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Veterans of Foreign Wars Legislative Priorities

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Benefits

The VFW's Concerns:

Comprehensive toxic exposure reform is the VFW's top legislative priority. Veterans from all eras have experienced an array of health conditions and illnesses associated with the toxic exposures and environmental hazards they encountered in service. The denial rate for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) claims related to toxic exposures is far too high. Many serious health conditions are not considered presumptive, health care is available to only certain veterans, and there are locations both foreign and domestic that are not yet recognized as areas of exposure. A new framework is necessary for VA to provide health care and benefits to toxic exposed veterans from all eras, now, and in the future.

The rate of Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) paid to the survivors of service members who died in the line of duty or to veterans who died from service-related injuries or illnesses has only minimally increased since the benefit was created in 1993. The VFW supports an increase in DIC payments to survivors, reaching parity with payments made to surviving spouses of other federal employees.

Since September 11, 2001, more than 2.7 million Americans have served in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), which is the longest war fought by the nation's all-volunteer force. Accordingly, GWOT veterans deserve to be memorialized in our nation's capital with their comrades of previous generations. In 2003, Congress passed legislation that prohibited the placement of new commemorative works within the Reserve—an area that encompasses the cross-axis of the National Mall and the land between the White House and the Jefferson Memorial. Veterans of the current era deserve a war memorial located alongside the existing memorials for WWII, Korea, and Vietnam.

The VFW urges Congress to:

- Pass H.R. 3967, *Honoring our PACT Act of 2021*, and the Senate *COST of War Act*. These bills would help millions of veterans by establishing a framework to address any toxic exposure, foreign or domestic, past, present, and future. This legislation would help Atomic veterans and Vietnam veterans, including those who served in Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, as well as in the Middle East, Afghanistan, K2, and beyond. They would add to VA's list of presumptive conditions and provide health care for all toxic exposed veterans.
- Pass H.R. 3402 / S. 976, the *Caring for Survivors Act of 2021*, to finally increase DIC payments to survivors, reaching parity with other federal agencies.
- Pass H.R. 1115 / S. 535, the *Global War on Terrorism Memorial Location Act*, to authorize the establishment of a GWOT Memorial on the National Mall.

Economic Opportunity

The VFW's Concerns:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is comprised of three administrations. The Veterans Benefits Administration is the largest of the three, overseeing the delivery of compensation and pension benefits, the GI Bill, VR&E, TAP, and home and business loans. The VFW believes economic opportunity is a lifelong need with the vast majority of veterans seeking meaningful employment, education, or job training. A fourth administration must be established in VA to properly address veterans' economic opportunity benefits utilization and improvement, with a dedicated Under Secretary with the authority to refocus resources, independently promote these programs, and create a central point of contact for Veterans Service Organizations and Congress.

For many veterans facing homelessness, especially against the economic turmoil resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, employment is not achievable without first attaining stable housing. Programs such as SSVF and HUD-VASH have invested in veterans by providing the safety net necessary to receive care and pursue employment and other economic opportunity. Legislation which would make pandemic-relief funding permanent is critical to provide continuity of resources and continuous program improvement.

Measures that have allowed eligible veterans to enter high-paying STEM jobs through VET TEC, rapidly retrain for in-demand fields through VRRAP, and pursue education and resources in new job fields through VR&E, have continued to demonstrate measurable success. It is critical they continue to be resourced, enabled to grow, and tracked through rigorous oversight.

Under the automotive adaptive grant program, VA is authorized to provide a one-time grant toward the purchase of a specially equipped automobile for veterans who need assistance driving due to a service-connected disability. This one-time grant is not enough for these disabled veterans as many struggle to pay out of pocket for the purchase of and modifications for follow-on replacement vehicles. This benefit needs to be improved to reflect the lifecycle of a standard vehicle and the need for consistent independent transportation for disabled veterans.

The shift from in-person to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the inequities between housing allowances for different modalities of instruction. Additionally, for the over 50% of student veterans who report having children, child care needs can affect the ability to persist to graduation. Congress must re-evaluate GI Bill provisions in order to reflect modern student veteran needs, to include allowing National Guard and Reserve service members' increasingly frequent activations to count as time toward GI Bill eligibility.

The VFW urges Congress to:

- Pass S. 1093 to establish a fourth administration in VA with an exclusive focus on economic opportunity benefits in order to provide adequate oversight and resources.
- Pass S. 2172, *Building Solutions for Veterans Experiencing Homelessness Act of 2021*, to continue to resource SSVF and HUD-VASH programs.
- Pass S. 444 / H.R. 1361, *AUTO for Veterans Act*, allowing eligible veterans to receive auto grants every ten years.
- Provide continued funding and rigorous oversight for employment training programs such as VET TEC, VRRAP, and VR&E, that show measurable positive outcomes, to include passing H.R. 2335, *VET TEC Enhancement Act of 2021*.
- Pass legislation that would provide equity in GI Bill benefits for Guard and Reserve members, in-person and online students, and student veterans with child care needs.

Retirement and Military Personnel

The VFW's Concerns:

The VFW has long argued that Department of Defense (DOD) retirement pay and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) service-connected disability compensation are fundamentally different benefits, earned for different reasons. Military retirees with 20 or more years of service and who are less than 50 percent service-connected disabled are required to offset their retiree pay with the amount of VA disability compensation they receive. Similarly, Chapter 61 retirees who were medically retired with less than 20 years of military service face the same dollar-for-dollar offset. As a result, some disability retirees are separated before becoming eligible for longevity retirement, while others have completed 20 or more years of service. Currently, more than 48,000 Chapter 61 retirees who sustained combat-related injuries while serving are unjustly being denied the benefits they deserve.

In the past few years, the Military Housing Privatization Initiative (MHPI) program has been plagued with widespread complaints of neglected or careless repairs and unsafe conditions including mold, lead-based paint, asbestos, poor water quality, and sewage. In response, DOD implemented a bill of rights to ensure tenants receive quality housing and fair treatment from contracted housing companies, including access to seven years of historical maintenance records prior to lease signing and upon request. Yet, Congress and service members do not have a centralized tool that provides information about base housing and related housing company performance, making proactive oversight and informed housing choices difficult.

As part of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2019, Congress implemented several changes to the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). From March 2020 to February 2021, VFW service officers collected 1,100 surveys from transitioning members, their families, and veterans. Results indicated that some of the new TAP mandates are not being carried out as Congress intended, such as participation no later than 365 days before separation, completion of at least one track, and connection to resources in the geographic areas members will reside after service.

Members of the armed forces can receive different types of separation documents depending on individual service characteristics such as duty status and time served. While the DD Form 214 (DD 214) is the widely accepted standard for proof of military service, members of the Guard and Reserve receive a DD 214 only under certain conditions. Moreover, a 2019 RAND Corporation study found that the DD 214 neither captures cumulative service for these members nor includes Guard and Reserve data, complicating access to the full breadth of their earned benefits.

The VFW urges Congress to:

- Pass H.R. 1282 / S. 344, *Major Richard Star Act*, which would enable Chapter 61 veterans who have been discharged due to combat-related injuries to be entitled to DOD retirement pay and VA disability compensation without offset.
- Enact legislation to implement a new online comparison tool for housing, similar to the GI Bill Comparison Tool, which would also serve as a central information center for oversight.
- Conduct periodic Committee on Armed Services hearings on transition, and commission a study to understand the fidelity with which each element of TAP is being implemented across DOD sites.
- Pass S. 1291, *Record of Military Service for Members of the Armed Forces Act of 2021*, which would enable accurate accounting of service periods and milestones for all active duty and Guard and Reserve members via a single, standard record of military service.
- Pass H.R. 3224 / S. 1611, *I am Vanessa Guillén Act of 2021*, which would help eliminate sexual assault and harassment in the military.

Health Care

The VFW's Concerns:

Vet Centers are the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) most unheralded program. For 42 years, they have been offering an array of services including individual and family counseling, benefits explanation, substance abuse assessment and referral, and many others. These centers operate without a proper staffing model to provide service for an increasingly eligible group of veterans and families.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to burden health care systems. While frontline health care staff adjusted for the wave of patients needing COVID-19 testing, treatment, vaccinations, and rescheduling overdue appointments, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) shortened the onboarding process and decreased vacancies by 17,000 positions in the past year. VHA needs to expedite staff hiring and onboarding to fill the remaining 29,787 vacancies.

From March 2020 to August 2021, VA increased telehealth visits by 1,407%. According to two VFW COVID-19 health surveys conducted in April of 2020 and 2021, veterans and retirees indicated the majority of their VA appointments were converted to telehealth. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted critical issue needs like the enhancement of telehealth platforms and capabilities that the VFW urges VHA to continue beyond the pandemic. For many rural and underserved veterans, connectivity remains a critical issue. Through Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations (ATLAS), the VFW has worked with VA and Philips to leverage VA's anywhere-to-anywhere authority to expand telehealth options for veterans who live in rural areas. VHA needs to explore ways to proliferate the program by expanding into urban areas that lack public transportation.

According to VA's *2020 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report*, fewer veterans died by suicide in 2019 than the year before. We will have to wait another year to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected veteran suicide protective factors. The VFW urges Congress to pressure VA to create a report on protective factors to include VBA benefits.

Women veterans comprise approximately 10 percent of the veteran population and are the fastest growing cohort within the veteran community. VA must ensure it addresses privacy concerns, expands women-specific substance abuse treatments and programs, increases VA staff cultural training, eliminates harassment and assault, and makes other improvements to women veterans' health care including maternity care.

The VFW urges Congress to:

- Pass H.R. 3575 / S. 1944, *Vet Center Improvement Act of 2021*, and H.R. 4233, *Student Veterans Counseling Centers Eligibility Act*, which would require VA to assess Vet Centers, and expand eligibility to include certain veterans who are using educational assistance benefits.
- Amend VA's hiring practices in order to fill critical vacancies in a timely manner.
- Pass H.R. 239, *Equal Access to Contraception for Veterans Act*, which would provide women veterans access to the same no-cost contraceptive care as their non-veteran counterparts.
- Pass H.R. 958 / S. 796, *Protecting Moms Who Served Act*, which would provide an understanding of fertility and infertility of women veterans, and shed light where gaps and barriers may exist.