



Federal Update for July 29 – August 2, 2013



Post-9/11 GI Bill Celebrates Fourth Anniversary

WASHINGTON – Thursday, August 1, marks the fourth anniversary of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. VA has issued approximately \$30 billion in Post 9/11 GI-Bill benefit payments since its inception in August 2009 and helped nearly 1 million Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families pursue their education.

“The Post-9/11 GI Bill has helped many of our Nation’s Veterans pursue their education and successfully transition to civilian life,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. “We’re proud that the Department of Veterans Affairs can administer this important benefit that makes such a big difference in the lives of nearly a million Veterans and their families.”

The Post-9/11 GI Bill is the most extensive educational assistance program since the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly known as the GI Bill, was signed into law.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill provides comprehensive educational support through tuition, books and housing allowance to people with at least 90 days of total service after September 10, 2001, or people discharged with a service-connected disability after 30 days.

Approved training under the Post-9/11 GI Bill includes graduate and undergraduate degrees, vocational and technical training, on-the-job training, flight training, correspondence training, licensing and national testing programs, entrepreneurship training, and tutorial assistance.

VA is now processing benefit payments for currently enrolled students in an average of seven days, largely as a result of VA’s ongoing transformation to electronic claims processing. The delivery of Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits has been automated and processing time cut in half through implementation of VA’s Long

Term Solution, an end-to-end claims processing system that uses rules-based, industry-standard technologies.

“Since the end of World War II, GI Bill programs have shaped and changed the lives of Veterans, Servicemembers, their families and their survivors by helping them reach their educational and employment goals,” said Allison A. Hickey, Under Secretary for Benefits. “That is still true today.”

In April 2012, President Obama signed Executive Order 13607 which established the Principles of Excellence, offering guidelines that promote student success under the program and ensure accurate information about institutions and their courses. Over 6,000 educational and training institutions have agreed to comply with these principles.

“The Principles of Excellence, further strengthened by Public Law 112-249, provide future student Veterans with greater consumer education” said Michael Dakduk, executive director of Student Veterans of America. “It is extremely important to have the right tools and information before making a decision on a post-secondary credential, degree program, or institution of higher learning.”

VA is working with schools, community organizations and other partners to ensure beneficiaries have all the information they need to use their education benefits, including:

- Education plans for all military and Veteran education beneficiaries;
- A designated point of contact for academic and financial advice at each school; and
- An end to fraudulent and aggressive recruiting techniques and misrepresentation.

This summer, VA is launching new tools to help beneficiaries learn more about their vocational aptitudes and select an education institution.

The ‘Factors to Consider When Choosing a School’ guide offers future students steps to take when researching, choosing, and attending a school. CareerScope® is a free, new tool featured on <http://www.gibill.va.gov> that measures a student’s

aptitude and interests through a self-administered online test, identifying potential career paths. The new GI Bill® Comparison Tool allows students to research and compare schools, including key indicators like average student loan debt and graduation rates.

“We will continue to work hard to improve VA’s benefits delivery process for Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries and to ensure that Veterans and their families have the tools they need to choose the right education institution to help them build a foundation for the future,” Hickey added.

For more information on the Post-9/11 GI Bill and other Veteran education programs, visit <http://www.gibill.va.gov>.

The Coast Guard Turns 223

The Coast Guard is celebrating its 223rd year this August 4th. The Coast Guard's official history began on 4 August 1790 when the first Congress authorized the construction of ten vessels to enforce federal tariff and trade laws and to prevent smuggling.

Department of Veterans Affairs: Available Data Not Sufficiently Reliable to Describe Use of Consulting Services

What GAO Found

Because data were not readily available to identify how the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) uses consulting services and what is known about their costs, this report discusses the limitations on data concerning consulting services and provides information on some of the uses of consultant contracts. Two primary factors limited GAO's ability to identify a list of consulting contracts that was sufficiently accurate and complete for identifying the types and costs of consulting services used by VA. First, there is no consistently used definition for consultant or consulting services across VA that GAO could apply for our intended purposes. Second, there are data limitations associated with identifying consulting services at VA. Since there is no means for contracting officers to track obligations for consulting services in the Federal Procurement Data System-New Generation, GAO used North American Industrial Classification Codes (NAICS) to

identify contracts that could be for consulting. However, GAO could not use the NAICS codes to consistently identify consulting contracts because a single NAICS code can be used to classify both consulting and non-consulting services and VA contracting officers sometimes reported that they had applied the wrong NAICS code to contracts. Nevertheless, VA offices were able to provide information on how they used consulting services and identified contracts among those in our sample that they considered to be consulting services. For contracts that VA officials considered to be for consulting, VA procured a variety of services, including program evaluations, engineering and support services, and gathering data to support decision making.

Why GAO Did This Study

VA is one of the U.S. government's largest agencies and provides services to service members, veterans, their dependents, and survivors. The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations requested that GAO assess how VA has used consulting services and what is known about the costs of these services. GAO identified contracts in the federal government's procurement information system and selected contracts to discuss with VA offices to understand how VA uses consulting services and to determine if officials considered these contracts to be for consulting.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making any recommendations. VA provided written, including technical comments, in response to a draft of this report. VA generally concurred with our findings but disagreed that data were unreliable. Based on our analyses, we maintain that data was not sufficiently reliable for our purposes.

VRAP Update

The House Veterans Affairs committee's subcommittee on Economic Opportunity held a hearing in JUL to consider changing the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program (VRAP) so that veterans can attend school on a part-time schedule. Currently the program requires participants to go to school full-time, but many licensure and certification courses only offer part-time classes. Over 105,000 veterans have applied to use VRAP, which provides a year of monthly GI Bill benefits for a veteran to attend a full-time training program to learn a new and marketable skill. But only 52,228 of those 105,000 are currently enrolled in

school. The program is limited to veterans ages 35 to 60 who are unemployed when they apply, are not eligible for other veterans education benefits and are not receiving veterans disability benefits based on a determination of unemployability. Those attending training receive \$1,564 a month in Montgomery GI Bill benefits. Congressman Bill Johnson (R-OH), the author of H.R.1357, said the current program requires spending 18 to 22 hours a week in class to be considered a full-time student. His bill would reduce minimum class time to 16 hours a week since most technical schools only offer 16 hours of instruction a week. One of the biggest problems veterans face is finding an accredited school with a one-year program. Only two-year public colleges are eligible, eliminating private and for-profit schools, as well as one-year programs offered at four-year public schools, although Johnson's bill doesn't address this problem. [Source: TREA News for the enlisted 29 Jul 2013 ++]

SECDEF Update

In his address 22 JUL to the Veterans of Foreign Wars national convention, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel called on the nation's 22 million veterans to become partners in helping the Defense Department work through "historic transition and change." Every major conflict in U.S. history has been followed by a period of "realignment and redefinition," with "enormous ramifications and consequences for our entire defense enterprise," the secretary noted at the convention, being held in Louisville, Ky. As the Defense Department undergoes the latest realignments and reshapes the military for the future, Hagel called on veterans "who helped build our military into the strongest, most capable and most respected on Earth" to help ensure it remains that way. "All of us at the Pentagon, and across this administration, value your perspective and devotion to our military men and women," he told the group. "We will need your help and partnership as we manage through a period of historic transition and change. "As I look out across this audience, I see thousands of veterans whose lives have been committed to helping our service members, their families and our veterans succeed, and to ensuring this country honors their legacy with policies that are worthy of their sacrifices," Hagel continued. "All of you, and the roughly 22 million veterans across this nation, have an important role to play in the debate over our country's future national security priorities." [Source: NGAUS Washington Report 23 Jul 2013 ++]

Traumatic Brain Injury Update

Traumatic brain injury prior to combat duty may be partially to blame for the rise of veteran suicides. The unusual number of sports players who experienced TBI (traumatic brain injury) and later committed suicide, and the number of military vets who experienced TBI while in combat and later committed suicide, may not be a coincidence, say brain injury researchers. “Research on traumatic brain injury is of utmost concern right now for veteran disability advocates,” commented veterans disability lawyer James Fausone. A new study published in the journal JAMA Psychiatry has proposed a link between multiple concussions or traumatic brain injuries and suicidal actions later. In addition, the study found that a significant number of the men who experienced military-related TBI had a sports-playing history, which indicates that they may have experienced TBI on the playing field years earlier.

The study, conducted by an Air Force psychologist, looked at 161 individuals sent to his clinic for suspected concussions. Those interviewed were asked about any history of head trauma, any battles with depression, PTSD or struggling with suicidal thoughts. The study concluded that many of the head injuries referenced by the study participants, in some cases as many as 6 injuries by one individual, were sustained prior to military service. Approximately 20 percent of the study participants reported that they experienced concussion during their basic training, and some reported that they had sustained as many as 15 different head injuries during their tour of duty. Post-traumatic stress disorder and depression are both high-risk factors for suicide, and combat experience typically would only increase their severity, said the researchers. Individuals who already experience one or both of these conditions and then join the service would explain why there are such high levels of suicide in the Armed Forces.

The researchers suggest that head trauma may set up a pre-existing disposition towards suicidal ideation or action which is then exacerbated by additional head trauma during combat. Exposure to an IED (improvised explosive device) buffets the brain within the skull by concussive shock waves, which can cause bleeding in the brain at numerous, hard-to-detect sites, causing damage. Subtle traumatic brain injury can be impossible to detect by an average physical; it is possible that many military personnel entered the service well enough to serve, and then subsequent damage further made them more susceptible to suicidal thoughts

than someone who had not sustained sports-related concussions or other head injuries. [Source: Northville MI Law Firm Newswire article 16 JUL 2013 ++]

Native American Veterans Memorial

A Native American Veterans Memorial authorized by Congress nearly 20 years ago but never built got a little boost from northeastern Oklahoma neighbors 24 JUL. U.S. Rep. Markwayne Mullin and Cherokee Nation Deputy Chief Joe Crittenden, both natives of Adair County, spoke in favor of renewing efforts to erect the memorial in Washington. “This is a subject very close to my heart,” Crittenden said during a hearing before the House Committee on Natural Resources’ subcommittee on Indian and Alaska Native Affairs. “I am a Vietnam veteran and a Navy veteran, and I am proud of all the contributions that Cherokees and all Native Americans have made.” Mullin said the memorial would demonstrate an important aspect of American Indian heritage. “Heritage may be something a lot of people don’t understand” about American Indians, he said. “This is one way we can show pride in that heritage.”

Mullin is the author of House Resolution 2319, which amends existing legislation to revitalize the memorial. Oklahoma U.S. Rep. Tom Cole is a co-author of the resolution. Mullin is a member of the Cherokee Nation, Cole of the Chickasaw Nation. Mullin and others contend that American Indians serve in the military in greater proportions than any other ethnic group. The Native American Veterans Memorial was authorized in 1994 as a fixture within what was then a proposed National Museum of the American Indian. That museum, part of the Smithsonian Institution, has since been completed on the National Mall. But the memorial never advanced past the authorization stage.

Funding was to come completely from private sources, and Jacqueline Pata, executive director of the National Congress of American Indians, said fundraising efforts were concentrated on the museum. “Now we think the museum is in a good place,” she said. Kevin Gover, the museum’s director and a member of Oklahoma’s Pawnee Nation, said passage of Mullin’s legislation would allow the museum foundation’s fundraisers to “go to work immediately” on raising money for the memorial. He said a budget for the project has not been set. Gover estimated that it would take five to seven years to design, fund and build the memorial — now planned for the outside of the museum — once Congress acts.

Sen. Brian Schatz (D-HI) has introduced a similar bill in the Senate. A vote on Mullin's bill has not been scheduled. [Source: Tulsa World | Randy Krehbiel | 24 Jul 2013 ++]

Pledge of Allegiance

Congressman Lee Terry (R-NE-2) has reintroduced a bill to settle a debate about rendering hand salutes when not in uniform. Representative Terry, who never served in the military but whose congressional district includes Offutt Air Force Base, is sponsoring the Veterans Equality to Salute Act, or VETS Act (H.R.2284). The bill would allow service members and veterans who are not in uniform to render hand salutes during the Pledge of Allegiance, rather than putting their hands over their hearts. The bill was referred the House Judiciary Committee, the congressional panel responsible for all things related to the American flag and saluting. He introduced a similar bill in 2011, and the idea was passed by the House last year as a provision attached to 2013 National Defense Authorization Bill. But it was dropped during negotiations with the Senate. "This common-sense legislation creates parity for those veterans and active-duty military not in uniform who want to give a military-style salute when they are reciting the Pledge of Allegiance," Terry said in a statement, adding that a local VFW chapter suggested the change. The change would not be unprecedented. In 2008, Congress amended the flag code to allow veterans and service members not in uniform to issue hand salutes when the U.S. flag is raised or lowered. In 2009, the code was changed to allow a hand salute during the playing of the National Anthem. Terry's legislation includes no enforcement mechanism to determine if the person giving a hand salute is or has served in the military. [Source: American Legion Leg Up 17 Jun 2013 ++]

VA Claims Backlog Update

In setting an ambitious goal three years ago to end the Department of Veterans Affairs' disability claims backlog in 2015, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki exposed himself to criticism, including calls to resign as the backlog rose. But that bold goal, Shinseki said, also helped VA get the funding it needed to modernize operations, including to phase out an inefficient, paper-driven claim processing system. "If I had written a plan that said we're going to end the backlog in 2025, I wouldn't have gotten any resources," Shinseki said in an interview while he visited the VA regional claims processing office in Newark, N.J. With extra billions of dollars appropriated for claims processing and other "transformative"

initiatives, VA's backlog finally is falling. It stood last week at 536,400, down from 608,000 in March. Shinseki said he remains confident it will be gone in 2015. He sounds a little less confident of ending homelessness among veterans by that year, another determined goal.

Regardless, the retired four-star general and former Army chief of staff doesn't regret setting bold objectives. "I've been writing plans all my life. I never wrote a tentative plan. That's not what you expect from a guy you want to solve a problem." A VA claim is in "backlog" if not decided within 125 days. When Shinseki became secretary, early in 2009, VA tracked claim performance with a different yardstick: average time to decision. The average then was 191 days, Shinseki said. The average sought was 125 days. "So if I completed a claim in one day, and another claim in 249 days, that's a 125-day average, and that would have ended the backlog," Shinseki said. "It just seemed to me a bad way to define the problem or try to solve it. So we said: No claims over 125 days." As newly defined, the backlog was 180,000 by September 2009. Over the next three years it more than tripled, passing 600,000, even as VA hired thousands more claim processors. VA was deciding a million claims a year, yet the backlog grew with as many as 1.3 million claims pouring in.

Only part of the flood of claims is from veterans who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Shinseki explains to Congress and to his own claims staff, it was his decisions to aid more veterans, including from the generation he went to war with in Vietnam, that helped to create the backlog. Under Shinseki, VA simplified the process for filing post-traumatic stress disorder claims from veterans of all wars. He made compensable more illnesses for 1990-91 Gulf War veterans exposed to toxins and other health threats in that campaign. He also added ischemic heart disease, Parkinson's disease and B-cell leukemia to the list of ailments for which Vietnam veterans can receive disability compensation, on presumption wartime exposure to the defoliant Agent Orange caused these conditions.

This last decision alone resulted in 280,000 retroactive claims. As of last month, 166,000 veterans with at least one of these illnesses, or surviving spouses, received more than \$4.5 billion in VA pay. Thousands of additional Agent Orange claims are being filed monthly.

Shinseki stands by his Agent Orange decisions, citing scientific studies. But for two years, VA had to reassign 2300 of its most experienced claim processors – a third of the staff – to review old claims that qualified for special handling under a 1985 Nehmer court ruling. Shinseki said he could be faulted for not better understanding requirements that Nehmer imposed so VA was better prepared for the extra workload. “They had to go through every page of every claim. It wasn’t enough to say, ‘Vietnam, exposure to Agent Orange and therefore Parkinson’s disease [so] grant service connection.’ The Nehmer decision required them to see if there was anything else in the file...page by page by page. And, by the way, Nehmer goes to the head of the line. Everything else waits...I should have asked more questions.” Shinseki promised in 2010 not only to end the backlog in 2015 but also to raise the decision accuracy rate to 98 percent, up from the low 80s. These goals, Shinseki guessed while visiting the claims staff in Newark last month, must have made a few of them “suck wind through your teeth.” That was also the reaction by some at headquarters, he told me.

“Somebody said, ‘Is he crazy?’ ‘No, no, no,’ I said. ‘I’m just asking: Is this a good goal? If it is, then we will go figure out how to get there.’ ” First priority was to begin to replace paper claims with electronic ones. Last month, six months early, VA completed rollout of an electronic claims processing program, the Veterans Benefits Management System. VBMS allows the 56 VA regions to accept new claims electronically. It also allows VA to accelerate a massive process of scanning existing paper claims into computers to be processed and decided faster and more accurately. Earlier this year, as criticism of the rising backlog intensified, Shinseki set a two-month deadline to identify and complete 66,000 claims more than two years old. VA expedited the process for claims at least a year old using new provisional approval authority to start benefits based on evidence submitted to date. He ordered mandatory overtime of 20 hours a month for all claims processors. And VA established a partnership with the American Legion and Disabled American Veterans to have their claim experts certify claim packets they worked as “fully developed” and ready for decision.

To meet the 98 percent accuracy goal, Shinseki hopes for support from Congress and vet groups to redefine a term. VA now counts a completed claim as “accurate” if every medical condition identified is rated correctly. So if an individual claims 12 conditions, and one is rated wrong, the claim doesn’t qualify as accurate in tracking VA performance. The all-or-nothing approach ignores a lot

of good staff work, Shinseki said. It would be more appropriate, he suggested, to base performance on percentage of conditions rated correctly, not claims flawlessly decided. Under such a change, VA would have an accuracy rate today of 95 percent, just shy of the 98 percent mark promised by 2015, officials said.

[Source: Stars & Stripes | Tom Philpott | 18 Jul 2013 ++]

VA Claims Backlog Update 2

The notably unproductive House wants to cut the pay of top Veterans Affairs officials if the department doesn't significantly reduce its disability claims backlog by next year. Legislation approved by the House would slice 25 percent from the pay of the agency's senior political leadership if a goal is not met. The portion of disability claims 125 days old could not exceed 40 percent by July 1 next year. As of 20 JUL 65 percent of the claims were more than 125 days old, according to VA. Wages — from the department's secretary through the assistant secretaries — would be cut for a three-month period from July 1 through Sept. 30, 2014. "The pace with which the VA is examining claims is unacceptable and must be fixed," Rep. Jack Kingston (R-GA), the sponsor of the provision, said in a statement. "When a soldier puts his life on the line for this country, he shouldn't be left waiting a year for help when he gets home. . . . If the leadership at the VA cannot reduce the backlog, they should see their pay cut."

The department already has stopped giving bonuses to some of its senior executives. "Based on VBA's organizational performance goals, senior executives will not receive performance awards for FY 2012," said Victoria Dillon, acting press secretary. "Instead, the funds will be reinvested to accelerate elimination of the backlog." Across the agency, bonuses dropped from \$3.3 million in 2009 to \$2.3 million in 2012. Despite Kingston's contention, there has been progress on the backlog. "Today, VA has the lowest total claims inventory since August 2011," Secretary Eric K. Shinseki told a Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Louisville on 22 JUL. "Barring any changes in entitlements, this number will continue to decline, and VA remains committed to eliminating the backlog in disability claims in 2015." During the past three months, "the backlog has dropped from 591,000 to 515,000" he said. "Claims over two years old have dropped from over 42,000 to about 1,700." If that's not enough for Kingston, fair enough. But perhaps his pay cut solution also should apply to Congress, particularly the House and especially the Republicans who control that chamber.

Sen. Bernard Sanders (I-VT), chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, criticized the House bill as politically motivated and said it ignored progress that the VA is making in reducing the backlog. At a 23 JUL afternoon news briefing on Capitol Hill, Sanders jokingly suggested that House members instead consider docking their own pay based on the legislation they pass. "Those guys would end up owing money," he said. But it's no joke.

Citing a report (<http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2013/07/vital-statistics-congress-mann-ornstein>) by Brookings and the American Enterprise Institute, my colleague Chris Cillizza wrote last week that "the 112th Congress (2011-2013) got less done than any Congress in more than six decades." A recent Huffington Post headline also tells the story: "113th Congress on Pace to be Least Productive in Modern History." The article, updated on 11 JUL, said that "the current Congress has had just 15 bills signed into law so far, the fewest in recent history."

That has real ramifications for the government and its staffers, but apparently it's fine with the top man in the House, Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio). "[W]e should not be judged on how many new laws we create," he said on CBS's "Face the Nation" on Sunday. "We ought to be judged on how many laws that we repeal." Republicans are even refusing to cooperate on a new budget, which directly affects federal agencies, their workplaces and employees. The Senate and the House have approved separate spending plans, but Republicans refuse to agree to a conference committee that would work out differences in the bills. "We have called upon the speaker of the House to appoint conferees to negotiate on the budget," Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) told his colleagues Tuesday. "He has refused." Michael Steel, a spokesman for Boehner, unconvincingly placed the blame for no House conferees on Senate Democrats. The usual practice, he said, is for "the House and Senate Budget committee leaders to come to an agreement on a framework before formally appointing conferees. . . . It is difficult, obviously, to reach such an agreement when the Senate Democrats' budget never, ever balances."

Federal employees, more than the average citizen, know from experience that is more than just another political gambit. No budget means uncertainty — uncertainty for employees and uncertainty for their ability to serve the public. "By not going to budget conference — let's be clear," Van Hollen said. Republicans

“want to take us right up to the cliff of government shutdown in the beginning of October, next fiscal year. They’re talking about once again rolling the dice and playing a game of chicken as to whether or not the United States pays its bills on time. “That is no way for the federal government to conduct itself.” [Source: The Washington Post | The Federal Diary | Joe Davidson | 25 Jul 2013 ++]

VA Medical Foster Home Update

On 18 JUL Chairman Jeff Miller, of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, introduced H.R.2726, the Long-Term Care Veterans Choice Act, to enhance and improve VA's existing Medical Foster Home (MFH) program. Established in 2000, a VA-certified MFH is a private residence where a VA-approved caregiver provides 24-hour support to eligible veterans. A VA-participant home cannot accept more than three veterans, and veterans are eligible for these placements when their care would otherwise need to be met in institutional settings. The MFH program is a humane alternative to nursing home placements. Health care for these residents is supervised in the home by VA's Home-Based Primary Care program or VA spinal cord injury home care program. Currently, the MFH program requires participating veterans to pay approximately \$1,500 to \$4,000 per month for this 24-hour caregiver supervision, including room and board. Even a veteran who is otherwise entitled to VA nursing home care at no expense must pay to reside in a VA-approved MFH.

H.R.2726 would authorize VA to enter into a contract or other agreement with a VA-certified MFH and would pay the full cost of this residential care of service-connected veterans if they are eligible for VA-funded nursing home care. Under this bill, as a component of such care, eligible veterans would also receive VA home health services at no cost. This is an important bill that would give priority to service-connected disabled veterans, and would give them an important alternative to nursing home care. DAV strongly supports this bill based on a long-standing national resolution approved by their members. DAV is urging all those in veteran community concerned about elder vet care to join them. [Source: DAV | Take Action | 25 Jul 2013 ++]

VA Burial Benefit Update

Federal policy is preventing some veterans with unmarked graves from getting headstones and tombstones to mark their final resting places, and some

supporters of historic cemeteries want that changed. Supporters in Ohio and Kentucky are among those who want to change a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs policy they say is too restrictive, The Cincinnati Enquirer reported. The federal regulation defines "applicant" as the veteran's next of kin, a person authorized in writing by the next of kin or a representative authorized in writing by the veteran. But members of historical groups and those working to preserve Civil War-era cemeteries say the policy wasn't consistently enforced until last year. Some seeking to get markers for veterans' unmarked graves say they've been turned down because they weren't direct descendants, the newspaper said. A national campaign to change the policy has launched an online petition at <http://www.marktheirgraves.org> asking that the VA make the regulation inapplicable to veterans who served more than 62 years ago. The petition collected 1,950 signatures as of 18 JUL, the newspaper reported. "This is having an impact all across America," said Jeff Richman, leader of a committee behind the petition. Richman is the historian for Green-Wood Cemetery in a Brooklyn, N.Y. It contains graves of 3,300 Civil War veterans. Richman said the policy creates an impossible and unnecessary burden for groups seeking to honor veterans who served generations ago. U.S. Rep. Steven Stivers (R-OH) has introduced H.R.2018 (Honor Those Who Served) legislation to change the policy. His proposal would allow anyone to apply for a marker or headstone if no next of kin can be found for a veteran who served on active duty in the Armed Forces at least 62 years before the date on which the marker is requested. For more recent veterans, the legislation would allow an application to be filed by a state veterans service agency, military researchers, local historians, genealogists, or others familiar with research sources or methods needed to prove a veteran's identity. The Enquirer reported that the VA's National Cemetery Administration says the agency understands the concern that the definition of an applicant for a marker may be "too limiting" and is reviewing the regulation.

VA spokeswoman Jo Schuda said 19 JUL that there have been instances of well-meaning individuals and organizations taking action to mark graves or replace headstones without family members' knowledge. The current policy was intended to avoid the possibility of that happening, she said. Among those lobbying to change the policy are supporters of Wesleyan Cemetery in Cincinnati. Kathy Dahl, a retired naturalist with the Cincinnati Park Board, has been a leader in unsuccessful efforts by the city of Cincinnati and nearly a dozen historical groups and other organizations to get VA markers for six African-American Civil War

veterans in unmarked graves at that cemetery. Genealogists and researchers looked for descendants, but could only find next-of-kin for two, Dahl said. The Sons of the American Revolution also want a marker or gravestone to mark the Wesleyan Cemetery plot for a Revolutionary War soldier. Tom Honebrink, general manager of 142-year-old Highland Cemetery in Fort Mitchell, Ky., said there also are military graves there that remain unmarked. "Nobody wants to see veterans' graves unmarked," he said. [Source: Associated Press article

VA Sexual Trauma Program Update

Military sexual assault victims say the Department of Veterans Affairs isn't doing enough to provide care and treatment for their trauma, especially when it comes to men who have been sexually abused. VA officials insist they are working as quickly as possible to address those concerns, noting that they've seen sharp increases recently in the number of veterans receiving care for military sexual trauma. "But as much as we have done over the last few years, there are significant gaps ... that we need to address," said Dr. Rajiv Jain, VA's assistant deputy undersecretary for patient care services. More than 85,000 veterans received sexual trauma-related care from VA medical personnel in fiscal 2012, an increase of almost 11 percent from the year before. The number of appointments and care meetings increased more than 13 percent from fiscal 2011 to fiscal 2012. Nearly one in four women seeking any medical care from the VA have reported suffering sexual assault or abuse during their military careers. That has prompted department officials to bolster their services in recent years, expanding treatment programs, assigning military sexual assault specialists in all VA health facilities, and mandating screening for all veterans entering the system.

But the VA Inspector General and a panel of victims on 19 JUL told members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee that many of those efforts have fallen short, frustrating and possibly endangering vulnerable veterans. Brian Lewis, a Navy veteran who was raped by a fellow servicemember in 2000, said of the 12 VA post-traumatic stress disorder residential facilities nationwide that specialize in sexual assault counseling, only one accepts male patients. The department offers no men-only support groups. "Many people see this as only a women's issue," he said. "That is not the case. The VA is fundamentally failing male survivors of military sexual trauma every day." But Lisa Wilken, an Air Force veteran assaulted by peers in 1993, said many victims who are frustrated with a

lack of offerings by the VA find it impossible to seek care outside the system, because of the department's reluctance to pay for non-VA counselors. Others said the department's screening efforts leave too many victims out.

An inspector general investigation found that VA travel voucher policies also make getting care difficult for many victims, and that many of the staffers assigned as the sexual assault care liaison are assigned that role as a secondary responsibility, not a sole focus. Military sexual assault has become a major focus of lawmakers in recent weeks, albeit more on the prevention and prosecution side than the long-term treatment. Lawmakers are considering changes to how sex crimes in the ranks are investigated and handled by military legal officials, including the possibility of sending those cases to an outside, independent body. But committee members say they are worried about the treatment issues too, and have promised to offer more legislation and scrutiny on the topic in coming months. VA officials have already promised that any veteran who has experienced military sexual trauma can seek care within the system, regardless if they are eligible for other veterans benefits. Jain said VA has established a working group to address complaints outlined by the inspector general, and said officials are also searching for fixes to the problems brought up by victims at the hearing. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Leo Shane | 19 Jul 2013 ++]

VA Prosthetics Update

The mission of the Veterans Affairs Prosthetic & Sensory Aids Service (PSAS) is to provide comprehensive support to optimize health and independence of the Veteran. Their vision is to be the premier source of prosthetic and orthotic services, sensory aids, medical equipment, and support services for Veterans. PSAS is the largest and most comprehensive provider of prosthetic devices and sensory aids in the world. Although the term "prosthetic device" may suggest images of artificial limbs, it actually refers to any device that supports or replaces a body part or function. PSAS provides a full range of equipment and services to Veterans. These range from items worn by the Veteran, such as an artificial limb or hearing aid; those that improve accessibility, such as ramps and vehicle modifications; to devices surgically placed in the Veteran, such as hips and pacemakers. In support of PSAS the VA provides various allowances, grants, and equipage to veterans who utilize the services of PSAS.

Clothing Allowance: Under Title 38 United States Code (U.S.C.) 1162, the VA must pay an annual clothing allowance to eligible Veterans. A Veteran is eligible if he/she has a service-connected condition, or a disability compensable under 38 U.S.C. 1151 that requires the Veteran to wear or use a prosthetic or orthopedic appliance that wears out or tears clothing (Title 38 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 3.810). The clothing allowance may also be paid if the Veteran uses a topical cream/ointment medication for a service-connected skin condition that is prescribed by a physician and causes irreparable damage to the Veteran's outer garments. NOTE: Irreparable damages do not include stains that are removable through regular laundering or dry cleaning. Beginning December 16, 2011, multiple clothing allowance payments were payable to Veterans who:

- Wear or use more than one qualifying prosthetic or orthopedic appliance (including but not limited to a wheelchair) for a service-connected disability or disabilities;
- Use a physician-prescribed medication for more than one service-connected skin condition; or
- Use an appliance and a medication for a service-connected disability or disabilities.

To apply for one or more clothing allowances, complete VA Form 10-8678 and submit to the nearest Prosthetics and Sensory Aids Service no later than 1 AUG of each year. The form be completed online and downloaded at <http://www.va.gov/vaforms/medical/pdf/vha-10-8678-fill.pdf>. Effective December 1, 2011, the amount for each clothing allowance award is \$741. For more information about Clothing Allowance refer to http://www.prosthetics.va.gov/Clothing_Allowance.asp

Automobile Grant: VA can pay a one-time grant to help certain service-connected Veterans and service persons buy a motor vehicle. The grant is payable to the seller only. Veterans/ Servicemembers who receive the automobile grant from VBA and have an approved VA Form 21-4502, is eligible to receive automobile adaptive equipment (AAE). AAE assists the eligible person into or out of the automobile or to safely operate the motor vehicle. The new automobile grant rate for FY 2013 is \$19,505. All automobile grants received on or after October 1, 2012 may be paid at the new rate. If the Veteran/ Servicemember received any

automobile grant requests on or after October 1, 2012 and paid the old rate of \$18,900, the Veteran/ Servicemember may be entitled to an additional payment. VA can approve a grant for almost any kind of vehicle. Call VBA at 1-800-827-1000 if you have questions about a particular vehicle. For more information about Automobile Adaptive Equipment, please visit <http://www.prosthetics.va.gov/AAE.asp>.

Guide & Service Dog Benefits: VHA published comprehensive regulations effective October 5, 2012, to include guide, hearing and mobility dogs. The regulations provide for veterinary benefits to include prescriptions, medical care, equipment to perform specialized tasks, and handler training with new guide/service dog paid by the VA. VA is working to provide a “pet insurance” to cover the veterinary benefits to make it easier for Veterans to access medical care for their dogs. VHA does not purchase or in any way provide a dog. Veterans who have obtained dogs must have approval from a VA medical care provider stating that the dog is an essential part of the treatment plan for the veteran in order to be eligible for the veterinary benefits. For more information refer to <http://www.va.gov/health/ServiceAndGuideDogs.asp>

If you have a general question regarding artificial limbs/orthotics, automobile adaptive equipment, clothing allowance, durable medical equipment, eyeglasses, hearing aids, HISA, home oxygen, wheelchairs or any other PSAS related device/service contact PSAS via IRIS at <https://iris.va.gov>. [Source: http://www.prosthetics.va.gov/Clothing_Allowance.asp Jul 2013 ++]

DoD/VA Seamless Transition Update

On 15 JUL, Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL) introduced a bill, S.1296, that sets specific goals for DoD and VA to accomplish while completing the electronic health record both departments are working on. Sharing medical records is important to separating service members, Nelson said. “For 15 years, we have tried to fix this problem ... they (veterans) should not have to worry about retaking medical tests or jumping through bureaucratic hoops to make sure their health records are complete.” The bill guidelines include:

- Within six months of enactment, DoD and VA physicians must use standardized forms for capturing health data.

- Within one year, the two departments must be able to exchange real-time data with a joint and common graphic interface.
- By June 30, 2015, service members must have the option of receiving an electronic copy of their health records.

“We need a modern health record system, and it needs to happen without further delay,” Nelson said as he introduced the bill. The Servicemembers’ Electronic Health Records Act was referred to the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee for consideration. Sen. Nelson may also try to get his measure added as an amendment to the 2014 defense authorization bill when the Senate works on its approval later in the year. [Source: NAUS Weeklu Update 19 Jul 2013 ++]