



December 18, 2020

*\*This is the last edition of the Action Corps Weekly of 2020. The next edition will be on Monday, January 11, 2021. We wish you a wonderful holiday season!\**

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**1. Congress Listens and Keeps Agent Orange Provision in NDAA:** The Senate passed the final version of the NDAA which included the Agent Orange presumptive conditions, already passed by the House, which now heads to the president for signature. The VFW wishes to thank our members and advocates who responded to the VFW Action Alert last month and contacted their members of Congress regarding this very important provision. “The VFW commends the Senate and House Armed Services Committees conferees of the *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (NDAA)* for including Senate Amendment 1972 in the final version of the bill. We thank Senator Tester for introducing this important amendment which will finally add bladder cancer, hypothyroidism, and parkinsonism to the list of Department of Veterans Affairs presumptive conditions for herbicide exposure,” said VFW National Commander Hal Roesch. “We urge President Trump to sign the NDAA into law and provide our Vietnam veterans the long-awaited care and benefits they deserve.”

**2. Congress Passes Significant Veterans' Legislation Package:** On Wednesday, the House passed its final vote on passage of [H.R. 7105](#), *Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020*, which passed the Senate earlier this month and now heads to the president for signature. This legislation includes several VFW-supported bills that were pending in the 116th Congress.

- Most notably the *Deborah Sampson Act*, which would break the cultural barriers impacting women veterans by requiring VA to address privacy concerns and improve access, expand the amount of time new mothers are given to find health care coverage for their newborns, increase staff cultural competency, eliminate harassment and assault, and make other much-needed improvements to women veterans' health care. This forward-looking focus legislation would also examine outcomes to women veterans' services by requiring studies and reports on barriers to receipt of care, gap analysis on services for homeless women veterans, the availability of prosthetics for women, and other topics.

- Would require VA to make Disability Benefits Questionnaires available for public use, again.
- Would lower the age from 57 to 55 to remarry without incurring penalties for surviving spouses receiving Dependency and Indemnity Compensation
- Would modernize the Service-Disabled Veterans Insurance (SDVI) program.
- Would require VA to study incidents of cancer and other illnesses experienced by service members who served at the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Air Base in Uzbekistan between Oct. 1, 2001, and Sept. 30, 2005.
- Would change the statutory definition of Vietnam veteran to include individuals who served in the Republic of Vietnam from Nov. 1, 1955, to Feb. 27, 1961.
- Would increase certain veteran funeral benefits and authorize VA to add spouses and eligible dependent children to VA-furnished headstones.
- Would increase from \$5 million to \$10 million the maximum amount VA may grant in a fiscal year to states and tribal organizations for maintaining veterans' cemeteries.
- Would call for the elimination of the 12-year limit on using Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) benefits.
- Would require VA to create a database on its website to explain public institution requirements for in-state tuition.
- Would expand benefits and services for homeless veterans.
- Would create certain education, employment, and housing protections for veterans impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The passage of this veterans' legislation package satisfies a number of VFW resolutions and legislative priorities regarding women veterans' health care, disability assistance and memorial affairs, and economic opportunity issues.

**3. VA Releases COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Plan:** VA has announced publication of the [VA COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Plan](#). VA began vaccinating veterans and frontline employees this week after the authorization was given for the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine. The plan includes a prioritization for identifying those who are at highest risk, and addresses vaccinations for veterans, staff, and other federal partners in the U.S., Puerto Rico, and U.S. territories where VA provides health care to veterans. [Learn more](#).

**4. VA Launches New Single Access Phone Number:** VA announced a new phone number to access all VA services. 1.800.MyVA411 (1.800.698.2411) is available 24 hours-a-day, 365 days-a-year, to serve veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. Callers have the option of pressing 0 immediately to be connected with a customer service agent. The Veterans Crisis Line (1.800.273.8255) and the White House VA Hotline (1.855.948.2311) will still be available at their current numbers. [Read more](#).

**5. AT&T Added to VA Video Connect Telehealth Program:** Veterans using the [VA Video Connect](#) app on their mobile phones through AT&T's cellular network will no longer incur data charges when using this video telehealth technology. AT&T joins T-Mobile, TracFone by Safelink, and Verizon in allowing veterans the ability to video conference with their VA care providers on their smartphones, tablets or computer from any location with an internet

connection. The agreement is part of VA's Anywhere to Anywhere initiative ensuring veterans have the best telehealth experiences. [Learn more.](#)

**6. Online Christmas Concert for WWII Veterans:** 2020 marks the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Netherlands following the German occupation during World War II. Ninety young singers of the Haarlem Choir School in The Netherlands intended to travel to the United States during their spring break on a *Thank You* tour to honor U.S. veterans for their important role in the liberation. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the tour cannot take place. In an effort to still show their appreciation, a special online Christmas concert will be streamed from the Cathedral of Saint Bavo in Haarlem, including the entire Cathedral Choir to honor U.S. veterans. This unique and short program can be viewed live on YouTube on Sunday, Dec. 20, 2020, at 1 p.m. EST. [Watch the concert.](#)

**7. MIA Update:** The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced two new identifications and three burial updates for service members who have been missing and unaccounted-for from World War II and Korea. Returning home for burial with full military honors are:

-- **U.S. Navy Fireman 1st Class Paul E. Saylor**, 21, was assigned to the battleship USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The USS Oklahoma sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Saylor. Interment services are pending. [Read about Saylor.](#)

-- **Army Pvt. Hillary Soileau**, 23, was a member of Company F, 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, when American forces went on the offensive to clear Guadalcanal of Japanese Forces. Soileau was wounded on Jan. 14, 1943, during fighting on a group of hills nicknamed Galloping Horse. Following the battle, he could not be found. Soileau was declared missing in action on Feb. 3, 1943, and officially declared killed in action on Dec. 13, 1945. Interment services are pending. [Read about Soileau.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 2nd Class Charles A. Jones**, 21, of Harvard, Nebraska, was assigned to the battleship USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The USS Oklahoma sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Jones. Jones will be buried in his hometown. The date is yet to be determined. [Read about Jones.](#)

-- **Marine Corps Cpl. Elmer E. Drefahl**, 22, of Milwaukee, was assigned to the battleship USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The USS Oklahoma sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Drefahl. The date and location for Drefahl's burial have yet to be determined by the family. [Read about Drefahl.](#)

-- **Army Sgt. Billy V. Rodgers**, 19, was a member of Company A, 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 31st Regimental Combat Team, 7th Infantry Division. He was reported missing in action on Dec. 2, 1950, when his unit was attacked by enemy forces near the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea. Following the battle, his remains could not be recovered. Rodgers will be buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia. The date has yet to be determined. [Read about Rodgers.](#)

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