Federal Update for March 24 - 28, 2014

Information Security: VA Needs to Address Long-Standing Challenges

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) continues to face long-standing challenges in effectively implementing its information security program. Specifically, from fiscal year 2007 through 2013, VA has consistently had weaknesses in key information security control areas (see table).

Control Weaknesses for Fiscal Years 2007-2013

Access control	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Configuration management	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Segregation of duties	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Contingency planning	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Security management	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: GAO analysis based on VA and inspector general reports.

In addition, in fiscal year 2013, the department's independent auditor reported, for the 12th year in a row, that weaknesses in information system controls over financial systems constituted a material weakness. Further, the department's inspector general has identified development of an effective information security program and system security controls as a major management challenge for VA. These findings are consistent with challenges GAO has identified in VA's implementation of its security program going back to the late 1990s. More recently, GAO has reported and made recommendations on issues regarding the protection of personally identifiable information at federal agencies, including VA. These were related to developing and implementing policies and procedures for responding to data breaches, and implementing protections when engaging in

computerized matching of data for the purposes of determining individuals' eligibility for federal benefits.

Draft legislation being considered by the Subcommittee addresses the governance of VA's information security program and security controls for the department's systems. It would require the Secretary of VA to improve transparency and coordination of the department's security program and ensure the security of its critical network infrastructure, computers and servers, operating systems, and web applications, as well as its core veterans health information system. Toward this end, the draft legislation prescribes specific security-related actions. Many of the actions and activities specified in the bill are sound information security practices and consistent with federal guidelines. If implemented on a risk-based basis, they could prompt VA to refocus its efforts on steps needed to improve the security of its systems and information. At the same time, the constantly changing nature of technology and business practices introduces the risk that control activities that are appropriate in the department's current environment may not be appropriate in the future. In light of this, emphasizing that actions should be taken on the basis of risk may provide the flexibility needed for security practices to evolve as changing circumstances warrant and help VA meet the security objectives in the draft legislation.

Why GAO Did This Study

The use of information technology is crucial to VA's ability to carry out its mission of ensuring that veterans receive medical care, benefits, social support, and memorials. However, without adequate security protections, VA's systems and information are vulnerable to exploitation by an array of cyber-based threats, potentially resulting in, among other things, the compromise of veterans' personal information. GAO has identified information security as a government-wide high-risk area since 1997. The number of information security incidents reported by VA has more than doubled over the last several years, further highlighting the importance of securing the department's systems and the information that resides on them.

GAO was asked to provide a statement discussing the challenges VA has experienced in effectively implementing information security, as well as to comment on a recently proposed bill aimed at improving the department's efforts to secure its systems and information. In preparing this statement GAO relied on

previously published work as well as a review of recent VA inspector general and other reports related to the department's security program. GAO also analyzed the draft legislation in light of existing federal requirements and best practices for information security.

POW/MIA Announcements

"Keeping the Promise", "Fulfill their Trust" and "No one left behind" are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II (73,000+), Korean War (7,921) Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,642), 1991 Gulf War (0), and OEF/OIF (6). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home. For a listing of all personnel accounted for since 2007 refer to http: //www.dtic.mil/dpmo/accounted_for. For additional information on the Defense Department's mission to account for missing Americans, visit the Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) web site at http: //www.dtic.mil/dpmo or call or call (703) 699-1169. The remains of the following MIA/POW's have been recovered, identified, and scheduled for burial since the publication of the last RAO Bulletin:

Vietnam

- The Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office announced 12 MAR that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, missing from the Vietnam War, were recently accounted for and will be buried in a group burial ceremony. Army Staff Sgt. Lawrence Woods, 39, of Clarksville, Tenn., will be buried as part of group on March 21, at Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington, D.C. in a ceremony honoring the servicemen who were lost in an aircraft crash on Oct. 24, 1964. Woods and seven other service members were aboard a C-123 Provider aircraft that crashed when it was struck by enemy fire while resupplying the U.S. Special Forces camp at Bu Prang, Vietnam. Also on board the aircraft were Air Force service members Capt. Valmore W. Bourque, 1st Lt. Edward J. Krukowiski, 1st Lt. Robert G. Armstrong, Staff Sgt. Ernest J. Halvorson, Staff Sgt. Theodore B. Phillips,

Airman 1st Class Eugene Richardson and Army Pfc. Charles P. Sparks. Shortly after the crash, U.S. forces arrived at the site and recovered remains of seven of the crew members, but they could not locate Woods. The remains for the seven crew members were individually identified and the men were laid to rest at that time. In early 1997, a joint U.S./Kingdom of Cambodia team investigated the crash site and found it to be on the Vietnam side of the border. Subsequently, a joint U.S./Socialist Republic of Vietnam team surveyed the site in 1999 and confirmed that the wreckage correlated to a U.S. C-123 Provider aircraft. In 2009-2010, U.S. and Vietnamese teams excavated the site and recovered human remains and additional evidence, including a metal identification tag from the aircraft's commander. To identify those remains, scientists from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command used forensic and circumstantial evidence, which allowed them to account for Woods.

Korea

- The Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) announced 6 MAR that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, missing from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Pfc. Donald C. Durfee, 19, of Painesville, Ohio, will be buried March 6, in Rittman, Ohio. In November 1950, Durfee was assigned to Company M, 31st Infantry Regiment, 31st Regimental Combat Team (RCT), when his unit was deployed to the eastern side of the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea. During the battle his unit was overwhelmed by Chinese forces, which caused the unit to begin a fighting withdrawal south. It was during this battle that Durfee was reported to have been killed in action on Dec. 2, 1950. Following the war in 1954, as part of prisoner exchange, known as Operation Glory, the remains of Durfee were not returned. In late 1954, Chinese forces repatriated 25 cases of remains from Durfee's last known location on the eastern side of the Chosin Reservoir. A military review board in December 1955, declared the remains as unidentifiable and at that time the remains were transferred to Hawaii to be buried as unknown in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, known as the "Punchbowl." In 2013, due to advances in technology, scientists from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) determined that the possibility of identifying the remains now existed. The unknown remains were disinterred for analysis and possible identification.

In the identification of Durfee, scientists from JPAC used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, such as dental comparison and radiograph comparisons, which matched his records. There were no surviving family members for Durfee's return.

World War II
None
[Source: http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/news_releases/ Mar 2013 ++]

Vet Jobs Update ► FEB Vet Unemployment 9.2%

The unemployment rate for post-9/11 veterans jumped in February, nearly erasing the gains of a few months ago, Bureau of Labor Statistics data show. Meanwhile, the nation's unemployment rate held steady around 6.7 percent and the economy added 175,000 jobs. The latest generation of veterans saw their unemployment climb to 9.2 percent, up from 7.9 percent in January. The number is comparable to the February 2013 unemployment rate of 9.4 percent for this group. Just two months ago, the post-9/11 unemployment rate was 7.3 percent, a lower number than such vets had seen in years. In a blog post about the rate, Jacqueline Maffucci of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America called for government and the private sector to continue to work together to help vets find jobs. "As IAVA prepares to launch its 2014 campaign to focus on combating military and veteran suicides, stressors such as job uncertainty and unemployment are certainly on our minds," the blog post said. "It is imperative that the nation continues to focus on employment for veterans, and recognizes that younger OIF/OEF veterans continue to struggle to find employment once they separate from the military." The post also suggested that vets having trouble finding work reach out to the group for help, at 855-917-2743 or transition@iava.org. For the veteran population as a whole, unemployment in February was 6.3 percent, up from January's 5.6 percent rate. Because veterans employment reports have a small sample size and can fluctuate greatly, Labor Department statisticians warn against attempting to draw major conclusions from any one month's jobs report. [Source: Military.com | George Altman | 7 Mar 2014 ++]

VA Claims Backlog Update ► S.2091 Introduced

The backlog of benefits claims pending with the Veterans Affairs Department has dropped by almost half from this time last year, when it made headlines as a national embarrassment and an insult to the service of veterans.
But despite that dramatic reduction, a group of senators still worries the backlog is not disappearing fast enough.

Members of the Senate's VA Backlog Working Group are pushing for new legislation to help zero out the number, and to keep attention on the improving but still ongoing problem. Their bill, the 21st Century Veterans Benefits Delivery Act (S.2091), would provide better customer service for veterans with pending claims, offer more money to veterans who file "fully developed" claims and mandate stricter oversight of claims officials. "The key is that we're not here five years from now having the same conversations," said Sen. Dean Heller (R-NV), sponsor of the legislation. "Right now, the system we have is designed for World War II veterans. We're trying to drag this system into the 21st century." VA officials have not offered an official position on the new legislation. In a statement, spokesman Drew Brookie said the department is still focused on its publicly stated goal of zeroing out the backlog — claims cases pending for more than 125 days — by the end of 2015. "We have made strong progress, and we know there is more work to do," Brookie said. The backlog currently sits at around 368,000 cases. It peaked at 611,000 in late March 2013, roughly four times higher than when President Obama pledged to erase the problem in early 2009.

VA officials have blamed more complex cases and a 2010 major revision in Agent Orange-related claims for the rise in the backlog. But they also credit better technology, new processing techniques and mandatory overtime in helping to drive down the backlog total. They also have implemented changes similar to the provisions of Heller's bill, such as awarding a year of retroactive benefits to veterans who file fully developed claims, which are designed to make processing and completion of a case easier.

Heller applauded VA's recent success but said he has concerns that the effort will not be sustainable without fundamental changes in how VA workers do business. He and other senators on the bipartisan working group also voiced concerns that the recent progress may divert attention and pressure away from VA, even though tens of thousands of veterans are still waiting for results. But whether the legislation can advance quickly enough to make a difference remains to be seen.

Related comprehensive veterans legislation from Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Comomittee, has been languishing in that chamber. And even with bipartisan support on the issue, it could take months to shepherd the bill through the House. The cost of the changes is unknown, although Heller maintains that it would be minimal for most of the items outlined in his bill.

Meanwhile, the backlog total hasn't dipped below 300,000 cases since January 2011. But VA could go under that mark before this summer, if recent progress trends hold steady. Details of the 21st Century Veterans Benefits Delivery Act:

Whereas the VA Backlog Working Group March 2014 Report identifies problems in current processes, the 21st Century Veterans Benefits Delivery Act aims to provide a comprehensive solution. The bill is divided into three sections:

Title I – Benefits Claims Submission. This section is designed to encourage, assist and educate veterans on the benefits of submitting a completed claim, when possible, as well as reinforce the services available to help a veteran complete a claim:

- Includes proposals to improve veterans' access to information about the claims process;
- Provides Veterans Service Organizations and veterans' preferred secondary contact with better access to information; and
- Authorizes monetary benefits to incentivize developed claims submission.

Title II - Reforming Practices of Regional Offices. Personnel and management must be given tools to perform efficiently. This section requires the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to make structural changes that increase accuracy and efficiency at the regional office level in the following ways:

- Calls for audit of regional offices of the Veterans Benefits Administration;
- Ensures improved accountability and oversight of VARO management;
- Provides resources to VBA employees and implements changes in process that allows VBA employees to move claims through the electronic benefits awards structure more efficiently; and
- Improves transparency to the public on the size and scope of the current backlog.

Title III - Government Response. This section holds the government accountable and helps to ensure the claims process is a priority.

- Demands greater cooperation from federal agencies to transfer requested information; and
- Presses VBA employees to process information it receives from these agencies in a timely fashion. [Source: MilitaryTimes & Sen. Moran News Release | Leo Shane | 6 & 10 Mar 2014 ++]

DoD Sexual Abuse Update ► S.1917 Passed | Sent to House

The Senate on 10 MAR finalized plans for broad reforms in how sexual assault cases are handled in the military, just days after a bitter floor fight over a larger overhaul of the entire military justice system. The new measure, S.1917 Victims Protection Act of 2014 sponsored by Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-MO) passed unanimously, disguising deep rifts within the chamber over how best to protect victims and punish sex offenders. It halts — for now — a months-long fight between two top female Democrats in the Senate on this issue, one that McCaskill complained painted her as soft on military leaders despite her insistence on tougher rules for the services. "The argument was posed as victims versus commanders and whose side are you on," she told reporters last week. "It's not that simple." Under the Senate-passed bill, military commanders no longer would be able to overturn jury convictions; the statute of limitations for military rapes would be erased; and victims would receive their own independent counsel in sex crimes cases.

The bill also would require civilian review if a commander declines to prosecute a sexual assault case; require dishonorable discharges for troops convicted of such crimes; and create harsh punishments for anyone who retaliates against victims who report rapes and assaults. And it dumps the so-called "good soldier" defense, which allowed lawyers to cite service members' past exemplary service as evidence that they would not commit violent crimes.

The measure builds on sexual assault reforms already adopted by Congress last year, in response to questionable response from military leaders following several high-profile sex crimes and rising reports of improper behavior in the ranks.

According to the Defense Department, roughly 26,000 instances of unwanted sexual contact occurred in the military in 2012, but less than 13 percent were reported and only half of those went to court. Critics of the system argued that military indifference and vindictiveness was to blame, often accusing victims of hurting unit readiness by reporting the crimes.

Veterans' groups and victim advocacy organizations had lobbied for changes in McCaskill's bill in recent years, particularly the extra protections for men and women who report sex crimes. But over the last year, a number of groups rallied behind an alternative measure sponsored by Sen. Kristen Gillibrand (D-NY), chairwoman of the Senate Armed Services Committee's personnel panel, arguing that McCaskill's reforms didn't go far enough. Gillibrand's plan, which was strongly opposed by military leaders, would have completely separated sexual assault prosecutions from the military justice system in an effort to ensure complete independence from negative influence. Opponents called her plan a dismantling of the military's judiciary, noting that under the bill other major crimes could be assigned to independent prosecutors. McCaskill argued that prosecutors — not commanders — were more loathe to go after sex offenders, and taking the cases away from them would result in less scrutiny of cases. Last week, Gillibrand's measure fell five votes short of overcoming a filibuster that would have moved it forward for a straight up-or-down vote, despite 55 senators backing the proposal. Gillibrand has vowed to bring up the proposal again in coming months.

Meanwhile, McCaskill said she is hopeful that the strong Senate support for her measure in the wake of the controversy will provide momentum for her legislation in the House. She said the changes would give the military "one of the most victim-friendly justice systems in the world." House leaders had publicly dismissed Gillibrand's plan, but has been more receptive to accepting some of the changes in McCaskill's bill. No hearings or voting timelines have been scheduled.
[Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | 10 Mar 2014 ++]

VRAP Update ► Help Hire Our Heroes Act

A bill that would continue training assistance for unemployed veterans has been introduced in the House. The Help Hire Our Heroes Act was announced 5 MAR by California Democrats Rep. Julia Brownley and Rep. Mark Takano, according to a

statement from Brownley's office. The bill aims to extend the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program through 30 SEP. The bill now goes to the House Veterans Affairs Committee. Funding to pay for it will come from cutting $270 million from the Leaking Underground Storage Tank Trust Fund, said Brett Morrow, a spokesman for Rep. Takano. The program, which began in 2012, provided up to 12 months of training benefits at community colleges and technical schools in high demand occupations for unemployed veterans between the ages of 35 and 60 who are no longer eligible for the GI Bill. Due to funding limitations, the VA stopped accepting new VRAP applications 1 OCT, and is scheduled to stop paying benefits 1 APR. "Far too many veterans in Ventura County and across the country are unemployed, and we owe it to them to help them re-train for new high-skilled jobs and careers," Brownley said in the statement. "The Veterans Retraining Assistance Program has succeeded in helping many veterans re-train and find employment, and it should not be allowed to lapse." This is a separate action than that of Senator Chuck Schumer (D-NY) who is now pushing to extend the program through 2016. He's co-sponsoring the "Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Act" S.1982. [Source: Stars & Stripes article 7 Mar 2014 ++]

Vet Legislative Issues Update ► Omnibus Bill S.1950 Fails

A divided Senate on 27 FEB derailed Democratic legislation that would have provided $21 billion for medical, education and job-training benefits for the nation's veterans. The Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act of 2014 (S.1950) bill fell victim to election-year disputes over spending and fresh penalties against Iran. Each party covets the allegiance of the country's 22 million veterans and their families, and each party blamed the other for turning the effort into a chess match aimed at forcing politically embarrassing votes. Republicans used a procedural move to block the bill after Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Bernie Sanders (I-VT) chided GOP lawmakers about their priorities. "I personally, I have to say this honestly, have a hard time understanding how anyone could vote for tax breaks for billionaires, for millionaires, for large corporations and then say we don't have the resources to protect our veterans," said Sanders, the measure's chief author.

Democrats noted that more than two dozen veterans groups supported the legislation. But Republicans said they still favor helping veterans while also wanting to be prudent about federal spending. "We're not going to be intimidated on this," said Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama, top Republican on the Senate Budget Committee. "We're going to do the right things for the veterans of America." The fight over priorities demonstrated again the bitter divisions that have restrained the legislative process in recent years. Efforts to address immigration, a tax overhaul and job creation all seem likely to go nowhere this year. Republicans criticized how most of Sanders' bill was paid for — with unspent money from the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and the winding down of American military involvement in Afghanistan. The GOP says those are not real savings because no one expected those dollars to be spent as those wars ended. Republicans also objected to provisions making more veterans without service-connected injuries eligible for treatment at the Department of Veterans Affairs facilities. They said that would swamp an already overburdened system.

The vote sidetracking the bill was 56-41, with supporters falling four votes short of the 60 they needed to prevail. Sens. Jerry Moran of Kansas and Dean Heller of Nevada were the only Republicans voting to keep the legislation alive and the only lawmakers crossing party lines on the vote. Veterans groups complained about being caught in partisan crossfire. "Veterans don't have time for this nonsense and veterans are tired of being used as political chew toys," said Paul Rieckhoff, founder and CEO of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, which supported the legislation. Democrats wasted little time trying to cash in on the vote. Within moments, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee unleashed an email headlined, "Mitch McConnell Votes Against Kentucky Veterans." McConnell is up for re-election this year. Republicans said there would be no retribution from voters because the Democratic bill would have harmed veterans' services by flooding them with too many people. They also said this year's election campaigns will focus on other issues, such as President Barack Obama's health law. "We're sort of fooling ourselves to believe that this drives the election issue list," said Sen. Richard Burr of North Carolina, top Republican on the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Thursday's showdown came after Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., refused to allow votes on a GOP amendment slicing the bill's size and adding the penalties against Iran for its nuclear program. Obama opposes new penalties

while international negotiations with Iran proceed. Fifty-nine senators of both parties have sponsored a separate bill imposing the punishment if the talks fail, though Obama's effort has weakened Democratic calls for a quick Senate vote. A vote could put the administration and some Democrats who favor the proposal in an awkward spot. The White House did not issue a public statement on whether it supported the veterans' bill. Sanders' legislation addressed everything from making more veterans eligible for in-state college tuition to providing fertility or adoption services for some wounded troops left unable to conceive.

The VA would have been given more tools to eat into its backlog of 390,000 benefit claims awaiting action for more than 125 days. The bill also would have bolstered programs for veterans who suffered sexual abuse, and would have increased dental care and provided more alternative medicine, such as yoga for stress. In a two-year test program, some overweight veterans living more than 15 minutes from a VA gym would have been given memberships at private health clubs. Benefits for some spouses of deceased veterans would have improved, and aid to relatives caring for a wounded veteran would have been expanded to include those who served before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

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

- H.R.4068: SCRA Rights Protection Act of 2014. A bill to amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to require the consent of parties to contracts for the use of arbitration to resolve controversies arising under the contracts and subject to provisions of such Act and to preserve the rights of servicemembers to bring class actions under such Act, and for other purposes.
- H.R.4095: Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2014. A bill to increase, effective as of December 1, 2014, the rates of compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for the survivors of certain disabled veterans, and for other purposes.
- H.R.4096: American Heroes COLA Act of 2014. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for annual cost-of-living adjustments to be

made automatically by law each year in the rates of disability compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for survivors of certain service-connected disabled veterans.

- H.R.4102: Deceased Vet Estate Benefit Entitlements. To amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify that the estate of a deceased veteran may receive certain accrued benefits upon the death of the veteran, and for other purposes.
- H.R.4110: Helping to Encourage Real Opportunity for Veterans Transitioning from Battlespace to Workplace Act of 2014. A bill to amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to provide a tax credit to encourage private employers to hire veterans, to amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify the reasonable efforts an employer may make under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act with respect to hiring veterans, and for other purposes.
- H.R.4140: Homeless Veterans with Children Act of 2014. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide per diem payments to eligible entities for furnishing care to dependents of certain homeless veterans, and for other purposes.
- H.R.4147: Student Veterans IT Upgrade Act. A bill to direct the Chief Information Officer of the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Deputy Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Economic Opportunity to submit to the Committees on Veterans' Affairs of the Senate and House of representatives a report regarding the information technology of the Department that is used in administering the educational benefits administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.
- H.R.4149: Help Hire our Heroes Act. A bill to amend the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 to extend the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program, and for other purposes.
- H.R.4150: Veterans Employment and Training Service Longitudinal Study Act of 2014. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Labor to enter into a contract for the conduct of a longitudinal study of the job counseling, training, and placement services for veterans provided by the Secretary, and for other purposes.
- H.R.4151: Veterans Education Survey Act of 2014. A bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to enter into a contract with a non-

government entity to conduct a survey of individuals who have use or are using their entitlement to educational assistance under the educational assistance programs administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

- H.R.4175: Victory for Veterans Stamp Act of 2014. A bill to provide for the issuance of a Victory for Veterans stamp, and for other purposes.
- H.R.4184: VA Educational Assistance Advance Payments. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify the manner in which an advance payment of initial educational assistance paid by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs is charged against the entitlement of a veteran to such assistance.
- H.R.4191: Disability Compensation Claims Medical Evidence. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the treatment of medical evidence provided by non-Department of Veterans Affairs medical professionals in support of claims for disability compensation under the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.
- H.R.4198: VA Capacity for Treating Vets Report. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to reinstate the requirement for an annual report on the capacity of the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide for specialized treatment and rehabilitative needs of disabled veterans.
- S.2091: 21st Century Veterans Benefits Delivery Act. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the processing by the Department of Veterans Affairs of claims for benefits under laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.
- S.2095 Veterans Health Care Access Received Closer to Home Act of 2014. A bill to reauthorize and modify the pilot program of the Department of Veterans Affairs under which the Secretary of Veterans Affairs provides health services to veterans through qualifying non-Department of Veterans Affairs health care providers, and for other purposes.

[Source: http: //www.loc.gov & http: //www.govtrack.us/congress/bills 23 Mar 2014 ++]

Veteran Hearing/Mark-up Schedule ► as of 13 Mar 2014

Following is the current schedule of recent and future Congressional hearings and markups pertaining to the veteran community. Congressional hearings are the

principal formal method by which committees collect and analyze information in the early stages of legislative policymaking. Hearings usually include oral testimony from witnesses, and questioning of the witnesses by members of Congress. When a U.S. congressional committee meets to put a legislative bill into final form it is referred to as a mark-up. Veterans are encouraged to contact members of these committees prior to the event listed and provide input on what they want their legislator to do at the event.

- March 25, 2014. SAC-MILCON-VA FY15 Budget Hearing.

- March 25, 2014. HVAC, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity will hold a hearing on Veterans Affairs Bills.
- H.R. 2942 — A bill to amend Title 38, United States Code, to reestablish the Professional Certification and Licensure Advisory Committee of the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- H.R. 3056 — A bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program on the provision of outreach and support services to veterans pursuing higher education under the Post 9/11 Educational Assistance Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- H.R. 3614 — A bill to amend Title 38, United States Code, to improve the recognition by states of skills learned in the military by a Veteran when issuing licenses and credentials.
- H.R. 4031 — Department of Veterans Affairs Management Accountability Act of 2014.
- H.R. 4037 — A bill to amend Title 38, United States Code, to make certain improvements in the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs relating to training and rehabilitation for Veterans with service-connected disabilities, and for other purposes.
- H.R. 4038 — A bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make certain improvements in the information technology of the Veterans Benefits Administration of the Department of Veterans Affairs to process claims more efficiently, and for other purposes.
- H.R. 4147 — Student Veterans IT Upgrade Act.
- H.R. 4150 — Veterans Employment and Training Service Longitudinal Study Act of 2014.
- H.R. 4151 — Veterans Education Survey Act of 2014.

- March 25, 2014. HVAC O&I will hold legislative hearing with issues related to construction, health, and other matters.
- *HR 3593* – Mandating arrangement with US Army Corps of Engineers for three major construction projects
- *Draft bill* – informed consent for pychotropic drugs
- *Draft bill* – oversight of contracts with service-disabled veteran owned small businesses
- *Draft bill* –Gulf War Illness
- *Draft bill* –Improve information security by implementing actions to improve transparency and governance
- *Draft bill* –Biological implant protocol and procurement

- March 26, 2014. House Veterans' Affairs Committee and Senate Veterans Affairs Committee will hold a joint hearing to receive the legislative presentations of The American Legion.

- March 26, 2014: HVAC DAMA will hold a Legislative Hearing on bills related to NCA and VBA.
- HR 2018 – Honor Those Who Served Act
- HR 2088 – Centers for Excellence
- HR 2119 – Veterans Access to Speedy Review (Video Hearing)
- HR 2529 – Veterans Spouse Equal Treatment Act
- HR 3671 – NCA Medallion Bill
- HR 3876 – Burial with Dignity Act
- HR 4095 – Annual COLA
- HR 4102 – Require Payment for Accrued Benefits to Veterans Estate
- HR 4141 – Expand Enhanced Use Leases to Cemeteries
- HR 4191 – Quicker Veterans Benefits Delivery Act (REVISED)

- March 27, 2014. HAC-MILCON-VA FY15 Budget Hearing.

- March 27, 2014. HVAC Health intends to hold a Legislative Hearing on health related bills.
- H.R. 183 – The Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act

- H.R. 2527 – Veterans counseling and treatment for sexual trauma that occurred during inactive duty training
- H.R. 2661 – The Veterans Access to Timely Medical Appointments Act
- H.R. 2974 – To provide for the eligibility for beneficiary travel for veterans seeking treatment or care for military sexual trauma in specialized outpatient or residential programs at facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes
- H.R. 3387 – The Classified Veterans Access to Care Act
- H.R. 3508 – Qualifications of hearing aid specialists
- H.R. 3180 – To include contracts and grants for residential care for veterans in the exception to the requirement that the Federal Government recover a portion of the value of certain projects (Kaptur)
- H.R. 3831 – The Veterans Dialysis Pilot Program Review Act of 2014 (Roe)
- H.R. 4198 – The Appropriate Care for Disabled Veterans Act
- DRAFT – To authorize major medical facility projects for the Department of Veterans Affairs for fiscal year 2014 and for other purposes. (VA FY14 Construction Package) [Source: Veterans Corner w/Michael Isam 13 Mar 2014 ++]

Reserve Retirement Age Update ► Pentagon Proposes Change

Reservists would be eligible to begin receiving military retirement pay immediately after completing 20 years of part-time service under a new Pentagon proposal for overhauling the retirement system. The plan would blur the lines between active and reserve careers by allowing both to qualify for "working age" retirement checks that for decades have been limited to the full-time active-duty force. The fundamental change for reservists — who today must wait until age 60 to collect their first nickel of retirement pay — is one element of a broader set of proposals that the Defense Department unveiled Thursday in a report sent to Capitol Hill and also to the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission, which is conducting an in-depth study on the issue and preparing recommendations for Congress early next year.

The new Pentagon proposal would convert both active and reserve retirement packages into a "hybrid" that promises smaller monthly retirement checks supplemented with a 401(k)-style investment account that troops and retirees

would own outright. Reservists would get the same annual government contributions equal to 5 percent of basic pay, and ownership of those investment accounts would transfer to service members after six years of service. That would mark the first time that a limited retirement benefit would be provided to troops who do not complete a 20-year career in either component. Under one option, reserve pension checks would be structured similar to the current system, forcing reserve retirees to wait until age 60 before drawing any retirement pay. A second option, however, would create a two-tiered pension system that provides only a "partial benefit" during the early retirement years, increasing to a "full benefit" after retirees reach a more traditional retirement age, such as 62.

Under that two-tiered option, both active and reserve troops would be eligible for the "partial benefit" pension check after completing 20 years of service. Those checks would be exceptionally small for reservists who spend an entire career in drilling status, perhaps several hundred dollars a year. But for troops who spend years in the active-duty force and then complete 20 years of service in a reserve component, the working-age pensions become more generous and more closely resemble active-duty career benefits. The change could reshape the decision-making process for millions of individual troops. It might motivate younger reservists to stay in uniform for a full career. It may also make some active-duty troops view the reserves more positively if transferring into part-time status does not eliminate the possibility of early retirement checks.

It's part of a broader goal inside the Pentagon to bring both active and reserve troops under a single retirement system. "The two-tiered defined benefit was designed with the reserves in mind," said a defense official who helped draw up the proposals. The plan would reinforce a push inside some parts of the Pentagon to increase future use of the reserve components. During the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, reservists mobilized far more often than any previous era of the all-volunteer force. Some officials want to retain that high level of readiness and increased operational role for the reserves. "In these times of emergency, they move back and forth between active duty and reserve duty, between the two components. So our attempt was to see whether or not changes to retirement might facilitate that movement a little more easily," the defense official said. The proposal is also designed in part to save money. For most reservists, the two-tiered plan ultimately would lower the value of the total economic value of the retirement package when based on current life expectancy. Under the most

aggressive scenarios, that total lifetime value could be reduced by as much as 20 percent. But military manpower experts are banking on the belief that reservists would place more value on the prospect of getting a small pension earlier in life rather than a larger package that is back-loaded to provide more benefits in old age.

The proposal offering early checks for reservists requires a “delicate balance” when determining how much to pay in the early retirement years, officials say. If payments are too generous and approach standard drill pay, most reservists would retire immediately after becoming eligible. Also, a generous retirement for part-time troops may provide an incentive for those on active duty to transfer into the reserves and potentially create a retention problem for the active components. Offering a new retirement benefit to “gray-area” reservists — those who serve long enough to qualify for military retirement benefits but are not yet age 60 — would likely change the shape of the force, according to the Pentagon report. Today, the reserve components struggle to retain midcareer service members, but those who stay tend to stay for many years and remain in the force well into their 40s and 50s. Early retirement checks would likely boost retention among midcareer reservists as individuals who are motivated by the early pension but also incentivize some older reservists to go ahead and retire and begin collecting benefits. In the end, the composition of the reserves would look more like the active-duty force under this proposal, according to the Pentagon report.
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