

VFW Expresses Deep Concern Over the Impact of Sequestration on Veterans

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WASHINGTON — During today's testimony before a joint hearing of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees, the national commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. (VFW) pledged the organization will not let America's veterans be forgotten by Congress or the Administration.

Today's testimony comes just days after the announcement of mandatory Department of Defense budget cuts brought on by sequestration.

"The VFW is deeply concerned about the impact sequestration will have on the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense budgets. Maybe not this year, but in future budget submissions, and how that reduction in programs and services will impact our troops returning from Afghanistan, our veterans, and their families," VFW National Commander John E. Hamilton, a Vietnam War Marine Corps rifleman and triple Purple Heart recipient, told the committees.

Since September 11, 2001, more than 50,000 service members have been wounded in action. Furthermore, data shows that more than half of all Iraq and Afghanistan veterans treated by the VA have suffered some sort of mental trauma, a fourth for PTSD. Other research suggests those numbers reach far higher.

"These numbers are staggering, and our efforts to provide the best possible mental health care for our newest war veterans must also include those who faithfully served in the past," said Hamilton.

The military suicide epidemic continues to be of great concern to the VFW. The most recent VA report on the subject indicates veteran suicides occur at a rate of 22 per day.

"The VFW feels every loss and we grieve with every family. Suicide is a nationwide epidemic, but a military or veteran's suicide is especially painful because of the resources and outreach VA and DOD have committed to awareness and prevention programs," noted Hamilton.

Hamilton also spoke of VFW's concern for how sequestration will impact the progress of VA

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facility improvements and research geared to address the specific needs of women veterans.

The VFW national commander expressed the need for the VA to ensure that women veterans' health programs are continually improved so that access and quality of care, along with patient privacy and safety, are equal to their extraordinary roles that expose them to the risk of combat, serious injury and death.

Furthermore, he urged Congress to pass S. 294, a recently proposed bill aimed to improve the disability compensation evaluation procedure for veterans who have been victims of military sexual misconduct.

As follow up to VFW's recent letter to Secretary Hagel on the subject, VFW took the opportunity to impress upon the Committee its stance on the current placement of the new Distinguished Warfare Medal and its support for H.R. 833. "Medals earned in combat have to mean more than new medals awarded in the rear," stated Hamilton.

Today's congressional testimony caps the annual VFW Legislative Conference during which approximately 600 VFW leaders from around the country visit their elected officials in Washington to discuss the issues important to veterans, service members and their families.

Other noteworthy events which took place during the Conference include:

Senator Patty Murray received the VFW Congressional Award in recognition of her outstanding service to our nation and for her support and dedication to service members, veterans and their families.

VFW hosted dinner at the National Press Club for 60 Wounded Warriors and care givers from Walter Reed Medical Center along with their families.

VFW named Danielle Hayes from San Francisco, Calif., the first-place winner of the annual Voice of Democracy scholarship competition and winner of a \$30,000 scholarship. Danielle's patriotic-themed essay received the highest marks out of 40,000 participating high school students.

Mariessa McKenna from Bowie, Md., was named the first-place winner of VFW's Patriot's Pen competition winning her a \$5,000 award.

USAA's Rick Perkins, Director, Affinity Management, and Chris Figueroa, Senior Account Manager, presented VFW with a donation, reinforcing their commitment to the VFW's nationwide support programs for military and veterans.