



## **Fact Sheet: The Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits Restoration Act**

*We ask the men and women of our military to make great sacrifices to protect our country. In return, we have a responsibility to ensure that when they come home they have access to the care they need and the benefits they've earned. The Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act would improve and enhance veterans' access to health care, extend training programs for servicemembers who are transitioning to civilian life, expand veterans' educational and job training benefits, improve benefits for survivors, and make the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) more transparent and efficient. We have all made a promise to those who have served, and Democrats and Republicans should work together to keep it.*

### **Safeguarding Future Benefits**

**Advance Appropriations.** This legislation would establish advance appropriations for mandatory accounts at VA, thus ensuring veterans receive consistent access to the benefits they have earned. Advance appropriations for all mandatory VA funding would remove VA from the uncertainty inherent in short-term funding bills and temporary appropriations lapses, which threaten veterans' care and access to services.

**Restore Full COLA for Military Retirees.** The bill would repeal the reduction to the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) included in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013 for working age military retirees. Overturning the COLA reduction for those who have recently joined the military or will join in the future would provide future military retirees with the full adjustment to their pensions.

### **Health For Heroes**

The Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act of 2014 includes numerous provisions to improve and expand healthcare access and benefits for veterans. Some healthcare provisions the bill includes would:

- Extend from five to ten years unfettered access to VA health care for recently separated veterans, which will enable veterans to address their health care needs early.
- Extend a pilot program providing rehabilitation, quality of life, and community integration services to veterans suffering from traumatic brain injury (TBI).
- Authorize a pilot program to expand access to dental care – a key aspect of overall health – to more veterans.

- Authorize pilot programs to help veterans achieve better overall health through preventative measures.
- Initiate a plan to improve access and quality of health care services to veterans in rural areas.
- Clarify that fertility counseling and treatment are included in veterans' medical services package. Therefore, requiring VA to provide reproductive care and treatment to spouses or surrogates of veterans with infertility related to their military service. Over 2,300 veterans have suffered reproductive injuries in Iraq or Afghanistan, and even more have suffered spinal cord injuries, and other injuries that have left them unable to have children.
- Authorize VA to enter into 27 leases in 18 states and Puerto Rico to expand access to health care, provide modern and safe research facilities, and provide one-stop services to homeless veterans. VA requested these leases for fiscal years 2013 and 2014, but authorization was delayed due to an unexpected scoring issue.

Additionally, the comprehensive veterans' package makes it a priority to address the scourge of military sexual trauma and help heal veterans' and their families' invisible wounds by improving access to mental health services. Provisions in the bill would:

- Expand eligibility for care and services for Military Sexual Trauma (MST) at a VA facility to active duty servicemembers. Active duty servicemembers would not be required to initially be seen by the Department of Defense and receive a referral before seeking treatment at a VA facility for MST.
- Extend counseling and treatment to servicemembers who suffered sexual trauma while serving on inactive duty training.
- Establish a program of supportive services for family members and caregivers of veterans suffering with mental illness. The VA would be required to offer the program to children, teens and young adults, using age-appropriate materials and programming.
- Require VA to develop a clinical screening tool to better identify and treat veterans who have experienced domestic abuse and to better assess the prevalence of domestic abuse in the veteran population.
- Making permanent a pilot program that provided child care for veterans receiving health care and mental health care at VA facilities and creating a similar program for Vet Centers.

### **Ensuring Veterans Receive the Benefits They Deserve**

VA has made significant progress tackling the claims backlog in recent months, as it continues to receive and process an unprecedented number of disability claims. However, more must be done to eliminate the backlog and ensure accuracy in claims processing. The comprehensive veterans' package includes provisions that would continue to keep pressure on the Veterans Benefits Administration while providing the necessary resources to build on VA's momentum in addressing the backlog. The legislation would:

- Require VA to provide recommendations to Congress for legislative or administrative action that would improve the timeliness and accuracy with which VA processes certain survivor benefits.
- Require VA to post at Regional Offices, claims intake facilities, and on VA's webpage information on the average processing time for fully developed claims and claims that are not fully developed. This information will give veterans and their families a fuller picture of the claims process and timeline.
- Direct VA to submit a quarterly report to Congress, which will be made public, on claims reduction goals and actual production at both the initial claim and appellate level.
- Improve the appellate process and efficiency of the Board of Veterans' Appeals by requiring video hearings, which would reduce wait times, reduce the need for travel and allow existing resources to be utilized on issuing decisions.

### **Training For The Next Mission**

With the war in Iraq over and the war in Afghanistan winding down, a new generation of veterans is returning home and transitioning to the civilian workforce. The comprehensive veterans' package devotes special attention to ensure America's brave servicemembers have the skills and resources they need to successfully transition into the civilian workforce. The bill includes provisions that would:

- Reauthorize the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program (VRAP), created by the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011, for two more years. VRAP provides up to one year of training assistance to certain unemployed veterans.
- Reauthorize, for an additional two years, VA's authority to provide benefits under the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program to members of Armed Forces with severe injuries or illnesses.
- Require VA to establish a three-year program to provide young veterans, between the ages 18-30, the opportunity to serve in an internship that would pair the veteran with private sector employers so they can gain civilian work experience.

Veterans' unemployment numbers steadily decreased in 2013 and have continued to fall thus far in 2014.

- [HERE](#) you can access state-by-state veterans' employment data for the 4th quarter of 2013.
- [HERE](#) you can access state-by-state veterans' employment data for the 2013 annual average.
- [HERE](#) you can access national January 2014 employment data for veterans.

## **No Veteran Leaving the Battle Field Should Have to Fight For a Job**

The Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act of 2014 includes several provisions that would improve veterans' access to job opportunities and employment resources. Provisions in the legislation would:

- Require the Department of Labor (DOL) to compile a list of websites and applications that would amplify veterans' job searches. The bill would also require DOL to report to Congress on the feasibility and advisability of creating a single, unified, employment portal to streamline and enhance veterans' searches.
- Require federal agencies to develop plans to hire an aggregate of 15,000 veterans to existing vacancies within five years using the Veterans Recruitment Appointment and the Veterans Employment Opportunities Act authorities.
- Require states to recognize military experience when issuing licenses and credentials to veterans, as a condition of receiving Jobs for Veterans State Grants, allowing veterans with certain training and experience to bypass cost prohibitive and duplicative training to secure licenses and credentials necessary for certain civilian jobs that are in line with the veteran's military training and experience.

## **Every Veteran Deserves The Opportunity To Go To College Or Master A Trade**

For decades, educational benefits and opportunities have been a key driver of success for veterans as they build a civilian life. The comprehensive veterans' package enhances existing education benefits to ensure veterans have the best opportunities available to aid in their transition to a long and prosperous civilian career. The bill includes provisions to:

- Provide in-state tuition assistance benefits at any public university for all post-9/11 veterans using the GI Bill. All qualified veterans would be able to receive in-state tuition, regardless of their residency.
- Reauthorize VA's Work-Study Program. This initiative would also expand the program to allow veterans to work in congressional offices to conduct outreach and assistance to servicemembers, veterans, and their families.

## **Accountability and Fiscal Responsibility in VHA**

In addition to ensuring access to quality health care for our nation's veterans, the Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act of 2014 includes a number of provisions to ensure accountability and fiscal responsibility in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), which would:

- Require VA to conduct an independent study to assess the organizational structures of medical centers and improve succession planning of key leadership of the Veterans Integrated Service Networks and medical centers.
- Require VA to report to Congress regarding telemedicine services (the use by a health care provider of telecommunications to assist in the diagnosis or treatment of a patient's medical condition) for veterans, including updates on VA teleconsultation and telemedicine initiatives, training, and partnerships with primary care providers.

## **Peace Of Mind While Serving**

The comprehensive veterans' package would enhance and improve the protections of the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA). The SCRA provides a broad range of protections for servicemembers by providing civil legal protections such as suspension of pending court proceedings or reducing the interest rate on certain pre-service obligations such as credit cards to ensure that they are fully focused on their job and their mission. The comprehensive veterans' package would:

- Provide servicemembers with a 180-day relief period if their licenses or continuing education requirements expire while the servicemember is eligible for hostile fire or imminent danger pay.
- Prevent a servicemember from being denied or refused credit solely because the servicemember is eligible for SCRA.
- Extend the SCRA's six percent interest rate limitation to pre-service private or federal student loan debt consolidated or refinanced during military service.
- Allow a servicemember to terminate a lease when he or she is assigned to or relocates to military housing.
- Extend the SCRA's foreclosure protections to surviving spouses during the one-year period following the death of a servicemember.

For more information about the bill, including bill text and a complete list of the veterans and military service organizations that support it, please visit the [Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs website](#).

## **Additional Information**

The bill is fully offset. The legislation is estimated to cost \$21 billion. The Veteran's Affairs Committee identified \$4 billion in savings from veterans' programs and an additional \$17 billion through modest caps to Overseas Contingency Operations funding beginning in FY 2018.