mailed that he had learned about the proposal and recalled driving Gen. Omar Bradley around the buildings in 1945 when Bradley was the head of the VA. He was elated to hear the buildings might be saved. Representatives of the Santee Sioux Nation have asked to be consulted on the project. The Indian tribe was imprisoned on the grounds after the 1862 uprising and has asked to be able to have a ceremonial prayer when the development is completed. Not all buildings will make the cut. A garage built in 1917 will be demolished. A quaint quartermaster’s one-room gas station built in 1932 will be mothballed but won’t be torn down. Some of the buildings were used up until the late 1970s and early 1980s for storage by the nearby VA Medical Center. But it has been 67 years since the last soldier fixed the last tank inside Building 211. [Source: Minneapolis Star Tribune | Mark Brunswick | 17 Mar 2013 ++]