House Passes MILCON and VA Appropriations Bill

Members of the House of Representatives passed the fiscal year (FY) 2009 Defense Military Construction and VA Appropriations Bill, the only one of 12 FY 2009 spending bills to pass during this session of Congress. The bill totals $118.7 billion for mandatory spending, veterans programs, military construction (MILCON) and base closings.

The measure contains $72.7 billion in discretionary spending. It allocates $24.8 billion ($400 million above the administration’s request) in discretionary spending for military construction, including $9.1 billion to cover Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission recommendations and $3.2 billion for military family housing. Discretionary funds also include $47.7 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs next year, which is $2.9 billion above the administration’s request. Most of the increase—$1.6 billion—is to fund prostheses, caseworkers and medical research to improve health-care facilities and treatment for veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Senate Appropriations Committee approved its own version of the measure in July, and the full Senate is expected to vote on the bill in September. The White House issued a statement that questioned the priorities of the bill and reproved Congress for exceeding the President’s spending levels and including expensive earmarks. President Bush has vowed to veto any FY 2009 spending measures that are not reduced to cover the higher cost of the MILCON and VA appropriations bill.

VA Fails to Inform Guard and Reserve. A report issued by the Inspector General of the Department of Veterans Affairs reveals that the VA is not meeting its clear legal obligation to inform new veterans of the benefits they may have earned through their service. In 2006, the VA did not deliver individual notices of possible benefits to 65,853 (33 percent) of 198,128 veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Due to incorrect ineligibility determinations, nearly 37,000 National Guard and Reserve veterans were among those not notified.

In response to that finding, chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Sen. Daniel Akaka (D-HI), held a public oversight hearing. He said he found it especially alarming “that Guard and Reserve veterans made up over half of those uninformed, even though they compose only about a quarter of servicemembers deployed.”

“Unlike their active duty counterparts,” Sen. Akaka pointed out, “Guard and Reserve veterans continuously transition between military and civilian life. In civilian communities, veterans of the Guard and Reserve, and their families, do not have access to the kind of support available in military communities. VA needs [specific] strategies to fill this gap.”

At the hearing, a panel of witnesses that included reserve component commanders and military and civilian mental-health officials made recommendations. Among them:

- The VA and DoD do not need to be the only source of care; care should be supplemented by building a large civilian network that is willing to help.
- The VA needs more experienced mental-health providers to provide group and individualized care for veterans and their families.
- The VA and DoD need to educate the American public
that many servicemembers are experiencing normal reactions to operational stress or combat—their reactions are not always related to post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury—and they need services outside the medical community to help them deal with depression, anger management, finances, grief and relationships.

- The VA must reach out to veterans on their own terms by using age- and population-appropriate media and services.

**House Favors Stop-Loss Stipend.** The House Appropriations Committee’s defense subcommittee approved a retroactive bonus to about 160,000 troops who were required to stay in the military beyond their enlistment time. The estimated 12,000 troops currently in that situation would also qualify for the benefit. The measure, which will cost about $600 million, would award an extra $500 a month to troops whose military service was involuntarily extended by the “stop-loss” policy.

According to the subcommittee staff, more than 120,000 soldiers whose separations or retirements were delayed by stop-loss orders since October 2001 would receive retroactive payments. Of that number, 61,500 were active duty soldiers, 43,600 were in the Army National Guard and 15,200 were in the Army Reserve. Army spokeswoman Lt. Col. Anne Edgecomb noted that 97 percent of the soldiers who have come under the stop-loss orders were E-5 and below. Most are believed to have left the military and would have to be located. Aides said the average time soldiers were kept in the military past their enlistment is seven months; the average payment would be $3,500 per person.

Army officials anticipate that the stop-loss stipend would be made as a lump sum payment. If a soldier who is stop-lossed decides to reenlist, his stipend would likely stop, but he would not be required to repay any stop-loss money he had already received. The retroactive payment would be tax-free for each month the soldier was in a combat zone and would be taxable for any month he served under stop-loss orders outside a combat zone. Soldiers receiving payments would have to file amended tax returns.

The stop-loss allowance is part of a $487.7 billion fiscal year 2009 Defense Appropriation Bill that cleared the House of Representatives subcommittee before Congress adjourned for a five-week recess. The bill also contains a 3.9 percent pay increase for the military on January 1, $1.4 billion for troop facility and barracks repairs, $3.6 billion for Future Combat Systems, and $1 billion for the National Guard and Reserve.

The Senate has not marked up its version of the spending bill. Once Congress returns on September 8, its members will have only three weeks to pass the defense spending bill and send it to President Bush before the targeted adjournment date in early October.

**Lt. Gen. Blum to NORTHCOM.** In a press briefing at the Pentagon in July, Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates recommended that President Bush

In recommending Gen. Blum, Secretary Gates noted that for more than five years he “has been a dynamic and effective leader of America’s National Guard community during a time of wrenching change for our citizen-soldiers. As chief, he has been a tireless advocate for America’s guardsmen and women, to see that they receive the right training, equipment and support for the demanding range of missions the Guard has taken on since September 11 and will face in the years to come.”

The elevation of Generals Blum and McKinley, if they are nominated and confirmed, is in keeping with the recommendations of the Commission on the National Guard and Reserves—made law as part of the fiscal year 2008 National Defense Authorization Act—that the chief of the National Guard be a four-star position and that the commander or deputy commander of Northern Command be a National Guard officer. Senate confirmation would set two historic precedents—the first four-star general in National Guard history and the first National Guard deputy commander of Northern Command.

**Suicide Hotline.** The government’s suicide prevention hotline for veterans, launched last summer by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in collaboration with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), has fielded more than 22,000 calls from former servicemembers and another 30,000 from concerned family members in its first year of operation.

The hotline is an extension of the federal National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK. When veterans or those calling about a veteran dial that number, they are directed to press one for more assistance. The caller is then automatically connected to a VA-operated call center staffed by 40 trained professional crisis workers with specific knowledge of military issues and resources. One-third of the counselors are veterans themselves. The service is available 24 hours a day, and all calls are confidential and free from stateside locations.

Among the specialized services the veterans hotline provides is referral to the veteran’s local VA suicide prevention coordinator for follow-up and monitoring. When call volume exceeds the capacity of the VA-operated call center, calls are automatically routed to one of five backup crisis centers within SAMHSA’s National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

Officials behind the suicide prevention effort see the high number of calls as an indicator that veterans are receiving needed help. The VA is planning to double its suicide prevention staff soon with the hiring of more than 200 employees. In coming months, the VA hopes to expand the resources available to veterans through the hotline service. For more information, visit [http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/).