

WASHINGTON WEEKLY



December 20, 2013

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Congress Approves Budget Deal with COLA Penalty

Congress passed a two-year budget deal containing a VFW-opposed provision that penalizes working age military retirees with reduced cost-of-living adjustments, which for an E-7 retiring today would result in the loss of income of \$70,000 or more by the time they turn 62. The penalty, which also affects medically-retired troops, is an automatic one-percent reduction from annual COLA increases until age 62. The VFW is now working with allies in both the House and Senate to find a bipartisan solution to overcome the COLA penalty, and in a [Call to Action](#), we are urging all VFW members and supporters to contact their members of Congress while they are home for the holidays. VFW National Commander Bill Thien said, "We know the federal government needs to curb its spending, balance its budget and put an end to the sequester, but to penalize military retirees, especially those who have been medically retired as a result of wounds received defending this nation, is totally unacceptable." Join the VFW [Call to Action](#) today.

The VFW Releases 2014 Priority Goals

This week, the VFW announced its [2014 Legislative Priority Goals](#) for the second session of the 113th Congress. Each year, the priority goals come from the resolutions passed by the VFW membership at our annual National Convention. Highlights from the 2014 goals include providing advance funding for all VA programs, protecting quality of life programs for military service members, retirees and their families; improvements in transition and employment tools for separating service members and veterans; as well as continued oversight and improvement to the VA disability claims system. In 2013 alone, VFW grassroots advocates generated more than 45,000 messages to every congressional office through the VFW Action Corps on critical issues like tuition assistance, military awards, budget, healthcare and Stolen Valor, all of which resulted in significant congressional action. To read more and to join us in our fight to preserve the benefits that our veterans, military and their families have earned, [click here](#). View a complete list of the [2014 Legislative Priority Goals](#).

Defense Bill Cleared for President

Late Thursday, the Senate passed FY 2014 *National Defense Authorization Act* (NDAA) by a vote of 84-15. The bill, H.R. 3304, is a bicameral compromise on funding levels as well as policy issues such as Guantánamo detainees and sexual assault in the military. If signed into law by the president, the FY 2014 defense bill would:

- Increase military pay by one-percent.
- Not increase or create new TRICARE enrollment fees. It would also give almost 173,000 military retirees and family members, booted from TRICARE Prime on Oct. 1 because of their distance from a military treatment facility, a one-time opportunity to reenroll in Prime provided they continue living in the same ZIP code.

- Add more than 30 provisions and reforms to the Uniform Code of Military Justice related to combatting sexual assault in the military.
- Expand religious freedom provisions for chaplains and service members to include beliefs and expression of beliefs.
- Create a definition of a gender-neutral occupational standards that would be used by each military service to develop the standards required for all military career designators.
- Prohibit the Defense Department from initiating another base realignment and closure round.
- Keep Guantanamo Bay operational, prohibits the transfer of detainees to the U.S. and the construction of detainee facilities in the U.S., and maintains limitations on detainee transfers to third countries.
- Re-authorize personnel recovery authorities to plan and execute the safe recovery of U.S. personnel isolated during military and contingency operations.
- And among many other initiatives, the NDAA facilitates the development of more functional, lighter and more protective body armor, as well as directs DOD to adopt and field a common camouflage utility uniform for specific combat environments for use by all service members.”

[Read](#) the full defense bill.

VA to Expand TBI Benefits

Some veterans with traumatic brain injuries who are diagnosed with any of five other ailments will have an easier path to receive additional disability pay under new regulations developed by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The new regulation, which takes effect in mid-January, will help veterans living with TBI who also have Parkinson’s disease, certain types of dementia, depression, unprovoked seizures, or certain diseases of the hypothalamus and pituitary glands. The regulation stems from a report of the National Academy of Sciences, Institute of Medicine (IOM) regarding the association between TBI and the five diagnosable illnesses. Eligibility for expanded benefits will depend upon the severity of the TBI and the time between the injury causing the TBI and the onset of the second illness. However, the VA said veterans can still file a claim to establish direct service-connection for these ailments even if they do not meet the time and severity standards in the new regulation. [Read more.](#)

TSA Expands Precheck Program

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has expanded its Precheck expedited screening program to all military service members, to include, beginning today, members of the Coast Guard. The expedited security screening benefit is now active at more than 100 participating airports when flying on nine major airlines. TSA will still continue its random security checks throughout the airport, and no individual will be guaranteed expedited screening. [Read more](#) about the program.

Congress Home for Holiday Recess

Congress closed out the first session of the 113th and headed home for the holidays. During the extended recess, we urge all of our advocates to schedule appointments with their legislators and discuss critical veterans and military quality-of-life issues. One issue that will remain in the forefront is the recent budget, which contained a provision that will cut future COLA for military retirees. To read more and take action, [click here](#). Other key initiatives we will have our eyes on include securing advanced appropriations for all VA programs, in-state tuition for student-veterans, continued access to treatment for victims of sexual assault, protecting military quality-of-life programs and working to expand veterans’ caregiver benefits. See a complete list of our [2014 Legislative Priority Goals](#).

Four MIAs Recovered

The Defense POW/MIA Office recently announced the identification of remains of four soldiers who had been missing in action since the Korean War. Recovered are:

- Cpl. Cletus R. Lies, Medical Company, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division, lost Nov. 28, 1950, in North Korea. He was accounted for on Dec. 7, and will be buried with full military honors in Bremen, N.D., in the spring of 2014.
- Sgt. 1st Class Joseph E. Gantt, Battery C, 503rd Field Artillery, 2nd Infantry Division, lost Nov. 30, 1950, in the vicinity of Somindong, North Korea. He was accounted for on Nov. 26 and will be buried will full military honors in Inglewood, Calif. on Dec. 28.
- Cpl. Joe W. Howard, 503rd Field Artillery, 2nd Infantry Division, lost on Dec. 1, 1950, in North Korea. He was accounted for on Dec. 5 and will be buried with full military honors in Jacksonville, Fla., on Jan. 9.
- Cpl. William A. Newton, 22, of Sikeston, Mo., Headquarters Service Company, 2nd Engineer Combat Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division, reported missing in action on Nov. 30, 1950, near Kunnu-ri, North Korea, and later died in Feb. 1951 as a POW. He is being buried today in Sour Lake, Texas.

[Read more](#) about their individual recoveries and identification.

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

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