

Newsletter
for
Veterans and active military

❖ **Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017:**

The President just signed into law the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017, also known as the “Forever GI Bill,” named after the American Legion national commander who wrote the original GI Bill language in 1944. This legislation contains 34 new provisions, the vast majority of which will enhance or expand education benefits for Veterans, Servicemembers, Families and Survivors. Most notably, Veterans who transitioned out of the military after January 1, 2013 will not be limited to the 15-year deadline to use their GI Bill benefits – hence the bill’s nickname, “Forever GI Bill.” This law also restores benefits to Veterans, who were impacted by school closures since 2015, and expands benefits for our reservists, surviving dependents, Purple Heart recipients, and provides many other improvements

❖ **NDAA 2018 ► Active duty/retiree out-of-pocket costs:**

In its estimates of the effects of key provisions in the House and Senate defense authorization bills for FY 2018, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) spotlights the higher out-of-pocket costs servicemembers and veterans and their families would face if certain Senate-devised personnel initiatives make it into the final bill.

On health care, for example, the Senate version of the bill proposes that TRICARE beneficiaries face higher copays for drug prescriptions not filled on base. By removing simple language regarding grandfathering, current retirees and servicemembers who eventually will retire would see higher TRICARE fees and deductibles. Though the Senate bill would expand other TRICARE options, the net effect of the health benefit changes it proposes would be to lower government costs and raise costs for beneficiaries by \$6.7 billion from 2018 to 2022, according to the CBO.

❖ **VA Claims Backlog ► Speed-Up Bill Sent to President:**

Congress has sent the president a bill aimed at trimming a rapidly growing backlog of veterans' disability claims. The House approved the bill by voice vote 11 AUG during a brief session, sending the measure to President Donald Trump. It would overhaul the appeals process, allowing veterans to file "express" appeals if they waive their right to a hearing or the ability to submit new evidence. The VA could test the new program for up to 18 months until Shulkin could certify it was ready for a full rollout with enough money to manage appeals effectively. Lawmakers hope the legislation ultimately could reduce average wait times to less than a year. Currently, veterans could wait five years or more to resolve their appeals over disability claims.

In my opinion, if you elect to waive your right to a hearing or to submit new evidence you are hoping that the VA representative performs the 'duty to assist' responsibility and if not, you have no recourse.

❖ **VA White House hotline:**

On 11 AUG the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs announced that the two-month pilot phase of the new White House VA Hotline that began in June has demonstrated that Veterans calling the hotline respond best when their calls are answered by fellow Veterans and others with first-hand experience on their issues. As a result, VA announced that it will target highly qualified Veterans to staff the hotline going forward, instead of contracting the service to a third-party vendor, and is hiring additional VA personnel to complete the planned move to a 24-hour operation. “The message we’ve heard loud and clear is Veterans want to talk to other Veterans to help them solve problems and get VA services,” said VA Secretary David J. Shulkin.

❖ **US Air Force up or out policy:**

The Air Force’s high-year tenure rules spell out how many years an airman can remain on active duty in a certain grade. For example, a senior airman can serve no more than eight years, a staff sergeant can

serve no more than 15 years, a technical sergeant can serve no more than 20 years, and a master sergeant can serve no more than 24 years. But under the high-year tenure extension program, eligible senior airmen, staff sergeants, technical sergeants and master sergeants in the right AFSCs and grades can apply to have their tenure extended by anywhere from one to two years.

“Although retention is high in some career fields and FY 16 and 17 retention programs were successful, the Air Force needs to ensure experienced airmen are able to complete the mission as well as train new airmen,” Col. Erik Bovasso, military sustainment and transitions programs division chief for AFPC, said in the release. High-year tenure “extensions will help improve mission capability in key areas where readiness is currently strained.” The extensions will be effective as of 1 AUG, AFPC said. To be considered for an extension, airmen must have been serving in the eligible control AFSC and grade, as listed in the Military Personnel Data System, on July 21. They also must have a high-year tenure date set between Oct. 1, 2017, and Sept. 30, 2018.

❖ **Purple Heart ► S.765/H.R.544 | Ban Sales:**

On 2 AUG, the Senate passed the VFW supported Private Corrado Piccoli Purple Heart Preservation Act S.765. Over past decades, businesses specializing in military artifacts have been selling military-issued Purple Hearts on the public market for inflated prices, which have made it extremely difficult for veterans and their loved ones to track and obtain lost or stolen medals. This bill puts an end to this practice by making it illegal for any business to sell military-issued Purple Hearts.

❖ **Memorial for Global War on Terror unanimous passage celebrated by veterans:**

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, the leading voice of the Post-9/11 generation of veterans, applauded the Senate passage of H.R. 873, establishing a memorial in Washington for our generation of warriors.

❖ **Service animals:**

Some of you know that I have a service dog and I get questions on the rules in Oklahoma for service dogs constantly. In an effort to help answer questions following is a brief statement on Oklahoma laws for service dogs:

Under Oklahoma law and the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), people with disabilities have the right to be accompanied by their service animals in restaurants, hotels, stores, theaters, and other places that are open to the public. The ADA covers people with all types of disabilities, including those who use psychiatric service animals. Oklahoma’s service animal law is more limited, in that it covers only those who are blind, deaf or hard of hearing, or have another physical disability. However, and other public accommodations in Oklahoma must comply with both state and federal law. Under the ADA, a service animal is a dog that has been individually trained to perform tasks or do work for the benefit of a person with a disability. The tasks or work the animal does must be directly related to person’s disability. In some cases, a miniature horse may also qualify as a service animal. Examples of service animals that must be allowed into public accommodations under the ADA include:

- a. hearing dogs, which alert their handlers to important sounds, such as alarms, doorbells and other signals devices
- b. psychiatric service animals, which help their handlers manage mental and emotional disabilities by, for example, interrupting self-harming behaviors, reminding handlers to take medication, checking spaces for intruders, or providing calming pressure during anxiety or panic attacks
- c. guide dogs, which help those who are blind or visually impaired navigate safely
- d. seizure alert animals, which let their handlers know of impending seizures, and may also guard their handlers during seizure activity, and
- e. allergen alert animals, which let their handlers know of foods or other substances that could be dangerous (such as peanuts).

