



NO ONE DOES MORE FOR VETERANS.

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# WASHINGTON WEEKLY



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## **FY 2014 VA Budget Released**

On Wednesday, the President released his FY 2014 budget for VA, calling for the continuation of VA's transformation into the 21st century. The proposed budget includes \$66.5 billion for medical care programs (\$55.6 billion for FY 2015 advance appropriations) and \$86.1 billion for benefit programs, which include disability compensation and pension payments. VFW Commander-in-Chief John E. Hamilton called the budget "a good starting point" but remains concerned that VA will not be able to adequately provide services to veterans as the wars begin to draw down. A grave area of concern is the \$2 billion shortfall in major construction and medical research, as recommended by the Independent Budget. The VFW was pleased to see a focus on reducing the disability claims backlog with continued investment in IT to enable VA to move closer to a fully automated disability claims process. Other highlights include:

- \$300 million for the Veterans Employment and Training Program (VETS).
- \$1.4 billion for Homeless programs.
- \$7 billion for Mental Health services, to include more resources for VA-DOD collaborative efforts to treat PTSD and MST.
- \$799 million for specialized care, which includes polytrauma and spinal cord injury units.
- \$460 million for Telehealth services.
- \$104 million for a new Transition Assistance Program.

[Read](#) the VFW press release. For additional information on the FY 2014 VA Budget, visit the [VA website](#).

## **The VFW Testifies on VA Budget**

On Thursday, the VFW testified before the House VA Committee as part of an Independent Budget (IB) panel on the FY 2013 VA budget. The IB is a comprehensive budget and policy document written by veterans to capture the full picture of what VA needs to care for veterans. The VFW is responsible for the construction portion of the IB, and our testimony centered on major and minor construction project funding. We voiced our concerns about the decades of underfunding of major construction accounts, which has led to a backlog of about \$25 billion. There are currently 21 VHA major construction projects that have been partially funded dating back to 2007. Safety and accessibility are concerns when construction accounts remain unfunded or underfunded for years. The IBVSOs recommended Congress double the requested level, providing VA with \$1.1 billion in major construction funding in FY 2014. VA must also begin presenting long-term proposals that will outline how the Department will address closing all major construction gaps. For more on the hearing and to view an archived webcast, [click here](#). [Read](#) the 2014 Independent Budget.

## **Defense Budget Harms Retirees**

The Pentagon released its FY 2014 budget this week, and proposals designed to cut military pay and increase healthcare fees for retirees and their families immediately came under fire. VFW Commander-in-Chief John E. Hamilton, a Vietnam veteran, said, "We recognize the Pentagon has tough decisions, but proposals in this year's budget break faith with our volunteer force by further burdening our military retirees and our military families." The proposed budget asks for a military pay raise of only one-percent and increases TRICARE fees for military retirees and their families — something the VFW adamantly opposed last session and included in resolutions passed by members at the 113th National Convention. The VFW will continue to pressure Congress and the Pentagon to find savings in programs that do not affect military personnel, retirees and their families. We will continue to update you here in the *Washington Weekly* and on our [blog](#). [Read](#) the VFW's press release on the DOD budget.

## **VFW Offers Support for Veterans Bills**

This week, the VFW testified before the House VA Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity on a series of bills designed to help veterans transition and improve their career options. Several of the bills are initiatives VFW advocates have been pushing with their members of Congress, including H.R. 357; the GI Bill Tuition Fairness Act, which offers in-state tuition to veterans attending public colleges and universities on the GI Bill; H.R. 562; the VRAP Extension Act, which extends the deadline to use VRAP education benefits until June 2014; and H.R. 631, the Servicemembers' Choice in Transition Act, which mandates individualized curriculum for separating service members through the military Transition Assistance Program (TAP). To learn more about the hearing and to view an archived webcast, [click here](#).

## **The VFW Wants to Hear From You on Twitter**

The VFW wants to hear from you! On Friday, April 19, 2013, at 10:30 am (EDT), we will be hosting our first VFW Twitter Chat. The VFW will answer participants' questions regarding our 2013 Legislative Priority Goals for one hour in real-time via the VFW's Twitter page, @VFWHQ (hashtag #ASKVFW). This chat will allow anyone interested in veterans' issues and advocacy to gain insight into what the VFW proudly supports, and is working on, in Washington. All you'll need is a Twitter account to participate. The VFW hopes to further engage and inform its online community through Twitter chats. [Follow the VFW on Twitter](#) for more information about upcoming chats. [Read](#) the VFW's Legislative Priority Goals.

## **House Armed Services Discusses Mental Health Research**

On Wednesday, the House Armed Services Personnel Subcommittee heard testimony on how research by DOD has improved the treatment our troops receive for mental health issues,

particularly TBI and PTSD. Chairman Joe Wilson (R-SC) noted that, since 2007, Congress has appropriated close to \$1.5 billion for PTSD and TBI research, funding nearly 1,000 clinical and scientific studies. The panel, which included the Assistant Defense Secretary for Health Affairs, the Service Chief of the Behavioral Health Clinic at Walter Reed, and the Surgeons' General of each of the armed services, reported on how those funds have been used to create better practices for the diagnosis, access to care, and treatment of invisible wounds. Some items discussed included the use of embedded mental health teams in military units and the development of the PTSD checklist, which allows clinicians to track symptoms of active duty service members over time. Of note, it was reported that the benzodiazepine class of medications typically used for anxiety may actually worsen many PTSD symptoms, while certain medications normally used to treat high blood pressure may reduce nightmares and hyper-vigilance. [Read more.](#)

### **House VA Committee Discusses National Cemeteries**

Earlier this week, The House VA Subcommittee on Disability and Memorial Affairs held an oversight hearing on the VA National Cemetery Administration (NCA). A recent audit that NCA performed on its gravesites found errors in burial placement and markers. According to NCA's Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs Steve L. Muro, proper changes were made and continued oversight will be performed to determine best practices. Subcommittee members also asked if VA is determining ways to improve access to national cemeteries for all veterans, especially those who live in states that do not have one. Currently, 11 states with a combined veteran population of 1.8 million are without an active national cemetery. For more on the hearing, or to watch the recorded webcast, [click here.](#)

### **DOJ Announces SCRA Settlements**

The Department of Justice recently announced a settlement under the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) regarding unlawful foreclosures by BAC Home Loans Servicing LP, a subsidiary of Bank of America, and Saxon Mortgage Servicing, a division of Morgan Stanley. About 316 service members whose homes were unlawfully foreclosed upon during 2006-2010 are going to receive about \$39 million for alleged violations. The VFW has pushed for SCRA upgrades and enforcements as part of our legislative goals. For more on the DOJ findings and settlement, [click here.](#)

As always, we want to share your advocacy stories on the VFW Capitol Hill blog. To share your stories, either [fill out our online form](#) or simply email photos and stories directly to [vfwac@vfw.org](mailto:vfwac@vfw.org).

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