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### **SENATE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE HEARING ON VA CLAIMS PROCESS**

On 13 March 2013, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) held a hearing concerning the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) claims process for medical benefits, the current backlog of benefit claims, the reasons for the current backlog, and the steps being taken to reduce and eliminate the backlog of claims. Witnesses included General Allison A. Hickey, Undersecretary of Veterans Affairs for Benefits, Mr. Stephen Warren, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Office of Information and Technology and Mr. Alan Bozeman, Director of the Veterans Benefits Management System Program Office. In his opening statement, Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), SVAC Chairman, acknowledged that the VA processes more claims than they ever have before but that it was imperative they move to a totally paperless system. Senator Johnny Isakson (R-GA), filling in for Senator Richard Burr (R-NC) as acting Ranking Member, opened by stating that the VA has been plagued by backlogs for years and that the VA must be completely transparent as to what works and what doesn't work in order for the process to be successful. Over the last four years, claims that are waiting for decisions that have exceeded 120 days have doubled from 400,000 to 800,000. The VA has identified many reasons for the hefty backlog including the claims process and the types of claims being submitted.

In her opening statement, General Hickey acknowledged that too many Veterans wait too long to get what they've earned but assured that execution of transformation to a paperless system will help reduce the current backlog. Of the claims filed seeking medical benefits, 23% have been filed by Gulf War Veterans, 20% from Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans, and 57% have been from Vietnam-Era Veterans. In offering reasons for the current backlog, General Hickey explained that the VA diverted 37% of their workforce to address claims by Vietnam-Era Veterans that had filed due to Agent Orange exposure. Further, she cited the process of obtaining medical and personnel records from the Department of Defense (DOD) as an impediment to the claims process stating that a required sixty day waiting period must be observed in between record requests.

When questioned by Senator Jon Tester (D-MT) if the waiting period was a result of VA policy or required by law, General Hickey responded that the issue was a legislative one and not a matter of VA policy. In addition, a major obstacle to final decisions on claims is the process in which they must be submitted. Currently, the VA still requires that

claims be filed using a paper system but is implementing an online system which it is confident will streamline the filing and decision process and help them meet their goal of total backlog elimination by 2015. Senator Dean Heller (R-NV) expressed doubts that the goal of backlog elimination is attainable and questioned if a solution might lie in hiring more people to help address the situation. General Hickey responded that full implementation of the online claims system would adequately address the issue and would require fewer personnel to go over the outstanding claims. Chairman Sanders commented on the ambitiousness of VA's goal and questioned whether the system could totally be implemented by 2015. General Hickey responded stating that she believed the system could be in place by the goal deadline and envisioned it being similar to the system currently in place for education benefits which has reduced the number of backlogged claims from 500,000 two years ago, to the 50,000 backlogged claims this year.

### **HOUSE ARMED SERVICES, MILITARY PERSONNEL HEARING ON CR IMPACT TO FAMILIES**

On 13 March 2013, the House Armed Services Committee (HASC), Subcommittee on Military Personnel held a hearing titled, "Impact of the Continuing Resolution, Sequestration, and Declining Operations and Maintenance Budgets on Military Personnel and Family Related Programs." The six member panel of Department of Defense (DOD) representatives and military personnel included Acting Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, Ms. Jessica Wright, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, Dr. Jonathan Woodson, and Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Manpower, Personnel, Training and Education (DCNO/MPTE) Vice Admiral (VADM) Scott Van Buskirk.

HASC- Military Personnel Chairman, Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC-02), opened the hearing by noting the impact that the CR and sequestration is having on family and health services to our military and Veterans. He emphasized its effect upon the daily lives of our service members and families, and how it's a massive challenge to manage our military's finances with no new budget. HASC- Military Personnel Ranking Member, Representative Susan Davis (D-CA-53) stated that this is the second hearing on personnel impact caused by the CR and sequestration, and no Congressional subcommittee has yet searched for a solution. For her, it's a problem that requires a bipartisan Congressional solution.

Ms. Wright began her testimony by re-emphasizing the impending future cuts and reductions to recruitment, training, and medical support. On top of the already \$46 billion in cuts, Ms. Wright testified there is a potential for an additional \$6 billion in further budget reductions. She continue to voice concerns that DOD is facing a hard balancing act, with problems such as civilian furloughs that cut 22 work days from April to September, the equivalent of a 20% reduction in pay. Dr. Woodson testified that despite deep budget cuts, the military will not compromise care or put anyone's health at risk. Even with the commitment to the same levels of care, Dr. Woodson did testify that there will be degradation to facility functionality, a loss in moral among those who work in such facilities, and a reduction in new investments, medical equipment, and a lower Research and Development (R&D) budget. Finally, VADM Van Buskirk testified that sequestration will cause reductions to naval operations, maintenance, training, and deployment. In his opening statement, he testified to the educational cutbacks the Navy is taking by cutting Naval Academy Summer programs and re-addressing the Tuition Assistance Program. There has also been a hold on the Veteran Work program that transitions Veterans into the civilian working world. On the bright side, the Navy is taking appropriate steps to minimize the adverse impacts to healthcare programs such as mental healthcare and drug prevention and rehabilitation services.

A few notable questions asked during the hearing included Dr. Woodson responding to Representative Walter Jones (R-NC-03) and his concerns about maintaining civilian healthcare physicians when such physicians have many other options to turn towards during sequestration, where Dr. Woodson assured the Congressman that DOD is looking into and preparing for such possibilities. VADM Van Buskirk provided information on how the Navy is engaging military personnel through various "Town Hall-like Forums" as one method to gauge the long term impacts of sequestration, and despite the re-addressing concerns; there is no decision at this time to end the \$84 million Tuition Assistance Program for the 27,000 sailors currently benefitting from it.

### **AUSN ANALYZES CONGRESSIONAL BUDGET RESOLUTIONS**

On 13 March 2013, the House of Representatives Budget Committee introduced and marked up its Fiscal Year 2014 (FY14) Budget Resolution which seeks a balanced budget through reforms in government spending. Chairman of the House Budget Committee, Representative Paul Ryan (R-WI-01), introduced his plan, called the 'Path to Prosperity.' In the House plan, \$560.2 billion is allocated for DOD spending on training, equipment, and compensation that in turn will help address threats and provide leadership on the global landscape. Furthermore, the resolution calls for \$6 trillion

budgeted towards defense spending over the next ten years but quickly urges efficient and responsible appropriation of the funding. The budget proposed by the House Budget Committee also calls for full funding of current Veterans' programs and benefits, allocating a total of \$145.73 billion. On the other side of the Capitol, the Senate Budget Committee Chair, Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), introduced her plan 'The Foundation for Growth' which would replace the remaining years of the sequester with what Senator Murray called a "balanced" package of revenue increases and spending cuts, while protecting spending for entitlement and programs. The Senate plan also envisions reducing the deficit by \$1.85 trillion over a decade. In regards to DOD spending, Senator Murray's plan calls for a reduction of Defense spending by \$240 billion to work in concert with the drawdown of forces from overseas. The Senate plan also provides \$63 billion in discretionary budget authority for FY14; including advance appropriation amounts equal to the President's FY13 Request levels for Veterans programs.

Details can be found at [AUSN's Capitol Hill Blog on House and Senate Budget Resolutions](#).

## **HOUSE VETERANS' AFFAIRS, ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY HEARING ON RESERVE UNEMPLOYMENT**

On Thursday, 14 March 2013, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC), Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity (EO), held a hearing titled: "Lowering the Rate of Unemployment for the National Guard and Reserve: Are We Making Progress?" Notable witnesses included Mr. Ronald G. Young, Director, Family and Employer Program and Policy for the Department of Defense (DOD), Major General (MG) Terry M. Haston, The Adjutant General (TAG), Tennessee National Guard, Major Ty Shepard, Director, California National Guard Employment Initiative, Mr. Ted Daywalt, CEO and President of VetsJobs, Mr. John Barnes, Managing Partner and CEO of Panther Racing and Mr. Al Garver, Executive Director, Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States.

In his opening state, HVAC- EO Chairman, Representatives Bill Flores (R-TX-17), stated, "40 to 50 percent. That's the unemployment rate we continue to hear of among some National Guard and Reserve units when they return from deployment. While some of those needing a job were fresh out of high school when they joined the Guard and Reserve and never held a job before deploying, such levels of unemployment have significant ramifications for not just the servicemember, but also for our national defense." The entire hearing centered on the unemployment rate of current Reserve Component members. The overwhelming testimony from all military witnesses centered on the concern that having unemployed servicemembers significantly reduces the readiness of the Guard and Reserves. After having to fight two wars over a decade, the National Guard and Reserve have transformed from a "strategic reserve force" to an "operational reserve force," and with this has come many hardships, pertaining to employment. The simple fact that many Reserve Component members are unable to guarantee that they will not be mobilized and deployed makes it tough for prospective employers to be able and willing to hire them. Compounding the issue, is that once a Guardsmen or Reservist completes their tour of duty, go through demobilization and come home, they have the potential to be called right back to Active Duty in the cases of natural disasters and other Reserve Component responsibilities.

There were a few notable proposed solutions to help curb the high unemployment levels within the National Guard and Reserve Force, proposed by witness and AUSN magazine contributor, Mr. Ted Daywalt from VetJobs. Those proposed solutions included; 1.) Much like in England, compensate employers when a National Guard or Reserve member is activated, so the employer can hire a contractor until the component member returns, 2.) Provide real tax breaks to employers that are not encumbered by the Department of Labor (DOL) and 3.) Have a better licensing and certification procedures that takes into consideration military experience. There are many legislation efforts to help with the later proposal that AUSN is currently supporting, such as S. 495, the Careers for Veterans Act, which would amend title 38, United States Code, to require Federal agencies to hire Veterans and to require States to recognize the military experience of Veterans when issuing licenses and credentials, which AUSN recently submitted a [letter of support for S. 495](#).

## **AUSN ON THE HILL**

This week, in addition to monitoring Congressional Hearings, AUSN met briefly with staff of the Senate- Navy Legislative Liaison office to share information and discuss working together in the future. As part of a coordinated effort with other Veteran Service Organization's (VSO's) and Military Service Organization's (MSO's), AUSN co-signed a letter to the President regarding concerns with the new Distinguished Warfare Medal. This letter and our preceding concerns, which AUSN sent to the media through one of our press releases, was picked up immediately in a [Navy Times story](#). In addition, AUSN attended the House Guard and Reserve Caucus Breakfast, co-chaired by

Representative Duncan Hunter (R-CA-50) and Representative Tim Walz (D-MN-01), where Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, Mr. Paul Patrick, spoke to attendees which included AUSN and other Veteran Service Organization's (VSO's) and Military Service Organization's (MSO's) as well as Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of the Navy (DON) officials, Members of Congress and staff. In the breakfast, the Chief of the Navy Reserve, VADM Robin Braun, gave a speech on her top priorities for the Navy Reserve which included full funding of resilience programs, National Guard and Reserve Equipment Account (NGREA) funding for equipment modernization and special pays and bonuses as incentives for continued recruitment and retention in the Navy Reserve. AUSN also hosted one of its regular Navy Now Forums this week at the Navy Memorial in downtown DC where VADM Richard Hunt spoke about the Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) program and its importance to the Navy to an audience of over 100 attendees.

#### **PRIORITY BILLS INTRODUCED THIS WEEK**

**S. 548, The Military Sexual Assault Prevention Act of 2013.** Introduced by Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), the bill would amend title 10, United States Code, to improve and enhance the capabilities of the Armed Forces to prevent and respond to sexual assault and sexual harassment in the Armed Forces.

**S. 529, (Official title yet to be released).** Introduced by Senator Richard Burr (R-NC), the bill would amend title 38, United States Code, to modify the commencement date of the period of service at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, for eligibility for hospital care and medical services in connection with exposure to contaminated water.

**S. 515, (Official title yet to be released).** Introduced by Senator Sherrod Brown (D-OH), the bill would amend title 38, United States Code, to extend the Yellow Ribbon G.I. Education Enhancement Program to cover recipients of Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry scholarship.

**H.R. 1134, The Rural Veterans Healthcare Accessibility Improvement Act.** Introduced by Representative Pete Gallego (D-TX-23), the bill would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a grant program and pilot program designed to improve the delivery of health care to veterans residing in rural areas.

**H.R. 1132, Efficient Service for Veterans Act.** Introduced by Representative Jeff Denham (R-CA-10), the bill would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Secretary of Defense to jointly ensure that the Vet Centers of the Department of Veterans Affairs have access to the Defense Personnel Record Image Retrieval system and the Veterans Affairs/Department of Defense Identity Repository system.

**H.R. 1131, (Official title yet to be released).** Introduced by Representative Jeff Denham (R-CA-10), the bill would amend title 10, United States Code, to extend military commissary and exchange store privileges, without time-period limitation, to members of the Armed Forces who are involuntarily separated with a service-connected disability and also to extend such privileges to their dependents.

**H.R. 1039, (Official title yet to be released).** Introduced by Representative Michael Fitzpatrick (R-PA-08), the bill would rescind unobligated amounts for foreign assistance to Egypt, and to appropriate funds for the Department of Defense tuition assistance program.

In the advocacy section of the website, you can click on [Bills of Interest](#) to get daily revisions on Congressional action for all AUSN priority bills. We STRONGLY encourage you all to visit our [Advocacy](#) page, especially the [Capitol Hill Blog](#) which receives almost daily submissions when Congress is in session to see what AUSN is doing for you on Capitol Hill.

We also encourage you and your friends and family to visit the re-designed [AUSN FACEBOOK PAGE](#). If you have an account, please Login and "Like" us, which will allow you to see our [TWITTER](#) feeds and other updates from AUSN that shows us monitoring Capitol Hill on your behalf!

#### **NEW LEGISLATIVE ALERTS**

There were two new [Legislative Alerts](#) sent this week based on hearings and interaction with Congressional staff, as well as traction on the issue. When these alerts are sent to your email, please click on the TAKE ACTION link that is at the top of the alert email to send a letter response to your Members of Congress. If you have not seen them, please go to the Legislative Alerts section on the AUSN webpage and/or check your e-mail for the following alerts which were titled:

**Legislative Alert #113-6: SUPPORT H.R. 303 and S. 234, Retired Pay Restoration Act**

**Legislative Alert #113-7: SUPPORT H.R. 833 and S. 240, Honoring Purple Heart/Bronze Star above New Medal**

## **NEXT WEEK OUTLOOK**

Next week, AUSN will again be meeting with a few Congressional offices and monitoring a few notable hearings, including a House Appropriations, Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs (MILCON/VA) hearing where MCPON Stevens will be testifying. In addition, the House and Senate next week will begin turning attention towards receiving the President's Budget (PB) request for Fiscal Year 2014 (FY14) by holding hearings and discussions before they recess next week Friday for two weeks. Upon their return, the PB will be dropped, around early April, and the FY14 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and Appropriations process begins.

## **AUSN LEGISLATIVE DEPARTMENT SEEKING LEGISLATIVE LIAISON VOLUNTEERS FOR 2013**

AUSN has received numerous volunteers for the Legislative Liaison program and is grateful for everyone who has thrown their hands up to help in our grassroots efforts in the states. AUSN's Legislative Director and National Vice President of Government Relations have spoken recently on our current volunteers and are finalizing details which will be released before the end of the month. We're hoping to start the program up in April 2013, right after the President is expected to drop his Fiscal Year 2014 (FY14) Budget request and Congressional hearings commence.

However, AUSN is still seeking TWO VOLUNTEER AUSN MEMBERS per state, (PARTICULARLY to fill remaining gaps from Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia and Wyoming) to act as AUSN Legislative Liaisons and meet with their Members of Congress AT LEAST TWICE a year, preferably once in the late Spring and once in the early Fall. The goal will be to have AUSN Members engage their Congressional Delegation and report to the Legislative Director at the AUSN Headquarters on what transpired and what they need. AUSN Headquarters will provide necessary copies of Legislative Alerts, Fact Sheets, Priorities/Objectives Cards and any other information in preparation for meetings upon request.

To qualify for being a 2013 AUSN Legislative Liaison, you must;

- Be an Active AUSN Member (and be a permanent resident of State you wish to liaison with)
- Be willing to meet with your Senators' offices TWICE a year (which have District offices throughout your State)
- Be willing to engage with at least ONE House Member District office TWICE a year
- Report to AUSN Legislative Director, Anthony Wallis, and/or the NEW National Vice President of Government Relations, RDML Robin Graf, USNR (Ret), on meetings and important highlights via e-mail
- Stick STRICTLY to FEDERAL issues of concern (AUSN Priority Card) to AUSN that are nation-wide and benefit all members of the Navy community

IF INTERESTED, please contact AUSN'S Legislative Director, Anthony Wallis, at [anthony.wallis@ausn.org](mailto:anthony.wallis@ausn.org) and copy RDML Graf, at [grafrl@cox.net](mailto:grafrl@cox.net). Once we have enough AUSN Volunteers (at least two from each State) we will notify you with further instructions.

## **AUSN LEGISLATIVE DEPARTMENT SEEKING DC METRO AREA AUSN MEMBERS FOR AUSN LIBRARY**

The Association of the United States Navy (AUSN) is currently seeking 2-4 Volunteers as soon as possible for cataloging, organizing, and establishing a working document for its Headquarters Library.

AUSN currently has a small library at our headquarters here in Alexandria, VA that is in need of updating. The library consists of many Navy and Naval History books as well as modern military history. This position would begin as soon as possible and extend into the summer if need be. AUSN is willing to help cover metro transit costs, but AUSN also offers free parking at our headquarters. Research equipment, i.e. computer stations and supplies, are available at AUSN headquarters. Volunteers, upon completion of organizing the library, will receive their names on a plaque, with AUSN's logo to hang outside the library.

Interested Volunteers should e-mail a cover letter and a resume to Mr. Anthony A. Wallis, Director of Legislation, at [anthony.wallis@ausn.org](mailto:anthony.wallis@ausn.org). If there are any questions, feel free to email Mr. Anthony A. Wallis or call him at 703-548-5800. Volunteers will report directly to Mr. Wallis on moving forward.

## **AUSN LEGISLATIVE DEPARTMENT ACCEPTING LEGISLATIVE INTERN APPLICANTS FOR SUMMER 2013**

The Association of the United States Navy (AUSN) is looking for a full or part time unpaid Legislative Intern for their offices in Old Town, Alexandria.

Candidates should have, or be pursuing, an undergraduate degree in Political Science/Government Affairs/Communications. Strong writing and personal skills a must! An interest and passion for the United States Navy and Navy Reserve is highly desirable. In addition to administrative tasks, i.e. answering phones and helping to schedule appointments, interns will monitor and write After Action Reports on Congressional Hearings of interest such as House and Senate Armed Services, Appropriations and Veterans' Affairs Committee hearings. Interns will also have the opportunity to attend meetings with Congressional Staff along with the Legislative Director as well as other meetings off of Capitol Hill.

The Legislative Director is also willing to oversee a research project of the intern's interest if they are pursuing class credit for the internship. Candidates can submit a cover letter, resume and 1-2 page writing sample to the Director of Legislation, Mr. Anthony A. Wallis at [Anthony.Wallis@ausn.org](mailto:Anthony.Wallis@ausn.org) or fax it to 703-683-3647. Schedules are flexible/negotiable for the summer and Metrorail travel reimbursement is available to interns as well as free parking at our headquarters off of King Street in Alexandria. Please apply by April 10. More information can be found on AUSN's Legislative Department Intern webpage.

**QUESTIONS/COMMENTS/CONCERNS**

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