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HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS, MILITARY CONSTRUCTION & VETERANS AFFAIRS HEARING- MILITARY LIFE

On Tuesday 19 March, 2013, the House Appropriations Committee (HAC), Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans' Affairs (MILCON/VA), held a hearing titled: "Quality of Life in the Military." The witnesses included Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps (USMC), Sergeant Major Michael Barrett and Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy (MCPON) Michael Stevens. MCPON Stevens had been slated to be at the hearing, but was in the hospital awaiting surgery. His opening statement was submitted for the record and his office invited any and all members of HAC-MILCON/VA to submit any questions they have for MCPON Stevens to them. In his submitted opening statement, he thanked the Subcommittee for holding the hearing and allowing him to testify on behalf of the "426,000 Active and Reserve Sailors comprising the finest Total Force in the history of the United States Navy." He highlighted the importance of Quality of Life measures that he sees as the most important tool for recruitment and retention of America's elite Sailor force, adding that Selective Reenlistment Bonuses (SRB's) are particularly important to officer and enlisted shortfalls in the Nuclear, Information Dominance and Special Warfare Operator fields. Continuing on, MCPON Stevens underlined affiliation bonuses as the key element in the recruitment and retention of Navy Reserve Sailors, and highlighted the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (YRRP) as the "tremendously successful" program used to care for Reserve servicemembers and their families following deployments. MCPON Stevens, towards the end of his statement, spoke for the importance of the "Navy Safe Harbor Program" and its ability to provide the highest quality non-medical care to all seriously wounded Sailors.

When questioning Sergeant Major Barrett of the USMC, HAC- MILCON/VA Chairman, Representative John Culberson (R-TX-07) asked what the top three quality of life concerns were. Sergeant Major Barrett answered that above anything else, the warfighter and family services programs are what have kept the USMC whole over a decade's worth of simultaneous warfighting. In addition, HAC-MILCON/VA Ranking Member, Representative Sanford Bishop (D-GA-02) asked what the biggest impacts of the furloughs, caused by sequestration, will be, and Sergeant Major Barrett answered that those childcare support services, such as behaviorists that care for children suffering from autism and ADD/ADHD will be negatively impacted by sequestration fueled furloughs.

HOUSE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE HEARING ON DISABILITY CLAIMS PROCESS

On 20 March 2013, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) held a hearing titled, "Focusing on People: A Review of VA's Plans for Employee Training, Accountability, and Workload Management to Improve Disability Claims Processing." HVAC Chairman, Representative Jeff Miller (R-FL-01) and HVAC Ranking Member, Representative Mike Michaud (D-ME-02), presided over the witness panel which consisted of General Allison Hickey, Undersecretary for Benefits, Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA). Ms. Hickey was accompanied by Ms. Diana Rubens, Deputy Undersecretary for Field Operations for the VA as well.

General Hickey testified, in her opening statement, that as a direct result of the budget support provided by the Committee, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has completed more than one million disability compensation claims the last three years in a row, the highest numbers ever in the history of VA, but claims waits are still too high. Despite processing over 1 million claims over the past three years, it has not been enough to keep pace with the total number of growing claims, with over 600,000 currently backlogged. Various factors, such as retroactive benefit awards for Agent Orange sufferers and an increase in access to the VA over the years, have contributed to the greater volumes and levels of backlogged claims. She stated that VA Secretary Shinseki has set a goal to eliminate the backlogs by 2015, and the VBA is retraining, reorganizing, streamlining business processes and building and implementing technology solutions based on the newly redesigned processes in order to improve benefits delivery. VA employees are at the forefront of this plan, and new training programs are being planned and implemented. Such actions taken include the establishment of Quality Review Teams (QRTs), which focuses on common sources of error, and a National Training Curriculum (NTC) to train current claims employees through a mandatory 80 hours of training annually. Station Enrichment Training (SET) provides standardized training in technical skills, and Changed Management Agents (CMAs) are regionally positioned employees to help guide transitions. General Hickey also testified about how the VBA will hold employees accountable during the process. This is done through on-going feedback on performance, skills certification programs, stat reviews, and accountability standards for program managers. General Hickey also testified about the Veterans Relationship Management (VRM) that engages, empowers, and serves Veterans and other claimants with seamless, secure, and on-demand access to benefits and service information. A key component of VRM is the E-Benefits portal that currently provides users with over 45 self-service options and greater access to benefits and health information at the time and method of their choosing.

Important questions of note included General Hickey assuring Representative Mark Takano's (D-CA-41) concerns over urban Veteran wait times are being addressed through local medical centers that can provide up to 5 years of medical care, allowing Veterans from avoiding the hassle of the standard healthcare process. Representative Jon Runyan (R-NJ-03) asked about employee training, and General Hickey responded that the VBA is using Performance Improvement Plans like other Federal departments, and these included overviews of employees' past's and decisions on opportunities or possible terminations based off of these overviews.

SENATE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE HEARING ON VA MENTAL HEALTHCARE

On 20 March 2013, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) held a hearing titled, "VA Mental Health Care: Ensuring Timely Access to High-Quality Care." The hearing concerned the accessibility, length of time, and quality of care that Veterans encounter when seeking mental health treatment from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as well as the efforts being made by VA to address issues related to providing adequate and timely treatment. Notable witnesses included; Dr. Robert Petzel, Undersecretary for Health, Department of Veterans Affairs, Dr. Janet Kemp, Director, Suicide Prevention and Community Engagement National Mental Health Program Office of Patient Care Services, Veterans Health Administration, Dr. Sonja Batten, Deputy Chief Consultant, Specialty Mental Health Office of Patient Care Services, Veterans Health Administration, and COL. Rebecca Porter, Chief, Army Behavioral Health. In his opening statement, SVAC Chairman, Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), stated the timely access to quality mental healthcare is crucial to Veterans and their families and that it is imperative for VA to not only provide multiple options for care, but also to inform Veterans of those options. SVAC Ranking Member, Senator Richard Burr (R-NC), echoed Senator Sanders' statement and stressed that the focus should be on helping Veterans regardless of whether treatment came from VA or an outside provider. For Veterans seeking mental health treatment, the VA set the goal of providing initial evaluations within 24 hours and more comprehensive evaluations within 14 days. However, last year some Veterans were reporting that they had been waiting up to 60 days to receive initial evaluations for treatment.

In his opening statement, Dr. Richard Petzel acknowledged that VA was experiencing setbacks in trying to provide

treatment in a timely fashion to Veterans seeking assistance. He noted that in August 2012, President Obama issued an Executive Order requiring VA to hire 1,600 new mental health providers by June 2013 and, to date; approximately 1,300 of those positions have been staffed. Dr. Petzel pointed to VA's Veterans Crisis Line which has received 750,000 calls over a five year time span as an effort that has experienced success, but conceded that more work needs to be done.

In her opening statement, Col. Rebecca Porter indicated that the length of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have tested the capabilities of Army members in managing mental health issues. She stated that the Army was aware of the stressors facing soldiers and that programs have been implemented to help members cope with them. Furthermore, she explained that mental health professionals were being embedded in units to aid with early detection of mental health issues. Senator Sanders opened up questions by asking about the ability of VA to meet their goal of hiring 1,600 mental health providers by the June deadline. Dr. Petzel stated that he believed the goal would be met and that steps had been taken to compact the steps in the hiring process. Senator Jon Tester (D-MT) asked Col. Porter if the military was taking any steps to combat the stigma that is associated with seeking mental health treatment. She replied that was the aim of embedding mental health professionals in the brigade areas and that by providing access to treatment would hopefully aid in reducing that stigma.

HOUSE ARMED SERVICES, MILITARY PERSONNEL HEARING ON SUICIDE PREVENTION

On 21 March 2013, the House Armed Services Committee (HASC), Subcommittee on Military Personnel held a hearing titled, "Update on Military Suicide prevention." Notable witnesses included Vice Admiral (VADM) Scott R. Van Buskirk, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (DCNO), Manpower, Personnel, Training, and Education, Dr. Jerry Reed, Jr., Director of the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, Brigadier General Robert F. Hedelund, Director of Marine and Family Programs, and Ms. Jacqueline Garrick, Acting Director of the Defense Suicide Prevention Office, Department of Defense (DOD).

HASC- Subcommittee on Military Personnel Chairman, Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC-02), opened the hearing by reminding the Subcommittee of the 356 military deaths by suicide in 2012 as well as the issue of maintaining and improving Veterans' mental health in a sequestration environment. HASC-Subcommittee on Military Personnel Ranking Member, Representative Susan Davis (D-CA-53), reminded the Subcommittee that it had been a year and a half since the last hearing on the matter of military suicide prevention and echoed statements made by Chairman Wilson. Citing his Army Reserve and National Guard experience, Chairman Wilson asked the panelists how Reservists' and Guardsmen mental health needs were being addressed. VADM Van Buskirk began his testimony by citing the casualties claimed by suicide in the Navy, which numbered 65 last year. VADM Van Buskirk stressed the importance of investigating all suicides when they happen and formulating and adapting strategies to prevent them in the future. In addition, he cited the efforts of the "Operational Stress Control" program in the Navy which seeks to promote health and resilience as well as removing the stigma related to mental health counseling, including a specific component to address the needs of the Navy Reserve. He went on to mention the launch of Mobile Training Teams as part of an effort to confront the increased tempo of operations on Sailors. VADM Van Buskirk detailed the benefits of embedding health professionals as part of the program to address the needs of the Navy. Likewise, Brigadier General Hedelund pointed to the Marines' efforts to address the needs of the Reserve through standardization of programs across the components.

A notable question asked included when Representative Niki Tsongas (D-MA-03) asked the panelists whether sequestration would undermine military suicide prevention efforts. Ms. Garrick agreed that the effects of sequestration were a cause of concern for DOD as it would increase workplace stress and increase operational tempo. VADM Van Buskirk cited a recent visit to Norfolk, VA and remarked that the current pressure on Sailors was significant and causing uncertainty. However, VADM Van Buskirk reiterated the Navy's full commitment to fully maintaining the programs to prevent military suicide even in a sequester environment.

AUSN ANALYZES FINAL PASSAGE OF NEW FY13 CR EN ROUTE TO POTUS

On 21 March 2013, the U.S. House of Representatives quickly cleared [H.R. 933, the Continuing Resolution \(CR\) for the remainder of Fiscal Year 2013 \(FY13\)](#), by a vote of 318-109, sending the measure to the White House for signature into law before the current CR expires on 27 March 2013, thus preventing a government shutdown. The new CR package would keep existing spending caps, which effectively would set non-emergency discretionary spending authority for the

year at about \$984 billion after the spending sequester is taken into account, down from \$1.043 trillion in Fiscal Year 2012 (FY12). It also would provide \$517.7 billion in base discretionary funding for the Department of Defense (DOD) and \$71.9 billion for Veterans programs under the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Military Construction (MILCON).

Highlights include the bill appropriating a total of \$17.4 billion for Navy aircraft including \$2.6 billion for 37 F/A-18 E/F's; \$546 million and 11 aircraft more than the President's request, and \$600 million for modifications to existing aircraft. In addition, the measure also appropriates \$941 million for 12 new E/A-18G Airborne Electronic Attack aircraft; \$86 million less than the President's request. In addition, there is \$1.2 billion for six F-35B's for the Marine Corps (\$163 million less than requested), and \$966 million for four Navy F-35C's (\$42 million less than the request). The new CR appropriates \$79 million for an additional C-40A for the Navy Reserve. The bill also appropriates \$4 billion for three Arleigh Burke DDG-51 vessels, \$988 million, or one vessel, more than the President's request. The bill also appropriates \$1.8 billion for four Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) vessels, and \$415 million for research and development of the ship. The CR also bill provides an extra \$135 million in unrequested funds for TBI and psychological health (PH) research and development.

Details can be found at [AUSN's Capitol Hill Blog on New FY13 CR Analysis](#).

AUSN ON THE HILL

In addition to monitoring hearings on Capitol Hill as well as the Continuing Resolution (CR) debate in the Senate, AUSN met with Congressional staff from the offices of Representative Jason Chaffetz (R-UT-03), Senator John Boozman (R-AR), Representative F. James Sensenbrenner (R-WI-05) and Representative Chris Gibson (R-NY-19) to discuss, amongst many other topics, planning for the President's Budget (PB) request for Fiscal Year 2014 (FY14), GI Bill protection and expansion to beneficiaries legislation and Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veteran legislation. Earlier in the week, AUSN received a brief by United Healthcare Group, the last of a series AUSN has been attending, on the transition status in the TRICARE West region and how the transition is ready for the official contract to begin with United Healthcare on 1 April 2013.

PRIORITY BILLS INTRODUCED THIS WEEK

S. 634, (*Official title yet to be released*). Introduced by Senator Jon Tester (D-MT), the bill would allow members of the Armed Forces and National Guard to defer principal on Federal student loans for a certain period in connection with receipt of orders for mobilization for war or national emergency.

S.633, (*Official title yet to be released*). Introduced by Senator Jon Tester (D-MT), the bill would amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for coverage under the beneficiary travel program of the Department of Veterans Affairs of certain disabled veterans for travel in connection with certain special disabilities rehabilitation.

S. 629, Honor America's Guard-Reserve Retirees Act of 2013. Introduced by Senator Mark Pryor (D-AR), the bill would amend title 38, United States Code, to recognize the service in the reserve components of the Armed Forces of certain persons by honoring them with status as veterans under law.

S. 628, Servicemembers Mental Health Review Act of 2013. Introduced by Senator Jon Tester (D-MT), the bill would amend title 10, United States Code, to extend the duration of the Physical Disability Board of Review and to the expand the authority of such Board to review of the separation of members of the Armed Forces on the basis of mental condition not amounting to disability, including separation on the basis of a personality or adjustment disorder.

S. 614, the Military Tuition Assistance Act of 2013. Introduced by Senator James Inhofe (R-OK), the bill would require the continuation of tuition assistance programs for members of the Armed Forces for the remainder of Fiscal Year 2013.

H.R. 1357, (*Official title yet to be released*). Introduced by Representative Bill Johnson (R-OH-06), the bill would amend the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 to improve the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program by providing assistance under such program for certain training programs that are considered less than full-time.

H.R. 1333, The Military Family Leave Act. Introduced by Representative Matt Cartwright (D-PA-17), the bill would amend title 38, United States Code, to grant family of members of the uniformed services temporary annual leave during the deployment of such members.

H.R. 1305, (*Official title yet to be released*). Introduced by Representative Brad Wenstrup (R-OH-02), the bill would amend title 38, United States Code, to provide clarification regarding eligibility for services under the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program.

H.R. 1284, (*Official title yet to be released*). Introduced by Representative Julia Brownley (D-CA-26), the bill would

amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for coverage under the beneficiary travel program of the Department of Veterans Affairs of certain disabled veterans for travel for certain special disabilities rehabilitation.

H.R. 1265, the Military Tuition Assistance Act of 2013. Introduced by Representative Beto O'Rourke (D-TX-16), the bill would require the continuation of tuition assistance programs for members of the Armed Forces for the remainder of Fiscal Year 2013.

H.R. 1251, Veteran Excellence through Education Act of 2013. Introduced by Representative Gloria Negrete McLeod (D-CA-35), the bill would authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make grants with minority serving institutions for the purpose of establishing verified delivery systems to address social and academic problems facing veterans enrolled at such institutions.

H.R. 1236, (Official title yet to be released). Introduced by Representative Walter Jones (R-NC-03), the bill would amend title 10, United States Code, to require the inclusion of a behavioral health professional on any physical evaluation board that considers issues of post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, or other mental health condition.

H.R. 1223, The Fairness for Military Homeowners Act of 2013. Introduced by Representative Duncan Hunter (R-CA-50), the bill would amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to ensure that relocation of a servicemember to serve on active duty away from the servicemember's principal residence does not prevent the servicemember from refinancing a mortgage on that principal residence.

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 #113-8: SUPPORT H.R. 1265 and S. 614, Military Tuition Assistance Act

Legislative Alert #113-9: SUPPORT H.R. 679 and S. 629, Honor America's Guard-Reserve Retirees Act

NEXT WEEK OUTLOOK

Next week and the following week, Congress will be out on recess, however AUSN's Legislative Department will be preparing for when the President's Budget (PB) request is released, expected 8 April 2013. In the coming weeks, AUSN will be receiving a brief on the Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) down at the DC Navy Yard as well as meeting with a few Congressional offices to discuss budget items that we can expect to see in the PB. In addition, AUSN will be meeting with staff of the Navy's Office of Legislative Affairs (Navy-OLA) and taking a group of our Navy Sailors, coordinating with the Department of the Navy, on an exclusive tour of the U.S. House of Representatives, including a House floor tour and visiting the Speaker of the House's offices. Since Congress is out the next few weeks, AUSN will not be sending a Legislative Update next until around mid-April. See you then!

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 and copy RDML Graf, at 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 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 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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