



***“The “Veterans and Military Groups” that approved the Armed Services Committee’s work didn’t speak for me.”***

~ Floyd Sears, MSgt, USAF (Ret) ~

---

## **WASHINGTON REPORT**

### **NDAAs Coming to House Floor for Vote**

The House was not in session this week. It is scheduled to meet next Monday when it will consider the House Armed Services Committee report on HR 1540, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012 (NDA). The Senate met this week to continue its preliminary work on its version of various bills such as the NDA and others.

The House Armed Services Committee voted 60 to 1 last week, following a more than 16-hour marathon markup session, to approve a bill (HR 1540) that provides \$553 billion Department of Defense base budget, an additional \$119 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and \$18 billion to support atomic energy defense programs at the Department of Energy for the next fiscal year.

Under other provisions of HR 1540, troops would see an across-the-board pay increase of 1.6 percent, equal to the amount recommended in the President’s budget.

Unfortunately, the bill does not, repeat, not end the reduction of payments under the Survivor Benefit Plan by the amount a survivor receives in Dependency and Indemnity Compensation. Instead, the Committee recommends increasing monthly payments in the Special Survivor Indemnity Allowance (SSIA) through 2021.

This year’s HASC NDA would increase SSIA and extend its life to Oct. 1, 2021. Under the revised incremental growth plan, SSIA would be raised to \$163 from \$90 in fiscal 2013, to \$200 in 2014, \$215 in 2015, \$282 in 2016 and \$314 for fiscal 2017. These amounts could change in coming years but fall far short of the more than \$1,150 deducted monthly under the current SBP/DIC offset.

In addition, the Committee also approved an amendment to require all four service chiefs to certify that the repeal of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy will not negatively impact combat readiness and effectiveness. Chairman Buck McKeon said the amendment would help respond to lingering questions about the effects of repeal on

homosexual policy on military readiness, recruitment and retention.

The Committee also approved a provision to prohibit use of military facilities for homosexual marriage ceremonies and barred Defense Department employees from conducting such ceremonies. The Navy has revoked a guidance it previously issued that approved use of Navy facilities for “further review.”

The provisions we are closely watching are the increase of TRICARE Prime enrollment fees and the increases in pharmacy copays.

We know there will be amendments offered to the bill. We will be monitoring developments closely and working to encourage an amendment to “hold the line” on shifting costs of earned benefits to military retirees and their families.

NAUS President Matz says: “Please ask your friends to help you keep up the pressure on your congressmen and senators. The final votes are far from being cast, and we must continue to let them know we are not for any TRICARE fee increase.”

### **Member of House Personnel Committee Describes Dismissed TRICARE Debate**

As readers know, an amendment to prohibit TRICARE Prime fee increases was refused consideration, ruled “out of order,” during the full House Armed Services Committee (HASC) markup of the fiscal year 2012 National Defense Authorization Act (HR 1540) last week. (see [May 13 NAUS Weekly Update](#) for more detail.)

The unconsidered amendment sought to re-establish the legislative language that banned the Pentagon from raising TRICARE Prime rates. The amendment would have restored the original language as already approved by members of the Subcommittee on Military Personnel.

In a newsletter to Florida constituents, Rep. Allen West (R-FL) provides additional description of the House Armed Services Committee action on TRICARE.

Rep. West writes, “... after the Subcommittee on Military Personnel voted in favor of a one year moratorium on increasing TRICARE fees, Chairman Buck McKeon altered language in the full committee mark-up that increases TRICARE fees in 2012, and then allows Department of Defense to make annual increases in TRICARE not greater than the percentage of COLA offered to military personnel each year.”

“While the TRICARE increase for 2012 equals just \$2.50/month and \$5/month for individuals and families respectively, by linking it to COLA from 2013 on,” the Florida Republican continued, “it gives the DOD the ability to essentially raise fees every year from now on, except on those off years when the COLA is not adjusted.”

“This seems to be a major break in the promise of TRICARE to those who joined the military,” the Congressman wrote.

And Rep. West concludes, “I do not support this full HASC initiative and recommendation on TRICARE.”

NAUS asks readers to please keep up the pressure on your congressmen and senators. And ask your friends to help, too. The House vote on the Committee’s bill (HR 1540) is scheduled next week. And with the Senate not scheduled to act until June or later, the final decision is far from certain.

Together, we must continue to let them know that military retirees should not be first on the firing line for budget reduction. We are not for any TRICARE fee increase as a first effort to reduce runaway government spending. There are many lower priorities that need to be taken well before earned benefits are reduced. Please continue to let your elected officials know how you feel about TRICARE and the proposed increases. Click [here](#) to send a message to your representatives.

### **How Can a 13 Percent Increase be Called “Modest”?**

We remain puzzled by terminology being used to describe a plan to increase TRICARE Prime fees 13 percent, starting Oct. 1, 2011. It seems as though everyone from the Pentagon to the House of Representatives, the National Press and even a number of major military associations are calling the Pentagon plan on TRICARE “modest.”

How does it happen that a plan for a 13 percent increase in TRICARE Prime can be termed as “a slight increase” or “a modest increase”? What is the definition of “modest”? Obviously for those who use it, “modest” includes increases up to the level under consideration, 13 percent. But what exactly is it based on?

We looked but could not find a measure of inflation anywhere near the 13 percent level. Medical inflation, which DoD wants to use to accelerate future TRICARE increases, runs around 6 percent. The cost-of-living index (COLA) has been “zero” the past two years, and the forward forecast for a 2012 COLA increase is nowhere near the “modest” level of 13 percent.

What would you call it if your mortgage payment was increased 13 percent? Would you call a 13 percent jump in prices at your favorite restaurant “modest”?

Frankly, a 13 percent TRICARE fee increase is out of line. It is excessive by any measure, especially as it is applied to a significant part of the “moral contract” promised to those who served a career in uniformed service and their families.

The House is scheduled to consider its version of the National Defense Authorization Act (HR 1540) next week. Please contact your elected officials and let them know how you feel about TRICARE increases for those who have earned the benefit by clicking [here](#).

### **Social Security Funds Shrinking**

Last week the Social Security Board of Trustees released its annual report on the Social Security Trust Funds.

According to the report, combined assets of the Old-Age and Survivors Insurance, and Disability Insurance (OASDI) Trust Funds will be exhausted in 2036, one year sooner than projected last year. The Disability Insurance Trust Fund will be exhausted in 2018, which was also the prediction last year.

### **National Maritime Day**

This Sunday, May 22, is National Maritime Day. It is a day for the U.S. to observe its proud maritime heritage and honor the men and women who serve and have served as Merchant Mariners. If you know any Merchant Mariners, take time to thank them for their service to the country.

### **Coast Guard Academy**

On Wednesday, President Obama delivered the keynote speech at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy commencement ceremony. It was the third wartime address by an American commander-in-chief to graduating Coast Guard cadets in the past decade.

## **HEALTH CARE NEWS**

### **New TRICARE Screening Test**

TRICARE has added coverage for an enhanced cervical cancer-screening test that helps detect the presence of the human papillomavirus (HPV).

The HPV DNA test is covered as a cervical cancer screening under TRICARE's clinical preventive services when performed in conjunction with a Pap smear for women aged 30 and older. Coverage is based on national guidelines for the use of HPV DNA testing and is retroactive to Sept. 7, 2010.

Preauthorization for HPV testing is not required, and beneficiaries have no copayments or cost-shares for routine cervical cancer screening under TRICARE.

In addition, TRICARE covers the CDC recommended vaccine series to prevent HPV infection in girls. The HPV vaccine is recommended for girls 11 or 12 years of age, but doctors may start the series in girls as young as 9 years old, and can give catch-up vaccinations through 26 years of age for those who have not completed the vaccine series.

TRICARE also covers screening for breast, colorectal and prostate cancer without cost shares or copays. For more information, visit the [TRICARE Preventative Services website](#).

### **TRICARE Management Activity Welcomes New Assistant Deputy Director**

Mary Kaye Justis was recently assigned chief, health plan integration and assistant deputy director of TRICARE Management Activity, Falls Church, VA.

Justis previously served as branch chief and associate administrator, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), Atlanta, GA.

## **ACTIVE DUTY NEWS**

### **Priority Admission**

San Diego State University is offering active duty service members, military spouses, family members and veterans an opportunity to appeal for priority admission into the institution. The offer is effective with the July 11 start of the Summer 2011 semester. For more information about the Priority Admission Program, contact the Navy College Office in San Diego at [\(619\) 556-4927](tel:6195564927).

### **Safe Harbor**

Navy Safe Harbor is the lead organization for coordinating the non-medical care of wounded, ill, and injured sailors, Coast Guardsmen and their families. Safe Harbor provides a lifetime of individually tailored assistance designed to improve the success of enrollees' recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration activities. For more information, visit the [Navy Safe Harbor webpage](#) or call toll-free [1-877-746-8563](tel:18777468563).

### **United States Presence in Libya War**

The War Powers Resolution of 1973 allows the president 60-days to conduct military operations without a declaration of war from Congress. Saturday, May 20, marks the expiration date on President Obama's military actions in Libya.

During the week, NATO air raids were conducted near Tripoli, Misurata, Hun and Sirte, hitting missile launchers, vehicles and ammunition storage sites. Airstrikes also hit Tripoli, the Capitol's Interior Ministry and other government building.

Last Sunday, NATO air forces conducted 147 sorties, of which 48 were strike sorties. Since March 31, air force missions total 6,808 sorties and 2,656 strike sorties.

Asked about US boots on the ground in Libya in a "60 Minutes" segment, Defense Secretary Robert Gates replied, "No, the President has been very, very clear about that."

Pentagon officials estimate that U.S. forces have spent more than \$750 million enforcing the NATO no-fly zone. And, Congress has yet to act on the War in Libya.

## **VETERANS NEWS**

### **VA Announces Disaster Assistance After Tornado Outbreaks**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced this week that special disaster assistance might be available to veterans with VA-guaranteed home loans who have been affected by recent tornados in the South. Veterans living in the designated disaster areas in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi and Tennessee may receive mortgage assistance through their loan servicers.

VA strongly encourages mortgage companies not to initiate any new foreclosures in the disaster areas for a period of 90 days. The agency also encourages mortgage companies that service VA-guaranteed home loans to extend every possible forbearance to borrowers who are in distress through no fault of their own. This includes suspension of reporting to credit bureaus and waiving late charges for affected borrowers.

Veterans should contact their insurance company as soon as possible to file claims for losses. At the same time, they need to contact their mortgage companies to let them know their circumstances and should also start the FEMA disaster application process as soon as possible by calling [1-800-621-3362](tel:1-800-621-3362). Low interest loans, cash grants, and housing assistance may be available from agencies associated with the disaster recovery effort.

VA has information available on its [home loan website](#) that provides basic guidance on options veterans should consider following a major disaster. Veterans may also contact their nearest VA Regional Loan Center at [1-877-827-3702](tel:1-877-827-3702).

### **VA to Offer Debit Cards**

The VA, through the Treasury Department, will soon begin to offer beneficiaries without bank accounts, an option to enroll in the Direct Express debit card program with Comerica Bank. Direct Express payments will be directly deposited into your account and made accessible through a debit card. Personal funds cannot be transferred into this account as it can only be used to receive Federal benefits. Direct Express cardholders have 24/7 access to their money at automated teller machines and can make purchases online and at any retailer that accepts MasterCard. This is a first step in plans to eliminate check payments in the future.

### **The VA Million Veteran Program**

The VA Million Veteran Program is an effort to consolidate genetic, military exposure, health, and lifestyle information together in one single database. The database will be used by authorized researchers to conduct health and wellness studies to determine which genetic variations are associated with particular health issues. For more information about MVP, including safeguards in place to protect the privacy and confidentiality of those veterans who take part, visit the [VA Million Veteran Program website](#)

### **New Family Caregiver Benefits Processing**

In the first week for open applications the VA has assisted more than 625 veterans,

service members and their family caregivers in applying for new services under the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010.

New services for primary Family Caregivers of eligible post-9/11 veterans include a stipend, mental health services, and access to health care insurance, if they are not already entitled to care or services under a health plan. The stipend portion of this service will be backdated to the date of the application. Comprehensive Caregiver training and medical support are other key components of this program.

VA began processing applications for eligible post-9/11 veterans and service members to designate a Primary Family Caregiver on May 9, 2011.

Applications can be processed by telephone through the Caregiver Support Line at [\(855\) 260-3274](tel:855-260-3274), in person at a VA medical Center with a Caregiver Support Coordinator, by mail or online at the [website](#) with the new Caregiver Application (VA Form 1010-CG). The website application also features a chat option that provides the Family Caregiver with a live representative to assist in completing the application form.