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**1. Legislative Wrap Up:** Last week, the Senate advanced three important bills including the VFW-supported S. 899, the *Veterans Providing Healthcare Transition Improvement Act*, which would ensure veterans who work for VA are able to attend medical appointments for service-connected health conditions within their first year of employment, without having to take unpaid leave. The Senate also passed H.R. 2147, the *Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act of 2018*, which would require VA to increase the number of Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists who assist justice-involved veterans in receiving the treatment they need, instead of being incarcerated for crimes that were associated with untreated or undertreated service-connected health conditions. Both S. 899 and H.R. 2147 have passed by the House and Senate and now head to the president's desk. The Senate also advanced H.R. 6157, which would provide appropriations for the Department of Defense to carry out its mission, including an additional \$10 million to enable the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency to identify the service members whose remains were recently returned by North Korea and reunite them with their loved ones — a mission the VFW fully supports.

**2. Veterans Committees Pressure VA to Conduct Cannabis Research:** Members of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs sent VA Secretary Robert Wilkie a letter urging him to use his current authority to conduct medical research into the safety and efficacy of medicinal cannabis. The letter highlighted conducting this research with a focus on veteran patients with post-traumatic stress disorder and chronic pain so providers can better understand the potential benefits or dangers of medicinal cannabis. The authors of the letter, Senators John Tester and Dan Sullivan, as well as Representatives Tim Walz and Phil Roe, have also introduced [H.R. 5520](#) and [S. 2796](#), the *VA Medicinal Cannabis Research Act of 2018*, which are

both supported by the VFW and would require VA to conduct such research. The letter also discusses that as more than half the country has legalized cannabis for medicinal or recreational use, veterans are legally obtaining it for medicinal purposes. “The veterans primarily get their health care from VA, but because of restrictive regulations, VA doctors are barred from recommending and, until recently, discussing, medicinal cannabis. The pervasive lack of research makes their jobs even more difficult, leaving VA clinicians flying blind, without concrete recommendations to provide veterans. VA doctors deserve to be fully informed about medicinal cannabis so that they can provide fact-based guidance to their patients.” [Read the letter.](#)

**3. VA Awards \$200M in Veteran Homelessness Assistance:** Thursday, VA announced plans to provide \$200 million in funding for the Grant and Per Diem Program (GPD) which supports homeless veterans. The funding is expected to support more than 13,000 beds for veterans in need across the country. Within the provided funding, \$2.7 million will be awarded to 12 special need-based grants that support homeless veterans with chronic mental illness, women veterans, and veterans taking care of minor dependents. The GPD program was established in 1994 to provide support and services to programs across the country taking care of homeless veterans in need of housing stability. [Read the article](#) or [learn more about VA’s homeless programs.](#)

**4. Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program to Expand:** VA is beginning the process of hiring more Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) counselors to help reduce the backlog of claims and wait times for users of this program. VR&E counselors are supposed to have a 1 to 125 counselor-to-case ratio, but the current ratio is much higher. The increased workload for counselors has led to delays in processing of VR&E claims and payments for the past few years. The VFW has long advocated for more money and more counselors in the VR&E system, and at the 119th VFW National Convention, VA Under Secretary for Benefits Dr. Paul Lawrence stated Vocational Rehabilitation would be one of his top priorities. The VFW is glad to see VA is finally addressing these concerns. This program currently has more than 120,000 participants, and hopefully the additional counselors will help veterans utilize this incredibly valuable program more effectively. [Learn more about VR&E and eligibility.](#)

**5. Army to Screen 40,000 Homes for Lead:** Following a Reuters report last week that found children living in Army housing faced a substantial risk of lead exposure, the Army announced this week that it will be conducting a review of approximately 40,000 on-post residences. The report highlighted medical findings showing that 31 children living in communities at Ft. Benning, Ga., suffered lead poisoning after being exposed to lead-based paint. The report also stated that in addition to homes at Ft. Benning, homes at Ft. Polk, Ft. Hood, Ft. Knox, Ft. Riley, and the United States Military Academy also tested dangerously high for lead. Additionally, between 2011 and 2016, more than 1,000 children living on post tested above the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s lead threshold level. At a press conference on Tuesday, Secretary of Defense James Mattis stated, “...this is a moral obligation we have to the families to provide safe lodging, obviously, for them. And it’s something we take very, very seriously.” [Read the report.](#)

**6. Report Finds Veterans Improperly Denied MST-related PTSD Claims:** VA’s Office of Inspector General (OIG) released a report that investigated denied disability claims for

posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related to military sexual trauma (MST). The findings concluded that the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) processed approximately 12,000 claims annually over the past three years for PTSD related to MST. In FY2017, VBA denied about 5,500 of those claims. The OIG review team sampled 169 denied claims and discovered 82 were incorrectly processed, which indicates an overall adjudication error rate of 49 percent. The incorrectly processed denial error projections were mostly found to be due to evidence submitted, VA not requesting adequate evidence, veterans submitting claims not being contacted by VA's MST coordinators, and insufficient medical opinions. "The Inspector General's report is very troubling," said VFW National Commander B.J. Lawrence in a [press statement](#). "The VA's own statistics show that suicide rates among military sexual assault victims are a growing problem, yet here we have VBA — which is the key to all things VA — incorrectly processing almost a quarter of all claims. That's failing our veterans." Veterans who submitted claims for PTSD related to MST and feel their claims were improperly denied may [contact the VFW](#) for claims assistance. [Read the report](#).

**7. Explosive Souvenirs are Unsafe:** Veterans sometimes unknowingly put themselves, their families, and neighbors in danger by keeping munitions as war souvenirs or keepsakes. Veterans and their families also incorrectly assume such munitions are safe because they are frequently handled or because the munitions are old. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) continues to be concerned with the type and number of military munitions they recover voluntarily each month from veterans and from the families of deceased veterans. The ATF reports about 50 recoveries every month of munitions ranging from hand grenades and smoke grenades to mortar rounds and landmines. No matter what you call them — souvenirs, war mementos, duds, or simulators — munitions are dangerous by design and should never be considered safe. This has led the Department of Defense to launch a new campaign against souvenir munitions and explosives called the 3Rs Explosives Safety Education Program, which instructs people to: **recognize** the danger souvenir munitions pose to yourself, your family and neighbors; **retreat**, do not disturb, touch, or move it; and **report**, call 911 and advise the police. [Read more about the 3Rs](#).

**8. V-J Day Commemoration:** Visitors to Washington, D.C. this weekend are invited to the National World War II Memorial on Sunday, Sept. 2, at 11 a.m., to mark the 73rd anniversary of Victory over Japan day, signally the end of WWII. For the commemoration, the Friends of the National World War II Memorial and the National Park Service will host a ceremony and wreath presentation at the World War II Memorial's Freedom Wall in remembrance of the more than 400,000 Americans and 60 million people killed worldwide during the deadliest military conflict in human history. Street and handicap parking are extremely limited, and the two closest Metro stations (Smithsonian and Federal Triangle) are about a half-mile away, but taxis are plentiful. [Read more information or RSVP](#).

**9. MIA Update:** This week, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced fifteen new identifications. Returning home with full military honors are:  
-- **Navy Cmdr. James B. Mills** was assigned to Fighter Squadron Twenty One, aboard the USS Coral Sea, where he served as an F-4B Radar Intercept Officer. On the night of Sept. 21, 1966, he departed on an armed reconnaissance mission over then-North Vietnam. During the mission, the other aircraft lost contact with Mills' aircraft, and his plane did not return to the ship. An

extensive search was conducted with negative results. Based on this information, Mills was declared missing in action. Interment services are pending. [Read about Mills.](#)

-- **Marine Corps Reserve Staff Sgt. Richard J. Murphy** was a member of 6th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, which landed at Red Beach, Saipan. Reports provide little information of what happened to Murphy after landing on Saipan, and he was declared missing in action as of June 15, 1944. On May 22, 1945, his status was amended to killed in action. Interment services are pending. [Read about Murphy.](#)

-- **Navy Reserve Pharmacist's Mate 3rd Class William H. Blancheri** was a member of Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force, which landed against stiff Japanese resistance on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll of the Gilbert Islands. Over several days of intense fighting at Tarawa, approximately 1,000 Marines and Sailors were killed and more than 2,000 were wounded. Blancheri died on the first day of the battle, Nov. 20, 1943. Interment services are pending. [Read about Blancheri.](#)

-- **Marine Corps Reserve Tech Sgt. Harry A. Carlsen** was a member of Company A, 2nd Amphibian Tractor Battalion, 2nd Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force, which landed against stiff Japanese resistance on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll of the Gilbert Islands. Over several days of intense fighting at Tarawa, approximately 1,000 Marines and Sailors were killed and more than 2,000 were wounded. Carlsen died on the first day of the battle, Nov. 20, 1943. Interment services are pending. [Read about Carlsen.](#)

-- **Marine Corps Capt. Lester A. Schade** was a member of Company I, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment. In April 1942, he was captured by enemy forces and held as a prisoner of war in the Philippine Islands. On Jan. 9, 1945, the prisoner transport ship he was aboard was attacked by American forces. Schade was listed as missing, but presumed dead as a result of the incident. Interment services are pending. [Read about Schade.](#)

-- **Navy Fire Controlman Edward J. Shelden** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Shelden. Interment services are pending. [Read about Shelden.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Wesley V. Jordan** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Jordan. Interment services are pending. [Read about Jordan.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Hale McKissack** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including McKissack. Interment services are pending. [Read about McKissack.](#)

-- **Navy Fireman 2nd Class Carl D. Dorr** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Dorr. Interment services are pending. [Read about Dorr.](#)

-- **Navy Machinist's Mate 2nd Class Archie T. Miles** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Miles. Interment services are pending. [Read about Miles.](#)

-- **Navy Fireman 1st Class Bert E. McKeeman** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo

hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including McKeeman. Interment services are pending. [Read about McKeeman.](#)

-- **Navy Fireman 1st Class Albert U. Kane** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Kane. Interment services are pending. [Read about Kane.](#)

-- **Navy Radioman 3rd Class Dante S. Tini** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Tini. Interment services are pending. [Read about Tini.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Richard L. Watson** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Watson. Interment services are pending. [Read about Watson.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 2nd Class Myron K. Lehman** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Lehman. Interment services are pending. [Read about Lehman.](#)

**To sign up new veterans' advocates, click here: <http://capwiz.com/vfw/mlm/signup.htm>.**

**As always, we want to hear your advocacy stories. To share your stories or photos with us, simply email them directly to [yfwac@vfw.org](mailto:yfwac@vfw.org).**