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1. Budget Deal Penalizes Military Retirees: By a vote of 332-94, the House passed a two-year budget deal Thursday that funds the government and temporarily ends the sequester, but at a huge financial cost to working-age military retirees younger than 62. If approved by the Senate and signed into law by the president, the provision will automatically subtract a full percentage point from annual COLA increases. For an E-7 retiring today at age 40, the cumulative loss of retirement income could exceed \$80,000 by age 62. “We know the federal government needs to curb its spending, balance its budget, and put an end to the sequester, but penalizing military retirees is not the solution,” said VFW National Commander Bill Thien, who said the troops view the attacks on pay and allowances, retirement and healthcare systems as a breach of faith, and a complete lack of support, understanding and appreciation for what it is they do daily for the rest of America. The Senate is expected to take up the Budget deal on Monday – There is still time to voice your opposition to this proposal by contacting your senators at <http://capwiz.com/vfw/issues/alert/?alertid=63026806&queueid=10042843021>.

To see how your member of the House voted, go to <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/113-2013/h640>

To read VFW's letter to congressional leaders, click here:

http://www.vfw.org/uploadedFiles/VFWorg/News_and_Events/Articles/2013_Articles/12-12-13%20-%20VFW%20Letter%20to%20Congress%20-%20Budget%20Agreement.pdf

To read VFW's Press Release, click here: <http://www.vfw.org/News-and-Events/Articles/2013-Articles/VFW-Takes-COLA-Fight-to-Senate/>

2. Defense Bill Update: On Monday, House Armed Services Committee Chairman Buck McKeon (R-Calif.) and his Senate counterpart, Carl Levin (D-Mich.), held a joint press conference to reveal details of the compromise their two committees reached on the \$633 billion National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2014. The House passed HR 3304 on Thursday by a vote of 350-69. If approved by the Senate and signed into law by the president, the FY 2014 defense bill would:

- Increase military pay by 1 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 at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-113hr1960pcs/pdf/BILLS-113hr1960pcs.pdf>.

3. House Extends Vet Programs: This week, the House cleared legislation (H.R. 3521) that would authorize 27 VA major medical facility leases that had been requested in the FY 2013/14 budget, Other legislation, H.R. 1402, extends funding for programs that were set to expire at the end of the year. They include- the reauthorization of the Veterans Transportation Service, the requirement for VA to provide service-connected nursing home care, the authority to provide VA housing assistance to homeless veterans, and the authority to allow non-VA doctors to conduct disability examinations. The bills now need to be cleared by the Senate to extend these programs to December 31, 2014.

For a list of medical facility locations or more about either bill, click here:

<http://veterans.house.gov/press-release/house-passes-important-va-health-care-legislation-votes-to-extend-other-veterans>

4. Senate Talks Disability Claims Progress: On Wednesday, the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee held an oversight hearing on VA’s ongoing effort to transform the disability claims system. The hearing, a follow-up to one held in March, delved into recent progress being made on claims pending longer than 125 days. Committee Chairman Bernie Sanders (I-VT), voiced his views alongside other committee members, that although VA has made positive strides to include recent data showing the number of claims pending longer than 125 days has dropped to just over 395,000 claims or 57 percent of the total inventory, many challenges remain. Other areas discussed included a recent IG report that found issues with provisional rating decisions reviewed at several regional offices, progress with electronic claims processing system/ VBMS and efforts to revise and update VA’s rating schedule. VFW has and continues to monitor all of the changes, progress and reports regarding the disability claims process. We will continue to keep you updated here in the Washington Weekly.

For more about the hearing, to include the recorded webcast, visit the Senate VA Committee website at:

http://www.veterans.senate.gov/hearings.cfm?action=release.display&release_id=c75bff2c-a8df-49a2-ab75-15b6f34af5f8

5. House Discusses Federal Contracting: This week the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hosted a joint hearing alongside the House Small Business Subcommittee on Contracting and Workforce to discuss VA's federal contracting processes. Specifically, the committees sought to learn more about VA's reverse auction contracting award processes, through which contractors offer bids through a third party site to do business with VA. The hearing came in the wake of a recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) report that expressed concerns over whether or not VA was receiving the best prices for its contracts through the reverse auction process. GAO called for further regulation to the process in light of the report. Most panelists throughout the hearing agreed that reverse auctioning presented some issues without proper regulation. During the hearing, VA announced that it had suspended its reverse auction processes, pending further review. To learn more about the hearing and read each witness' prepared remarks, click here:

<http://smallbusiness.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=362983>

6. Two MIAs Identified: The Defense POW/MIA Office has announced the identification of remains belonging to two servicemen who had been missing since the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Identified are:

- Army Pfc. Jerry P. Craig, 17, of Panhandle, Texas, who will be buried Dec. 19, in Leesville, La. In late November 1950, Craig was a member of Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regimental Combat Team, deployed along the eastern bank of the Chosin Reservoir in North Korea, when they were attacked by Chinese forces and forced into a fighting withdrawal to a more defensible position. Craig was reported missing in action on Dec. 2, 1950.
- Air Force Col. Francis J. McGouldrick Jr. of New Haven, Conn., who is being buried today at Arlington National Cemetery. On Dec. 13, 1968, McGouldrick was on a night strike mission when his B-57E Canberra aircraft collided with another aircraft over Savannakhet Province, Laos. McGouldrick was never seen again and was listed as missing in action.

Read more about their individual recoveries and identification at

http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/news_releases/.

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 by clicking here, <http://www.vfw.org/Forms/Capitol-Hill-Blog-Submissions/>, or simply email photos and stories directly to vfwac@vfw.org

To sign up new veterans' advocates to receive the Washington Weekly every Friday, click here: <http://capwiz.com/vfw/mlm/signup.htm>