

# Veterans Omnibus Bill Advances Key Priorities for Vets and Their Families

**NEW YORK (February 26, 2014)** – The Senate today is considering critical legislation that would advance a number of key priorities for the veterans community, including providing additional advance funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), improving health care services, expanding educational and job opportunities, and helping the VA address the disability claims backlog. Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) called on the Senate to pass the veterans omnibus bill (S.1982), introduced by Senator Bernie Sanders, Chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.

“This bill is a game changer that will change the trajectory for millions of veterans for decades to come. This veterans omnibus bill includes a number of key bipartisan priorities for our community – strengthening veterans benefits, health care, education and employment,” said IAVA Founder and CEO Paul Rieckhoff. “In 2013, veterans were not immune from gridlock in Washington. This year has to be different. To support those who have sacrificed the most, we urge the Senate to pass this critical legislation.”

## **Among the critical provisions of S.1982:**

**Education:** Public institutions would be required to charge the in-state tuition rate for Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries while the individual is living in the state and enrolls in school within three years after separating from the military. A similar measure passed in the House last month by a vote of 390-0.

**Advance funding for VA:** The bill establishes advance appropriations for mandatory accounts within VA. This would protect key programs and services in the event of another government shutdown. Currently, only VA health care is funded one year in advance.

**Ending the VA disability claims backlog:** This bill would require VA to submit to Congress a quarterly report on the disability claims backlog, which currently stands at about 390,000. This report must be made public and include both reduction goals and actual production for original claims and appellate claims. S 1982 also requires VA to establish a two-year program to award grants to increase veterans’ awareness of benefits and services by improving the coordinated outreach efforts between federal, state, local and nonprofit organizations.

**Unemployment:** The bill reauthorizes for an additional two years the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program (VRAP), created by the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011. The bill also creates a new, unified, online employment portal containing information regarding all federal programs and activities concerning employment, unemployment and training resources for veterans.

**Survivor benefits:** For surviving spouses and their children, the bill puts forth an increase to monthly Disability Indemnity Compensation (DIC) payments for three years instead of the current two years, and survivors who remarry after the age of 55 would not be penalized with the loss of DIC, medical care or education benefits. This bill would also improve survivors' education benefits by expanding the Gunnery Sgt. John David Fry Scholarship program to include surviving spouses, and expand Yellow Ribbon Program eligibility to beneficiaries of Fry Scholarships.

**Health care:** S. 1982 extends the time in which Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are eligible to enroll in VA health care from five years to 10 years and also assists veterans suffering from reproductive issues, largely related to injuries suffered from IED blasts, in starting their families. The bill also extends military sexual trauma (MST) counseling and treatment to members of the Guard and Reserves while also making MST services available to active duty personnel at VA facilities.