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1. Veterans Education Roundtable: The House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity hosted a roundtable discussion about modernizing veterans' education benefits. The VFW along with other Veteran Service Organizations, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the National Association of State Approving Agencies, and various universities and technology companies such as Microsoft, discussed ways to assist transitioning veterans to find high-demand employment opportunities. Schools in attendance addressed concerns with learning modules for non-traditional students, such as providing hybrid courses. The VFW and other VSOs talked about opportunities, concerns and the proper route that courses, such as computer coding, are required to undergo for accreditation and federal funding. Overall, the consensus was that employment training and higher education are evolving.

2. Caregiver Benefits Legislation Introduced: Legislation was introduced this week in both chambers of Congress that would expand caregiver benefits to veterans who served before September 11, 2001. *The Military and Veteran Caregiver Services Improvement Act* has received bipartisan support in the Senate from sponsors Senators Susan Collins, R-Maine, and Patty Murray, D-Wash., both of whom have received the VFW's Congressional Award. The bill has already received 25 bipartisan co-sponsors in the House. Additionally, Secretary of Veterans Affairs David J. Shulkin expressed support this week for the expansion of the program. This legislation is a major priority for the VFW and its Auxiliary. We will continue to monitor this legislation closely. Follow the Action Corps Weekly for more updates.

3. HVAC Hearing on Future of Choice Program: On Tuesday, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs held a hearing to discuss the status of the Choice Program and how to improve the way VA provides private sector care to veterans. Secretary of Veterans Affairs David J. Shulkin testified that VA is making improvements to the Choice Program, which would streamline veterans' experience when receiving care from private sector doctors. Committee members discussed a number of ways to improve and expand VA's use of private sector doctors to care for veterans. VFW Legislative Director Carlos Fuentes submitted testimony urging that Congress ensure VA continues to serve as the coordinator of care for veterans and to make certain private sector doctors understand their unique health care needs. Secretary Shulkin echoed the VFW's views by saying his goal is to ensure private sector doctors are trained on how to care for veterans. [Read the testimony or view the webcast.](#)

4. Location for Gulf War National Memorial Approved: The Senate passed a joint resolution on Wednesday which would authorize a national memorial dedicated to those who served in the campaign that liberated Kuwait from an Iraqi invasion to be built on the National Mall. The House passed its version of the language in January and the VFW has committed \$500,000 to support the construction. [Read the Senate's joint resolution.](#)

5. VA Mental Health Care for Vets with OTH Discharges: During a hearing before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs on Tuesday, Secretary of Veterans Affairs David J. Shulkin announced that VA will no longer turn away veterans seeking urgent mental health care simply because they received other-than-honorable discharges. VA plans to implement the new rule later this year. [Read more on the initiative.](#)

6. VA Offers Free Services for MST: The Department of Veterans Affairs provides free physical and mental health care services for survivors of sexual trauma regardless of service-connected disability. VA is providing outreach to men and women who may be experiencing difficulty coping to let them know that VA and Vet Centers are options for help. According to Kayla Williams, director for VA's Center for Women Veterans, "VA provides all care for mental and physical health conditions related to MST free of charge, and veterans do not need to have reported their experiences of MST at the time or have other documentation that they occurred in order to receive free MST-related health care..." [Read more here.](#)

7. HVAC Advances Five Important Veterans Bills: On Wednesday, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs held a markup to consider five bills, all of which the VFW supports. The committee deliberated and advanced a bill to give the Secretary of Veterans Affairs increased authority to hold VA employees accountable for wrongdoing and poor performance. The committee also voted to protect veterans' second amendment rights and destigmatize mental health care by ensuring veterans who seek VA mental health care and require the assistance of others to manage finances are not reported to the no-sell list without proper due process. Also advanced is a bill to remove the secondary payer requirements under the Choice Program, so veterans no longer receive bills from Choice providers simply because they are covered by private health insurance. The bill would also prolong the program by authorizing VA to use funds that are due to expire in August 2017. The committee also moved a bill that would provide full Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to veterans who have earned the Purple Heart, but were unable to complete 36 months of active duty. All five bills await consideration by the full House, which is

scheduled to consider the accountability bill and other veterans' bills next week. [View a webcast of the markup.](#)

8. Military Quality of Life Hearing: On Wednesday, the senior enlisted members for the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force testified before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans' Affairs about military quality of life. The services highlighted new and expanded programs designed to support service members and their families, while also mentioning key challenges. Significant topics all included sequestration's impact on infrastructure maintenance and modernization, as well as compensation instability and uncertainty — specifically the possible change to a single-salary pay system and the implementation of the new blended retirement system. Additional discussion focused on the ongoing investigation into a Facebook group dedicated to exploiting and harassing female service members. [Read testimony and view the hearing.](#)

9. FY2017 Defense Funding Bill Passes House: On Wednesday, the House passed the Defense Appropriations Bill, which would fund the Department of Defense for the remainder of fiscal year 2017. DOD is currently operating under a continuing resolution which has significantly impacted its ability to operate because it limits its ability to implement new programs and properly plan deployment cycles. The House-passed bill would provide DOD with \$577.9 billion, which is an increase of \$5.2 billion over the fiscal year 2016 enacted level and \$1.6 billion more than the Obama administration's request. The bill now heads to the Senate. The current continuing resolution is set to expire on April 28, 2017.

10. MIA Update: The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced the identification of remains of seven Americans who had been missing in action from WWII, Korea, and Vietnam. Returning home for burial with full military honors are:

-- **Army Cpl. Gerald I. Shepler**, 20, of Liberty, Ind., will be buried March 11 in Liberty. Shepler was the lead scout on a reconnaissance patrol for Company K, 3rd Battalion, 187th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division, near Hajoyang-ni, North Korea, when his patrol was ambushed by enemy forces. Shepler was unaccounted for after the mission, and the U.S. Army declared him deceased on Nov. 29, 1950. [Read more about Shepler.](#)

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

-- **Army Air Forces Pvt. William D. Gruber** was assigned to the Philippine Department, U.S. Army Forces in the Far East, when Japanese forces invaded the Philippine Islands on Dec. 8, 1941. Gruber and his unit tended to the wounded until the U.S. fortress of Corregidor fell on May 6, 1942. Gruber was among the thousands of U.S. and Filipino service members taken captive and forced to endure the Bataan Death March en route to prisoner of war camps. Gruber was eventually moved to Cabanatuan POW camp on the island of Luzon, where more than 2,500 POWs would perish. Interment services are pending. [Read more about Gruber.](#)

-- **Army Air Forces 1st Lt. Robert E. Oxford** was a member of the 425th Bomber Squadron, 308th Bomb Group, 14th Air Force. On Jan. 25, 1944, Oxford's B-24J Liberator disappeared in bad weather while flying a supply mission from Kunming, China to Chabua, India. Without a

way to determine the loss location, no search efforts were conducted and all aboard were declared deceased the following day. Interment services are pending. [Read more about Oxford.](#)

-- **Army Pfc. Manuel M. Quintana** was a member of Company K, 3rd Battalion, 29th Infantry Regiment. In late July 1950, the regiment unexpectedly encountered enemy forces while moving toward Hadong, in present day South Korea. Following the battle, Quintana could not be accounted for and was declared missing in action as of July 27, 1950. Interment services are pending. [Read more about Quintana.](#)

-- **Army Sgt. Willie Rowe** was a member of L Company, 3rd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division. On Nov. 25, 1950, his unit was attacked by Chinese forces while advancing north towards the Ch'ongch'on River region of North Korea. Following the battle, Rowe was unaccounted for and was declared missing. Interment services are pending. [Read more about Rowe.](#)

-- **Air Force Reserve Capt. Daniel W. Thomas** was an OV-10A pilot. On July 6, 1971, Thomas and his fellow crewmember were flying over Laos in support of an eight-man Special Forces reconnaissance team when they crashed due to bad weather. Interment services are pending. [Read more about Thomas.](#)

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.