



Federal Update for February 3 – 7, 2014



DoD Benefit Cuts Update ► Pentagon Wants Cuts Later

Pentagon leaders support dramatic changes to military retirement. Just not right now. And not for existing retirees. And maybe not the plan Congress has already passed. In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on 28 JAN, defense officials pushed for a repeal of the military retirement changes passed by Congress last month as part of a comprehensive budget deal. They called the move unexpected and unfair, saying that any large changes in military compensation should not include current troops and retirees, who have been promised specific benefits and retirement payouts already. But Christine Fox, acting deputy secretary of defense, also noted that changes to compensation such as troops' pay, health care benefits, and retirement payouts will be needed soon, to keep personnel costs from overwhelming the rest of the military budget. "We cannot afford to sustain the rate of growth in military compensation that we've experienced over the last decade," she said. "We must find ways to slow it down ... if the department is going to maintain the current force."

Fox said officials want to wait until later this year when the military compensation and retirement modernization commission will issue its report before making any further pay and benefits changes. But she stopped short of demanding an immediate repeal of the retirement change — a 1 percent reduction in the annual cost-of-living calculation for working-age retirees. That rankled the lawmakers before her and veterans groups sitting behind the witness table, both who are incensed over the retirement reduction vote. The cost-of-living change will save the government about \$5.7 billion over the next decade, according to Congressional Budget Office estimates. Lawmakers on the budget committee argued in December the savings were needed to finalize the larger budget deal, and remove mandatory sequestration budget cuts which have haunted Pentagon planners for two years. But since the retirement changes were adopted, dozens of

lawmakers have railed against the decision. Democratic senators on the committee took turns attacking the measure while also defending their vote for the plan as a necessary evil that needs to be amended.

Congress has already passed one large correction, restoring those cost-of-living cuts for most medically retired veterans. SASC Chairman Carl Levin (D-MI) argued a repeal is needed “because (the change) targets a single group — military retirees — to help address the budget problems of the federal government as a whole.” Veterans groups have offered similar complaints, and said the move breaks promises made to troops who have made many sacrifices on behalf of their country. Paul Rieckhoff, chief executive officer of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, called the move “a betrayal” which has hurt morale and compromised recruiting. The Military Officers Association of America estimates the retirement change will cost a typical enlisted member who retires at 40 about \$83,000 over 20 years, and cost a typical retired officer more than \$124,000 over 20 years. That’s based on an estimated retirement package totaling about \$1 million over that span.

The Senate is expected to take up a measure this week repealing the retirement change, as part of a veterans legislative package dealing with dozens of benefits and health care changes. But that measure faces an uncertain future in the House — Senate leaders haven’t specified how they’ll pay for the measure, and House leaders have demanded clear offsets for all new spending. Meanwhile, more than a dozen repeal bills are pending in Congress, but none with broad bipartisan support. Veterans advocates have loudly complained that if a repeal doesn’t happen soon, focus on the retirement reduction might fade, making it even more difficult to remove. In a press conference with veterans before the hearing, committee member Sen. Mark Begich (D-AK) said he is confident a fix can be found soon. “We have just completed several appropriations bills that many in the media didn’t think we’d ever get done,” he said. “There’s a different tone now ... and I think it’s clear a lot of people want to correct this.”

DECA Budget Cuts Update ► DoD Discussing \$1B Over 3 Years

The Defense Department is discussing a \$1 billion cut over the next three years to the commissary's budget in a move that could lead to a widespread closure of stores, Pentagon and industry officials said. Word of the pending cut comes two months after news that the Pentagon's top financial advisor ordered the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) to produce a plan to close most stateside commissaries should the need arise. The commissary agency currently operates 247 stores worldwide. Under the requested closure plan, all but 24 rural stores stateside and stores located outside the continental U.S. would close. DeCA currently receives \$1.4 billion annually in tax payer funding. The potential Defense Department cut would reduce the agency's budget over three years until it stood at \$400 million fiscal 2017, sources confirmed to Military.com. Starting with the 2015 budget, Congress would be forced to either find funding elsewhere and give the Defense Department more than its requested commissary budget, or allow officials to make sweeping changes to the commissary system, including potential closures.

"If DeCA's budget is cut to such a magnitude, it would ultimately require DeCA to close stores or change the way it delivers the commissary benefit," a source with knowledge of the proposed cuts told Military.com. "But those options would mean military families would have to pay more for their groceries, significantly reducing the non-pay compensation benefit provided through the commissaries. Once again, military families are being forced to sacrifice their hard-earned money to achieve deficit reductions by having their benefits reduced or eliminated." Pentagon leaders are under pressure to find savings throughout military spending following the passage of sequestration and the associated \$500 billion cut to the defense budget over the next decade. Military officials have said all DoD agencies will be reviewed in order to cut costs to include family programs. DeCA's \$1.4 billion annual budget funds employee salaries, keeps the lights on in stores and pays for food to be shipped to overseas locations. A congressionally mandated five percent surcharge on all commissary sales pays for other operation costs such as construction and building maintenance. A recent grocery store study by DeCA found that using the commissary saves shoppers an average of 30.5 percent annually when compared to other stores off base.

The cuts will be incremental and will appear first in the department's 2015 budget request, expected to be released next month. The full \$1 billion cut would not be included in the request until 2017, sources said. Implementing the cuts

incrementally may be a way for DoD officials to test Congress' acceptance of the cuts, sources said. Reducing the commissary's budget could be a strategy to force Congress to fund other Defense Department priorities, sources said. "The strategy may be to cut DeCA's budget and basically force Congress' hand to offset the cuts. However, if Congress doesn't fill the hole in the first year it basically gives DoD permission to continue to cut DeCA's budget going forward," an industry source said. It's unclear how the Obama administration will react to the proposed cuts as the White House must approve the defense budget before sending it to the Hill for approval. Last year, President Obama told Marines at Camp Pendleton, Calif. that closing commissaries is "not how a great nation should be treating its military and military families."

DoD personnel and readiness officials declined to confirm the cuts on the record – but did not deny that major commissary cuts may be on the table. "We are in the process of finalizing our budget submission for Fiscal Year 2015, and we cannot provide any specifics at this time. I can tell you that no commissaries have closed, and no commissaries are about to close," said Joy Clabaugh, a spokesman for the personnel and readiness office of the assistant secretary of defense. "As the Department of Defense faces an increasingly constrained budget environment, we are reviewing all programs to identify cost-cutting and money-saving opportunities. We have a process in place to finalize and announce budget decisions, and right now, we are assessing all options. By law, DoD cannot close or consolidate any commissary stores without giving Congress written, 90 day notice and justification. If DoD's reduced commissary budget request is authorized, the department will need to find significant cost savings within the commissary system, which could include closing some stateside stores or changing the way food is shipped to commissaries overseas, sources said.

DeCA last year weighed several cost saving or revenue increasing options, including adding beer and wine to their inventory or requesting that Congress double the commissary product surcharge from 5 to 10 percent, said Tom Gordy, president of the Armed Forces Marketing Council, which lobbies for brokers doing business with military stores, at a November hearing of the House Armed Services Committee. However, some within the DoD and commissary system do not look on either of those options favorably. Critics say adding alcohol to commissary shelves would cause competition with the Exchange systems, which operates for profit. And increasing either prices or the surcharge would lower patron savings.

The pending cut will be the most drastic way the commissary system has been impacted by DoD budget woes thus far. Commissaries were closed six extra days due to sequestration in 2013 when weekly furloughs were ordered for all DoD employees, including commissary workers. They were closed an additional five days over the government shutdown in October.

News of the pending government shutdown and corresponding commissary closures in October resulted in one of the largest sales days ever for the agency at \$30.6 million, more than double their normal daily sales volume. Shoppers flocked to the stores filling their carts with meat. Military family members nationwide reported verbal fights and bickering in stores as shoppers vied for items. Candace Wheeler, a vice president for American Logistics Association & The Coalition to Save Our Military Shopping Benefits, said she expects servicemembers and their families to reach out to multiple lawmakers to ensure such a cut to the commissary does not pass. "The military community will fight this devastating cut to their earned commissary benefit," said Candace Wheeler, spokesperson for The Coalition to Save Our Military Shopping Benefits.

"Commissaries are vital to helping military families make ends meet and provide much needed employment for veterans and family members, cutting them would be another broken promise," added Wheeler. [Source: Military.com | Amy Bushatz & Richard Sisk | 22 Dec 2014 ++]

DoD Benefit Cuts Update ► CBO Looks at TRICARE Options

Pushing working-age military retirees out of Tricare Prime could save the Pentagon nearly \$90 billion over the next 10 years, a measure that would generate the most savings of the various options recently considered by the Congressional Budget Office to trim the defense health budget. In a report released 16 JAN, CBO analysts said the cost-cutting options that would make the biggest dent in the \$52 billion Defense Department medical budget would be those that increased military retirees' contributions to their own health care. According to the CBO, proposals to increase Tricare enrollment fees and copayments for working-age retirees could save \$24.1 billion from 2015 to 2023, while introducing minimum out-of-pocket charges for beneficiaries using Tricare for Life would save roughly \$18.4 billion. But banning working age retirees from

the Pentagon's HMO-style Prime plan could save \$89.6 billion — an amount difficult to ignore, budget experts said.

“Shifting current cost-sharing arrangements so that beneficiaries pay a greater percentage of their health care costs would reduce DoD's spending significantly ... primarily by encouraging people to leave Tricare in favor of other providers. It also would encourage those who continued to participate in Tricare to use fewer services,” the report states. CBO warned, however, that estimating the entire potential savings to the federal budget if the options were implemented is difficult, because they would force some Tricare users to other federal health programs, such as the Veterans Health Administration, or use nontaxable employer-offered care, which would lower the revenue those options generate.

Veterans advocates have long been concerned about the impact of Tricare fee increases on their members. In 2013, 171,000 retirees and their families lost access to Tricare Prime — a change that had been in the works since 2007 — but they were not told about it until just months before, setting off a firestorm of complaints. And each year, Congress has thwarted Pentagon efforts to increase fees sharply or implement enrollment payments for some programs. “The proposed DoD increases have been very troubling to our beneficiaries,” Gold Star Wives President Sandra Drew told the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission in November. Pentagon officials have sought to assuage fears, however. Speaking to *Military Times* 8 JAN, Defense Health Agency acting deputy director Al Middleton said the military health system must tread carefully in restricting retiree access to Prime at military hospitals because they often represent the most challenging cases that allow military medical personnel to keep their skills sharp. “It would be a worry to push this group from medical care because the clinical material would evaporate,” Middleton said.

For its analysis, CBO considered three main areas in which DoD could control costs: improving chronic disease management; increasing efficiencies within the military health program and changing retirees' access to Tricare. Analysts concluded that the savings from educating patients on better monitoring their conditions and improving disease management would “be small, tens of millions of dollars each year.” In terms of streamlining administrative costs, CBO examined the potential savings of closing the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences and concluded that those savings also would be small because they

would be offset by the costs of increasing the number of medical school scholarships needed to maintain force medical readiness. Also, the report said, the school is so small, shuttering it would only save “a few million to about \$150 million, significantly less than the savings that would result from cost-sharing options.” In 2012, the Defense Department spent \$52 billion on health care. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Patricia Kime | 17 Jan 2014 ++]

DoD Religious Expression Update ► New Grooming Standard Policies

A clean shave and a boot-camp buzz cut are no longer mandatory for adherents of religions whose grooming practices differ from those traditionally required by the U.S. military. The Pentagon announced 22 JAN that beards, turbans, religious body art and other previously off-limits manifestations of spiritual devotion can now be allowed throughout the military. The policy also OKs other religious practices not related to appearance. The requests for religious accommodation should "reflect sincerely held beliefs" and not damage military readiness, unit cohesion or good order and discipline, according to a revised Defense Department instruction on accommodation of religious practices. The policy has its limits, but is designed to allow troops free expression of their religion, as required by Congress in the 2013 National Defense Authorization act, a spokesman said. Jews, Sikhs and Muslims in the military are among those who in recent years have sought greater latitude in order to comply with their religions.

"When requests for accommodation are made, the needs of the requesting servicemember are balanced against the needs of mission accomplishment," Pentagon spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Nathan Christensen wrote in an email. "Only if it is determined that the needs of mission accomplishment outweigh the needs of the servicemember may the request be denied." The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in December sent a letter to Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel about department policies it said "may result in the unnecessary exclusion of Sikh Americans and Americans of other religious faiths from military service based on their religious beliefs manifested in their dress and grooming." Requests for accommodation that don't conflict with standing DOD policies -- such as allowing troops to engage in prayers required by their religion throughout the day -- can be dealt with by immediate commanders, he said. Others that butt up against existing policies, such as the wearing of beards or headgear, will need waivers issued by military

department secretaries, or by military officers no lower than heads of personnel and manpower for each service. Reaction to the policy Wednesday was diverse and intense.

- Rabbi Sanford Dresin, director of military programs at the Aleph Institute, which waged a successful legal battle to win a Jewish chaplain's right to wear a full beard, said he was surprised and cheered by the new policy. "If this is all true, I'm ecstatic to say the least," he said. "I think it demonstrates sensitivity and respect for multiculturalism." Dresin said he was gearing up to contend with the Marine Corps over the right of Jewish Marines to wear yarmulkes, headwear many Jews feel their religion requires them to wear. He said he now hopes the new policy makes the effort unnecessary. Dresin, a chaplain endorser for DOD, said it would also make recruiting Jewish chaplains easier. "There remains a shortage of Jewish chaplains in the military and I feel that I will be able to provide additional chaplains if this is the case," he said.
- Mikey Weinstein, president of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation -- which battles what he describes as fundamentalist Christian domination of the military -- said the relatively small numbers of non-Christian practitioners who benefit from the new rules would be dwarfed by the number of Christians who use it as cover to try to impose their belief system. DOD will find it harder to fight the spread of homophobia, anti-Islam sentiment, misogyny and anti-Semitism with the new policy, he predicted. "Far from this being all about beards and turbans for Sikhs or yarmulke for Jewish personnel, I am concerned over a potential for a new tsunami of fundamentalist Christian oppression and tyranny from superiors to their subordinates," Weinstein said.
- Ron Crews, executive director of the Chaplains Alliance for Religious Liberty, an evangelical group that often takes issue with Weinstein, welcomed the ruling. He said the organization's members are concerned that with recent changes in DOD policies governing open service of gays in the military and allowing benefits for same-sex spouses, they would be limited in expressing their faith's teachings on homosexuality. The new ruling provides some assurance, he said. "Our initial response is that we are grateful that DOD is taking seriously Section 533 that was passed in the FY13 NDAA," he said. "And we're wanting to make sure that military

members are able to exercise their religious liberties without any fear of recrimination." [Source: Stars & Stripes | Chris Carroll | 22 Jan 2014 ++]

DoD/VA eBenefits Portal Update ► 15 Jan Glitch Impact on Vet Data

The software glitch that forced the Department of Veterans Affairs to take down the eBenefits Web portal over the weekend may have affected far more veterans than initially reported and enabled anyone who was logged in to alter the personal information contained in an unknown number of records. VA has been investigating a problem with the joint VA-Defense Department eBenefits system since 15 JAN when several veterans reported being able to see the personal information belonging to other veterans when they logged into the system. An internal VA memo obtained by FedScoop showed approximately 10,000 veterans had logged into the system during the time frame when the glitch was discovered. Subsequently it was revealed that slightly over 5,000 vets were online during the time and could have been affected.

New video footage obtained by FedScoop from Eric Grzelak, a disabled veteran who has tried unsuccessfully to alert VA to the problems, shows the glitch exposed the private records of multiple veterans for every person who was logged in. In addition, Grzelak's video evidence shows it was possible to alter the records, placing at risk the private information of potentially tens of thousands or more veterans. "I could see someone's name, date of birth, Social Security number, what disabilities they had [and] how much they got paid," Grzelak told FedScoop. "Everything you would look at would pull up someone else's info. It would change every time you refreshed the page." FedScoop has agreed not to show the video footage because it reveals the private information belonging to Grzelak and other veterans.

Grzelak first became aware something was wrong with the system when he logged into the portal to check on the status of a claim. But instead of showing Grzelak's benefits summary, it displayed an application for an increase in compensation based on unemployment belonging to a different veteran. The application included the veteran's name, address, telephone number, Social Security number and VA file number. Grzelak immediately tried to edit his own claim. But that page asked him to verify an address he didn't recognize. "I thought

it was a security thing to verify it was me, so I said no,” Grzelak said. “Then, I put my address in. When I hit next, it pulled up some random guy with all his info, [but] with my address that I just updated. So you could change people’s info if you wanted. So I’m not sure if this poor guy’s stuff is going to start coming to my house.”

The eBenefits portal is managed jointly by VA and DOD, and allows veterans and their dependents to access their medical and educational benefits, claims and a wide variety of forms and military documents. Included in that information is the ability to update direct deposit information, generate home loan certificates of eligibility, view DOD TRICARE medical information, military personnel records and VA payment histories. More than 2.8 million veterans living in 180 countries have registered with the portal, which recorded more than 4.3 million visits in 2013. The eBenefits portal was back online late Sunday night, but there was no mention of why the site had been down or if veterans should check their accounts for accuracy. Grzelak said he did not see any problems when he logged in around 11 p.m. ET. “I think it’s a huge deal that I was able to change someone’s info,” Grzelak said. “Everyone needs to check now to make sure all their information is correct. I mean, you could change anything — bank info, home address. It was all open.” [Source: FedScoop | Dan Verton | 20 Jan 2014 ++]

VA Aid & Attendance Update ► H.R.2189 Impact on Program

Although only a small percentage of the millions of veterans and their families use the Aid and Attendance benefit offered by the VA, it is clearly a vital program for those in need of medically related assistance with their daily activities. At present this program is financially "means" tested and there is currently no penalty for applicants who divested themselves of assets and subsequently applied for benefits. But because of perceived abuse of the program generated by a GAO report, a Senate bill was introduced into the Congress in 2012 that imposed a three-year "lookback" period for uncompensated transfers prior to the filing of the VA application. The bill did not get traction, but was replaced in 2013 by a new House bill that contains similar provisions (H.R.2189). The bill passed the House on Oct. 28 (404 to 1) and was referred to the Senate for review. While most bills take time to become actual law, it appears from the movement of this bill that legislation may be forthcoming in 2014 that will drastically affect veterans

and their family members who use the Aid and Attendance benefit. The language contained in the bill, if made into law, will make the following changes:

- Improvement of claims processing -- A commission will be appointed to address the issue of claims backlog. Anyone who has dealt with the VA can understand the frustration with delays in processing claims and communication on the status of a pending claim. While some claims are resolved in 30 days, the average is usually many months. This legislation mandates that all claims will be approved or denied with 125 days of application. While four months is not exactly fast, at least it gives the applicant some hope.
- Claim Status Website -- In an effort to keep applicants informed of pending claims without waiting on hold on the telephone for lengthy periods of time (or being able to get through at all), a section of the bill directs "the Secretary to maintain on the VA website publicly accessible information concerning pending and completed claims of compensation for a veteran's service-connected disability or death."
- Pension (aka Aid and Attendance) -- The bill also provides "that if a veteran eligible for a pension for service or for a non-service-connected disability, or the spouse of such veteran, disposes of a resource that was part of such veteran's estate for less than its fair market value within three years before applying for such pension, the Secretary shall deny or discontinue the pension payment for months beginning on the date of such disposition and ending when the uncompensated value of such resource is reached." This language appears to mean that the VA pension program will soon review financial transactions of an applicant much like the federal/state Medicaid long-term care services program (i.e. nursing home care). Given the budget constraints on government, it was inevitable that this gifting ability would be restricted.

Assuming H.R.2189 becomes law (or something similarly drafted), how will it affect applicants? You can anticipate the VA looking to the rules used by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, which currently imposes a five-year look-back period for asset transfers prior to application for long-term care benefits. For illustrative purposes, Pennsylvania currently penalizes a Medicaid applicant one month of long-term care payment coverage for about every \$8,400

given away during the five years preceding the application. This is based on the average daily cost of nursing home care in the commonwealth. In contrast, it appears that the measuring device to be used by the VA in arriving at its penalty divisor will depend upon the current maximum pension with Aid and Attendance benefit (for a married veteran in 2014, that's slightly over \$2,000 a month). Using that logic, a gift will create four times the penalty period for the VA benefit than the Medicaid benefit would. Some simple math will tell you that if an applicant gives away more than \$72,000 (36 months x \$2,000), he/she would probably be better off just waiting three years to apply for VA benefits and not have to even disclose the gift in month 37. While there will probably be exceptions and planning techniques to counter the imposition of transfer penalties, the existence of this potential new rule should not be ignored.

A side effect of a proposed three-year look-back rule is that it may actually delay the processing of VA claims. The VA already has a notorious reputation related to claims backlogs, and the processors are not reviewing three years of financial records on each claim. Imagine the increased workforce needed to review all these records. So when might all this take place? Never? Not likely. Given the status of our economy, our aging population and political pressure to eliminate "gaming" the system, it is inevitable that the VA will impose a financial look-back period for applicants. That said, the bill also currently provides for the "grandfathering" of applications made prior to the implementation of the new rule. Those wishing to take advantage of the present law may want to investigate their options before H.R.2189 or a similar bill becomes law. [Source: Pittsburgh Post-Gazette | Julian Gray and Frank Petrich | 25 Jan 2014 ++]

VA Surgical Implants ► Policy & Structural Problems Disclosed

Veterans are facing a deadly new threat that is coming not from faraway battlefields, but from stateside hospital rooms, according to the results of a Government Accountability Office investigation released 15 JAN. In a hearing before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, representatives from the GAO and American Legion detailed problems with the Veterans Affairs Department and its Veterans Health Administration, citing critical flaws in the purchasing and tracking of surgical implants such as skin and bone grafts, cardiac pacemakers and artificial joints. They also criticized procedural flaws that permit surgical implant vendors

to be present in operating rooms — and, in some cases, operate on patients, against industry practices. “Without proper caution, allowing a representative to participate in direct patient care can compromise veterans’ safety,” said Randall Williamson, a director in GAO’s health care team.

Though VA procedures state vendors are to provide only “technical assistance and advice,” the vendors’ role is established through a waiver signed by the patient, leaving no consistent policy across hospitals, Williamson said. The GAO investigation found that those patient waivers were not always obtained, or were incomplete. “It’s just a contract between the patient and vendor,” said Roscoe Butler, American Legion assistant health care director. “We want the VA to establish a national policy, then use the consent form as an agreement between the vendor and the patient.” Williamson said national VA policies “do not adequately define how much vendors can be involved in patient care,” and proposed an additional provision clarifying how to deal with vendors should they break policy. Philip Matkovsky, an assistant deputy in the Veterans Health Administration, insisted that he had never witnessed vendors engaging in direct patient care, and that the presence of representatives in operating rooms was standard practice.

The GAO report also noted structural problems with tracking which veterans are receiving which implants, “putting some veterans at risk” in case of an emergency or product recall. An audit two years ago by the VA Inspector General identified expired surgical products on VA shelves. “The grave concern to the American Legion is that, in addition to having expired products on the shelves, veterans potentially could be walking around today with expired surgical implants,” Butler said. Improper system management also was linked to a failure on the part of VA to seek the most market competitive prices for implants. Matkovsky defended the spending as part of a transition begun in fiscal 2012 to guarantee proper procurement of surgical implants and prosthetics. The solution, as Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tenn., sees it, is simple. “I don’t believe we have a problem here that can’t be easily solved with the systems that we already have,” he said. “This should be data-driven, and not just cost-driven.” That solution could be as basic as a barcode system, the GAO and American Legion said. As committee member Rep. Mike Coffman (R-CO) argued, proper management of implant records remains an issue that “has been unresolved for far too long.” [Source: Medill News Service | Christophe Haubursin | 15 Jan 2014 ++]

VA Congressional Oversight Update ► 111

Outstanding Requests

The Department of Veterans Affairs' pattern of selective responsiveness – and sometimes total unresponsiveness – to oversight inquiries from the House Veterans Affairs Committee has continued into 2014. VA has 111 outstanding requests for information from the panel dating back to June 2012, including a series of eight inquiries delivered to VA in late October and into November concerning information technology security in the wake of multiple data breaches compromising VA networks since 2010. Those inquiries, a high priority for the committee because of the potential seriousness of the data breaches, were due in early November, are now two months overdue, with only a preliminary letter authored by VA CIO Stephen Warren sent to Rep. Mike Coffman (R-CO) chairman of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee. “The leisurely pace with which VA is returning requests – and in some cases not returning them – is a major impediment to the basic oversight responsibilities of the committee,” a Capitol Hill official with knowledge of the inquiries told Federal computer week (FCW). The source said VA’s unanswered questions have “created mounting frustration” for committee members, prompting Chairman Jeff Miller (R-FL) to “take the unprecedented step” of writing weekly letters to VA Secretary Eric Shinseki detailing the number of outstanding requests and calling for “accurate information in satisfaction of these requests.” In Warren’s response to the committee on 22 NOV, he wrote that “VA will continue to work to provide information that is responsive to the subcommittee's requests.” In November, sources within VA’s Office of Information Technology, where most of the questions were directed, told FCW that the congressional probing had caused a “stressed environment.” The VA sources said only 20 of its 8,000 OIT employees were compiling responses, with one telling FCW it was like “another full-time job for a lot of folks,” though Congress has insisted the questions should be rudimentary for any large IT organization. The Capitol Hill source said that a recent internal memo authored by Warren asks VA OIT personnel to focus on four areas: system baseline practices and procedures, configuration management, patch management and elevated privilege review. That initiative drew limited praise from Miller, indicating VA likely has a long way to go before it rights the transparency ship with Congress. [Source: Federal Computer Week | Frank Konkel | 14 Jan 2014 ++]

Homeless Vets Update ► Nearly 50,000 During 2013

As more young veterans of recent wars leave the military, the number of them falling on hard times and homelessness continues to rise sharply. Nearly 50,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans were either homeless or in a federal program aimed at keeping them off the streets during 2013, almost triple the number in 2011, according to numbers released 16 JAN by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The number among this generation falling on hard times is rising sharply even as homelessness among veterans of all ages and conflicts has been on the decline, according to the VA. Advocates for the homeless say many of the estimated 2.5 million Americans who served in the two wars went into combat zones on multiple deployments, something many veterans of previous conflicts never had to endure.

- "They're coming home to a bad economy. The country is different. Their families are different. They are different. Plus they are dealing with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and other issues around mental health," says Gregory Scott, president of New Directions For Veterans, a non-profit assistance group in Los Angeles.
- "We don't know what the long-term impacts will be on the Iraq and Afghanistan veterans," says John Driscoll, president and chief executive officer of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans.
- VA spokeswoman Victoria Dillon said the number of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans struggling with homeless issues has grown because the department has expanded efforts to identify and assist them. The department has programs throughout all 50 states, working with community groups to target homeless veterans, and as a consequence, a more accurate picture of the number of these veterans is emerging.
- A lack of affordable housing has contributed to veteran homelessness, the VA says.

In JAN the department announced it will continue to fund, at a record annual level of \$300 million, a program that places a priority on finding immediate shelter for veterans or helping those at risk of homelessness to keep their homes.

The program began with \$60 million in 2011 and grew to \$300 million in 2013. The department recently announced it was locking in funding at \$300 million for each of 2014 and 2015. "Those who have served our nation should never find themselves on the streets, living without hope," VA Secretary Eric Shinseki said in announcing the funding. The money is in the form of grants to more than 300 community groups that target homeless veterans or those at risk of becoming homeless. It provides a range of services to help veterans keep their homes, including mediation with property owners, assistance with rent and utilities, moving expenses, child care and transportation, the VA says.

"We're thrilled," Driscoll says of the funding, adding that it is "finally up to scale where it could really start having some major impacts." He says consideration should be given to increasing the grants to \$500 million annually because the ultimate extent of homelessness among veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars is unknown. "We don't know what the need for services long-term is going to be," he says.

In the past month, two major American cities—Salt Lake City and Phoenix—have both announced that they have ended "chronic homelessness" among military veterans in their town. How? Both pulled off this legitimately impressive (if temporary) feat by focusing, before anything else, on housing. The New York Times sums up the rationale behind Phoenix's approach: According to local and national surveys, it is more expensive to cover the costs of emergency room visits or nights in jail for homeless people than it is to give them homes. A 2009 analysis commissioned by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, which handles the largest population of homeless veterans in the country, found that the monthly cost of housing and supportive services for one person was \$605, while the public costs of a person living on the streets were roughly \$2,900 a month.

Across the country, the strategy is centered on an approach called Housing First, through which a home is not treated as a reward for good behavior. The logic is simple and economically compelling. By paying something up front to give people a place to live, a city can save a lot of money on social services. The political difficulty arises when moralizers object that homeless people should not be "rewarded" with subsidies. In fact, society always pays one way or another. Enacting a comprehensive housing program for homeless veterans, who have already made a donation to the public, so to speak, is more palatable. But if no-

questions-asked housing works for homeless veterans, it should work for all homeless people. Let's do it. [Source: USA Today's Gregg Zoroya & Gawker's Hamilton Nolan 16 & 17 Jan 2014 ++]

Vet Census ► No Nationwide Census Since 2000

The United States has not accounted for its veterans in a nationwide census since 2000 and both Montana veterans and U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., are imploring the U.S. Census Bureau to get it done. Since 2000, the Veterans Administration has provided what it calls “official estimates and projections” by using a mathematical model. “How can America care for its veterans when America doesn’t know how many veterans it has?” asked Edward E. Saunders, adjutant of Billings Chapter 10 of Disabled American Veterans. Saunders, a retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel from Laurel, first raised the issue with Tester and VA Secretary Eric Shinseki during a town hall meeting in Billings in 2011. Saunders has since continued to urge Tester to fight for a count. This week, saying he believes the nation’s veterans may be undercounted, Tester called on the U.S. Census to conduct an official count of veterans in the 2020 Census. With approximately 2.5 million Americans having served in Iraq and Afghanistan, including a historically high number of Guardsmen and reservists, it is imperative to have an accurate count of American’s veterans, especially in historically undercounted rural areas, Tester said.

With more accurate data, Congress could better ensure that adequate funding is appropriated for community services, such as nursing homes for aging veterans, as well as employment and job services programs that remain in high demand, Tester said. “In order to provide veterans the services they earned, we have to know how many there are and where they live,” Tester told the Billings Gazette. “Getting an accurate count of veterans in rural America helps us live up to the promises we made to the men and women who put their lives on the line to defend our country.” Montana has the nation’s second-highest per capita veteran population, as well as a large population of military retirees. Additionally, it is home to many American Indian veterans, a historically undercounted group, according to Tester. He implored the U.S. Census Bureau to make counting American Indian veterans a “top priority.” “The short of it is, America doesn’t know for sure how many veterans it has and VA makes it sound like VA knows,”

Saunders said. The U.S. Census Bureau did not return phone calls on the issue 29 JAN. [Source: Billings Gazette | Cindy Uken | 29 Jan 2014 ++]

Vet Toxic Exposure ~ Fukushima ► Congress Wants Answers

House and Senate lawmakers want answers on whether U.S. sailors received high doses of radiation while supporting humanitarian operations in Japan following the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami. In the fiscal 2014 omnibus budget bill, lawmakers direct Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs Dr. Jonathan Woodson to provide Congress a full accounting of those who served on the carrier Ronald Reagan during the operation and any medical problems they later developed. A group of sailors has filed suit against Tokyo Electric Power Co., alleging they suffered health issues as a result of exposure to radiation leaked from the company-owned Fukushima nuclear power plant when it had a meltdown after the earthquake and subsequent tidal wave. The lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California, has 71 plaintiffs with ailments ranging from leukemia and thyroid problems to eye diseases and polyps. The Pentagon has released data on the levels of radiation seen during and after the disasters and established a registry for 70,000 troops and family members who worked or lived near the affected region to monitor their health. Officials have said that the Fukushima leaks were not a threat to health. They have said that, at least for the ground troops who served in the operation, the radiation doses they received were three times lower than those absorbed by an airline flight crew during a typical cross-country trip. According to the Navy, the worst-case radiation exposure for Ronald Reagan crew members was less than a quarter of the annual radiation received from background exposure such as from rocks, sun and soil, of the average individual living in the U.S.

But Congress wants the Defense Department to provide answers nonetheless. Lawmakers requested not only an inventory of any adverse medical conditions experienced by Ronald Reagan sailors, they want a detailed account of actions taken by the service to prevent radiation exposure, minimize it or treat it among affected personnel. The lawsuit alleges that TEPCO officials knew the seriousness of the radiation leak but did nothing to warn the U.S. of the danger. In November, a judge granted TEPCO's motion to dismiss the case but attorneys for the plaintiffs said they will drop some of the allegations to continue the suit. If the

omnibus bill becomes law, the report is due to Congress by 15 APR 2014. [Source: Military.com | Patricia Kime | 14 Jan 2014 ++]