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Do Not Cut Military Health Care Staff

The FRA has signed onto a letter, with other like-minded organizations, to members of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees asking Congress to delay and closely review proposed cuts of nearly 18,000 military medical billets from the current 130,000. The Defense Department's fiscal 2020 budget calls for the elimination of about 18,000 military medical positions, and the FRA is concerned that such drastic cuts could impact access and quality of care for retirees, active duty members and their families. These proposed cuts could also impact combat casualty care capabilities. Many TRICARE Prime enrollees are already being pushed into the civilian healthcare network for all of their care.

The FRA wants to delay these cuts and urges Congress to review the possible negative consequences to such drastic cuts in staff. Members are urged to use the [Action Center](#) to ask their legislators to review these cuts and their possible impact on access and quality of care.



AOBWN Bill Discussed in Subcommittee

The House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs held a hearing on several legislative proposals including the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act (H.R.299). The sponsor of the bill, House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) Chairman Rep. Takano and HVAC Ranking Member Rep. Phil Roe pledged to pass the legislation in the near future and send it to the Senate. Last year,

similar legislation passed the House (382-0) in the last session of Congress and then stalled in the Senate committee. Reps. Roe and Takano vowed to work on getting the Senate to have a floor vote on this legislation after it passes the House.

In January, the Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit ruled 9-2 that blue water navy Vietnam veterans are eligible for benefits. The decision should pave the way for disability compensation for tens of thousands of veterans who served aboard ships off the coast of Vietnam during the conflict, but had been deemed ineligible for the same disability benefits as others who served on the ground and inland waterways. After asking for an extension last month, the Department of Justice now has less than 30 days to appeal the decision to the Supreme Court. The legislation will codify the ruling in the U.S. Code and was the first bill that Chairman Takano introduced this year as the new chairman of the committee.

Members are urged to use the [FRA Action Center](#) to ask their legislators to support the bills in the House and Senate, and ask the President to tell the Department of Justice not to appeal the court decision.

FRA Co-sponsors House Guard and Reserve Caucus Breakfast

As part of its strong support of Sea Services Reserve Component enlisted personnel, the FRA recently joined with other military and veterans' organizations in cosponsoring the House Guard and Reserve Caucus Breakfast on Capitol Hill. Rep. Steven Palazzo (Miss.), cochair of the bipartisan caucus, ran the meeting. USMCR Major Gen. Bradley James told the group the Marine Reserves appreciate the more predictable budget process and he mentioned that 2,100 Marine Corps Reservists are currently deployed. That number includes 754 individual augmentees assigned to other deployed units. USNR Vice Admiral Luke McCullum told the group 3,000 reserve sailors are currently deployed. He stated the Navy reserve has more than 100,000 members and is focused on aviation re-capitalization. The admiral stated that reservists must balance work, family and the navy. USCGR Rear Admiral Matthew Sibley told the caucus their top priority is to get to the authorized end strength of 7,500 guardsmen. He also mentioned there will be a new position created, Assistant Commandant for Reserves.

Top officials from the Army Reserve, Army National Guard, Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve also provided reports on the status of their organizations.

HVAC Hearing on Suicide

The House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC) held a hearing on veteran suicide due to four recent incidents of suicide on VA campuses - including one the night before the hearing in Cleveland, Ohio.

On average, twenty veterans commit suicide every day. That rate has remained largely the same since the late 1990's despite two decades of sincere effort from Administrations on both sides of the political spectrum. There have been substantial increases in funding, staffing, programs, attention and support for mental health care and suicide prevention inside as well as outside of the VA healthcare system. Since 2005 alone, funding for VA mental health care has increased 258 percent, to the most recent budget request and record high \$9.4 billion.

The House Veterans Affairs Health Subcommittee held a hearing the next day to discuss suicide prevention legislation that included allowing the VA to use cannabis on a trial basis for mental health treatment. It was noted that opioid overdose by veterans is more than twice the national average and that the VA has reduced opioid use by 22 percent. Subcommittee members argued that cannabis could be used in lieu of opioid use in some cases.