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1. New Appeals Process Launched This Week: On Tuesday, VFW Washington Office Executive Director Bob Wallace, National Veterans Service Director Ryan Gallucci, Training & Quality Assurance Manager Lauren Barefoot, and Retired National Veterans Service Director Jerry Manar joined senior VA officials at VA central office for the kickoff of the new and improved appeals process. Starting this week, all veterans who disagree with their VA rating decision will have three new options to resolve their benefit disputes: request a higher-level review from a more experienced person, submit a supplemental claim with additional evidence, or appeal directly to the Board of Veterans' Appeals. Over the past four years, Mr. Manar and Ms. Barefoot have represented the VFW in negotiations with Congress, VA, and other veterans organizations to craft this new framework. The goal of the new process is to offer veterans greater flexibility and transparency to resolve benefit disputes in a timely manner, instead of waiting years for VA to adjudicate their appeals. The VFW will monitor the implementation and work with VA to resolve any issues that come up. [Read more](#) about appeals modernization. For assistance appealing a decision on your benefits claim, [contact a highly trained and accredited VFW Service Officer](#).

2. VFW Launches Mobile App Ahead of 2019 Legislative Conference: The 2019 VFW Legislative Conference is a week away. The VFW has designed a new mobile event app to give attendees the tools needed to make the most out of attending VFW national events. The new VFW Events app allows for attendees of the VFW's Legislative Conference and National Convention to receive important notifications and reminders throughout the events, have instant access to the daily agenda, the opportunity to connect with other attendees and more. The new VFW Events app is available for download at both the [Apple App Store](#) and the [Google Play Store](#) by searching VFW Events. Users who don't have a smart phone or tablet can also access the app [here](#).

3. DOD 2017 Spouse Survey Release: On Thursday, VFW Director of National Security and Foreign Affairs John Towles joined MilitaryOneSource and senior DOD officials to discuss the results of the 2017 Spouse Survey. The target population for the survey consisted of spouses of

active duty members of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force, including spouses of National Guard and Reserve members, who have at least six months of service and were below flag or general officer rank. The survey found that the majority of military spouses are satisfied with military life overall; however, this has declined slightly compared to the results from the 2012 and 2016 surveys. Additionally, it found that approximately 24 percent of military spouses are unemployed due primarily to barriers such as frequent permanent change of station moves, diminished access to child care, and the need to acquire state-specific licensure. [Read the results](#) of this year's survey and past surveys.

4. DOD to Begin Water Contamination Study: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in conjunction with the Department of Defense, announced this week that it will begin a formal review of water contamination on military bases in the coming months and is expected to continue through 2020. This initial study will specifically look at the levels of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in 10 affected locations. PFAS are chemicals that were used in firefighting foam on bases and are also present in many household products. PFAS have been linked to various cancers and developmental delays for babies and children. This study comes in the wake of a Pentagon report released last year that found dozens of DOD installations and surrounding communities had PFAS contaminated groundwater and well water. Sites being reviewed during the study include: Naval Air Warfare Center Warminster, Francis S. Gabreski Air National Guard Base, Shepherd Field Air National Guard Base, Peterson Air Force Base, Eielson Air Force Base, Barnes Air National Guard Base, Reese Technology Center, Stewart Air National Guard Base, New Castle Air National Guard Base, and Fairchild Air Force Base. [Learn more](#) about the Pentagon review of groundwater contamination.

5. Bill to Increase Veterans in Infrastructure Introduced: Senators Gary Peters and John Cornyn recently introduced S. 492, the *Disabled-Veterans Rebuilding Infrastructure to Vitalize our Economy (DRIVE) Act*, which would create a goal that five percent of the federal funding for infrastructure projects be granted to service-connected disabled veteran owned small businesses (SDVOSBs). The VFW-supported *DRIVE Act* would increase SDVOSB's ability to compete for infrastructure contracts. [Read more](#) about the *DRIVE Act*.

6. Coast Guard to Build New Heavy Icebreakers: Congress has restored funding for the Coast Guard to begin building its first new heavy icebreaker in 40 years. The funding was part of the \$333 billion spending bill the president signed last week, according to an article in Stars and Stripes. The Coast Guard will receive \$655 million to begin building an icebreaker to replace the aging Polar Star — its only working heavy icebreaker — and \$20 million more to begin buying materials for a second such vessel. “With the support of the administration and Congress, we plan to build a new fleet of six polar icebreakers — at least three of which must be heavy icebreakers — and we need the first new Polar Security Cutter immediately to meet America’s needs in the Arctic,” the Coast Guard said in a statement to USNI News. The Coast Guard has one operational heavy icebreaker and one that is inoperative. The service also has a medium icebreaker and a research vessel with light ice-breaking ability. This fleet is miniscule compared to Russia’s 40 icebreakers. Even China, which aims to create an Arctic trade route known as the “polar silk road,” has two heavy icebreakers and plans to acquire more. [Read the Stripes article here.](#)

7. MIA Update: The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency did not announce any identifications or recovery updates this week.

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.