



Federal Update for Sept. 30 – Oct. 4, 2013



House Moves to Protect Military Pay

The House unanimously passed the "Pay our Military Act," to protect servicemembers and their families from any pay halts or slowdowns in the event the federal government shuts down at midnight Monday. The bill put forward by Republican representatives effectively removes military pay as a reason for lawmakers to agree to a budget that includes funding for the Affordable Care Act. The House-passed military pay bill also guarantees that all Defense Department civilian employees and contractors supporting DoD operations will be paid.

American Legion Launches Suicide Prevention Center

The American Legion has launched a new Suicide Prevention Web Center on its national website to provide veterans and their families with life-saving resources and programs during their time of transition and need. The center debuts at a time when suicide rates for U.S. veterans are among the highest, an estimated 20 veterans commit suicide every day. September is Suicide Prevention Month. Military.com strives to share important information to our active duty, veteran and family audience that can help save lives.

Walz Statement on Reckless GOP Government Shutdown

Washington, DC [10/1/13] – Today, Representative Tim Walz released the following statement after the House GOP refused to stop playing political games with our economy and forced a government shutdown.

“Ensuring the government remains open is one of Congress’ most basic responsibilities. It’s incredibly reckless that the House Majority has yet again

chosen party over country and abdicated its duties in order to play political games and pander to their Tea Party base. Enough is enough. The American people deserve better. The Majority must stop the games, start doing the most basic work they were sent here to do, and reopen the government.”

Gold Star Parents & Families Day

It's a club no one wants to join and a group that doesn't want any new members. But Gold Star parents and families say the bond they share with others who have lost a child or spouse to war is tighter than anything. "It is not a group you would willingly join, but we have all become very close because we know what the other feels," said Robyn Pannier, whose son, Phillip Pannier, 20, died in Iraq in January 2008 while serving with the 101st Airborne Division. Sunday 29 SEP, by Presidential proclamation, was Gold Star Mothers and Family Day, a holiday created by Congress in 1936 to honor those families who lost a loved one during war. It always falls on the last Sunday in September. The name comes from flags that families used to hang in their windows during World War I.

A blue star represented a living serviceman, while a gold star was reserved for those who had fallen in battle. Last year, President Barack Obama changed the holiday to include Gold Star families as well. This year's proclamation reads: "In our city centers and our bustling parks, monuments stand dedicated to visionary leaders and singular moments in the life of our Republic. But in empty seats at family dinners and folded flags above the mantle, we find the constant thread of our Nation's character -- the truth that America endures because it is home to an unbroken line of patriots willing to lay down their lives for the land they love. As we honor the men and women who gave their last full measure of devotion, we hold close the families left behind.

Most of us can only imagine the pain of a mother who loses a daughter, the husband who loses his partner, or the son who loses a father. Prepared to serve others at any cost, their loved ones exemplified the values of courage and selflessness that define our Armed Forces and fortify our Union. The families of the fallen embody that same character. Amid their sorrow, these homefront heroes support one another and lift up their communities. As our country seeks to understand the depth of their sacrifice, we draw strength and inspiration from their example.

On this day, we remember our commitment to the Gold Star mothers and families who carry on with pride and resolve despite unthinkable loss. We recall our sacred obligation to those who gave their lives so we could live ours. As a grateful Nation, we declare that we will never forget their sacrifice, and we renew our promise to build a future worthy of their devotion. We also recognize our countrymen and women who continue the fight, putting their lives on the line each day. Long after the battle is over, we will continue to give our military and Gold Star families the care and support they deserve -- in a listening ear, a comforting shoulder, a helping hand, and a moment given to keep alive the memories of their Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen. The Congress, by Senate Joint Resolution 115 of June 23, 1936 (49 Stat. 1985 as amended), has designated the last Sunday in September as "Gold Star Mother's Day."

NOW, THEREFORE, I, BARACK OBAMA, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and the laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim September 29, 2013, as Gold Star Mother's and Family's Day. I call upon all Government officials to display the flag of the United States over Government buildings on this special day. I also encourage the American people to display the flag and hold appropriate ceremonies as a public expression of our Nation's sympathy and respect for our Gold Star Mothers and Families. IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this twenty-sixth day of September, in the year of our Lord two thousand thirteen, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and thirty-eighth.
BARACK OBAMA [Source: Stars & Stripes | Andy Kravetz | 27 Sep 2013 ++]

Kosovo Campaign Medal

The Defense Department has announced the transition of the Kosovo Campaign Medal to the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, effective Jan. 1, 2014. In a 19 SEP memorandum, Acting Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Jessica L. Wright stated that the KCM recognized the significant contributions of U.S. military personnel in support of Operation Joint Guardian since 1999 as part of the NATO-led Kosovo Force.

"The contributions of U.S. military personnel have been integral to ending open hostilities and to reducing ethnic tensions, allowing for the dramatic reduction of

force levels over the past decade," Wright noted. As smaller contingencies of U.S. forces continue to support Operation Joint Guardian and NATO headquarters in Sarajevo, the AFEM will accordingly recognize that support of operations in the Balkans, the memo states.

The AFEM area of eligibility mirrors that of the KCM, Wright explained, with the addition of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Hungary. The eligible area also encompasses Serbian land and airspace including Vojvodina, Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia, and U.S. Naval vessels operating in the Adriatic Sea. The Department of Defense Manual 1348.33, Volume 2, "Manual of Military Decorations and Awards" contains specific eligibility criteria. [Source: AFPS | Amaani Lyle | 24 Sep 2013 ++]

Military Lodging Update

If you're mourning the end of summer – and with it, the annual vacation season – take heart that military lodging facilities remain open for business, offering year-round escapes at a fraction of the cost of commercial hotels. Now might be the perfect time for qualified fun seekers to use their military, retiree or Defense Department identification cards to book lodging at one of hundreds of military-owned accommodations all over the world. The facilities range from standard hotel rooms on military installations to campgrounds and recreational vehicle parks to luxury armed forces recreation centers in Garmisch, Germany; Honolulu; Seoul, South Korea; and Walt Disney World in Orlando, Fla. Generally speaking:

- Each service, including the Coast Guard, runs its own lodging program for official travelers and offers up empty rooms on a space-available basis to leisure travelers from every branch. They also operate facilities geared specifically for recreational guests.
- Every service runs its own reservation system, and rules about who can stay in the facilities vary slightly among them. But for those willing to do a little homework, military lodging can open doors to affordable year-round getaways.

Susan Langless, who oversees the Navy's lodging facilities, said they typically save guests about 40 percent compared to civilian hotels. Those looking for "big city" vacations can check into Navy Lodge hotels in the Seattle and San Francisco areas,

as well as San Diego and New York, she said. However, travelers longing for a relaxing beach getaway can visit one of Navy Lodge's beach destinations. For a Gulf Coast vacation, for example, they can check out a Navy Lodge in Gulfport, Miss., or Pensacola, Fla. Meanwhile, the Navy Getaways program features accommodations at 49 sites around the globe. That includes more than 2,600 recreational vehicle spots, tent sites, cottages, cabins, townhomes and resort-style vacation rentals. Among them is Navy Getaways Pacific Beach Resort and Conference Center in Washington, offering three-, four- and five-bedroom cottages, hotel suites, an RV spot and campground. Not only are these facilities affordable, Langless said, but they also are "great places to stay and relax."

Many of the military accommodations are considered "best-kept secrets" by their guests. For example, the Army morale, welfare and recreation program features the popular Seward Military Resort on Alaska's Kenai Peninsula, reported Debbie Martin, the Army's chief of hospitality programs. Guests can choose from a variety of accommodations as they enjoy world-class fishing, spectacular glaciers, and abundance of wildlife and recreational opportunities galore. Also, in addition to the luxurious Hale Koa Armed Forces Recreation Center in Honolulu, the Army operates the Pililaau Army Recreation Center on Oahu's Leeward Coast and the Kilauea Military Camp mountain resort on Hawaii's Big Island. Bob Vogt, division director for Army Installation and Management Command's soldier and community recreation division, said he is particularly fond of the cabins Army MWR operates on Torii Station Army Base in Okinawa. He described the Torii Beach location as "one of the most beautiful beachfront locations anywhere in the world." Within the continental United States, the Army MWR program manages Lake of the Ozarks Recreation Area in Missouri, which features lakefront cabins and motel rooms, along with boat and jetski rentals. "America's Army and other eligible patrons should use Army Lodging, because it provides them with conveniently located, high-quality lodging and hospitality services at an affordable price," Vogt said.

The Marines Corps' network of recreational facilities includes villas, cabanas and cottages at Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii. The Del Mar Beach Resort, near Camp Pendleton, Calif., is a luxury oceanfront resort spanning pristine beaches and spectacular views of the Pacific, and a host of other amenities. Travelers also might want to check out the Big Bear Recreational Facility, a hidden retreat in the heart of the San Bernardino Mountains. Run by the Marine Corps, it offers

affordable camping and lodging facilities for active duty, retired military personnel, reservists, DOD employees and their authorized family members.

In addition to hotels on many Air Force bases, Air Force Personnel Center's services directorate features more than two dozen recreational areas worldwide. Ramstein Inns on Ramstein Air Base in Germany is directly across the street from the passenger terminal, and at the front door to many of Germany's most popular destinations. The Nellis Inn on Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., is convenient gateway to the Las Vegas attractions. Peterson Air Force Base's inn provides easy access to Colorado Springs, Colo., and the Rocky Mountains. Members interested in visiting the mid-Atlantic coast can check out the Fort Fisher Air Force Recreational Area in Kure Beach, N.C., which provides visitors easy access to the Cape Fear River and the Atlantic Ocean, Paige Hughes of the Air Force services directorate reported. Those who prefer the mountains and canyons of the western United States can visit Farish Air Force Recreation Area outside Colorado Springs, Colo., or Fort Tuthill Air Force Recreation Area near Flagstaff, Ariz., with easy access to the Grand Canyon. Those stationed in the Pacific can enjoy recreational areas in Hawaii, Okuma Air Force Recreation Area on Okinawa, Japan, and Tama Air Force Recreation Area on the main island north of Tokyo.

Visitors traveling with a recreational vehicle have even more options available, Hughes said. With more than 60 family camps to choose from, they can find facilities near San Antonio, Charleston, S.C., and other popular cities, or close to Florida Panhandle beaches. Even travelers familiar with the Defense Department's vast network of accommodations might forget to explore those offered by the Coast Guard. Those facilities include the Petaluma Lake RV Park, on a small lake in California's Sonoma County. U.S. Coast Guard Station Marathon offers four cottages in the heart of the Florida Keys. And to the northeast, the Coast Guard offers summertime lodging at a former lifeboat station on Cuttyhunk Island, Mass., now converted into a house with two apartments.

"Look at MWR recreational lodging opportunities when planning your vacation," Vogt advises military travelers. "All services offer low-cost options from campsites, cabins to small lodges. It's a potential cost saving to you and your family -- and it allows MWR to continue to offer reduced rates on programs and services at locations across the U.S. and in overseas locations." For more details about recreational lodging options, visit the service morale, welfare and

recreation websites <http://www.armymwr.com/travel/recreationcenters> or the Defense Department's lodging website <http://www.dodlodging.net/info.aspx>.
[Source: American Forces Press Service | Donna Miles | 19 Sep 2013 ++]

Space "A" Travel Update

Fantasizing about an exotic getaway but finding yourself strapped for cash? A "Space-A" seat aboard a military aircraft might be just your ticket to that vacation of your dreams. Military owned or contracted aircraft fly to more places than many people realize, even to areas without U.S. military installations. When all mission-related passengers and cargo are accommodated, empty seats are offered up to eligible passengers on a space-available basis. Last year, almost 215,000 service members, military family members and retirees took advantage of these "Space-A" flights all over the world, according to Air Force Master Sgt. Chris Alexander of Air Mobility Command's passenger policy and fleet management branch. They flew stateside at no cost on military planes and paid just \$3.90 for a seat on a commercially chartered flight, Alexander reported. Those on international flights paid \$17.20 or less to cover the cost of head taxes and federal inspection fees.

The travelers didn't require high-placed contacts or insider information -- just a basic understanding of how the system works. In general, active-duty members and retirees and their families can fly Space-A between Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard facilities around the world. Flights also are available from the Seattle-Tacoma and Baltimore-Washington international airports. Seats are offered to Space-A passengers only after all official-duty passengers and cargo have been accommodated, Alexander emphasized. Once those requirements are met, empty seats are offered to any qualified Space-A traveler. They may get a standard seat on a contracted commercial aircraft. But in other cases, it might be a backward-facing seat on a C-5 Galaxy aircraft or a jump seat on a C-130 Hercules cargo plane or KC-135 Stratotanker, or anything in between, Alexander said. Passengers with a sense of adventure willing to try Space-A travel can sign up at the terminal they plan to fly from in person, online or by email or phone and stay on the roster for up to 60 days or, if applicable, until their military leave expires. It's possible to sign up for more than one destination, and at more than one terminal to improve the chances of getting a seat.

When passengers register, they get assigned to a passenger category that designates their place in "line" for a seat. Space-A may be the one instance in which rank doesn't have its privilege. Seats are offered on a first-come, first-served basis, depending on a Space-A passenger's travel category and date and time they registered.

- First priority, Category 1, goes to active-duty service members and their accompanying family members on unfunded emergency leave.
- Category 2 is assigned to those on environmental morale leave.
- Category 3 is for members and their families on ordinary leave or in a house-hunting status in conjunction with a permanent-change-of-station move.
- Category 4 goes to unaccompanied active-duty family members on environmental and morale leave.
- Category 5 is assigned to unaccompanied family members and service members on permissive temporary duty.
- Category 6 goes to military retirees, reservists, National Guard members and ROTC cadets.

Once official mission requirements are met, the likelihood that any would-be traveler gets a Space-A seat depends on a multitude of factors, Alexander said. Some air terminals have more flights than others, and larger commercially contracted aircraft tend to have more seats than cargo planes. Timing is an important factor, too, he said. During the summer months, when many military families are making PCS moves or vacationing, Space-A seats fill up quickly. In Germany, for example, an aircraft with 100 or more available seats may fill up with travelers in Categories 1 to 3 alone, Alexander said. Yet, Alexander said, retirees, who are in the lowest-priority group for Space-A seats, are big fans of the program and frequently get seat assignments. Many make a point of learning how the system works and avoid the busiest travel times so they are more likely to get a seat, he said. AMC, which enforces the policies for the Space-A program, spells out the details of Space-A travel on its website <http://www.amc.af.mil/amctravel/index.asp>. The site, including a downloadable Space-A handbook, is updated regularly.

The command's Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/pages/AMC-Space-A-Travel/338024229564691> provides travelers the most current information possible to help them plan better than ever before and to answer any questions they might have, Alexander said. The site offers 72-hour flight schedules that are updated daily. One of its newest features is a Space A "roll call report." It provides information about seats provided to Space-A passengers within the previous 24 hours, including the latest date and time they signed up and which travel category they had been assigned. AMC introduced the feature as part of its efforts to give travelers more predictability, but works closely with its operational security team to make sure it's not divulging too much information that could tip off potential adversaries, Alexander said.

Admittedly, Space-A travel can be a gamble. Many people have heard horror stories about seemingly endless waits for empty seats on outgoing flights, wasted leave days and destinations never reached. Passengers are cautioned to be prepared to buy a return flight on a commercial aircraft, as well as meals and lodging, if they find themselves unable to secure a Space-A flight home. But trends show that many travelers are willing to sacrifice some of their leave for a free or almost-free seat on an unfilled military contract aircraft. Alexander attributes it to higher ticket prices on commercial aircraft and more awareness across the military about Space-A travel opportunities. "People say, 'Wow, this is a great service, and I am going to use this, because it is one of my benefits,'" Alexander said. "As long as you have an open mind and you are educated on the processes and you have some time available, Space-A can definitely work well in your favor." [Source: AFPS | Donna Miles | 17 Sep 20133 ++]

Wounded Warrior Project

TRACK is the first education center in the nation specifically for Wounded Warriors with facilities located in Jacksonville, Florida and San Antonio, Texas. The 12-month program gives warriors a jump-start on meeting their educational goals, while also supporting goals around personal health and wellness, mental health and career development. TRACK students enter as a team, or cohort, and continue through the program together, offering the ideal environment for students at all ability levels, including those who might not have been successful in traditional academic settings in the past. TRACK students support one another

during their journey and leave the program with the skills and supports necessary to continue their education and/or enter the civilian workforce.

One of the TRACK's students, Zachary Dunn, is nearly 10 years and 7,000 miles away from the day his life nearly ended. It was a mercifully cool morning in April 2004 in a town called Fallujah. The 19-year-old Lance Cpl. Dunn, a Marine infantryman from Kansas City, Mo., was riding in the back seat of a Humvee as part of an Iraq combat patrol. The patrol was on its way back to base using the same road it had left on, a tactic soldiers soon learned to avoid. "I don't remember hearing the blast," Dunn, now 29, said. "It happened that quickly. All I remember was waking up on the bed, found out my Kevlar was off, reached up and felt a handful of blood." Suffering from shrapnel wounds all over his head and upper body from the roadside bomb blast, Dunn was shipped back to the States to recover and was medically discharged from the Marines the following year. The years that followed were "an up-and-down ride," Dunn said. Physically he had a traumatic brain injury, numbness in his extremities and pain that made it hard to stand for long periods. Mentally he suffered from bouts of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress. To make matters worse, there were not many resources for wounded veterans in a country just beginning to come to grips with the physical devastation wrought by the War on Terrorism. But in 2007 Dunn found the Wounded Warrior Project and in 2012 began its TRACK program. The program, which started in 2008 in Jacksonville, guides the men through their first year of college life and facilitates the transition from combat soldier to student. For many combat veterans, the experience of going from a war zone to a college classroom can seem daunting to say the least, Dunn said. "We want to smooth the transition," Chris Rick, the manager of TRACK, said. "We want to provide them with the skills to be able to sit next to an 18-year-old that has no life experience and is whining about this, that and the other thing."

About 15 veterans are accepted for TRACK each semester and 92 have graduated so far. Their move to Jacksonville, and home after graduation if they choose, is paid for by U-Haul. But up to 80 percent of graduates do stay in Jacksonville, Rick said. They are given a stipend while in the program and provided housing. The TRACK center, at 7020 AC Skinner Parkway, serves as a headquarters, classroom, gym and hangout where two of their first college classes are taken with their fellow warriors taught by Florida State College at Jacksonville professors. Toward the end of the course, the men work a paid internship at a Jacksonville business

related to their chosen field of study. Their physical demands are met by a personal trainer who works to rebuild their bodies. A mind trainer of sorts also is on staff. Lisa Grossman, an employee of APEX Performance, trains them to focus their minds for peak performance during what could be stressful situations like crowds and college exams. It's much like the football kickers APEX also trains. A part of the program's donations even come from fines against New York Giants players, courtesy coach Tom Coughlin. It has been a game changer for many veterans, "a complete 180 from my life before," Dunn said. For more info on TRACK go to <http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/track.aspx>.

[Source: The Florida Times-Union | Clifford Davis | 14 Sep 2013 ++]

DoD 2014 Budget Update

While veterans will not be immune to a government shutdown, the pain will be significantly mitigated by a new law passed in 2009 that is intended to protect veterans' hard-earned benefits in the event that Congress came to another standstill over the budget. In 2009, Congress passed and President Obama signed into law a bill to begin funding the Department of Veterans Affairs medical accounts one year in advance. This "advanced appropriation" ensures timely and predictable funding for VA hospitals and clinics, which serve 9 million veterans across the country. But it also guards the nation's veterans from the effects of congressional gridlock. The latest political fight and the possibility of a government shutdown illustrates why advanced appropriations was a major public policy priority for the veterans community which made it the focal point of IAVA's 2009 "Storm the Hill" advocacy campaign. The health care and benefits that servicemembers earned fighting for our country never should be jeopardized by political fighting. IAVA has heard from many veterans rightfully concerned about how a shutdown would affect the community. Fortunately, because of the advanced appropriations and the requirement to provide mandatory benefit payments, many VA services are protected.

In addition to VA medical facilities and clinics remaining operational, veterans can also continue to receive counseling services and continue to have access to the 24-hour Veterans Crisis Line. VA benefits should continue to go out to those who have been awarded benefits. Benefit payments are considered to be mandatory financial obligations of the government, and therefore payment is considered to be automatically pre-authorized and should continue during a shutdown. Also,

employees whose work is necessary to ensure continued payment of these benefits are expected to continue working. So that means that if, for instance, a veteran has a 50% disability benefit, he or she should continue to get disability benefits during a shutdown. If he or she has a VA pension, these benefits should continue to be paid. Existing benefit payments for the Post-9/11 GI Bill should also be distributed as scheduled, though new claims would be paused.

While veterans and their families are more protected than other groups in the case of a shutdown, that isn't too say that an impact won't be felt. The government shutdown may threaten progress on ending the VA disability claims backlog. Since March, the VA backlog has decreased by almost 30 percent because of a renewed focus, new initiatives, and required overtime for processors. About 450,000 veterans remain in the backlog, however, and much work remains to help them and get the backlog to zero. These efforts are in jeopardy if the government shuts down. In the past, the VA has been able to plan ahead to retain the large majority of the claims workers to process VA disability claims. Yet, because the VA will lose administrative support, claims processing may be slowed and all work processing appeals or new claims will stop. It is also unlikely that mandatory overtime – a key component of the VA's major progress on the disability claims – will be continued under a government shutdown. There are other ways the VA and servicemembers will be affected beyond the VA backlog. The VA's customer service hotlines will likely close, meaning that veterans' questions will go unanswered. Furthermore, recent VA efforts to educate and enroll veterans about their benefits may be delayed.

That any services or benefits will be affected shows why we need advanced appropriations to fund the VA's full discretionary budget a year in advance. We must ensure that all VA accounts will have predictable funding in an era where continuing resolutions and threats of government shutdowns are all too frequent. America's veterans have already paid their debt to this country and in return for their service, our nation promised them care and benefits to help transition back into civilian life. IAVA supports the "Putting Veterans Funding First Act," which would ensure full advanced funding. Even though the VA and veterans are protected in many ways - thanks to advanced appropriations and other statutory requirements – it is not fair to say that those who have and continue to serve our nation are untouched by the current debate in Washington. In the future,

veterans should be assured of all the care and benefits they have earned. [Source: Defense One | Tom Tarantino | b 26 Sep 2013 ++]

Sequestration Update

The uniformed chiefs of Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps got another shot 18 SEP at describing the deepening readiness crisis that Congress has inflicted on the armed forces. The chance came as the sequester-driven chaos of 2013 kicks into a kind of hyper drive with new budget threats from political gamesmanship: a possible federal government shutdown in October and a fresh attempt by Republicans to defund the 2010 Affordable Care Act by refusing to raise the U.S. debt ceiling, leaving the nation at risk of defaulting on loan obligations. Though U.S. troops still fight in Afghanistan, the military faces year two of arbitrary defense cuts, this one set at \$52 billion for the year that begins Oct. 1. The cuts likely will be delayed for some months by a "continuing budget resolution," or CR, which Congress needs to pass by October because it hasn't enacted a final defense appropriations bill. The CR would freeze military spending at fiscal 2013 levels, but deny the services authority to start new programs, thus deepening the backlog of military construction projects and new purchases on weapon systems. Every chief of service testified before the House Armed Services Committee that force readiness is falling, rapidly. Unless Congress dampens the impact of the automatic budget cuts, called sequestration and unwisely made part the 2011 Budget Control Act, then the services will be unable to execute force requirements set down in 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance.

- **USA** - By OCT 2014, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond Odierno warned, "85 percent of our active and reserve [component] Brigade Combat Teams will not be prepared for contingency requirements." The active Army is drawing down from a wartime peak of 570,000. But the cost of every active soldier above 490,000 is being funded by the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) account, not the Army's basic budget, Odierno explained. That gimmick to make Army and Marine Corps budgets look smaller in wartime means that until active strength falls sufficiently, Army's share of budget cuts under sequestration must come entirely out of operations, maintenance and weapon modernization. Odierno predicted degrading readiness and "extensive modernization program shortfalls" through fiscal 2017. Funding shortfalls will impact more than 100 Army acquisition

programs, putting at risk the ground combat vehicle program, the Army's Aerial Scout program and many others. He said sequestration would cut total Army strength by 18 percent over seven years, with the active Army falling 26 percent to 420,000; Army National Guard sliding 12 percent to 315,000 and Army Reserve dropping nine percent to 185,000. Total Brigade Combat Teams will fall by 45 percent. "In my view, these reductions will put at substantial risk our ability to conduct even one sustained major combat operation," Odierno said. "It is imperative that the Congress not implement the tool of sequestration," Odierno added, calling himself a realist not "an alarmist."

- **USMC** - Marine Corps Commandant Gen. James Amos testified that sequestration is putting the nation at risk. In the past year, the Corps has sustained readiness of deployed forces "at the expense of infrastructure and sustainment and modernization programs. This can't continue...If we are to succeed on future battlefields we must modernize and we must care for our infrastructure and training facilities," which now are degrading. "Soon there will be little left within these accounts to offset our readiness requirements," Amos said. If sequestration continues, Marine Corps active strength will fall to 174,000 versus 186,800 needed to carry out defense strategy guidance. That smaller force, if sent to war, couldn't return until the fighting stopped, Amos said. In peacetime, a Corps that small would only support two-for-one dwell time, or a year back home for every six months deployed. For force and family morale, the Corps should be sized for three-to-one dwell, he said. "Sequestration will force us to plow through scarce resources, funding our old equipment and weapon systems in an attempt to keep them alive and functional," Amos said, while modernization weapon programs get canceled.
- **USN** - Adm. Jonathan Greenert, chief of naval operations, warned that if sequestration continues in fiscal 2014, Navy will cancel procurement of eleven tactical aircraft, one Virginia-class submarine, a littoral combat ship and an afloat forward staging base. Delivery of the new Ford aircraft carrier would be delayed along with mid-life overhaul of an older carrier. Navy would continue only "safety-essential" facility renovations. By 2020, the Navy's combat fleet would fall to 255 ships -- 30 fewer than today and 51 fewer than needed to support the defense strategy.

- **USAF** - Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III said, without relief from sequestration, his service over the next five years will cut its active force by 25,000 airmen, about five percent, and cut aircraft by 550 or 9 percent. "We will be forced to divest entire fleets of aircraft," Welsh said, rather than taking down some aircraft of every type. Spending on modernization would be cut 50 percent overall, raising the cost of every new aircraft and delaying delivery of critical equipment. But even after a full decade of sequestration, Air Force would remain best in the world, Welsh predicted, sounding a lone note of cheer amid three hours of gloom.

Rep. Jim Cooper (Tenn.), a senior Democrat on the committee, told the four-star officers it is they who should be grilling Congress on the "irrational budget environment" it created because of "political bickering." Rep. Harold "Buck" McKeon (R-CA), committee chairman, took exception to some of Cooper's remarks, those largely blaming Republicans. But McKeon acknowledged partisanship is harming the armed forces. "I agree that we haven't done the type of job that we should, and we need to dig in and really work hard on this problem," McKeon said. Later, bringing the hearing to a close, he gave an even weaker assessment of how this once powerful committee might bring some relief to a deepening readiness crisis. "Maybe we can have some sway in some of these discussions," McKeon said, to a [Source: Mil.com | Tom Philpott | 19 Sep 2013 ++]

VA Patient Centered Care Update

The Department of Veterans Affairs announced 19 SEP that Veterans will have greater access to quality health care through a new initiative: Patient-Centered Community Care (PCCC). "PCCC is an innovative solution that helps VA medical centers continue to provide quality care efficiently," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "This will be a valuable option for VA medical centers to use to expand our Veterans' access to care." Under PCCC, VA medical centers will have the ability to purchase non-VA medical care for Veterans through contracted medical providers when they cannot readily provide the needed care due to geographic inaccessibility or limited capacity. Eligible Veterans will have access to inpatient specialty care, outpatient specialty care, mental health care, limited emergency care, and limited newborn care for enrolled female Veterans following the birth of a child. "PCCC provides a regional contracting vehicle for VA to work

with local community providers to give Veterans access to high quality care,” said Dr. Robert Petzel, VA’s Under Secretary for Health. “It will also help VA in our continued efforts to ensure timely and accessible services are provided to Veterans for non-VA medical care.”

In total, VA has awarded two contracts under PCCC, one to Health Net Federal Services LLC and another to TriWest Healthcare Alliance Corp. These companies will set up networks in six regions covering the entire country. VA expects to have these regional contract networks available to its medical centers by the spring of 2014. The awarded contracts, estimated at \$9.4 billion, include one base year and four option years. PCCC is part of the overall Non-VA Medical Care Program. It will provide all VA facilities with an additional option to purchase non-VA medical care when required Veteran care services are unavailable within the VA medical facility or when the Veterans benefit from receiving the needed care nearer to their homes. Among the many benefits to the Veterans and VA under these new contracts, VA will enjoy standardized health care quality metrics, timely return of medical documentation, cost avoidance with fixed rates for services across the board, guaranteed access to care, and enhanced tracking and reporting of non-VA medical care expenditures over traditional non-VA medical care services. [Source: VA News Release 19 Sep 2013 ++]

VA Claims Backlog Update

In May 2013, the VA announced a partnership with two veterans service organizations -- the Disabled American Veterans and The American Legion -- to reduce the backlog of claims for veterans benefits by encouraging the filing of “fully developed claims.” Such claims can be expedited in half the time it takes to process a regular claim. The VA’s use of collaboration with veterans outreach organizations reflects a broader trend in government to partner with non-profits and others to navigate the complex requirements of various federal benefit programs, such as Medicaid, Social Security Disability, Supplemental Security Income, and the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps). In the case of the VA, a new report for the IBM Center by Drs. Lael Keiser and Susan Miller concludes that collaboration is seen as useful and it is growing, at the front lines in the VA’s regional benefit determination offices around the country. They found that: “Effective collaboration between government agencies and outreach organizations can potentially:

- Reduce the time that it takes to process applications.
- Increase accuracy in eligibility decisions.
- Improve customer service”

They note, however, that collaboration is not easy to achieve for a number of reasons, such as the inherent tension between outreach advocates for approval of benefits vs. the duty of a federal benefits examiner to accurately apply program eligibility criteria. Drs. Keiser and Miller conducted several dozen interviews with VA managers, state government-run veterans agencies, and various veterans service organizations such as The American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars. They offer insights on how collaboration in the field affected timeliness, accuracy, and customer service.

Impact on Timeliness. Interviews with both veterans organizations and VA managers highlighted both the positive and negative effects of greater collaboration, on the timeliness of processing benefit applications. On the positive side, veterans organizations (VOs) help reduce the workload of VA benefits examiners by ensuring the claims submitted are complete, so the VA can make a decision without extensive back-and-forth with a claimant: “Many regional office managers believe that the relationship the VOs have with veterans, as well as the amount of experience they have communicating with veterans, make VO representatives particularly effective in getting documents from veterans . . . veterans trust them.” On the negative side, though, some VA managers believe that “because outreach organizations place such a high priority on providing the best service to their clients – which VA agrees is a good thing – this can sometimes lead to the filing of questionable claims that may not be supported by evidence. This ultimately slows down the process and contributes to backlogs in the system.” The authors found that, where VA regional offices did joint training with VOs on the process and where they co-located offices, these kinds of concerns were reduced through better informal communications.

Impact on Accuracy. Interviews also found that cooperation between VA and VOs “can have an impact on the extent to which claims are processed accurately and consistently.” Again, they observed both positive and negative effects from collaborative efforts. On the positive side, the additional reviews of claims by

both parties improved their accuracy. One VO representative told Drs. Keiser and Miller: “we help each other not make mistakes.” For example, one Connecticut veteran claimed an injury to his left knee, but the medical evidence showed that it was on the right knee . . . the VO confirmed and ensured the veteran corrected his claim. On the negative side, some interviewees felt that inaccuracies would increase because VOs “might learn ways to make claims fit the eligibility criteria. . . if non-agency personnel have access to the inner workings of government agencies they may ‘learn the key.’” To mitigate this potential negative effect, interviewees agreed that VO representatives need to “develop a reputation as professional advocates. This requires the VO personnel to work inside the rules and regulations.” When advocates are honest brokers, they create trust among both their clients as well as the VA.

Impact on Customer Service. “Customer service,” notes the authors, “involving helping veterans understand the program and the process while being treated with compassion and respect.” Because many of the VO representatives are former veterans themselves, veterans trust the information they receive from them. The authors say “The VOs field a tremendous number of calls from veterans, and this help to eliminate the burden on the VA. The VA can thus focus more attention on processing claims quickly and accurately. . . VA employees recognize the importance of these functions.” “VOs can also alert regional office managers when frontline workers are not providing good customer service,” note the authors. For example, “Sue Malley, director of the New York regional office, describes an incident where the VOs alerted her to a problem with customer service. Without the VOs, she would not have known about the issue.”

Insights and Strategies. While key stakeholders found collaboration between VA and the VOs beneficial, Drs. Keiser and Miller found variations in the levels of collaboration between various VA regional offices and veterans service organizations. They identified several best practices that could be applied more broadly, such as highlighting shared goals, co-locating offices, and ensuring the VOs were seen as “honest brokers” in the claims process by all parties. This can be done by building trust “through expertise and joint training,” note the authors. [Source: GovExec.com | John Kamensky | 19 Sep 2013 ++]

VA Congressional Stonewalling

Members of a House committee lambasted the Department of Veterans Affairs 19 SEP for a lack of transparency and unwillingness to cooperate with Congress. Rep. Mike Koffman (R-CO) accused the VA's office of congressional and legislative affairs of using a veneer of incompetency to mask a "process of systematically covering up information that's embarrassing to the Veterans Administration." "You are not what you appear to be today – a bumbling idiot," Koffman told Joan M. Mooney, the VA's assistant secretary for congressional and legislative affairs, during her appearance before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Both Republicans and Democrats complained of slow response for information, noting that the committee has over 70 pending requests to the department, some over a year old.

In her testimony, Mooney noted that her office has dealt with over 80,000 congressional requests since 2009, with VA officials testifying at over 260 congressional hearings, conducting over 2,000 congressional briefings or meetings and responding to over 4,700 questions for the record. "VA and Congress share the same goal: to do everything we can to improve the health care, benefits and other services delivered to our nation's veterans, their families, and survivors earned through service," said Mooney, who worked on Capitol Hill for two decades before taking her position at the VA. Rep. Jeff Miller, (R-FL) the chairman of the committee, said that Mooney's office had received a 41 percent budget increase and 40 percent increase in staff since 2009. "That the committee feels compelled to hold this hearing today should send a clear signal that the status quo is not acceptable," said Rep. Michael Michaud, (D-Maine), the ranking Democrat on the committee. "High workload is not an excuse for the current situation which has gone on since 2009, and which simply must change," Michaud added. "If VA needs additional funding for more staff we need to know." Rep. Tim Huelskamp (R-KS) complained he had been waiting 52 weeks to learn how much money VA had spent in support of the 2012 National Veterans Golden Age Games, held in St. Louis, and attended by about 800 veterans. Huelskamp said this was a simple, factual question, and that the long delay led him to believe VA had no intention of answering. He grilled Mooney about the delay, but she would say only that she understood his frustration and that this was one of many questions VA was working to answer. "I don't care if you care about my frustration. I want an answer. It seems like your responsibility today is to say, 'We'll get back to you on that,' " Huelskamp said, adding that he understands why veterans trying to get answers from VA are so frustrated.

In an interview 18 SEP, Rep. Miller complained that it had taken the VA too long to respond to congressional queries for information about Navy Yard shooter Aaron Alexis's interactions with the VA. "How was he treated, did he miss any appointments?" said Miller. "In 2013, it should be pretty easy to get this information." The VA released a statement 18 SEP saying that Alexis had sought treatment for insomnia at two VA hospitals in August, but that he had told medical providers that he was not depressed or violent. [Source: Washington Post | Steve Vogel | 19 Sep 2013 ++]

VA & Affordable Care Act Update

How does the upcoming rollout of Obamacare affect Georgia's 770,000 military veterans and others throughout the nation? Are their VA benefits changing? What should veterans do if they're uninsured now? The Department of Veterans Affairs earlier this month sent out a letter to veterans explaining their options under the Affordable Care Act. That's one reason the Department of Veterans Affairs expects to see its veteran patient population grow by about 66,000, a senior VA official told Congress in APR. Nationally, 8.7 million veterans are enrolled in the VA health program.

- First, the 2010 law won't change VA benefits, and;
- If a vet is enrolled in VA health care, that coverage meets the standards for the health reform law's insurance requirement. So that veteran will not face any penalties for not having health insurance in 2014.

According to the Urban Institute, there are an estimated 1.3 million uninsured veterans under age 65 in the United States, constituting roughly 10 percent of the nonelderly veteran population nationally. The estimate in Georgia is about 56,000 veterans without health insurance. Most uninsured veterans are eligible for VA health care, federal officials say. In the recent letter, the VA urges all qualified people who have no coverage to enroll in its health care system. There are no enrollment fees, monthly premiums or deductibles, and most veterans have no co-pays. (Some vets who have sufficient means pay modest co-pays.) Because enrollment takes time due to the need to verify eligibility, it's best to sign up quickly. Not everyone who has served in uniform qualifies for VA health care. "It's a common misconception that everyone gets VA coverage," says Amanda Ptashkin of the consumer advocacy group Georgians for a Healthy Future.

One major group who do not meet the basic eligibility requirement for VA care are Reserve or National Guard vets who served on active duty for training purposes only. (In recent years, it has become common for Reserve and Guard members to be called up for active duty and sent on assignment just like members of the regular military. If they are on active duty long enough, these troops can earn standard VA benefits. But from the 1950s through the '80s, Guard and Reserve members were rarely called up, and many served for years without earning enough active-duty time to qualify for benefits.)

Overall, a veteran's eligibility is determined by length of active service, type of discharge, service-connected disabilities, and income level, among other factors. Contrary to one common myth, war service is not required; there are many peacetime veterans in the VA health system. But not all veterans who are eligible for VA care are enrolled. Genevieve Kenney of the Urban Institute's Health Policy Center, who has co-authored studies on uninsured veterans, says that one possible explanation is that some uninsured vets who could qualify may not be aware that VA coverage is available to them. Kenney adds that ACA-related changes — such as the availability of trained navigators, the screening of applications for a variety of programs, along with the fact that VA coverage will satisfy the individual mandate, could raise veterans' enrollment in VA services. More than 300,000 children of veterans and more than 600,000 spouses of veterans are uninsured, and most are not eligible for VA care, Kenney notes. She says that more than 40 percent of uninsured veterans and over 50 percent of uninsured family members report having unmet health care needs.

Veterans who aren't eligible for VA — and their families — could go to the health insurance exchange, or marketplace. But another option, gaining Medicaid coverage, is limited in states that aren't expanding the program. Georgia has rejected Medicaid expansion. Ironically, in states that don't expand Medicaid, the poorest adults don't qualify for the subsidies in the health insurance exchange. About 20,000 low-income uninsured veterans would be eligible for Medicaid if Georgia expanded the program, but at the same time won't receive subsidies in the health insurance exchange either. "It doesn't seem like it's a big enough issue for people who object to the ACA," says Tim Sweeney, director of health policy for the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. In Georgia, there are three VA hospitals and more than 20 clinics throughout the state. Ways to enroll in VA care or determine your eligibility are:

- Visit www.va.gov/healthbenefits/enroll.
- Call 1-877-222-VETS (8387).
- Visit your local VA health care facility.

[Source: Georgia Health News | Andy Miller | 16 Sep 2013 ++]

Congressman Walz

Congressman Walz voted against both the HJ Res. 72 and HR 3230. Each bill, though good intentioned doesn't support 100% of veterans or 100% of the National Guard and Reserve Component. The only way to accomplish that task is to reopen and fund all of government. Congressman Walz is concerned this piecemeal approach to funding government pits neighbor against neighbor, American against American and that is simply unacceptable at this time. The government shouldn't be in the business of picking winners and losers. To truly serve our veterans, we must reopen and fund all of government.

It is also important to remember that HJ Res. 72 not only cuts \$6 billion from the VA, but it leaves out important veterans' programs that belong to DOD, HUD, and DOL. The best thing Congress can do for veterans and servicemembers is to pass a clean continuing resolution (budget), and pass H.R. 813 so we can avoid this predicament in the future.

HR 3230 is similar in that it doesn't fund the entire Reserve Component. It leaves the civilian technicians out of the picture. These are the full-time folks in our armories who keep the lights on, order the supplies and coordinate the training. He likens it to sending troops off to war but not funding the cooks, ammunition suppliers or the refuelers. Civilian Technicians are the lifeline to any unit, he should know, he was a technician himself.

The only way to care for 100% of our Veterans, National Guard, Reservists, and their families is to reopen 100% of the government. In addition to your input, my colleagues in DC are listening to the input from the national veterans' organizations such as the American Legion, AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Paralyzed Veterans of American (PVA) and the Veterans of Foreign War (VFW). They too support this view of reopening 100% of government as the best solution.