

Key Veterans Bill Blocked by Senate Shenanigans

NEW YORK (February 27, 2014) – As a result of gridlock and dysfunction that has plagued the U.S. Senate for years, a critical veterans omnibus bill (S.1982) stalled today after Senate leaders engaged in procedural games. Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America strongly supported the bill, which would provide additional advance funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), improve health care services, expand educational and job opportunities, and help the VA address the disability claims backlog. IAVA today blasted Senate leaders for playing political games ahead of the interests of veterans and their families.

“Washington’s attacks on our veterans and their families continue. It has been a winter of discontent, starting when Congress cut military retirement benefits before being pressured into reversing course. Then earlier this week, Congress forced the Pentagon to make budget cuts that increased living costs for our servicemembers. And now the Senate can’t pass a critical and transformative bill that includes priorities that have garnered bipartisan support for years,” said IAVA Founder and CEO Paul Rieckhoff.

“Republicans blame Democrats. Democrats blame Republicans. And veterans are caught in the crossfire. Veterans don’t have time for this nonsense. And veterans are tired of being used as political chew toys. IAVA will be storming the Hill next month to demand Congress stop the attacks and put veterans ahead of petty politics. The leaders of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees must come together and set an agenda for 2014 or else we’ll have another year where Congress fails to support veterans,” Rieckhoff added.

The bill, introduced by Chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Bernie Sanders, received broad support from almost all Veterans Service Organizations. It includes a number of key provisions:

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 Dependency 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.