



Federal Update for December 9 - 13, 2013



VA Health Care: Improvements Needed in Processes Used to Address Providers' Actions That Contribute to Adverse Events

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers GAO visited did not adhere to certain policy elements of the protected peer review process, and monitoring by VA's Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is limited. According to policy issued by VHA, protected peer review may be used by VA medical centers (VAMC) when there is a need to determine whether a provider's actions associated with an adverse event were clinically appropriate--that is, whether another provider with similar expertise would have taken similar action. Despite VAMC officials' general understanding of the protected peer review process, none of the VAMCs GAO visited adhered to all four protected peer review policy elements selected for review, including the timely completion of reviews, and the timely development of peer review triggers that signal the need for further review of a provider's care. Failure of VAMCs to adhere to the protected peer review policy elements may result in missed opportunities to identify providers who pose a risk to patient safety. Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN), responsible for oversight of VAMCs, monitor VAMCs' protected peer review processes through quarterly data submissions and annual site visits. A VHA official said that VHA monitors the process by reviewing and analyzing the aggregated quarterly data submitted by VAMCs through the VISNs. The VA Office of the Inspector General (OIG) also conducts oversight of the protected peer review process as part of a larger review of VAMCs' operations. While the VISNs and VA OIG have reviewed VAMCs establishment of peer review triggers to prompt further review of a provider's care, neither they nor VHA has monitored their implementation. As such, VHA cannot provide reasonable assurance that VAMCs are using the peer review triggers as intended, as a risk assessment tool. This weakens VAMCs'

ability to ensure they are identifying providers that are unable to deliver safe, quality patient care.

VAMCs' adherence to the non-protected focused professional practice evaluation (FPPE) process is unclear due to gaps in VHA's policy on documentation requirements, and VHA does not routinely monitor non-protected processes. An FPPE for cause is a time-limited evaluation during which the VAMC assesses the provider's professional competence when a question arises regarding the provider's ability to provide safe, quality patient care. Information collected through the FPPE can be used to inform adverse actions, such as limiting the provider's scope of care. Although VAMC officials were generally aware of the FPPE process, there are gaps in VHA's policy regarding how these evaluations should be documented and what information should be included, which limited GAO's ability to assess VAMCs' adherence to the process. For example, one VAMC provided GAO with documentation labeled as an FPPE and identified by the service chief as an FPPE; however, the quality manager said a formal FPPE was not conducted and that the documentation was actually part of a protected peer review. These differing views illustrate that, even within the same facility, gaps in VHA's policy on documenting FPPEs create a lack of clarity and opportunities for misinterpretation and inappropriate use. Moreover, the gaps in VHA's policy may hinder VAMCs' ability to appropriately document the evaluation of a provider's skills, support any actions initiated, and track provider-specific incidents over time. There is no routine monitoring of FPPEs for cause by VHA, VISNs, or VA OIG.

Why GAO Did This Study

Adverse events--clinical incidents that may pose the risk of injury to a patient as the result of a medical intervention, rather than the patient's underlying health condition--can occur in all health care delivery settings. VAMCs can use one or more of the protected (confidential and non-punitive) and non-protected processes to evaluate the role of individual providers in adverse events. GAO was asked to review the extent to which processes used to respond to adverse events are carried out across VAMCs. In this report, GAO examined (1) VAMCs' adherence to VHA's protected peer review process, and the extent to which VHA monitors this process, and (2) VAMCs' adherence to VHA's non-protected processes and the extent to which VHA monitors these processes. To conduct this work, GAO visited four VAMCs selected for variation in size, complexity of surgeries typically performed, and location. GAO reviewed VHA policies and

federal internal control standards and analyzed data from the four selected VAMCs. GAO also interviewed VHA and VA OIG officials, as well as officials from VISNs of the four selected VAMCs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA take action to ensure VAMCs adhere to certain elements of the peer review policy, require VAMCs to report data on implementation of peer review triggers, and develop more specific policy to help guide the FPPE process, including documentation requirements. In its written comments, VA generally concurred with GAO's conclusions and recommendations.

Recommendations for Executive Action

Recommendation: To improve VHA's use of the protected peer review and non-protected processes to respond to individual providers involved in adverse events or when questions arise regarding providers' ability to deliver safe, quality patient care, and to address protected peer review process requirements, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs should direct the Under Secretary for Health to ensure that VAMCs send all required initial peer reviews (level of care 2 and 3) to the peer review committee.

Agency Affected: Department of Veterans Affairs

Recommendation: To improve VHA's use of the protected peer review and non-protected processes to respond to individual providers involved in adverse events or when questions arise regarding providers' ability to deliver safe, quality patient care, and to address protected peer review process requirements, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs should direct the Under Secretary for Health to ensure VAMCs' peer review committees complete final peer reviews within 120 calendar days.

Agency Affected: Department of Veterans Affairs

Recommendation: To improve VHA's use of the protected peer review and non-protected processes to respond to individual providers involved in adverse events or when questions arise regarding providers' ability to deliver safe, quality patient care, and to address protected peer review process requirements, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs should direct the Under Secretary for Health to provide clear

guidance and assistance on the purpose, development, and implementation of peer review triggers.

Agency Affected: Department of Veterans Affairs

Recommendation: To improve VHA's use of the protected peer review and non-protected processes to respond to individual providers involved in adverse events or when questions arise regarding providers' ability to deliver safe, quality patient care, and to address protected peer review process requirements, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs should direct the Under Secretary for Health to require VAMCs to periodically provide data on peer review triggers, including the number of providers that have exceeded the triggers as part of the protected peer review data VAMCs report to VISNs on a quarterly basis.

Agency Affected: Department of Veterans Affairs

Recommendation: To improve VHA's use of the protected peer review and non-protected processes to respond to individual providers involved in adverse events or when questions arise regarding providers' ability to deliver safe, quality patient care, and to address the non-protected FPPE process, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs should direct the Under Secretary for Health to develop more specific policy on the FPPE process, including documentation requirements such as the FPPE's purpose, time period covered, evaluator's assessment, and the summary of actions to be taken.

Agency Affected: Department of Veterans Affairs

Vet Service Dogs Update ► VA to Restart Suspended Study

The Department of Veterans Affairs plans to restart a study evaluating the use of service dogs to assist veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The study was suspended in August 2012, for the second time, when VA alleged that a vendor violated its contract and endangered the health of its dogs. At the time VA had paired 17 veterans with service dogs. The goal of the study, which was mandated by Congress in 2009, was to serve as many as 200 veterans. VA

expected to resume the study in less than a year, following an investigation and changes to the study design. In early NOV 2013 the agency indicated it was ready to revive the study when it published a request for market research from service dog organizations. Gina Jackson, a national VA spokeswoman, confirmed that the study will be restarted, with the first new dog pairings scheduled to take place as soon as May 2014. The appeal, otherwise known as a "request for information," indicates that VA is prepared to make significant changes to the study.

The contract for service dog providers this time will be five years instead of three. One of the new stipulations requires dogs to meet standards set by Assistance Dogs International or the American Kennel Club. There are now strict rules prohibiting the non-profit provider from requesting financial support or donations from a veteran, a concern that had been raised in the study's previous iteration. The study will also include emotional support dogs in addition to service dogs. The former may have a therapeutic effect, but is not covered by the American Disabilities Act, which guarantees the right of a service dog owner to bring his or her animal into private or public facilities. Veterans who use PTSD-trained service dogs say the animals help them manage the condition by performing tasks like waking a veteran from a nightmare or creating a buffer in large crowds or public places.

Deb Davis, community outreach manager for Paws With A Cause, a Michigan-based service dog organization that did not participate in the study but met with VA officials during the hiatus to discuss possible revisions to the study, said she was encouraged by the agency's new approach. The extended timeline and a new emphasis on the type and temperament of dog used by a provider indicated to Davis that VA had adapted to a tough learning curve for the betterment of the study. "We were very happy to see some adjustments that will make the results much more viable," Davis said. Paws With A Cause does not train PTSD service dogs largely because the field is so new and doing so would require the organization to hire a psychologist who specializes in PTSD. Davis said it had submitted information to VA's appeal to help the agency collect a breadth of data about how service dog organizations obtain animals and train them.

Veterans who are paired with a PTSD service dog often rave about how it improves their condition. Yet, there has been controversy over the expertise and professionalism of organizations that have emerged to serve the demand.

Christina Roof is a consultant and national assistance dog policy expert based in Washington, D.C., who previously worked with VA to develop clinical guidelines for its service dog program. She said that VA has approached restarting the study with appropriate caution. "I'm encouraged that they did stop, took a step back, went to experts out in the field, redesigned the program, and now they're going to do it right and protect veterans and the dogs," she said. When the study resumes next year, it will be open to non-profit organizations across the country. If the study's results show positive effects for veterans with PTSD, it is possible VA will consider a new health benefit that covers the maintenance of a PTSD service dog, just as it does for veterans who use a service animal for physical disabilities. [Source: Forbes | Rebecca Ruiz | 22 Nov 2013 +]

Vet Jobs Update ► Warriors 4 Wireless Launched

On 20 NOV, the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy joined with a coalition of private-sector partners from the telecommunications industry to launch "Warriors 4 Wireless," a new nonprofit program aimed at connecting veterans and returning service members to jobs in the rapidly growing wireless telecommunications industry. A White House release said the program includes stakeholders from Joining Forces -- a national initiative that provides opportunities and support to military members and their families -- as well as from the private sector, the federal government, the U.S. military, and industry trade associations committed to scaling successful training models for veterans with wireless-relevant skills. Warriors 4 Wireless builds on a Veterans IT Training and Certification program, launched at the White House in April 2013 in response to a call to action by President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama asking industries to make it easier for military service members and veterans to receive civilian training and certifications, according to the release.

Although the majority of IT specialists in the military receive training that is equivalent to their civilian IT counterparts, they typically do not have industry-recognized certifications that reflect the IT skills and expertise gained during service, the release said. "The administration is committed to the care of all service members, veterans, and their families," Army Col. Rich Morales, executive director of Joining Forces, said in the release. "We are proud to support initiatives like Warriors for Wireless that play a critical role in connecting members of the armed forces leaving military service to the jobs training and certification

necessary to obtain many high-tech, high-skilled jobs in the private sector." Federal Communications Commission Chairman Tom Wheeler said in the release, "I wholeheartedly salute the Warriors for Wireless initiative aimed at connecting our Nation's veterans and returning service members to jobs in the rapidly growing wireless telecommunications industry. It's a win for the increasing number of Americans across our nation who rely on wireless networks at work and at home, and the exciting new opportunities that these networks are helping create in health care, education and every corner of our economy. Let's work together to make it a success."

The Warriors 4 Wireless program is designed to help address the shortage of skilled jobs for returning veterans while satisfying the wireless industry's immediate need for skilled tower-climbers to rapidly, efficiently, and safely deploy wireless telecommunications equipment and facilities. The Warriors 4 Wireless pilot program was launched in Washington, D.C. in 2012, achieving an 86 percent job-placement rate for the more than 50 participating veterans, according to the release. Today's event will expand the pilot program to a nationwide initiative, with the launch of new partners and industry commitments. Industry partners -- including Cisco, American Tower, Dynis, and PCIA -- are supporting Warriors 4 Wireless in a number of ways, including by providing industry-recognized technical and safety training and certifications to veterans, developing new curricula and skills-training modules, and connecting transitioning service members to available wireless-industry jobs across the country, the release said. Among the new commitments announced at today's event:

- Dynis has trained and employed more than 50 servicemen and women through the Warriors 4 Wireless pilot program over the past year. Dynis will continue to support an expanded Warriors 4 Wireless program through equipment contributions and curriculum development and by providing training opportunities, training instructors, and funding.
- MasTec is providing training facilities and instructors to support Warriors 4 Wireless, and has committed to connect 1,500-plus expected MasTec job openings in the first half of 2014 to veterans and service members participating in the Warriors 4 Wireless program.
- American Tower Company is partnering with Warriors 4 Wireless to help launch careers in the wireless industry for returning service members. ATC

will provide participants access to select assets in the ATC tower portfolio for training and certification and it is working to help connect program graduates with potential employment opportunities at ATC. Additionally, ATC is supporting the design and implementation of the Warriors 4 Wireless Training Program at Aiken Technical College in South Carolina.

- Futures, Inc. is providing the "US IT Pipeline" online platform, originally developed for the IT Training and Certification Program launched last April, which will be the centralized hub for matching and connecting service members with civilian training, certifications, and employment opportunities as part of the Warriors 4 Wireless program.
- Cisco is committed to helping train, connect and hire veterans as they transition from the military to the private sector. Through support of the US IT Pipeline, Cisco will continue to work with Futures, Inc., and other Warriors 4 Wireless partners to provide training and access to high-skilled job opportunities to servicemen and women. Additionally, Cisco will provide support to help enable wireless employers and veteran job applicants conduct virtual interviews from anywhere around the globe.
- Outside Planet Magazine, a telecommunications industry publication, is supporting the mission of Warriors 4 Wireless by donating media and advertising support to raise awareness about these efforts.

In addition, Pricewaterhouse Cooper, T-Mobile, Novation, PCIA, the Wireless Infrastructure Association, CTIA, the Wireless Association, and the Competitive Carriers Association will also provide additional support and financial assistance to the initiative. Tom Kalil, deputy director for technology and innovation at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, said, "Today's employers require a workforce equipped with 21st-century skills and training. Our men and women in the armed forces are uniquely positioned with the knowledge and drive to succeed, but may lack certain industry qualifications. We applaud this initiative aimed at enabling thousands of service members to earn industry-recognized credentials and translate their military experience into private-sector careers." William Towery, a retired U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer 3 who received Fiber Optics Installer/Technician certifications and other certifications through the Warriors 4 Wireless pilot program has a blog post which can be viewed at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/11/19/guest-blog-how-i-transitioned-high-tech-job-after-20-years-military>. [Source: DoD Daily Digest Bulletin | AFPS | 20 Nov 2013 ++]

Homeless Vets Update ► 24% Reduction Since 2010

The Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Housing and Urban Development on 21 NOV announced that a new national report shows a 24 percent reduction in homelessness among Veterans since 2010. The report also showed an 8 percent reduction between January 2012 and January 2013. The decline keeps the Obama administration on track to meet the goal of ending Veterans' homelessness in 2015. "We are on the right track in the fight to end homelessness among Veterans. While this trend is encouraging news, we know that there is more work to do," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "As President Obama said, we're not going to rest until every Veteran who has fought for America has a home in America. The results in the latest report are a credit to the effort given by our dedicated staff, and our federal, state, and community partners who are committed to ending Veterans' homelessness." "We're making real and significant progress to reduce homelessness in this country and now is not the time to retreat from doing what we know works," said U.S. Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan. "If we're going to end homelessness as we know it, we need a continued bipartisan commitment from Congress to break the cycle trapping our most vulnerable citizens, especially our Veterans, between living in a shelter or a life on the streets. I understand these are tough budget times but these are proven strategies that are making a real difference. We simply can't balance our budget on the backs of those living on the margins." The 2013 Point-in-Time Estimates of Homelessness, prepared by HUD, estimates there were 57,849 homeless Veterans on a single night in January in the United States, an 8 percent decline since 2012 and a 24 percent decline since 2010.

VA has made ending Veterans' homelessness by the end of 2015 a top priority, undertaking an unprecedented campaign to dramatically increase awareness of VA services for homeless Veterans and Veterans at risk of becoming homeless. While the number of homeless people in the United States dropped by 4 percent since 2012, according to the 2013 report, Veterans' homelessness has shown a more robust decline. During a period of prolonged economic recovery, the Obama Administration has been able to reduce the number of homeless Veterans by 24 percent, breaking previous patterns of increased homelessness during difficult

economies. Earlier this year, HUD and VA also announced the award of nearly \$70 million of HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing grants to further assist in addressing the issue of Veterans' homelessness. The program combines rental assistance from HUD with case management and clinical services provided by VA. Since 2008, a total of 58,140 vouchers have been awarded and 43,371 formerly homeless Veterans are currently in homes of their own because of the joint HUD-VA program.

One of the tools VA uses in its systematic approach to prevent and end Veterans' homelessness is the Supportive Services for Veteran Families grant program. In July, VA announced the award of nearly \$300 million in grants to 319 community agencies to help approximately 120,000 homeless and at-risk Veterans and their families. More recently, VA has announced \$8.8 million in grants for 164 projects to acquire vans for homeless providers and to rehabilitate housing, plus \$4.9 million in grants for 25 community-based projects to enhance services for Veterans. The grants promote housing stability among homeless and at-risk Veterans and their families. The grants can have an immediate impact, helping lift Veterans out of homelessness or providing aid in emergencies that put Veterans and their families at risk of homelessness. More information about VA's homeless programs is available at www.va.gov/homeless. Details about the Supportive Services for Veteran Families program are online at www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf.asp. [Source: VA News Release 21 Nov 2013 +]

Vet Education Legislation ► 2013 SERVE Act Introduced

On 14 NOV Senators Tim Kaine (D-VA) and Saxby Chambliss (R-GA), bipartisan members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, introduced S.1717, the Servicemember Education Reform and Vocational Enhancement (SERVE) Act of 2013, a bill to improve the quality of educational programs for servicemembers and veterans and help them transition into the civilian workforce. According to the Senator's joint press release it will improve the quality of education and training for veterans and military members taking advantage of educational benefits provided by the Dept. of Veterans Affairs and the Dept. of Defense. Here is a quick summary of what the legislation seeks to accomplish:

- Require institutions accepting VA or DoD educational benefits to meet minimum standards by ensuring consistency between federal agencies. Raising the bar on minimum standards that educational institutions must meet ensures servicemembers are getting a quality education.
- Improve transparency of education and training programs by requiring institutions to disclose information such as graduation rates, withdrawal policies, and program costs to students and by ensuring programs fully deliver what they advertise.
- Require these institutions to provide access to academic and/or career counseling for military and veteran students in hopes of not only improving their chances of graduating, but also helping prepare them for future careers.
- Facilitate the use of VA and DoD educational benefits for employment training programs by creating a five-state pilot program. States will be charged with developing best practices needed to ensure that quality employment training, apprenticeship, and on-the-job training programs are eligible for participation in the Post-9/11 GI Bill program.
- Require an annual report to relevant Senate and House Committees on which schools and programs veteran and military students are putting their educational benefits toward, the number of complaints received, and recommendations for further legislative action to improve educational outcomes and ensure the greatest return on investment in these federal programs. [Source: Military.com | Terry Howell | 18 Nov 2013]

Following is a Summary of Veteran Related Legislation Introduced in the House and Senate Since the Last Bulletin was Published

- H.R.3451 — Veterans Conservation Corps Act of 2013. A bill to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a veterans conservation corps, and for other purposes
- H.R.3453 — Putting Our Veterans Back to Work Act of 2013. A bill to reauthorize the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011, to provide assistance to small businesses owned by veterans, to improve enforcement of employment and reemployment rights of members of the uniformed services, and for other purposes.

- H.R.3469 — SERV Act. A bill to amend titles 5 and 38, United States Code, to clarify the veteran status of an individual based on the attendance of the individual at a preparatory school of a service academy, and for other purposes.
- H.R.3474 — Hire More Heroes Act of 2013. A bill to amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to allow employers to exempt employees with health coverage under TRICARE or the Veterans Administration from being taken into account for purposes of the employer mandate under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.
- H.R.3477 — Veterans Legal Support Act of 2013. A bill to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide support to university law school programs that are designed to provide legal assistance to veterans, and for other purposes.
- H.R.3493 — Servicemembers Transition Improvement Act of 2013. A bill to require a pilot program on the provision of certain information to State veterans agencies to facilitate the transition of members of the Armed Forces from military service to civilian life.
- H.R.3499 — Rural Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act. A bill to provide for advance appropriations for certain information technology accounts of the Department of Veterans Affairs, to include mental health professionals in training programs of the Department, and for other purposes.
- H.R.3506 — Honor Our Fallen Heroes With Dignity Act of 2013. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of the Army to permit visitors to leave appropriate items on gravesites and markers located in section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery, and for other purposes.
- H.R.3507 — 21st Century Care for Military and Veterans Act. A bill to amend titles 10 and 38, United States Code, to expand the use of telehealth under the TRICARE program and in the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.
- H.R.3514 — Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Enhancement Act. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to expand the authority of veterans to transfer entitlement to Post-9/11 Educational Assistance to dependents.
- H.R.3515 — Increased Age Limit for Post-9/11 Education Assistance Dependents Act. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to increase

the age limit for children using transferred Post-9/11 Educational Assistance.

- H.R.3516 — Veterans and Armed Forces Health Promotion Act of 2013. A bill to improve health care furnished by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense by increasing access to complementary and alternative medicine and other approaches to wellness and preventive care, and for other purposes.
- H.R.3521 — Department of Veterans Affairs Major Medical Facility Lease Authorization Act of 2013. A bill to authorize Department of Veterans Affairs major medical facility leases, and for other purposes.
- H.R.3554 — Veterans Access to Care Act. A bill to amend the Public Health Service Act to designate certain medical facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs as health professional shortage areas, and for other purposes.
- H.R.3569 — Protecting the Freedoms and Benefits for All Veterans Act. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to add a definition of spouse for purposes of veteran benefits that recognizes new State definitions of spouse.
- H.R.3600 — GI Education Benefit Fairness Act. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for clarification regarding the children to whom entitlement to educational assistance may be transferred under the Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program.
- H.R.3615 — Careers for Heroes Act. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the hiring of veterans by the Federal Government.
- S.1662 — Veterans Health Care Improvement Act of 2013. A bill to provide for the introduction of pay-for-performance compensation mechanisms into contracts of the Department of Veterans Affairs with community-based outpatient clinics for the provision of health care services, and for other purposes.
- S.1682 — Veterans Education Counseling Act of 2013. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to make certain clarifications and improvements in the academic and vocational counseling programs administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.
- S.1707 — Vulnerable Veterans Housing Reform Act. A bill to exclude consideration as income under the United States Housing Act of 1937 payments of pensions made under section 1521 of title 38, United States

Code, to veterans who are in need of regular aid and attendance, and for other purposes.

- S.1717 — SERVE Act of 2013. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve oversight of educational assistance provided under laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Secretary of Defense, and for other purposes.
- S.1736 — SERVE Act. A bill to amend titles 5 and 38, United States Code, to clarify the veteran status of an individual based on the attendance of the individual at a preparatory school of a service academy, and for other purposes.
- S.1740 — Department of Veterans Affairs Major Medical Facility Lease Authorization Act of 2013. A bill to authorize Department of Veterans Affairs major medical facility leases, and for other purposes.
- S.1755 — Dignified Interment of Our Veterans Act of 2013. A bill to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to conduct a study on matters relating to the claiming and interring of unclaimed remains of veterans, and for other purposes. [Source: <http://www.loc.gov> & <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills> 29 Nov 2013 ++]

POW/MIA Update ► Identified 15 thru 30 Nov 2013

"Keeping the Promise", "Fulfill their Trust" and "No one left behind" are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II (73,000+), Korean War (7,900+), Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,655), 1991 Gulf War (0), and OEF/OIF (6). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home. For a listing of all personnel accounted for since 2007 refer to http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/accounted_for.

For additional information on the Defense Department's mission to account for missing Americans, visit the Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) web site at <http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo> or call or call (703) 699-1169. The remains of the following

MIA/POW's have been recovered, identified, and scheduled for burial since the publication of the last RAO Bulletin:

Vietnam

The DPMO announced that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, missing from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Staff Sgt. Lawrence Woods, 5th Special Forces Group, 1st Special Forces, was lost on Oct. 24, 1964, near the Cambodian border. He was accounted for on Sept. 27, 2013, and will be buried in early 2014.

Korea

The DPMO announced 19 OCT that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, missing from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Cpl. George W. Conklin Jr., Company I, 3rd Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division, was lost on Dec. 3, 1950, near the Chosin Reservoir in North Korea. He was accounted for Oct. 30, 2013. Conklin was 18 when he went missing in early December 1950, following a battle in North Korea with Chinese forces, according to the Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel office. In 2004, a Joint U.S./Democratic People's Republic of Korea team surveyed the grounds where Conklin and his fellow members of Company 1, 31st Regimental Combat Team, had fought. The team discovered a mass grave filled with human remains wearing uniforms that belonged to U.S. infantry and field artillery personnel. Evidence and forensic identification tools, including DNA from Conklin's brother, were used to confirm his identity. He was buried with full military Honors with his parents, siblings and other family members 9 Nov. in Phelps, N.Y.

World War II

The DPMO announced that two Army Air Force Officers missing in action from World War II have been accounted for and are being returned to their families for burial with full military honors.

- Army Air Force 1st Lt. Louis L. Longman, 433rd Fighter Squadron, 475th Fighter Group, was lost on April 16, 1944, in Papua New Guinea. He was accounted for on Nov. 1, 2013, and will be buried in Clinton, Iowa, next spring.

- Army Air Force Capt. Franklin B. Tostevin, 67th Tactical Reconnaissance Group, was lost on March 20, 1945, when his F-6P aircraft crashed near Eigen, Germany. He was accounted for Oct. 30, 2013, and will be buried at Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver on Dec. 13. [Source: http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/news_releases/ Nov 2013 ++]

China's Military Buildup ► Congressional Advisory Panel Report

A congressional advisory panel sounded a warning 20 NOV about China's military buildup, predicting Beijing could possess the largest fleet of modern submarine and combatant ships in the western Pacific by 2020. The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission said China's military modernization is altering the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region and challenging decades of U.S. pre-eminence. The commission advises Congress on the national security implications of the relationship between the two world powers. The groups' annual report also examined cyberintrusions from China, the trade and economic relationship with the U.S., and China's global ties.

The primary recommendation is for Congress to fund shipbuilding and increase the Navy's operational presence region in support of the Defense Department's goal to base 60 percent of its warships in the Asia-Pacific region by 2020, compared with about 50 percent currently.

That's a priority of the Obama administration's diplomatic and military rebalance to Asia after a decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq. The commission said it welcomes the policy, but added: "There is growing concern among U.S. allies and partners that the Department of Defense will be unable to follow through on its commitment to the rebalance due to declining defense budget and continuing security challenges elsewhere." The panel also recommended that the U.S. improve air and maritime capabilities of allies in the region. Last year, the Chinese Foreign Ministry accused the commission of "indulging in Cold War mentality." Beijing says it has no offensive intent, and says Washington of trying to contain it. The U.S. far outstrips China in military spending, but in Asia faces a greater burden in fielding forces far from its own shores.

Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, voiced concern that at a time when the U.S. military faces budget cuts, China's military spending is increasing and its leaders want to increase combat readiness. "Its current pace of military modernization shows that Beijing is developing the ability to project power and influence further abroad," McKeon (R-CA) told a committee hearing 20 NOV. Rep. Adam Smith (D-WA) said that while the U.S. should monitor military developments in China, an adversarial relationship between the two powers is not inevitable. "There is no reason that we should have China as an enemy," Smith said. "We should certainly look for ways to work together."

The report's assessment of China's naval capabilities draws on information from think tanks and U.S. naval intelligence. It said China is known to be building seven classes of vessels, including nuclear and diesel submarines, destroyers and other warships. It expects the naval modernization to continue for the "foreseeable future." China's is also advancing its capabilities in space, which is viewed as critical because of the use of communication satellites for intelligence and modern warfare. For the first time, there are public indications China may be developing the ability to target satellites at the high altitude used by the U.S. global positioning system and many military and intelligence satellites, according to the report. But China described a May suborbital rocket launch it conducted as part of a high-altitude scientific experiment. [Source: AP | Matthew Pennington | 20 Nov 2013]

Tricare Dental Program Update ► 2014 Changes

Effective Feb. 1, 2014, the TRICARE Dental Program (TDP) monthly premium rates will change. These rate changes are regular annual increases that are part of the TDP contract. Ongoing premiums can be paid via a member's payroll allotment/deduction. Members who are not able to pay using this method can opt for electronic funds transfer or credit card payments. Visit the Metlife TRICARE site for information regarding payment options. The following lists your new TDP monthly premium rates:

- Single Premium (one family member): \$10.96
- Family Premium (more than one family member): \$32.89

- Selected Reserve of the Ready Reserve and Individual Ready Reserve (Special Mobilization Only) Sponsor-Only Premium: \$10.96
- Single Premium1 (one family member, excluding sponsor): \$27.40
- Family Premium (more than one family member, excluding sponsor): \$82.23
- Sponsor and Family Premium: \$93.19
- Individual Ready Reserve (Non-Special Mobilization) Sponsor-Only Premium: \$27.40
- Single Premium1 (one family member, excluding sponsor): \$27.40
- Family Premium (more than one family member, excluding sponsor): \$82.23
- Sponsor and Family Premium: \$109.63

Under the TDP, there is a \$1,300 annual maximum benefit per beneficiary, per plan year for non-orthodontic services. Each plan year begins May 1 and ends April 30. Payments for certain diagnostic and preventive services are not applied against the annual maximum. There is an additional \$1,200 maximum for dental care necessitated by an accident. [Source: NAUS Weekly Update 22 Nov 2013 +]

Pension Loans/Advances ► ASSURE Act Targets Retiree Exploitation

Congressman Matt Cartwright (D-PA.) has introduced the Annuity Safety and Security Under Reasonable Enforcement (ASSURE) Act H.R.3310 along with Rep. Gerry Connolly (D-VA). The legislation, introduced with the support of 38 colleagues, aims to protect federal and military retirees by expanding ‘Truth in Lending Act’ disclosure provisions to any situation where a federal or military pension is used as consideration for an “advance.” The bill also caps the interest rate on such an “advance” at prime plus six percent. Currently, there is no private right of action in many of the applicable federal statutes that prohibit pension assignments. This bill allows for such an action.

These simple measures will protect federal retirees from exploitation, allow individuals to assert their rights in court, and ensure that retirees maintain their financial independence. “While current federal law already prohibits federal and military retirees from assigning their pensions to a third party, many companies

have resorted to skirting state and federal laws by requiring the retiree to deposit his or her pension in a separate bank account controlled by the firm,” said Cartwright. “Moreover, firms refer to the product they sell as a “pension advance” rather than a loan. In reality, these “advances” require borrowers to sign over all or part of their monthly pension checks and carry interest rates that are often many times higher than those on credit cards.” A review by The New York Times more than two dozen contracts for pension-based loans found that after factoring in various fees, the effective interest rates ranged from 27 percent to 106 percent — information not disclosed in the ads or in the contracts themselves. Furthermore, to qualify for one of the loans, borrowers are sometimes required to take out a life insurance policy that names the lender as the sole beneficiary.

In May 2013 the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee launched an investigation into this practice. Moreover, several state regulators initiated investigations into these practices, most notably in New York and Massachusetts. Unfortunately, the pension lending companies continue to target retirees who often have little or no recourse. “Federal workers, military career servicemen and women, and postal workers spend a lifetime earning a federal annuity, an annuity to which they’ve contributed each paycheck. Federal annuities were designed to provide retirees with a stream of guaranteed income that gives them a sense of financial security in their golden years. Unfortunately, pension advance companies often prey upon federal retirees and veterans,” said Cartwright.

“The ASSURE Act provides protection to American retirees from predatory lenders who go to great lengths to target and mislead retirees in their most vulnerable moments,” said Jeanette Dwyer, President of the National Rural Letter Carriers’ Association, endorsing the ASSURE Act. “Through selling ‘pension advances’, they coerce federal and military retirees to sign away the rights to the retirement benefits that they worked their whole lives to accrue, only to leave them no recourse after the fact. The ASSURE Act caps interest rates on these types of loans and creates a private right of action to protect those exploited by predatory lenders.” Supporting Organizations for this legislation include:

- National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association (NARFE)

- American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE)
- American Foreign Service Association (AFSA)
- National Association of Postal Supervisors (NAPS)
- American Postal Workers Union (APWU)
- National Association of Federal Veterinarians (NAFV)
- Military Order of the Purple Heart
- Professional Aviation Safety Specialists (PASS)
- Senior Executives Association (SEA)
- National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE)
- National Rural Letter Carriers' Association (NRLCA)
- The Retired Enlisted Association (TREA)
- Federal Managers Association [Source: TREA | News for the Enlisted | 18 Nov 2013 ++]

Walz Announces Measure to Name Mankato Vets Facility after Late War Hero and Local Legend

Washington, DC [12/10/13] – Today, Representative Tim Walz announced the introduction of a bipartisan bill in the U.S. House of Representatives to formally name the Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in Mankato, MN after late war hero and local legend Lyle Pearson, formally of North Mankato, who passed away January 11, 2013. The entire Minnesota U.S. House of Representatives Congressional Delegation co-sponsored the legislation.

Pearson enlisted in the US Army Air Corps in May of 1942. After completing training as a pilot for the B-17 bomber, he was assigned to the 15th Air Force in Europe. First Lieutenant Pearson flew the equivalent of 50 combat missions over occupied territory until he was shot down over Italy in December of 1944. He spent six months as a prisoner of war until the camp was liberated in May 1945. Lyle was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, multiple Air Medals, and the Purple Heart for his bravery.

“Lyle Pearson was the true definition of an American hero,” Representative Walz said. “Through his lifelong dedication to service, both in and out of uniform, Lyle left a profound and everlasting impact on southern Minnesota and the country as a whole. I’m proud to offer this measure in honor of his memory and life of service to our great nation.”

After the war, Lyle rejoined his wife at their family farm, but the desire to serve never left him. Beginning in 1957, Lyle administered programs for the Nicollet County Juvenile Court and Nicollet County Court Services, first as the Chief Probation Officer and then as the Director of Court Services. In 1969, he was named the Minnesota Corrections Man of the Year.

In 1961, he served as the Minnesota Department Commander of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) and in 1975, as National Commander, presenting legislative programs on behalf of the DAV to the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees.

Throughout his life, Lyle served in various community leadership positions, including as a board member of the Minnesota Valley Action Council, 4-H club leader, fight judge for the Golden Gloves Boxing program, and for over 54 years as a volunteer at the St. Peter State Hospital.