

**December 21, 2018**

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### **Urgent Plea to Pass Agent Orange Reform**

Senator Blumenthal (Conn.) requested a Unanimous Consent motion to bring the "Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act" (S.422) to the Senate floor for a final vote and sending it onto President Trump to be signed into law failed when Senator Mike Lee (Utah) objected. Earlier this week Senators Kirsten Gillibrand (N.Y.) and Steve Daines (Mont.), sponsors of the Senate version of the "Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act" (S.422), dispatched a letter to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (Ky.) requesting Senate floor time for a vote on the House version of the "Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act" (H.R.299) that passed the House unanimously in June. Previously a Unanimous Consent motion to bring the House bill (H.R.299) out of committee and voted on by the full Senate failed when Senator Michael Enzi (Wyo.) objected.

Director of Legislative Policy John Davis participated in a press conference, along with key members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, urging the Senate to pass H.R.299 before the session ends. Members are strongly urged to use [FRA Action Center](#) on the website to weigh in on this issue.

### **Partial Government Shutdown Looming**

As NewsBytes goes to press, Congress is facing the possibility of partial government shutdown at midnight on Friday, December 21, 2019. The Senate just passed a Continuing Resolution (CR) that will last until February 8, 2019 to avoid a partial government shutdown. The Department of Defense Authorization as well as Veterans Affairs and Defense Appropriations bills passed and have been signed into law. Since Defense and Veterans spending legislation has already been enacted, FRA members should not be impacted. The one exception would be the Department of Homeland Security that includes the U.S. Coast Guard. Coast Guard retirees will continue to receive benefits, but active duty guardsmen might have their pay delayed. They will be paid after the shutdown ends.

The major point of disagreement is funding for a border wall along the southern border of the country. In a recent meeting with House Minority Leader Rep. Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, President Trump vowed to have a partial government shutdown unless there was additional funding for the border wall. The Senate CR does not contain any funding for the border wall and the House leadership has indicated it will amend the CR to add funding for a border wall. President Trump indicated he will veto any CR without border wall funding.

## **SVAC & HVAC Review Implementation of MISSION Act**

Rep. Phil Roe, M.D. (Tenn.) and Sen. Johnny Isakson (Ga.) Chairmen of the House and Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, respectively, held a rare joint oversight hearing on of the Department of Veterans Affairs implementation of the VA MISSION Act. The VA MISSION Act (S.2372) was signed into law by President Trump on June 6, 2018 (P.L. 115-182). The FRA-supported bill will do the following:

- Expanding the VA Caregiver program to include all disabled veterans;
- Consolidating seven VA community care programs into one to improve access to care;
- Funding for the VA Choice program; and
- Auditing VA infrastructure.

The expansion of the VA Caregiver program to include all disabled veterans is a major victory for FRA. Currently the program is only available to veterans who were seriously disabled on or after September 11, 2001.

VA Secretary Robert Wilkie informed the committees on the progress the VA is making in implementing this important legislation.

## **President Visits Arlington Cemetery and Supports Expansion**

President Trump made an unscheduled visit to Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) on Saturday for a holiday commemoration. The President visited the cemetery during an annual event in which holiday wreaths are laid to honor the sacrifices made by veterans and their families.

The president was given a tour of the cemetery and as he walked through the rows of white tombstones, he told reporters that he supported a plan to expand the cemetery so it could continue to hold burials for decades to come. The issue of expanding ANC is being studied by the Advisory Committee on Arlington National Cemetery. The Commission is reviewing restrictions on burials at ANC, expansion or a combination of both.

This past year, FRA surveyed members on their thoughts and concerns regarding eligibility to be buried at ANC. A very large majority (92 percent) believes that ANC should pursue all possible options for acquiring additional land before making any eligibility restrictions. More than 67 percent want to reserve a set amount of space for Medal of Honor recipients and/or active duty deaths. ANC is managed by the Army and does not fall under the rules and regulations of veteran's cemeteries administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The Secretary of the Army will be presented the commission's recommendations and then decide by September 2019 on the best way to proceed.

## **FRA Headquarters Holiday Closures**

The FRA National Headquarters (NHQ) staff wishes everyone a Merry Christmas, a safe, joyous holiday and a very happy 2019! Our offices will be closed Monday December 24 thru Wednesday December 26 for Christmas, and will reopen on Thursday, December 27. NHQ will

also be closed Monday December 31, 2018 through Wednesday, January 2, 2019 in observance of New Year's Day. Due to the holiday schedule, the next edition of FRA Newsbytes will be Friday, January 4, 2019, unless legislative developments on Capitol Hill warrants it.