

## VFW WASHINGTON WEEKLY

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**1. VA Budget Released:** The President on Monday released his \$140.3 billion FY 2013 budget proposal for the Department of Veterans Affairs. The total amount includes mandatory funding for programs such as disability compensation and pension, as well as discretionary funding for VA medical care, to include advanced appropriations. The amount represents a 4.5-percent increase over FY 2012 funding, but falls more than \$4 billion short of what is recommended by *The Independent Budget*, which the VFW co-authors with AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans and Paralyzed Veterans of America. The VA budget request includes:

- \$6.2 billion to expand inpatient, residential and outpatient mental health programs.
- \$3.3 billion for returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans' programs.
- \$2.1 billion to improve the benefits claims process.
- \$1.3 billion for veterans' homelessness programs.
- \$403 million for women veteran programs.
- \$258 million for national cemeteries.

VFW has concerns about the low recommendation for major construction and the slight increase for medical and prosthetic research. VFW National Commander Richard DeNoyer said a record 240 troops lost one or more limbs in Afghanistan last year will require a lifetime of care, and that "it shouldn't be in VA medical facilities that average more than 60 years old." Read the VFW press release at <http://www.vfw.org/News-and-Events/Articles/2012-Articles/VFW-Calls-VA-Budget-Proposal-a-Good-Start/>.

**2. VFW Testifies on VA Budget:** On Wednesday, VFW testified before the House VA Committee as part of an *Independent Budget* (IB) panel on the FY 2013 VA budget. The IB, now in its 26th year, captures the full picture of what VA needs to care for veterans. VFW is responsible for the construction portion of the IB, and our testimony centered on major and minor construction project funding. We voiced our concerns about the woefully underfunded construction accounts, noting that Congress projected some \$2.8 billion for projects, while the Administration this year only asked for \$725 million, which is well over \$2 billion short of what is needed. Safety and accessibility are concerns when construction accounts remain unfunded or underfunded for years. VFW asked Congress to increase funding so VA can complete numerous projects under way, as well as those being planned. To read VFW testimony, go to <http://www.vfw.org/VFW-in-DC/Congressional-Testimony/>. To learn more about the hearing and to view a recorded webcast, visit <http://www.vfwonthehill.org/2012/02/watch-live-vfw-shinseki-to-testify-on.html>. Read the *Independent Budget* at <http://www.independentbudget.org/>.

**3. DOD Budget Breaks Faith With Troops:** Also released Monday was the requested FY 2013 budget for the Department of Defense, which the VFW believes contains negative military pay and benefits proposals that will become “deal breakers” with the troops. One proposal recommends 1.7-percent military pay increases for 2013 and 2014, and a mere half percent in 2015. Tied to pay changes is DOD’s concurrence to create a Military Retirement Modernization Commission, which some in Congress already said should also examine the non-taxed status of military allowances, such as separate rations, housing and combat pay. The second proposal would force military dependents and retirees to pay more for their Tricare health programs. DOD recommended a three-tiered annual enrollment fee for Tricare Prime—based on the amount of retirement pay received—which over the next five years would quadruple existing fees for some working age military retirees. DOD also proposed instituting a one-tier annual enrollment fee and increased deductibles for Tricare Standard and Extra programs, a three-tiered fee for Tricare for Life coverage, and new pharmaceutical copays for everyone except uniformed service members. “Defeating these negative Quality of Life proposals are top VFW legislative priorities,” said VFW National Commander Richard DeNoyer. Read more about VFW’s position at <http://www.vfw.org/News-and-Events/Articles/2012-Articles/DEFENSE-BUDGET-BREAKS-FAITH-WITH-TROOPS/>. Help VFW defeat these negative proposals by writing your members of Congress here: <http://capwiz.com/vfw/issues/alert/?alertid=61005316>. To learn more, visit <http://www.vfwonthehill.org/2012/02/pentagon-unveiled-its-budget-proposal.html>.

**4. VFW Discusses G.I. Bill with State Approving Agencies:** This week the VFW joined the National Association of State Approving Agencies, or NASAA, for the organization's annual conference in Arlington, Va. State Approving Agencies serve as the "boots on the ground" for certifying G.I. Bill-eligible programs across the country, which is why VFW was honored to join a distinguished panel of veterans' advocates to discuss challenges and opportunities for student-veterans who seek to use their Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits. To learn more about the panel and the VFW’s ongoing efforts to ensure student-veteran success visit: [www.vfwonthehill.org](http://www.vfwonthehill.org).

**5. Pay & Benefits Top Troop Concerns:** In testimony this week before the House Appropriations Committee’s subcommittee on military construction and veterans affairs, the senior enlisted advisors of the four military services also said pay and benefits were the top concerns of their troops. “The last thing we want to have is for some soldier, sailor, airman or Marine deployed in harm's way, being concerned about whether or not they are going to be paid. That's something we don't need these young people to be concerned about,” said Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond Chandler. Service members also are concerned about their retirements, even though the senior enlisted advisors said retirement is not something that should be on the minds of a young people in uniform. "That is the No. 1 thing I hear from airmen and from families, said Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force James Roy. “It is a distractor. I need young airmen focused on mission.” Read more at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=67234>.

**6. VA Adds Texting Feature to Crisis Line:** Since its launch in 2007, the VA’s Veterans Crisis Line has answered more than 500,000 confidential calls, and trained responders have made more than 18,000 rescues. In 2009, an anonymous online chat service was added, which has already helped more than 28,000 people. Now VA has added a third option for veterans, service members and family members who would rather text than call or go online: a free text messaging

service at **838255**. The confidential Veterans Crisis Line (**1-800-273-8255, Press 1**), online chat ([www.VeteransCrisisLine.net](http://www.VeteransCrisisLine.net)), and text messaging service (**838255**) are monitored 24/7 by trained crisis responders. Learn more about VA's overall crisis prevention program at [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide\\_prevention](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention).

**7. New Effort Aids Military Spouse Employment:** Moving is tough enough on military families, but it's even tougher on the one-third of working spouses who are in professions that require licenses or certifications. Twenty-four states are currently making an effort to ease the portability of licenses and certifications without lowering any standards. First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden are now working to get this initiative out of the other 26 governors' inboxes. "We understand the unique challenges that you face, and we are going to do everything that we can to make sure that you can pursue your careers and provide for your families," said Mrs. Obama at the Pentagon on Wednesday. Read more at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=67211>.

**8. Korean War MIA Identified:** The Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office recently announced the identification of remains belonging to Army Cpl. William R. Sluss, 21, of Nickelsville, Va. In late November 1950, Sluss and elements of the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division were attacked by Chinese forces near Kunu-ri, North Korea. On Nov. 30, 1950, Sluss was listed as missing in action as a result of that heavy fighting. In 1953, returning Americans who had been held as prisoners of war reported that Sluss had been captured by the Chinese and died in the spring of 1951 as a result of malnutrition. Read more at [http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/news\\_releases/2012/release\\_sluss.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/news_releases/2012/release_sluss.pdf).