

VFW Washington Weekly
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1. White House Announces Vets Job Corps: VFW was front and center when the President announced a Veterans Job Corps initiative aimed at helping veterans find pathways to employment. Some of the initiatives include grants to communities that recruit and hire veterans to serve as police, firefighters and other first responders. The program also includes additional support for veterans' entrepreneurship and intensive reemployment services for Post 9/11 veterans. Said VFW National Commander Richard DeNoyer, "There is no initiative too bold when it comes to helping veterans get jobs, especially with the new generation of post-9/11 warriors now reentering society in numbers not seen since the Vietnam War. Our nation and her public and private employer partners must do everything possible to not only ensure their smooth transition, but to enlist their extraordinary talents to help serve and protect our nation and communities, and to help restore our economy to greatness. We thank President Obama for continuing to move the issue of veterans' employment forward, and for his strong commitment to those who have worn the uniform and to their families." Read more on the White House website at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/02/03/president-obama-s-plan-put-veterans-back-work>, and on the VFW blog at <http://www.vfwonthehill.org/2012/02/vfw-applauds-presidential-jobs.html>

2. Retirement Changes Threaten All-Volunteer Force: In an opinion editorial just posted on the Stars & Stripes website, VFW National Commander Richard DeNoyer is very concerned that negative quality-of-life changes on a military still at war will destroy the all-volunteer force. He said constantly comparing civilian programs with military pay, retirement and health care plans -- while calling the military programs "too generous" --- is insulting, and so is any proposal that requires those who sacrifice the most for our nation to sacrifice even more. He said the VFW opposes all plans to change the military retirement system, and "we reject any proposal that would require military retirees to pay more for their earned healthcare programs." Read his OpEd at <http://www.stripes.com/vfw-retirement-changes-could-hurt-recruitment-1.167633>.

3. VA Adds 47 Ships to Agent Orange List: The VA has added 47 vessels to its list of Navy and Coast Guard ships whose crews may have been exposed to the defoliant Agent Orange. Former service members who served aboard these "blue water" ships as well as the more than 200 others listed in VA's database from 1962 to 1975 may be eligible for disability compensation. According to The Military Times, vessels recently added to the roster include the

hospital ship *Repose*, which operated in close coastal waters from 1966 to 1970, and the transport ship *General R.M. Blatchford*, which landed elements of the 1st Infantry Division at Vung Tau in October 1965. Read more at

<http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/shiplist/index.asp>.

4. Physical Disability Board Review Update: Congress established a Physical Disability Board Review (PDBR) in 2008 to review disability determinations of veterans discharged between September 11, 2001, and December 31, 2009. Those with a combined disability rating of 20 percent or less who did not retire can apply for a review. Since the programs creation, only 5 percent of those eligible have applied to have their status reviewed. DOD is partnering with VA to reach out to others to notify them about the PDBR by sending letters to veterans this year. While the collaboration will help ensure that veterans have access to their benefits, eligible veterans can also directly contact the PDBR immediately through their website. We also ask you share this information with everyone you know. For more, go to http://www.health.mil/About_MHS/Organizations/MHS_Offices_and_Programs/PDBR/pdbr-faqs.aspx.

5. Family Caregiver Support Could Expand: First Lady Michelle Obama announced this week a series of measures intended to increase the nation's support for the caregivers of wounded, ill and injured service members by expanding military family leave protections under the Family and Medical Leave Act. The proposals will, in part:

- * Extend the 26-week unpaid leave entitlement to family members caring for recent veterans with a serious injury or illness incurred in the line of duty, including conditions that may arise up to five years after leaving the military;

- * Allow family members to take time off from work before, during or after a spouse, child or parent's deployment to tend to service-related matters, such as military briefings or making financial and legal arrangements; and

- * Increase the amount of time an employee may take to spend with a loved one who is on rest or recuperation leave from five days to up to 15 days.

Read more at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=66983>.

6. House VA Committee Hearings: The House Veterans Affairs Committee held two hearings this week to focus on VA pharmacy contracts and another on employment for Guard and Reservists.

- * On Wednesday, the full committee discussed VA pharmaceutical contracting practices after a VA Inspector General report revealed that the VA did not follow their own standard purchasing practices. Committee members asked heated questions about the procedures and policies in purchasing drugs and who is being held accountable. They also discussed what fixes are being made and how will it affect the care provided to veterans. VA Representatives openly admitted that violations took place, but that changes have been implemented to fix the deficiencies. Subpoenas have been requested for all documents and communications from VA related to the issue by the committee. Committee Chairman, Jeff Miller (R-FL) said the committee plans to continue strict oversight on the issue and intends to hold senior officials accountable. Read more at <http://www.vfwonthehill.org/2012/02/house-committee-questions-va-on.html>.

- * On Thursday, the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity held a hearing entitled "Lowering the Unemployment Rate for National Guard." Witnesses representing various State

National Guard programs, the Department of Labor's Veterans Employment and Training, VetJobs, as well as the Manufacturing Institute, all discussed ways to combat the troubling unemployment numbers. Initiatives and policies like mandatory Transition Assistance Programs for all Guard and Reservists and changes to USERRA were mentioned to maximize employment opportunities. Read more at <http://www.vfwonthehill.org/2012/02/watch-live-house-to-address.html>.

7. VA Acquisitions Internship Available: The VA last week launched an acquisition internship to prepare newly-returned veterans to become federal contracting specialists. Called "Warriors to Workforce," the internship is a three-year program where participants will earn the 24 educational credits in business required to become contracting professionals. The program includes courses in leadership, technical acquisition training and on-the-job experience. Graduates will have taken the required coursework to earn a Federal Acquisitions Certification in Contracting, which is recognized throughout the federal sector as evidence of solid education in the career field. Successful graduates will be eligible for contract specialist positions at the GS-11 level. Read more about VA's Acquisitions Academy at www.acquisitionacademy.va.gov.

8. Overseas Absentee Voting Improves: Last year, 18 states were noncompliant with the 2009 Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act. The number now is four, according to a new Pew Center on the States report. The four states in noncompliance are Alaska, California, New York and West Virginia. The primary reason is they have not changed state laws to adhere to the 45-day window for mailing and receiving absentee ballots from overseas-assigned military and other U.S. citizens stationed or residing in foreign countries. Getting those four states to adhere to the provisions of the MOVE Act would fulfill VFW Resolution #416, which was passed at last year's 112th VFW National Convention in San Antonio. Read the Pew report at http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Pew_Democracy_From_Afar.pdf.

9. MIA Recoveries to Resume in North Korea: After a seven-absence due to security concerns, Joint POW/MIA Action Accounting Command teams will be heading back into North Korea this spring to search for the remains of missing Americans from the Korean War. The teams are scheduled to work in two areas: Unsan County, about 60 miles north of Pyongyang; and near the Chosin/Jangjin Reservoir, where more than 2,000 soldiers and Marines are believed to be missing. Of approximately 83,000 Americans missing since World War II, almost 8,000 are from the Korean War---with about 5,500 of them believed to be in North Korea. The resumption of recovery operations in North Korea fulfills VFW Resolution #423, which was passed at last year's 112th VFW National Convention in San Antonio. Read more at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=66958>.