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**1. Search for New VA Secretary Continues:** The nominee to become the next secretary of Veterans Affairs, Rear Adm. Ronny Jackson, withdrew his name from consideration yesterday. VFW Executive Director Bob Wallace said whoever is selected next to lead the department must be a proven and effective leader with management experience, someone who will hold themselves as well as their staff accountable for their actions. “There are many challenges facing VA today, as well as great opportunities to further enhance the health care and benefits our nation’s veterans have earned,” he said. “The VFW looks forward to discussing issues and opportunities with the new nominee, who must be ready to meet those challenges on day one. We also hope for a swift and bi-partisan confirmation process,” he said. “Once confirmed, the VFW looks forward to working with him or her to ensure VA remains the gold standard for veterans health care and the delivery of benefits. Our nation’s veterans deserve and will accept nothing less.”

**2. VFW Testifies on VA Life Insurance Programs:** The VFW testified on Wednesday before the House Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs with regard to four life insurance programs managed by VA. VFW National Legislative Service Associate Director Ken Wiseman offered the VFW’s recommendations to improve Servicemembers’ Group Life Insurance (SGLI), the SGLI Traumatic Injury Protection Program, Veterans Group Life Insurance, and Service-Disabled Veterans Insurance by expanding enrollment periods, increasing coverage amounts and protecting those who use the programs.

The consensus of the committee members is that transitioning service members likely do not have life insurance on their minds when leaving military service, so longer enrollment periods and better information on available programs may help veterans make this important decision about getting coverage. [Watch the hearing](#) or [read the testimony](#).

**3. VFW Attends Medical Cannabis Research Roundtable:** On Thursday, VFW National Legislative Service Associate Director Kayda Keleher took part in a roundtable discussion on medical cannabis research with the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. In attendance were committee Ranking Member Tim Walz and Representatives Lou Correa and Earl Blumenauer, who jointly introduced VFW-supported H.R. 5520, *VA Medicinal Cannabis Research Act of 2018*. H.R. 5520 is cosponsored by Chairman Phil Roe and 36 additional members of Congress. The discussion focused on what type of research veterans would like to see VA conduct, how such research should be conducted and the next steps to assure VA is able to conduct the research. "This legislation would open the door to understanding the effects and interactions of medical marijuana, and pave the way to improve the quality of veterans' lives. The VFW applauds Ranking Member Walz, Chairman Roe and Congressman Correa for listening to the voices of veterans, and for clearing the way for this crucially needed research to ensure VA providers continue leading from the front in medical knowledge and care provided," said VFW Executive Director Bob Wallace. [Read the bill text](#) or [the VFW's testimony](#).

**4. TRICARE West Referral Backlog:** Health Net Federal Services (HNFS) is experiencing a large backlog in processing referrals and authorizations. This backlog was caused by many issues, including duplicate and incomplete submissions from providers. Currently, only medically urgent requests receive priority in processing, however, the Defense Health Agency is allowing HNFS to waive its usual authorization process for TRICARE Prime referrals in the West Region. If you get a referral from your provider, you can download a referral/authorization waiver letter, then seek specialty care covered by TRICARE. Prior authorization is still required for inpatient, applied behavior analysis, laboratory-developed test and Extended Health Care Option services. Additionally, HNFS is working to process all requests within TRICARE standards by extending operating hours and adding staff. Simplified TRICARE urgent care guidelines allow most beneficiaries to seek urgent care without a referral or visit limits. [Download the referral/authorization letter](#).

**5. Student Loan Discharges for Disabled Veterans Made Easier:** Last week the Department of Education and VA teamed up to simplify the loan discharge program for disabled veterans. Currently, veterans who are eligible for Total and Permanent Disability can apply to have their federal student loans forgiven, but not enough people know about this opportunity. The new process will involve information sharing between the two departments in order to proactively identify and reach out to eligible veterans. U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos said, "Simplifying the loan forgiveness process and proactively identifying veterans with federal student loans who may be eligible for a discharge is a small but critical way we can show our gratitude for veterans' service." The VFW applauds Secretary DeVos for this new approach to inform veterans about the benefits they have earned. [Learn more](#) about the program and eligibility requirements.

**6. Armed Forces Retirement Home Fee Increase:** Many residents of the Armed Forces Retirement Home (AFRH) located in Gulfport, Miss., and Washington, D.C., will see a fee increase in their monthly rates beginning on Oct. 1. The increase is the result of one of many steps being taken to address recent funding shortfalls which have threatened the AFRH's continued operation. In addition to raising residential fees for those living in "Independent Living" and "Independent Living Plus" units, AFRH will also be leasing excess land at the Washington, D.C., property and ending financial support to the AFRH golf course. In light of this, the VFW has been in direct contact with the Department of Defense (DOD) to request a meeting with both DOD and AFRH senior leadership to express our concerns. Check the Action Corps Weekly for updates as they become available.

**7. Spirit of the Elbe Commemoration:** The VFW was in attendance at a wreath-laying ceremony this week at "The Spirit of the Elbe" marker in Section 7A of Arlington National Cemetery. The marker reads, "In recognition of the cooperation by American, Soviet and Allied armed forces during World War II. This marker symbolizes the link up of Soviet and American elements at the Elbe River on 25 April 1945. In tribute to the partnership in the battle against tyranny." Event hosts were the U.S. State Department, the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIA Affairs, the Russian Ambassador to the U.S., and representatives from more than a half dozen former Soviet Bloc countries.

**8. Protecting Veterans Against Fraud:** The U.S. Postal Inspection Service and the AARP Fraud Watch Network recently launched Operation Protect Veterans — a nationwide campaign to warn our military and veterans about scams and fraud schemes that target them. A recent survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago showed that 16 percent of U.S. veterans have lost money to fraudsters, compared to 8 percent of nonveterans. More worrisome is 80 percent of respondents reported being targeted by scams directly related to their military service or the veterans' benefits they receive. A major component of the Operation Protect Veterans campaign includes distributing printed brochures at more than 37,000 post offices to warn veterans about the scams. These brochures will also be available at the VFW National Convention in Kansas City, Mo., this July. VFW Posts that would like additional brochures to distribute to their members can order quantities of 150 or more by sending requests directly to [protectveterans@aarp.org](mailto:protectveterans@aarp.org). Please include the quantity you need and a valid mailing address. Shipping is free.

**9. Hearing on National Defense Strategy and Budget Request:** On Thursday, the Senate Committee on Armed Services held a hearing to discuss DOD's [2018 National Defense Strategy](#) and [Fiscal Year 2019 Budget Request](#). Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Joseph F. Dunford discussed how the recent Bipartisan Budget Agreement has enabled DOD to regain its competitive advantage and properly defend our nation, but a return to sequestration would erode such progress and endanger our national security. Secretary Mattis also discussed his priorities to build a more lethal force, strengthen alliances and build new partnerships, and reform the department's business practices for performance and affordability. [Watch the hearing](#), which starts at the 14-minute mark.

**10. VA Nominations Approved by the Senate:** On Thursday, the Senate approved two VA nominations. Dr. Paul R. Lawrence was approved to serve as under secretary for benefits and Joseph L. Falvey Jr., to serve as a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims.

**11. Possible Peace in Korea:** It is far too early to address this week's historic meeting between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, but one thing is sure — the possibility of peace on the peninsula will hopefully enable the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency to reenter North Korea, where DPAA has not operated since 2005 due principally to safety and security concerns. More than two-thirds of the 7,704 American servicemen listed as missing and unaccounted-for from that war are in North Korean-controlled territory, with many buried in mass graves. The potential to recover and return our fallen to their families is enormous, and that is a message the VFW will carry to Congress which will need to appropriate additional funding to support the new mission requirements.

**12. MIA Update:** The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency has announced identification and burial updates for four American service members who had been missing in action from WWII. Returning home for burial with full military honors are:

-- **Navy Fireman 2nd Class John D. Wheeler**, 26, of Gaither, Ark., whose identification was previously announced, will be buried April 28 in Harrison, Ark. Wheeler was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. Wheeler was one of 429 crewmen killed in the attack. [Read about Wheeler.](#)

-- **Navy Reserve Lt. William Q. Punnell**, 27, of Flandreau, S.D., whose identification was previously announced, will be buried May 2 in Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington, D.C. Punnell was the acting commanding officer of the VF-14 Fighter Squadron, operating from the aircraft carrier USS Wasp. On July 25, 1944, Punnell flew his F6F-3 "Hellcat" with several other aircraft on a strafing mission against Japanese targets on the islands of the Republic of Palau. Punnell was in the lead position when the tail of his aircraft took a direct hit from anti-aircraft fire. His fellow pilots witnessed his plane crash into the water and immediately sink with no bailout reported. Interment services are pending. [Read about Punnell.](#)

-- **Navy Aviation Machinist's Mate 2nd Class Durell Wade** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. Wade was one of 429 crewmen killed in the attack. Interment services are pending. [Read about Wade.](#)

-- **Navy Water Tender 1st Class Stephen Pepe** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. Pepe was one of 429 crewmen killed in the attack. Interment services are pending. [Read about Pepe.](#)

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 [vfwac@vfw.org](mailto:vfwac@vfw.org).