



Federal Update for January 6 – 10, 2014



Representatives Walz, Maffei Introduce Military Retirement Restoration Act

Washington, DC [12/20/13] – Today, Representative Tim Walz (D-MN) announced that he joined Rep. Dan Maffei (D-NY) to introduce H.R. 3793, the Military Retirement Restoration Act. This bill would repeal the unwarranted cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) cuts for military retiree's under the age of 62 that were included in the Bipartisan Budget Act. This legislation will be fully paid for by closing tax loopholes for corporations that operate and are run from the U.S. but use off-shore tax havens to avoid paying their fair share, footing middle class families and veterans with the bill.

Companion legislation has been introduced in the Senate by U.S. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) and is co-sponsored by Senators Amy Klobuchar and Al Franken. Walz also plans on introducing a bill in 2014 that would find savings by rooting out waste and inefficiencies at the Department of Defense by requiring an audit of the Pentagon.

“Our country needs a budget in order to end the irresponsible governing-by-crisis cycle in Washington, ensure another reckless and costly shutdown does not occur, and to give our local businesses and communities the certainty they need to grow and create jobs,” said Representative Walz. “That being said, the budget that passed was far from perfect. I opposed the unwarranted cuts to COLA for military retiree's under age 62 that were included in the bill. That is why I joined Representative Maffei in introducing a bill to restore these cuts. I will continue to push leadership to uphold the promises made to our servicemembers.”

Below is a summary of the legislation.

The Military Retirement Restoration Act would replace the cuts to military retiree benefits included in the Bipartisan Budget Act by preventing companies from avoiding U.S. taxes by abusing overseas tax havens. Specifically the bill:

- Repeals the provision in the Bipartisan Budget Act (Section 403) that modifies the annual cost-of-living adjustment for working-age military retirees by making the adjustments equal to inflation minus one percent. This provision, which is scheduled to go into effect in December 2015, would result in a benefit cut for working-age military retirees. The Bipartisan Budget Act modifies the annual cost-of-living adjustment for working-age military retirees by making the adjustments equal to inflation minus one percent. At age 62, the retired pay would be adjusted as if the COLA had been the full CPI adjustment in all previous years, and the service members would receive the full COLA from then on. The provision would have saved approximately \$6 billion over ten years.
- Prevents companies from avoiding paying their fair share of U.S. taxes. The repeal would be fully offset by stopping companies incorporated offshore but managed and controlled from the United States from claiming foreign status and avoiding U.S. taxes on their foreign income. It would require these companies to be treated as U.S. domestic corporations for tax purposes. This provision and is expected to raise over \$6.6 billion over ten years.

VA Nursing Homes: Reporting More Complete Data on Workload and Expenditures Could Enhance Oversight

What GAO Found

In fiscal year 2012, the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) nursing home workload--the average number of veterans receiving nursing home care per day--was 36,250 across all of the three nursing home settings in which VA provided or paid for veterans' nursing home care. The three settings include Community Living Centers (CLCs), which are VA-owned and operated; community nursing homes with which VA contracts to provide care for veterans; and state veterans' nursing homes, which are owned and operated by states. Over half (53 percent) of this workload was provided in state veterans' nursing homes, 28 percent in

CLCs, and 19 percent in community nursing homes. Nearly 90 percent of total workload was long-stay (91 days or more for residents with chronic conditions), and at least 75 percent of care provided in each of VA's three settings was long-stay. In addition, 62 percent of VA's total workload was provided to discretionary veterans (those veterans without certain levels of service-connected disabilities). In fiscal year 2012, VA spent \$3.5 billion (71 percent) of its total nursing home expenditures on care provided in CLCs, 16 percent in state veterans' nursing homes and 13 percent in community nursing homes. Seventy-five percent of total spending was for long-stay care, and at least 70 percent of spending in each setting was for long-stay care. About half of total VA spending was for discretionary veterans.

GAO found that VA does not provide nursing home workload and expenditure data by length of stay and resident characteristics in its budget justification, although the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) encourages agencies to provide such information to the maximum extent possible to justify staffing and other requirements and improve congressional decision making. As a result, VA does not provide complete information, which could hinder Congress' budgeting and oversight of VA's nursing home staffing and resource requirements.

Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2012, about \$4.9 billion of VA's \$54 billion health care services budget was spent on nursing home care. To inform Congress of its budgeting priorities, VA prepares a budget justification, which is reviewed by OMB, that includes data on nursing home workload and expenditures in the three settings. VA also collects data on length of stay (long- and short-stay) and resident characteristics, including eligibility status, as VA is required to pay for mandatory veterans' nursing home care and may pay for discretionary care as resources permit. These data are important for Congress to understand how funding is allocated for long- and short-stay care and for residents in each setting.

GAO was asked to examine VA's nursing home program. Among other things, GAO examined (1) VA's nursing home workload in each setting, by length of stay and resident characteristics; and (2) VA's expenditures for nursing home care in each setting, by length of stay and resident characteristics. GAO analyzed VA nursing home workload and expenditure data, including fiscal year 2012, by setting, length of stay, and resident characteristics; and interviewed VA officials.

What GAO Recommends

To enhance congressional oversight of VA's nursing home program, GAO recommends that VA supplement data currently included in its budget justification with workload and expenditures by length of stay and resident characteristics. VA concurred with GAO's recommendation and stated it will provide these data upon release of its fiscal year 2015 budget.

Recommendation for Executive Action

Recommendation: To provide more complete data for Congress, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs should supplement nursing home workload and expenditure data currently included in VA's budget justification with the following information: (1) Average daily census by length of stay and resident characteristics, including veterans' eligibility status and age. (2) Total expenditures and per diem expenditures by length of stay and resident characteristics, including veterans' eligibility status and age.

Agency Affected: Department of Veterans Affairs

NDAA 2014 Update ► Sent to President for Signature

While the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013 attracted the most attention in Washington this week, the FY 2014 defense authorization bill (H.R. 3304) cleared on Thursday night 26 DEC by a vote of 84-15 keeping intact the 52nd consecutive year of a defense bill passage. The Senate cleared a final procedural hurdle on Wednesday to limit debate and ensure no amendments were brought forward for consideration so the Senate could make it home for the holidays. The bill authorizes nearly \$527 billion in defense base budget spending with over \$80 billion for overseas contingency operations. The final bill includes:

- **Military Pay Raise:** The bill omits a critical provision that would have guaranteed service members a 1.8 percent pay raise in accordance with private sector wage growth. Without that protection, the President's executive authority, transmitted to Congress in September, will set the 2014 military pay raise at 1 percent.

- End Strength: The bill authorizes just over 1.36 million active duty personnel, a reduction of over 40,000 from FY 2013 levels.
- Executive Compensation Reform: Caps private sector compensation on DoD contracts at \$625,000 and allows for the cap to be adjusted based on the Employment Cost Index (why would congress allow defense contractors to see an increase of 1.8 percent, but cap military pay at 1.0 percent? It's baffling).
- TRICARE: The bill flatly rejected all administration proposals to establish or increase TRICARE fees. It also included a grandfather clause for TRICARE beneficiaries affected by the reduction in Prime Service Areas. Those who were removed from of TRICARE Prime coverage will now have a one-time option to remain in the program. Finally, it requires a study of TRICARE compound pharmacy policy.
- Military Sexual Assault: The bill includes over 30 provisions that strengthen measures to combat military sexual assault within the chain of command.
- Special and Incentive Pays: Provides one year extensions to several special and incentive pays.
- BRAC: Prohibits the Pentagon from initiating another round of BRAC.
- Disability Evaluations: Requires the Secretary of Defense to review the backlog of pending Integrated Disability Evaluation System cases and outline steps to eliminate the backlog.

The defense bill fell short on many Military Coalition's supported issues. The bill did not include provisions to:

- Ending the SBP-DIC offset;
- Expanding concurrent receipt;
- Expanding the Applied Behavioral Analysis TRICARE benefit;
- Establishing that career reservists with no active duty service are deemed veterans of the armed forces;
- Allowing a special needs trust for survivor benefit annuities; and
- Restoring full COLAs for military retirees under 62

To read the final version of H.R.1960 Defense Bill refer to <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-113hr1960pcs/pdf/BILLS-113hr1960pcs.pdf>.
 [Source: MOAA Legislative Update 20 Dec 2013 ++]

Secret Technology Given to China

Israel Secret U.S. missile and electro-optics technology was transferred to China recently by Israel, prompting anger from the U.S. and causing a senior Israeli defense official to resign. The head of defense exports for the Israeli Defense Ministry resigned after a U.S. investigation concluded that technology, including a miniature refrigeration system manufactured by Ricor and used for missiles and in electro-optic equipment, was sent to China, according to the Israeli newspaper Maariv. Another Israeli news site, Aretz Sheva, reports the U.S. is concerned the technology could ultimately find its way to Iran, which last year sought to buy military equipment from China for its nuclear program. Ricor, on its company website, identifies a number of defense programs using its miniature cryo-coolers, including UAVs, airborne enhanced vision systems, missile warning systems, hand-held thermal imagers and thermal weapons sights. The Maariv report identified the Israeli defense official as Meir Shalit, and said he apologized to U.S. officials on a recent visit.

Israel has a long record of getting U.S. military technology to China. In the early 1990s then-CIA Director James Woolsey told a Senate Government Affairs Committee that Israel had been selling U.S. secrets to China for about a decade. More than 12 years ago the U.S. demanded Israel cancel a contract to supply China with Python III missiles, which included technology developed by the U.S. for its Sidewinder missiles, The Associated Press reported in 2002.

DoD Benefit Cuts Update ► Why Retiree Cuts Are No Big Deal

Not surprisingly, the provision in the Ryan-Murray Budget agreement that reduces the annual cost of living adjustment for military retirees by 1 percent is provoking outrage among some parts of the military lobby. According to the Military Officers Association of America, or MOAA, this provision is a substantial cut, reducing working-age retiree pension by about 20 percent, and breaks faith with our men and women in uniform. However, the claims of MOAA and others are misleading. Consider the following:

- First, the provision does not break faith with the vast majority of men and women in uniform, since most of them will not retire. According to DOD's Office of the Actuary, responsible for overseeing retiree pensions, only 15 to 17 percent of the enlisted soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen who served in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan will serve long enough to retire. The current retirement system provides no retirement benefits at all to servicemembers who serve less than 20 years. If MOAA, which used to be called the Retired Officers' Association, really cared about the overwhelming majority of the enlisted men and women who serve in the military, they would advocate scrapping the current outmoded retirement system in favor of a 401(k) type system for all who serve.
- Second, the reduction applies only to working-age retirees - that is, military retirees who have not yet reached the age of 62. Since the vast majority of people who retire from the military in their 40s and 50s take other jobs, often using skills they have gained or developed in the military, their military retirement pay is not their sole source of income. Moreover, when working-age retirees reach the age of 62, their retired pay would be readjusted back to the full amount they would have gotten if they had received the full COLA each year. After 62, retirees would receive the full COLA adjustments. In other words, the COLA reduction is temporary, affecting only those who retire from the military but are still young enough to work.
- Third, the reduction does not affect those who suffered physical and mental wounds during their service. Disability compensation is paid through the Veterans' Administration and will not be affected by this provision.
- Fourth, the alleged 20 percent lifetime reduction to working-age retiree pay applies only to those who separate at exactly the 20 year mark. Many men and women serve past the 20 year mark, putting them correspondingly closer to age 62, when their retirement pay is adjusted back up to the full amount. Consequently, the impact on them will be much less than the 20 percent number touted by MOAA.

- Fifth, and most importantly, MOAA ignores all of the other benefits that have been given to military retirees over the past decade that have enhanced the value of their retirements. These generous benefits more than make up for this potential cut to working-age retiree pay. For example:
- Over the past decade, Congress has frequently adjusted base pay above the cost of living, increasing it half a percent above the cost of living in 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009, and 2010. Thus, retirees will have correspondingly higher retired pay, on which the annual cost of living adjustment will be applied.
- Thousands of those who have retired over the last seven years have received several thousand dollars more a year in retired pay than they were promised. Servicemembers who enlisted after July 1, 1986 were supposed to receive 40 percent of their base pay at 20 years of service under the "Redux" retirement system, with COLA adjustments 1 percent below inflation. By contrast, in the previous "High-3" system, servicemembers received 50 percent of base pay and COLA adjustments equal to inflation. However, in 1999, before any servicemembers retired under the new "Redux" system, Congress made the "Redux" plan optional. According to DOD's Office of the Actuary, most retirees who would have retired under the "Redux" plan have picked the more generous "High-3" option.
- Retirees under age 65 also receive low-cost access to health insurance via TRICARE. Until 2012, Congress had refused to raise TRICARE premiums to reflect the growth in health care costs. As DOD put it in their FY2013 budget request, asking to increase retiree TRICARE premiums, today, a working-age retiree's family of three pays for only about 11 percent of their medical costs, compared to 27 percent when TRICARE was established in 1996, a savings of over \$2,000 per year. Currently, TRICARE prime enrollment fees are only \$273.84 per year for an individual, or \$547.68 for a family, far cheaper than comparable private insurance plans.

- Moreover, Medicare-eligible military retirees are covered by TRICARE for Life with no additional costs, deductibles or fees. Established in 2001, the TRICARE for Life program functions like a "Medigap" plan, paying for all medical expenses that are covered by TRICARE but not Medicare Part B or D.
- Finally, military retirees who were receiving disability compensation from the VA used to have their military retiree pay "off-set" by the amount of their VA disability compensation. In 2004, Congress changed the law to allow retirees to receive VA disability compensation on top of their retired pay.

Considering all of these factors, it is hard to make an argument that the U.S. government is not acting in good faith for the men and women in uniform. Even with the proposed slight adjustment in annual cost of living adjustments, military retirees are compensated generously. [Source: Defense One | Lawrence J. Korb and Katherine Blakeley | 6 Dec 2013 ++]

DoD Benefit Cuts Update ► Vets Retired On Medical Disability

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., chairman of the House Budget Committee, appear to be in sync in defending the controversial cap that Congress has imposed on cost-of-living adjustments for "working age" military retirees starting in January 2016. They should be, Ryan is suggesting, because the idea for the COLA cap came to him from the Department of Defense. And the budget deal he struck will help to ease automatic defense spending cuts from sequestration that military leaders said were decimating force readiness. Hagel and Ryan also agree, however, that it was a mistake for Ryan and his negotiating partner, Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, not to have shielded more than 100,000 servicemembers retired on medical disability from the planned COLA caps. Therefore, even as Congress forwarded the Bipartisan Budget Act on to President Obama to be signed into law, Ryan said he and Murray will work to amend it so it excludes those medically retired and their survivors from the COLA caps "well before" they are to take effect. Ryan wrote this in a guest editorial in the USA Today.

At a Pentagon press conference, Hagel embraced the Ryan-Murray budget deal after it passed both the House and Senate by comfortable margins. Defense leaders, he said, are “prepared to engage the Congress in achieving compensation reform. But any changes to cost-of-living adjustments should not apply to medically disabled retirees. These retirees need to be exempted from the changes in the budget agreement.” The vast majority of retirees are non-disabled, but the COLA cap provision in the Bipartisan Budget Act makes no distinction. Unless the law is amended, COLAs for all military retirees under age 62 will be capped after 2015 at one percentage point below annual inflation as measured by the government’s Consumer Price Index or CPI. At age 62, full COLAs would be restored and annuities reset to levels retirees would have seen at that age had full COLAs been in effect since retirement. Impacted retirees, however, would never get back money lost annually before 62 under the CPI-minus-one-percent formula.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates savings to the Department of Defense of \$6.3 billion over the first decade the COLA cap is in effect. The impact on individuals will vary based on rate of inflation. For example,

- if an enlisted member in pay grade E-7 retires at age 40 with an initial annuity of \$23,000, and if cost of living climbs an average of three percent a year, then by age 62 the COLA capped of two percent would cut \$83,000 off the total value of E-7 retired pay. However, if inflation averages two percent a year, the loss by age 62 falls to \$72,000.
- An officer who retires as an O-5 at age 42, with an initial annuity of \$43,000, stands to lose more than \$124,000 by age 62 with a CPI-minus-1 COLA, assuming average inflation of three percent. If inflation, however, averages two percent, the COLA cap would dampen retired pay for that officer by \$109,000 by age 62.

Military Officers Association of America, which prepared these estimates, also produced numbers showing the effect of the COLA cap on some few members forced to retire early on medical disability.

- An E-6 who retires at age 32, after 12 years of service, due to injury or illness would lose more than \$45,000 in retired pay by age 62 if inflation were to average three percent.
- An O-3 officer medically retired at 34 after 12 years would lose more than \$63,000 in retired pay by age 62.

The Senate followed the House by a week in approving the budget deal, as a dozen Republicans joined every Senate Democrat in voting for the bill despite a rising chorus of criticism from military retirees, careerists nearing retirement and by military association and veterans' groups. The intensity of the political heat encouraged a number of lawmakers to introduce bills immediately that would replace the COLA cut with cost-cutting alternatives their constituents might find more palatable. For instance, Sens. Mark R. Warner (D-VA) and Tim Kaine (D-VA) introduced legislation to replace the COLA cap with language that would block companies from using foreign tax havens to avoid U.S. taxes. That idea isn't popular with Republicans who oppose any kind of tax increase. Rep. Mike Fitzpatrick (R-PA) instead wants to replace the COLA cuts with a bill to tighten the Refundable Child Tax Credit program so illegal immigrants can't abuse it and receive fraudulent payments. Fitzpatrick cited recent findings from the Treasury Department's inspector general of billions of dollar being paid improperly to undocumented workers.

The budget deal Ryan and Murray struck softens the effect of budget sequestration by \$63 billion across 2014 and 2015, with half of it bringing budget relief to the Department of Defense. It shelves about one third of across-the-board defense spending cuts expected those years from the sequestration mechanism adopted in the 2011 Budget Control Act. Hagel said the deal restores some predictability to defense spending near term but DOD still faces "very difficult budget decisions." With defense budgets still capped \$70 billion below requested levels for 2014 and 2015, Hagel said, DOD still must make deep cuts to overhead and infrastructure costs, "tough choices on force structure" and reform military compensation. Even as Murray moved to distance herself from the COLA cap provision in the deal she negotiated, Ryan defended it. He called current retirement benefits generous and said most retirees to be impacted by the COLA caps will be working in second careers anyway. He also echoed warnings from Hagel and the Joint Chiefs about the perils of rising personnel costs. "For me,

there's simply no choice between responsible reforms of military compensation and making what our military leadership has called 'disproportionate cuts to military readiness and modernization,' " Ryan explained. "Every time we kick the can down the road, we put our troops' combat readiness at risk." [Source: Stars & Stripes | Tom Philpott | 26 Dec 2-13 ++]

VA Claims Backlog Update ► Why AL & VA Figures Differ

Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki says the agency made progress this year in reducing the claims backlog that has regularly caused heat from some veterans groups and lawmakers. According to the VA's annual Performance and Accountability Report released in mid-DEC, the Veterans Benefits Administration hit key milestones in 2013, which puts it on track to end the chronic claims backlog by 2015. "As of September 30, 2013, the claims inventory totaled 722,013; down from a high of 883,930 in July 2012," the report states. "Of that inventory, the backlog -- those claims older than 125 days -- was 418,472, nearly 193,000 below the peak backlog in March 2013." The same report also states that as of this past August the accuracy rate of decided claims was just over 89 percent. That figure is just a percentage point shy of the one Under Secretary for Benefits Allison Hickey presented earlier in the month to the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee. Then, Sen. Richard Burr (R-NC), the committee's ranking member, expressed serious doubt over the figure, pointing out that other backlog trackers put the error rate significantly higher in some cases.

The American Legion, which partners with the VA in assisting vets with claims applications and also conducts its own accuracy surveys, put the error rate at 55 percent during 2013. Others, including the VA's Office of the Inspector General, have arrived at other figures, but none coming up to the claim made by the VA. During the Senate hearing, Hickey said the Legion numbers were right for the way they figured them, but said the VA numbers are validated by an independent group, the Institute for Defense Analyses. Zach Hearn, deputy director for claims for the Legion's veterans' affairs and rehabilitation division, said he understands why the VA would be upset over the Legion's numbers. "Here they're sitting with a 90 percent accuracy rate and someone says: 'hold on, here's what we've discovered,'" Hearn said. The Legion's review over the past year of 260 claims

decided at eight VA regional offices concluded that 55 percent had errors -- meaning an accuracy rate of 45 percent, or half of what the VA claims.

The OIG, in a review of 46 claims from the VA Regional Office in Newark, N.J. this past year, found errors in 21 -- nearly half. The VA says its own review of claims is far broader than those done by the Legion and the IG. For one thing, the Legion is only able to review claims it has consent to look at. The VA uses an internal program, Systematic Technical Accuracy Reviews, or STAR, to review a random sampling of claims completed at each of its 56 regional offices. Beyond that, the VA's work is reviewed by the Institute for Defense Analyses, which Hickey argued validates the department's findings. Brandon Friedman, the VA's former director of online communications and author of "The War I Always Wanted," defended the VA's figures after the Senate clashed over stats. "One (VA) uses a random, statistically significant sample of claims. The other (American Legion) uses a non-random, biased sample of claims," Friedman said on Twitter. Friedman, who is now a vice president with the public relations firm Fleishman-Hillard and a fellow at the Truman National Security Project, said in a later interview that any lawmaker can ask VA to explain its methodology as well as its data. "How quickly they get it typically depends on the complexity of the request," he said. [Source: Military.com | Bryant Jordan | 26 Dec 2013 ++]

Traumatic Brain Injury Update ► VA Adds 5 TBI Related Illnesses

Some Veterans with traumatic brain injury (TBI) who are diagnosed with any of five other ailments will have an easier path to receive additional disability pay under new regulations developed by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The new regulation, which takes effect 30 days from 16 DEC, impacts some Veterans living with TBI who also have Parkinson's disease, certain types of dementia, depression, unprovoked seizures or certain diseases of the hypothalamus and pituitary glands. "We decide Veterans' disability claims based on the best science available," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "As scientific knowledge advances, VA will expand its programs to ensure Veterans receive the care and benefits they've earned and deserve." This regulation stems from a report of the National Academy of Sciences, Institute of Medicine (IOM) regarding the association between TBI and the five diagnosable illnesses. The IOM report, *Gulf War and Health, Volume 7: Long-Term Consequences of Traumatic Brain*

Injury, found "sufficient evidence" to link moderate or severe levels of TBI with the five ailments.

The new regulations, printed in the Federal Register, say that if certain Veterans with service-connected TBI also have one of the five illnesses, then the second illness will also be considered as service connected for the calculation of VA disability compensation. Eligibility for expanded benefits will depend upon the severity of the TBI and the time between the injury causing the TBI and the onset of the second illness. However, Veterans can still file a claim to establish direct service-connection for these ailments even if they do not meet the time and severity standards in the new regulation. Veterans who have questions or who wish to file new disability claims may use the eBenefits website, available at <http://www.eBenefits.va.gov/ebenefits> . Servicemembers who are within 180 days of discharge may also file a pre-discharge claim for TBI online through this VA-DoD eBenefits portal. The published final rule was made available 17 DEC at <http://www.regulations.gov>. Information about VA and DoD programs for brain injury and related research is available at www.dvbic.org. Information about VA's programs for Gulf War Veterans is available at http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/hazardous_exposures.asp.
[Source: VA News Release 16 Dec 2013 ++]

PTSD Update ► Study Shows Myocardial Ischemia Link

Patients with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were more likely to have myocardial ischemia on exercise treadmill testing than those without the disorder in a recent prospective cohort study. In the Mind Your Heart Study, researchers evaluated data collected from 663 participants treated on an outpatient basis at two Veterans Affairs Medical Centers (VAMCs) in California between 2008 and 2010. Incidence of myocardial ischemia (reduced blood flow to the heart) was compared between patients with and without symptoms of PTSD as indicated by the Clinician-Administered PTSD Scale. Evidence of ischemia was determined via exercise treadmill testing. PTSD was observed in 35% of the cohort, including 210 patients with full PTSD and 20 with partial PTSD. Myocardial ischemia on testing was observed in 17% of patients with PTSD compared with 10% of those without. A significant association between ischemia and PTSD remained after adjustment for factors that included age, sex, history of cardiovascular disease CVD, obesity,

sleep quality, depression and the presence of traditional cardiac risk factors. Exclusion of patients with prior CVD did not eliminate the significance of this association. The use of continuous PTSD symptom score as the predictor of ischemia also yielded a significant association with myocardial ischemia. Sensitivity analysis adjusting for peak exercise capacity during testing did not significantly alter results, nor did exclusion of patients with partial PTSD from analysis or the addition of those with partial PTSD to the non-PTSD group. "While research continues on causal mechanisms, providers still have opportunities to intervene and prevent potentially disabling or fatal CVD events in patients with PTSD," the researchers wrote. "... Discussing how PTSD can have a harmful impact on physical health may provide additional encouragement for patients to seek treatment. Our finding that PTSD symptom severity was linked to CVD risk also suggests that improving symptoms could lower cardiac risk, though it would be important to examine this in PTSD treatment trials." [Source: Cardiology Today | J.H. Turner | 15 Dec 2013 ++]

COLA 2016 Update ► Res. H.J. 59 Reduced Retiree COLA

Republican senators made unsuccessful last-ditch bids to undo cuts to military retiree benefits in the House-passed Res. H.J. 59 Continuing Appropriations Resolution, 2014 budget deal ahead of a crucial Senate test vote 17 DEC. Alabama GOP Sen. Jeff Sessions filed an amendment On 16 DEC to restore COLA money that was cut from veteran and military retiree pension benefits by closing a loophole that allows illegal immigrants to qualify for child tax credits. His move came after several GOP senators voiced complaints about the budget package, which sailed out of the House the previous on a strong bipartisan vote. Those senators were also calling on their colleagues Tuesday morning to spare military retirees from the cuts. However, late-breaking endorsements from several GOP senators could help lift the budget bill over the finish line.

Republicans opposed to that provision say it unfairly forces veterans to pick up the cost of new spending. The provision generating heated opposition from Veterans of Foreign Wars and allied lawmakers would cut retirement benefits for military retirees by \$6 billion over 10 years. "It's unacceptable to single out our men and women in uniform in this way," said Sen. Kelly Ayotte (R-NH) who had already expressed her intention to vote against the proposed budget.

Democrats needed to hold most of their caucus of 55 senators together and pick up a handful of GOP senators in order to reach the 60-vote threshold to advance the bill on with the 17 DEC test vote. The prospect that the budget would clear the cloture (i.e. an act to close debate) hurdle brightened when three GOP senators -- Orrin Hatch of Utah, Johnny Isakson and Saxby Chambliss of Georgia -- announced that they would vote yes. A fourth, Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, expressed his support on 15 DEC. Sens. John McCain and Jeff Flake of Arizona also said they would vote in favor of cloture last week.

But unlike in the House, where Speaker John Boehner aggressively battled conservative groups trying to kill the bill, GOP leaders in the Senate signaled opposition, or at least resistance, to the package. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky would not say which way he planned to vote, but he was widely expected to oppose the measure. Similarly, Senate Minority Whip John Cornyn of Texas announced his opposition 16 DEC on his campaign's website -- a step his Senate office was unwilling to take. It was later deleted after reporters from The Associated Press asked for confirmation of a Cornyn quote that appeared on the Internet site Breitbart.com. "Senator Cornyn opposes this budget deal because it breaks previously set spending caps and goes in the 'wrong direction' with regards to entitlement spending," according to the post. His Senate spokeswoman, Kate Martin, would only say that Cornyn would take "a close look" at the measure and is "concerned" that it reverses some of the spending cuts won in a hard-fought 2011 budget pact.

The third-highest ranking Republican in the Senate, conference chairman John Thune of South Dakota, announced 13 DEC that he opposed the deal because it breaches spending caps put in place by a 2011 budget deal "and doesn't include meaningful spending reforms that address our debt and deficit." Ayotte, Sessions and other senators focused largely on the cuts to veterans and military retirees. Sessions' amendment would restore the funding by requiring applicants for a particular child tax credit to submit their Social Security numbers. Federal law bars illegal immigrants from collecting tax benefits but that particular tax credit is often claimed by undocumented residents, according to recent watchdog reports. Sessions' office has estimated that closing the tax credit loophole would save the government approximately \$4.2 billion, the amount the Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration reported that illegal immigrants received due to the credit in 2010. Congress faces a 15 JAN deadline to pass a budget bill or risk

another partial government shutdown. The debt-ceiling deadline is expected to hit sometime in February. [Source: FoxNews.com | Politics | 17 Dec 2013 ++]