



Legislative Update

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HOUSE VETERANS AFFAIRS, DISABILITY ASSISTANCE SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING ON VA CLAIMS

On 21 September 2012, the House Veterans' Affairs (HVA), Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) held a hearing on methods to reduce backlogged claims at the Department of Veterans' Affairs. The Subcommittee Chaired by Representative Jon Runyan (R-NJ-03) and Ranking Member, Representative Jerry McNerney (D-CA-11) heard from witnesses, including Mr. Eliseo Cantu and Mr. James Richman of the Texas Veterans Commission, Mr. Steve Hernandez of the Veterans Service Office of McLennan County, TX and Ms. Diana Rubens of the Veterans Benefits Administration at the VA.

Chairman Runyan began his opening statement with the problems of backlogged veterans in receiving health benefits, and how the wait for care is far too long. He brought up the Texas State Strike Force Team as an example of how to address these problems. Ranking Member McNerney explained that 1.3 million claims are jamming the system, and poor processing capabilities are doing nothing to fix the problem. Even 10,000 more claims processing personnel have not been able to alleviate the problem and have only expanded the system's bureaucracy. Representative McNerney ended his statement reiterating that the broken system must be fixed. The first panel to testify consisted of three members involved in the previously mentioned Texas Strike Force Program. Mr. Cantu laid out statistics of Texas backlogs, such as 179,000 district claims in 2011 and over 68,000 claims over 125 days old as of July 2012. Mr. Richman talked about the strike team program, how it operates, and its successes. These include specifically going after claims over 125 days old, and completing 2,525 cases in just the first month of operations. Mr. Hernandez then spoke again about the strike force in general, namely indicating its \$1.5 million dollar cost, and speaking on the possibility of increased private sector help. Next, in the second panel, Ms. Rubens from the VA spoke about the coordination between the VA and the Texas Veterans Commission in processing claims for Texan Veterans. The Veterans' Benefits Administration, she said, wants to reach a 98% processing rate for all claims within 125 days. To accomplish such a goal, she highlighted three initiatives; the e-benefits web portal, disability benefit questionnaires, and the fully developed claims program.

Ranking Member McNerney proceeded to ask Mr. Cantu what the most effective method is to address backlogged cases. Mr. Cantu responded that timely communication is key, as the current call centers are being swamped with claims and there is a need for a more effective system of lower level call centers. Chairman Runyan then asked Ms. Rubens if she can give a sense of what has worked between the VA and Texas Veterans Board in regards to cooperating with the strike force. Ms. Rubens replied that the strike force has sped the process by helping with the review of claims and readying them for decision.

SENATE PASSES CONTINUING RESOLUTION

In the early hours of Saturday morning, at around 1:30am, the Senate passed [H.J. Res 117, the Continuing Appropriations Resolution Act of 2012](#) (CR), amongst a flurry of debate and hold ups this past week. The CR passed by a vote of 62-30 and was presented to the President on 25 September 2012 for his signature before the deadline of this Sunday, 30 September 2012. By Thursday afternoon, 20 September 2012, the Senate voted 67-31 on a motion to proceed to H.J. Res 117 that would fund the federal government for six months, opening the Senate for a final floor vote, however disagreement on legislation to be considered before the CR vote, including bill's by Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and Senator Rand Paul (R-KY), delayed the final CR vote.

On Thursday, Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) stated to Senate Minority Leader, Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY), that he wanted to include another bill on outdoor sports and hunting, S. 3525, by Senator Jon Tester (D-MT), who is facing a difficult reelection in his home state. The posturing by both Senate Democrats and Republicans delayed what should have been quick and easy, as the CR passed the House last week, into a dragged out debate. By Friday, amid threats that the Senate could hold votes over the weekend, Senate leaders signed off on a deal to vote on all four of the measures, Senator Paul, Senator Graham and Senator Tester's bills with the CR being voted on last. In order to get the CR passed before the start of the new fiscal year on 1 October 2012, Senate Democrats signed off on the CR only when it was sure to incorporate the \$1.047 trillion discretionary spending cap outlined in last year's debt limit deal. The CR will extend spending through 27 March 2013 and increase levels for most programs and agencies by about 0.6 percent, totaling \$608 billion for the Department of Defense (DOD), including \$88.5 billion in war funding. However, some lawmakers and staff have been hinting about another CR for the remainder of Fiscal Year 2013 (FY13), after the March 2013 deadline expires, which would allow Members of Congress to focus on Fiscal Year 2014 (FY14) bills.

Details can be found at [AUSN'S Capitol Hill Blog Entry on Senate Passage of the CR](#).

AUSN SENDS LETTERS TO HOUSE AND SENATE COMMITTEES ON RCOH FUNDING NOT IN THE CR

AUSN wrote letters this week to the House Appropriations Committee (HAC), House Armed Services Committee (HASC), Senate Appropriations Committee (SAC) and Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) Chairmen and Ranking Members regarding concerns with the recently passed [H.J. Res 117, the Continuing Appropriations Resolution Act of 2012](#) (CR). With the final passage of the CR, concerns on funding levels, including the Navy testifying twice in the past week on the CR's impact on Navy carrier Refueling and Complex Overhaul (RCOH), have gone largely unheeded. Admiral Mike Ferguson, Vice Chief of Naval Operations (VCNO), recently testified last week before HASC on concerns about the ability of the Navy to keep an 11 aircraft carrier fleet if carrier Refueling and Complex Overhaul (RCOH) funding for CVN-71 and 72, the USS Theodore Roosevelt and the USS Abraham Lincoln respectively, doesn't come through by early next year. Similarly the week before, the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Sean Stackley, voiced these concerns at a HASC- Oversight Subcommittee hearing in that the CR has had no RCOH funding language for CVN's 71 and 72. Assistant Secretary Stackley was puzzled, much like the Committee members, as to why this was, as he and the Navy had both made it clear that RCOH for those two CVN's remains their utmost priority. The Assistant Secretary also noted that if there is no budget agreement and no "stand-alone" legislation for it, CVN-71's RCOH funding will run out as early as late January 2013.

Details can be found at [AUSN's Capitol Hill Blog Entry on Letters to House and Senate Committees](#).

AUSN ON THE HILL

As was reported last week in the 'Next Week Outlook' section, AUSN found out that the hearing by the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee on Department of Defense (DOD) financial accountability was canceled and will be rescheduled for after the election. However, this past week, in addition to engaging the Hill, AUSN had a few meetings with other groups in the Veteran Service Organization (VSO) community including The Military Coalition (TMC) to talk about pending veteran health care concerns, discussing the TRICARE debate and how it may shape up with National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) consideration in the lame duck Congress and the National Military Veterans Alliance (NMVA) meeting discussing possible outcomes with the sequestration debate. In addition, AUSN spoke to a few VSO representatives and Congressional staff at various events this week, including a thank you reception to VSO's on helping to get final passage of the GAIN Act into law; legislation that AUSN and our members supported with [Legislative Alert #112-6](#). AUSN held a very successful Navy Now Form where our guest speaker was Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral Jonathan Greenert with well over 100 guests at the luncheon to hear on the status of our Navy ([brief highlights here](#)). Lastly, AUSN attended the retirement and change of office ceremony for Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy (MCPON) Rick West and incoming MCPON Michael Stevens which was at the DC Navy Yard.

PRIORITY BILLS INTRODUCED THIS WEEK

H.R. 6563, (Official title yet to be released). Introduced by Representative Edward Markey (D-MA-07), the bill would require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a veteran's jobs corps.

S. 3614, (Official title yet to be released). Introduced by Senator Jack Reed (D-RI), the bill would establish a pilot program to authorize the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development to make grants to nonprofit organizations to rehabilitate and modify homes of disabled and low-income veterans.

In the advocacy section of the website, you can click on [Bills of Interest](#) to get daily revisions on Congressional action for priority bills. I 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 no new legislative alerts this week. Again, 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 (a few of you have written in that you wish to send letters, but don’t know how). Please continue to go to the [Legislative Alerts](#) section on the AUSN webpage and/or check your e-mail and submit ones you haven’t seen yet to your Congressional delegation.

NEXT WEEK OUTLOOK

The U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate is out of session for campaign season. AUSN encourages everyone to vote on Election Day, 6 November 2012. We have compiled an up to date election site for our Members to visit to see if their Members are retiring, lost in their primary or running for different offices this year at [AUSN’s Election Tracker page](#). It’s a big year with the entire House up for re-election, over a third of the Senate and the White House. In addition, due to the House and Senate being out of session, there won’t be any Legislative Updates until they return, which currently is schedule for the week of 12 November 2012. Until then, AUSN is meeting with staffers on the Hill and preparing for when Congress returns with a full agenda which includes finding a solution to the sequestration problem, possibly looking at passing one or a few FY13 Appropriation bills, as well as passing an NDAA (which if it fails to do, would be the first time in over 50 years Congress has not passed an NDAA). This upcoming month is also AUSN’s Conference down in Norfolk where we will review and adopt resolutions which form the basis of our advocacy efforts for the upcoming year. If you have any thoughts or issues you would like to have discussed or even submitted as a resolution, please see [AUSN’s Resolutions Format page](#) to submit.

The Association of the United States Navy is continuously on and/or monitoring Capitol Hill, advocating for your concerns and utilizing our strong relationships with Members of Congress, Staff and cooperating with other military associations to tell the Navy and our veterans’ story. This is an ALL HANDS ON DECK effort and your grassroots advocacy will help make the changes that need to happen!

QUESTIONS/COMMENTS/CONCERNS

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