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TO: Benefits Protection Team Leaders

FROM: Joy J. Ilem, National Legislative Director

SUBJ: **LEGISLATIVE UPDATE**

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The 114th Congress is in its final stretch as the House and Senate seek to conclude this year's legislative business by this weekend, which will require passage of a short-term continuing resolution for fiscal year 2017 to fund the federal government through next spring. Most VA programs, services and benefits have already been fully funded for FY 2017 through advance appropriations.

Before final adjournment, the House and Senate are also seeking to pass veteran-related omnibus legislation, H.R. 6416, which passed the House on December 6, that includes modest provisions related to veterans' claims processing, education, employment, entrepreneurship, homelessness, health care and burial benefits. Unfortunately, however, critical legislation addressing several DAV priorities were dropped from the omnibus bill due to cost or partisan disagreements, including provisions to modernize the appeals process, extend caregiver assistance to veterans of all eras and provide women veterans equitable access to earned benefits and health care services.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 (S. 2943) is also expected to receive final Congressional approval this week. This bill includes several items pertinent to DAV members, including provisions to extend commissary and exchange privileges to certain disabled veterans, and increasing protections for veterans who suffer military sexual assault.

Some new Committee leaders for the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees have been announced. Rep. Phil Roe, M.D. (R-TN) was selected by the Republican Steering Committee to serve as Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee for the 115th Congress, succeeding Jeff Miller (R-FL), who is retiring. Dr. Roe was sworn in to Congress in 2009, and has been active on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee since that time. Roe earned his Medical Degree from the University of Tennessee in 1970, and served as a captain in the 2nd Infantry Division 2nd Medical Battalion of the U.S. Army Medical Corps from 1973-74. An OB-GYN, Roe spent time training at a VA hospital in Memphis and worked in consultation with the VA to see veterans in his private practice.

Montana Democratic Senator Jon Tester will take over as Ranking Minority Member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs committee for the 115th Congress. Senator Tester replaces Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), who served in that role for the past two years. Senator Tester emphasized that he will work closely with veterans service organizations (VSOs) to increase

timely access to care at the VA and increase opportunities for veterans after they leave the armed services. Tester, who serves as Ranking Member of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee dealing with the VA budget, has been on the Veterans' Affairs Committee since 2007 and been a frequent critic of efforts to "privatize" the Department. Senator Tester's priorities for the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee include reforming the Veterans' Choice Program, streamlining duplicative care in the community programs, strengthening accountability, and addressing medical workforce shortages at the VA. Senator Johnny Isakson (R-GA) will continue as Chairman of the Senate VA Committee and the Ranking Minority Member for the House VA Committee has not yet been announced.

I am happy to report DAV National Service and Legislative Headquarters Executive Director Garry Augustine and our staff, along with other VSOs, have already begun meeting with President-elect Trump's transition team, sharing our support for a strong VA with needed reforms. DAV and VSOs are presenting a united front to keep a robust VA at the forefront of caring for our nation's veterans. We informed the transition team that we are encouraged by progress that has been made by VA under Secretary McDonald in the past couple of years and that we look forward to further progress on improving access for veterans to health care, as well as more needed reforms to provide veterans with more timely and accurate claims and appeals decisions. Another meeting with President-elect Trump's transition team has been scheduled.

Just a reminder, DAV's Mid-Winter Conference will be held in Washington, DC, February 26 through March 1, 2017. National Commander David Riley will present the DAV's legislative agenda to a joint session of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees on Tuesday, February 28, at 2:00 pm, in the Cannon House Office Building, room 345. I encourage you to coordinate with your Department leadership to schedule meetings with your elected officials and/or their staff during Mid-Winter. You are also urged to persuade your team members not traveling to Mid-Winter to contact the local offices of their Representatives and Senators and reinforce the message DAV members will be conveying in Washington.

Thank you for all your hard work and efforts over the past year. My staff and I wish you a happy and safe Holiday Season. Rest up and be prepared for a busy 2017!


JOY J. ILEM
National Legislative Director

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