

News Flash



News for Veterans July 1, 2011 U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs

Press Release

June 6, 2011

http://veterans.senate.gov/press-releases.cfm?action=release.display&release_id=c359e632-92ee-4d5a-94eb-24ce20a99c6b

Alert: Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma: Expanded Definition

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has expanded eligibility for disability compensation due to non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (NHL) for veterans who served in Vietnam's offshore waters. This is welcome news for Blue Water veterans whose claims for compensation benefits had been denied under VA's earlier more restrictive definition of the disease.

Background: The term NHL includes a number of different conditions that may be categorized differently under various medical classification systems. Recently, VA expanded its definition of NHL to include chronic lymphocytic leukemia and small-cell lymphocytic lymphoma, two conditions that VA previously contended were unrelated.

[CLICK HERE for a copy of VA's decision](#)

CQ TODAY ONLINE NEWS -- APPROPRIATIONS

June 30, 2011 -- 4:41 p.m.

Senate Appropriators Unanimously Endorse 'Lean' Military Construction-VA Spending Bill
By Eugene Mulero, CQ Staff

The Senate Appropriations Committee on Thursday unanimously approved the panel's first spending bill for fiscal 2012, a \$142 billion measure to fund military construction and veterans' affairs program. Appropriators voted 30-0 to endorse the legislation (HR 2055), and panel Chairman Daniel K. Inouye, D-Hawaii, said he would like the full Senate to consider the measure starting July 5.

"We're going to do our best to report it to the floor on Tuesday and start debating it," Inouye said after the markup.

However, that scenario is unlikely, as Democratic leaders indicated later Thursday that they want to move other legislation to the floor next week.

Thad Cochran of Mississippi, the committee's top Republican, called Thursday's markup "an important step toward our shared goal of enacting 12 individual, responsible appropriations bills in a timely manner." The measure includes \$72.5 billion in discretionary funding, which is \$1.3 billion below President Obama's request and \$618 million less than current funding. It also includes \$69.5 billion in mandatory funding.

The bill would provide \$2.6 million less than the version that the House passed (HR 2055) earlier this month, said Mark Steven Kirk of Illinois, the top Republican on the Military Construction-VA Appropriations Subcommittee.

Both versions would provide \$52.5 billion in advance appropriations for VA health care accounts in fiscal 2013.

If the Senate passes the bill, members from both chambers are expected to achieve a swift compromise over the minor differences in conference.

South Dakota Democrat Tim Johnson, chairman of the Military Construction-VA Subcommittee, said the legislation is "lean, disciplined and responsible."

"The bill is critically important to our troops," Johnson said, adding that he is hopeful the full Senate would consider the bill in July.

Kirk added, "This is a very good bill. It has strong bipartisan support. It is ready for the Senate floor, which I hope would be as early as Tuesday."

Veterans Programs

For the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the bill would provide \$58.6 billion in discretionary spending for fiscal 2012 --- \$181 million below the president's request. It also includes about \$69.5 billion in mandatory funding for the VA, matching the administration's request.

The bill would spend \$4.9 billion for health care and other social programs for veterans who are temporarily and chronically homeless. That includes \$939 million -- matching the president's request -- for programs meant to help homeless veterans find temporary shelters and long-term housing. About \$202 million would go toward the Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing, or HUD-VASH --- a program touted by the Obama administration and the VA as a means of reducing the number of homeless veterans by 2015.

Reducing the veterans' homeless rate has been a top priority for VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, who has vowed to ensure that the department provides housing for every veteran by 2015. His goal is backed by the leaders of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs panels, who secured an increase of \$50 million for the HUD-VASH program as part of the fiscal 2011 spending deal (PL 112-10).

This year there are about 76,000 homeless veterans, according to the VA.

"In a very difficult budget atmosphere, this bill provides solid investments in some top VA priorities," said appropriator Patty Murray, D-Wash., chairwoman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs panel. "But it will always take sustained investment to meet the needs of our veterans and I look forward to continuing to work with the Obama administration to build on what have been record increases in funding for veterans' care." The bill also would provide \$250 million to expand access to VA health care in rural and remote areas, matching Obama's request. It would provide nearly \$3 billion for post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury treatment for veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. And programs to assist women veterans would get \$270 million, as requested, in the legislation.

Military Construction

The bill would provide \$13.7 billion for military construction, which is \$1 billion below Obama's request and \$2.9 billion less than the fiscal 2011 enacted level. The bulk of this decrease, Kirk said, was due to a cut in funding for 23 military construction projects.

The measure includes \$258.8 million for the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process, which concludes in September. That total is \$1.9 billion below the fiscal 2011 enacted level.

The legislation does not provide funding for military construction projects for overseas contingency operations, which are primarily the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The total for military construction includes \$11.1 billion for projects ranging from operations training facilities to schools, hospitals, barracks and clinics for active-duty and reserve military personnel. That amount is about \$1 billion below the president's request for the active-duty component.

Before approving the bill, the panel adopted a manager's amendment sponsored by Johnson that would require reports from the administration on bases overseas, the Veterans Benefits Management System and the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center.

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Audio of Full Committee Markup of FY12 Milcon/VA Bil
<http://appropriations.senate.gov/webcasts.cfm?method=webcasts.view&id=87c84f25-4a8c-4902-92eb-2e313edd3b90>

JUNE 29, 2011 SENATE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE PASSES LEGISLATION

S.277 : Caring for Camp Lejeune Veterans Act of 2011
Sponsor: Sen Burr, Richard [NC] (introduced 2/3/2011) Cosponsors (8)
Committees: Senate Veterans' Affairs Latest Major Action: 6/29/2011 Senate committee/subcommittee actions. Status: Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Ordered to be reported without amendment favorably.

S.572 : A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to repeal the prohibition on collective bargaining with respect to matters and questions regarding compensation of employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs other than rates of basic pay, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Brown, Sherrod [OH] (introduced 3/14/2011) Cosponsors (6) Committees: Senate Veterans' Affairs. Latest Major Action: 6/29/2011 Senate committee/subcommittee actions. Status: Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Ordered to be reported without amendment favorably.

S.745 : A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to protect certain veterans who would otherwise be subject to a reduction in educational assistance benefits, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Schumer, Charles E. [NY] (introduced 4/6/2011) Cosponsors (2) Committees: Senate Veterans' Affairs. Latest Major Action: 6/29/2011 Senate committee/subcommittee actions. Status: Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Ordered to be reported without amendment favorably.

S.894 : Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2011
Sponsor: Sen Murray, Patty [WA] (introduced 5/5/2011). Cosponsors (14)
Committees: Senate Veterans' Affairs. Latest Major Action: 6/29/2011 Senate committee/subcommittee actions. Status: Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Ordered to be reported without amendment favorably.

S.914 : A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the waiver of the collection of copayments for telehealth and telemedicine visits of veterans, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Begich, Mark [AK] (introduced 5/9/2011) Cosponsors (2)
Committees: Senate Veterans' Affairs. Latest Major Action: 6/29/2011 Senate committee/subcommittee actions. Status: Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Ordered to be reported without amendment favorably.

S.951 : Hiring Heroes Act of 2011
Sponsor: Sen Murray, Patty [WA] (introduced 5/11/2011) Cosponsors (26)
Committees: Senate Veterans' Affairs. Latest Major Action: 6/29/2011 Senate committee/subcommittee actions. Status: Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Ordered to be reported without amendment favorably.

To view these bill go to: <http://capwiz.com/vva/issues/> or <http://thomas.loc.gov/>

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 1, 2011

VA Issuing First Payments to Caregivers

WASHINGTON -- The Department of Veterans Affairs will send out more than \$430,000 in stipend payments to nearly 200 Family Caregivers of Veterans in July. These Family Caregivers were the first to complete their Caregiver training under the program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers. The first payments to 96 recipients were issued today.

"This is a long-awaited day for many Family Caregivers who diligently worked to achieve this landmark legislation to enhance services for Family Caregivers," said VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki. "I am proud VA can now offer direct support to the loved ones who give the Veterans we serve a greater quality of life by allowing them to remain at home surrounded by family and friends."

Family Caregivers will receive an average \$1,600 in monthly stipend payments. The initial payments will average \$2,500 because the first stipend checks are retroactive to the date of application. The amount of the stipend is based on the condition of the Veteran and the amount of care they require as well as the geographic location where the Veteran resides. An additional 80 stipend payments will be released from the U.S. Treasury on July 8 bringing the total to 176 Family Caregivers receiving the stipend in July.

"We continue to process and approve applications on a daily basis" said Deborah Amdur, VA's Chief Consultant for Care Management and Social Work. "It has been profoundly gratifying to receive messages from Family Caregivers about the value of this program."

Since May 9, nearly 1,250 Caregivers of Veterans who were seriously injured in the line of duty on or after September 11, 2001, have applied for the Program. A core caregiver training curriculum is a required component of the program. This comprehensive training, which was developed by Easter Seals in collaboration with VA clinical experts, has received many positive comments from Family Caregivers. In addition to the training, eligible Family Caregivers can also access mental health services and are provided health care insurance, if they are not already entitled to care or services under a health plan.

Veterans may review the criteria for eligibility and download the Family Caregiver program application (VA CG 10-10) at www.caregiver.va.gov. The application enables the Veteran to designate a primary Family Caregiver and secondary Family Caregivers if needed. Caregiver Support Coordinators are stationed at every VA medical center to assist with coordinating the training or assist Caregivers in locating available services.

Support for all Caregivers is also available via the national Caregiver Support Line at [1-855-260-3274](tel:18552603274). Caregivers of Veterans from all eras are encouraged to use the Website and Support Line to learn about more than two dozen supportive services VA offers to Family Caregivers.

To view all VA recent press releases go to: <http://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/>

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 30, 2011

VA Begins Implementation of Open Source Program

TIAG Selected to Build Custodial Agent

WASHINGTON -- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) today announced that it has begun the implementation of an open source community based on its electronic health record (EHR), selecting The Informatics Applications Group (TIAG) to create the Custodial Agent that will serve as the community's central governing body. VA will contribute its current EHR, known as VistA (Veterans Integrated System Technology Architecture), to seed the open source effort.

"Our EHR is central to the quality of care we provide to Veterans," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "As we continually advance the health care we deliver, so too must we advance the capability of EHR software. Moving to an open source model invites innovation from the public and private sectors. It is an important element of our EHR collaboration with the Department of Defense and an important part of our strategy to ensure that VA clinicians have the best tools possible, and that Veterans receive the best health care possible."

In April, VA announced its intent to establish a Custodial Agent (CA) to serve as the central governing body for an open source community. The CA will provide important communication, organizational, and administrative functions that enable community members to share information and software and to collaborate on the improvement and the use of EHR systems. TIAG, an innovative technology services company, has been selected to design and launch the Custodial Agent.

"We have a tremendous opportunity to create the next generation of EHRs, which is so important to our EHR collaboration with DoD and to many current and future users of electronic health records," said VA Chief Technology Officer Dr. Peter Levin. "In order to achieve the highest level of utility and safety, we must engage as broad a base of EHR users and developers as possible. We are working closely with TIAG to design a robust Custodial Agent that enables this level of community engagement."

VA expects the Custodial Agent to launch in August and to commence full operation in the fall. For more information, see today's entry on VA's Vantage Point blog (blogs.va.gov) and the Open Source EHR Custodial Agent website (www.osehrca.org).

To view all VA recent press releases go to: <http://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/>

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VA Expands Public Reporting to Include Performance and Productivity Data of Benefits Offices

WASHINGTON -- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has expanded its performance and productivity website by making additional data available to the public.

"In keeping with our commitment to deliver timely and high quality benefits to our Nation's Veterans, VA strives to keep Veterans, their families, and the public informed about the performance and productivity of VA's regional offices, which administer benefits," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "This new effort expands the Department's commitment to public transparency by sharing performance and productivity data in the delivery of benefits, including compensation, pension, vocational rehabilitation and employment, education, home loans, and insurance."

VA announced last year its ASPIRE for Quality initiative, aimed at making data and outcome information available to the public in such areas as acute care, ICU, outpatient, safety and annual process measures, and how each Medical Center measures up to quality goals.

"VA is committed to making performance and productivity data available to ensure VA is accountable for the timeliness and quality of the benefits we provide to our Nation's Veterans," said VA Under Secretary for Benefits Allison A. Hickey.

The expanded ASPIRE for Productivity website provides information on how VBA and its regional offices are doing in relation to Department goals. The site specifically depicts how each of the regional offices measures up to productivity and other claim processing goals.

The new ASPIRE performance and productivity data can be accessed on the VA website at <http://www.vba.va.gov/reports/> .

To view all VA recent press releases go to: <http://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/>

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