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WASHINGTON WEEKLY



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March 15, 2013

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The VFW Writes President to Lower Drone Medal Status

The VFW led an effort of 19 Veteran and Military Service Organizations to request President Obama's personal involvement to lower the precedence of the new Distinguished Warfare Medal to below the Purple Heart. The letter was sent after Defense Secretary Hagel tasked Joint Chiefs Chairman General Dempsey to conduct a review of the medal's 9th place ranking among five dozen current military medals and ribbons. Meanwhile, all VFW members and supporters are needed to continue urging their congressional delegation to sign on as cosponsors of bipartisan companion bills to force the Pentagon to lower the medal's status. As of today, 87 members of the House support H.R. 833, and 24 members of the Senate support S. 470, but more cosponsors are needed. [Read](#) the joint VSO/MSO letter to the President. To see if your representative and senators have signed on, enter the respective bill number in the [search block](#). To take action, [click here](#).

TIME Columnist Called Out

Today, the VFW called out *TIME* magazine columnist Joe Klein for an article being published Monday that calls for the resignation of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki. The article, titled "Ten Years After: A National Disgrace," twists facts, attacks the secretary personally, and makes numerous allegations that his department is not taking care of veterans. "We want the VA to succeed, and that's why we work closely with Secretary Shinseki and his staff to help identify and correct problems in a professional manner from within, not by enlisting the media to sensationalize issues the great majority of Americans and, quite frankly, many veterans don't understand," said VFW National Commander John Hamilton. "The VFW helped to create the VA in 1930. We will not let it fail." [Read more](#).

Tuition Assistance Update

In the wake of last week's announcements by military branches to suspend their Tuition Assistance (TA) program, the VFW has ramped up action to ensure that service members have access to higher education for professional development. The VFW sent a letter to Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, asking for full reinstatement of each service's TA program and offering support for an amendment to the pending Defense Continuing Resolution offered by Sens. James Inhofe (R-OK) and Kay Hagan (D-NC) that would reinstate military TA. The VFW has also been out in force discussing TA cuts in the media, like the *Huffington Post* and *Stars & Stripes*. [Read](#) the *Huffington Post*'s coverage. [Learn more](#) about the issue.

Senate Discusses Sexual Violence in the Military

On Wednesday, the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Personnel held a hearing on sexual assault in the military. The hearing, chaired by Sen. Kristen Gillibrand (D-NY) began with testimony from several sexual assault victims who described their experiences, frequency of assaults, and the difficulty of reporting and navigating the military's judicial system. The other panel of witnesses were representatives from the Pentagon's acting general counsel's office and leaders from all branches of the military services. Discussion centered on current reforms, including special victims units, changes within the military court system and who, if anyone, should have authority to overturn decisions. DOD estimates that 19,000 service members are victims of sexual assault each year. But only a small fraction—about 2,700 or 14 percent—actually report these crimes, underscoring the fact that many victims fear retaliation if they seek legal action. For more about the hearing and to view an archived webcast, [click here](#).

Senate VA Committee Still Talking About VA Disability Claims Backlog

The Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee opened up their first full hearing of the session discussing the VA disability claims backlog. Current numbers recorded by VBA show total claims pending (including compensation, pension, education, appeals, etc.) at about 1,957,000. Most of the members expressed frustration that they are still talking about the claims backlog and the fact that the numbers are ever increasing. They told witnesses from VA that this is the number one item they get calls about from constituents and that the VSO community has acknowledged it as a top priority. VA Undersecretary for Benefits Allison Hickey spoke strongly about VBA's transformation and the number of claims adjudicated, which surpassed 1 million last year. She also talked about the inventory of claims and the factors impacting the backlog. The committee members asked her about the goal to have the backlog under control by 2015 and the VA-DOD joint-integrated medical record as well as the ongoing plan for a seamless handoff from VA to DOD that seems to have dissipated. Joe Violante, Legislative Director for the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), reminded the committee that to build a paperless system with new technology and updated business processes, as well as changing the cultural shift within VA, will take time and collaboration with all interested parties. For more about the hearing, or to view the recorded webcast, [click here](#).

House VA Committee Hearings

This week, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee had a busy week of hearings, beginning with the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations discussion on Gulf War veteran's healthcare. A recent IOM report, "Gulf War and Health: Treatment for Chronic Multisymptom Illness," prompted the subcommittee to look at services provided to Gulf War veterans by VA. Subcommittee Chairman Mike Coffman (R-CO) remarked that the hearing was not about whether Gulf War Illness exists, but how it is identified, diagnosed and treated, and how the tools put in place to aid these efforts have been used.

Wednesday, the Subcommittee on Health held a hearing titled, "[Meeting Patient Care Needs: Measuring the Value of VA Physician Staffing Standards](#)." Discussion centered on VA's need to establish productivity standards for staffing levels, especially in areas of specialty care services. Linda Halliday, Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Evaluations, Office of Inspector General at VA, provided recommendations that have been in the works for over ten years. Subcommittee

Chairman Dr. Dan Benishek (R-MI) agreed with a key recommendation that requires VHA to establish productivity standards for at least five specialty care services by the end of FY 2013 while approving a plan for all specialty care services within three years. The VFW believes that appropriate physician staffing levels are critical to ensuring veterans receive quality care, while minimizing their appointment scheduling wait times.

Thursday, The Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations held a hearing titled, "Examining Patient Wait Times at VA." Subcommittee members cited recent reports from GAO and VA's own Inspector General Office showing little has improved within the system, and wait times for veterans are often severely backlogged. According to witnesses, schedulers have to use a cumbersome system that creates significant errors, and VHA does not have a clear policy on patient scheduling. The subcommittee has asked VA for updates on consultation backlogs and has noted that they intend to urge VA to be forthcoming about its problems so that solutions can be identified to help veterans waiting for access.

Also on Thursday, the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity discussed the high unemployment rate for National Guard and Reserve units returning from deployment. According to recent statistics 40-50% of those deployed are unemployed when they return from duty. Witnesses from the Pentagon cited an 11% unemployment rate for all ranks and 18% for young enlisted members. Others questioned the validity of the numbers, which came from a self-reported survey. Representatives from the State of California and Tennessee noted that getting accurate numbers is difficult because some Guard and Reserve members—such as recent high school Army National Guard members—did not have jobs before they deployed, while others are college students. Ted Daywalt, president of VetJobs.com, told the committee members, "You cannot solve a problem if you do not know the extent of the problem, or worse, try to pretend it does not exist. The bottom line is members of the NG&R are suffering due to bureaucratic politics. I believe this problem will only get worse as the NG&R are used more with the downsizing of the active forces."

For more on any of the hearings listed, including prepared remarks from each witness and archived webcasts, visit the [House VA website](#).

Operation Homecoming Commemoration

Forty years ago this week, the first of many Air Force C-141 Starlifters began departing North Vietnamese airspace with 591 returned American POWs, to include 325 Air Force, 138 Navy; 77 Army, 26 Marines, and 25 U.S. civilian employees. In addition, 69 POWs held by the Viet Cong in South Vietnam left aboard flights from Loc Ninh. Nine others would be released from Laos and three from China. [Read more](#).

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.

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