

NATIONAL ECONOMIC COMMISSION

TOPIC 1: ECONOMY

BACKGROUND: The economy shrank at a worse-than-expected 6.1 percent pace at the start of this year as sharp cutbacks by businesses and the biggest drop in U.S. exports in 40 years overwhelmed a rebound in consumer spending. In January through March quarter consumers came back to life, boosting their spending after two straight quarters of reductions. The 2.2 percent growth rate was the strongest in two years. The current rate of unemployment in the United States is 8.5 percent. Analysts expect the jobless figure to top 10 percent by the end of the year. According to the Department of Labor one in nine Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are currently out of work. Unemployment among these veterans, those between the ages of 20 to 24, reached 15 percent in February (13.8 percent for same age group of non-veterans). The total number of unemployed veterans of the two wars is about 170,000, which is about the same number of servicemembers deployed to those wars. One out of every four veterans who do find employment earns less than \$25,000 per year.

POSITION: The Economic Commission is responsible for ensuring that America's veterans have the opportunity to provide with honor and dignity, the economic necessities of life for themselves and their families. The American Legion will continue to sponsor Career Fairs and Business Development Workshops to provide employment and business opportunities for our veterans and their families.

ACTION: The American Legion will continue to monitor the state of our economy and employment so we can provide necessary assistance and resources to our veteran community.

TOPIC 2: CAREER FAIRS

BACKGROUND: In April, The American Legion along with Military.com and RecruitMilitary are sponsoring Career Fairs in Chicago, Austin, Norfolk, Long Beach, Phoenix, Baltimore, Tampa, Cleveland, Newport News, Fort Sill, and Midwest City, Oklahoma. These Career Fairs have numerous veteran-friendly companies looking for new employees. Companies like Northrop Grumman, Wal-Mart, Mac Tools, Troops to Teachers, University of Phoenix, Comcast, Verizon Wireless, Home Depot, DeVry University, Walgreens, Raytheon, and Priority Solutions, along with DOD employers are represented at these Career Fairs. These Career Fairs give a broad range of opportunities for our veterans and their families. In 2009, our Career Fairs have averaged approximately 300 to 500 participants at each event.

POSITION: The American Legion continues to support these Career Fairs that assist our veteran community with finding stable and gainful employment. Additionally, these Career Fairs have been great opportunities to promote The American Legion and our programs, as well as to promote membership.

ACTION: The American Legion will continue to assist veterans with obtaining gainful employment through Career Fairs both at the National Convention and throughout the year with our MOU's with Military.com, RecruitMilitary, and AVUE Technologies. In addition, The American Legion will be participating in Career Fairs with the Department of Defense and Walter Reed on June 3 and June 4, respectively. The Career Fair at Walter Reed will provide a training workshop for employers concerning PTSD and TBI. This workshop will assist in removing obstacles and create workplaces where employers understand how to recruit and interact with servicemembers and veterans with various types of disabilities.

TOPIC 3: EDUCATION

BACKGROUND: DOD and service officials have settled on final rules concerning the transferability portion of the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Servicemembers must be on active duty August 1, 2009, and must have completed a minimum of six years of service, with a commitment to serve 4 more, in order to be eligible for this transferability benefit. Servicemembers can transfer any or all of their unused benefits, up to the maximum of 36 months of benefits. Defense officials expect to begin accepting requests to transfer benefits in June; however, payments cannot be made until August 1, the start date of the New GI Bill program. Please note, the rules are not quite final; discussion is ongoing on a procedural matter about how to release the final regulations. But defense and service officials fully agree on details for what is expected to become one of the most popular military recruiting and retention benefits, said Bob Clark, DOD's Assistant Accession Policy Director and the chief official working on this new benefits plan.

POSITION: The American Legion strongly supports the transferability benefit within the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

ACTION: When the final regulations from DOD are published, the Economics Division will forward this information to the Department Adjutants, Department Commanders, and Department Service Officers to be distributed throughout the organization. The American Legion will also continue working with VA's outreach management team to coordinate outreach efforts so servicemembers and veterans have the necessary information concerning their new education benefit.

TOPIC 4: SMALL BUSINESS

BACKGROUND: Joe Sharpe attended the Advisory Committee on Veterans Business Affairs meetings held on 21-22 April 2009. The focus of the Committee during the two-day sessions was Federal procurement and veterans' business development. Listed below are some of the recommendations that were made by the Committee:

- Provide immediate supplemental funding for current and new SBA-managed Small Business Development Centers and Veterans Resource Business Centers
- Allow public stakeholders, including Veteran Service Organizations, to observe council deliberations and decision-making
- Increase the number of trained contracting officers to work with veteran-owned businesses

- Review the quality and content of current training for contracting officers; institute periodic refresher courses
- Conduct surveys and elicit feedback from veteran-owned businesses on the quality and timeliness of responses by contracting officers
- Increase small business training and education programs nationwide

POSITION: The American Legion will continue to have a representative from Economics to attend these Advisory Board meetings to advocate for programs that will benefit our veteran business community. The American Legion also seeks and supports legislation to require a 5% goal, with set-asides and sole source authority, for Federal procurements and contracts for businesses owned and operated by service-disabled veterans and business owned and controlled by veterans. Additionally, The American Legion recommends that the Office of Veterans' Business Development within the SBA receive \$15 million in FY 2010 in order to implement a nationwide community-based assistance program to veterans and self-employed members of the Reserve and National Guard.

ACTION: The American Legion will continue to monitor issues within SBA, and provide essential information to our veteran small business owners.

TOPIC 5: POLICY

BACKGROUND: This week Sen. Webb (D-VA) introduced S.847. This bill would eliminate penalties for beneficiaries of Dependents' Educational Assistance (DEA) who also qualify for and accrue benefits under other VA and DOD educational benefits programs as a result of their own military service. DEA (or Chapter 35) is granted to the dependents and survivors of veterans who have permanent and total service-connected disabilities or who have died of these disabilities. Because VA limits education benefits under multiple programs to 48 total months of credit, DEA counts against additional GI Bill benefits that may be earned by these beneficiaries.

POSITION: The American Legion supports S.847. This important legislation would allow those men and women who have protected, sacrificed, and served this country honorably pass on their educational benefits to their spouses. On April 30, 2009, The American Legion sent out a support letter to Sen. Webb applauding his leadership in addressing issues that are important to America's veterans and their families.

ACTION: The American Legion will continue to monitor this legislation and provide updates when necessary.

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Week Ending 5/1/09

Legislative Division Update

TOPIC 1: Medicare Reimbursement for VA Medical Care

BACKGROUND: VA is prohibited from billing Medicare for third-party reimbursements for the treatment of enrolled, Medicare-eligible veterans' nonservice-connected medical conditions. The American Legion recommends Medicare reimbursements to supplement VA annual budget. **ACTION:** During congressional testimony and numerous interviews with the media, The American Legion promoted Medicare Reimbursement as a new revenue stream for VA. **POSITION:** The American Legion fully supports Medicare reimbursement for VA and will seek legislation in the 111th Congress.

TOPIC 2: Budget Reform for VA Medical Care

BACKGROUND: The American Legion, VFW, DAV, AMVETS, Blinded Veterans Association, JWV, Military Order of the Purple Heart, PVA, and VVA have joined forces in support of changing VA medical care from *discretionary* to *mandatory* annual appropriations. The goal is to help stabilize VA medical care funding by using a formula based system similar to Social Security and Medicare. The Partnership is placing emphasis on sufficiency, timeliness, and predictability of VA's annual appropriations. On February 12, companion legislation was introduced in both the House and Senate to address this issue. Entitled the "Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act of 2009," the bills are: **S. 423**, introduced by Senator Daniel Akaka (HI) with **43** cosponsors; and, **H.R. 1016**, introduced by Representative Bob Filner (CA) with **101** cosponsors. **ACTION:** The American Legion continues to lobby lawmakers to effect budget reform for VA Medical Care. On April 2, during consideration of the FY 2010 budget resolution, **Senate Concurrent Resolution 13**, Senator James Inhofe (OK) introduced an amendment that would include VA medical care in a listing of Federal programs that receive advance appropriations. The amendment was approved by unanimous consent. The House agreed to this amendment on April 29, when the conference report to the budget resolution was approved by both congressional chambers. **POSITION:** The American Legion will continue to seek legislation for assured funding in the 111th Congress and will monitor these bills as they work through Congress.

TOPIC 3: Disabled Veterans' Tax in the 111th Congress

BACKGROUND: Following passage of this year's Defense Authorization Bill, Chapter 61 military retirees with less than 20 years of military service and military retirees rated 100 percent service-connected disabled due to Individual Unemployability can now qualify for concurrent receipt of their military retirement pay and their VA disability compensation without the dollar for dollar offset for Combat Related Special Compensation. **ACTION:** On January 8, Representative Gus Bilirakis (FL) introduced **H.R. 303**, the "Retired Pay Restoration Act." This legislation would: a) allow the receipt of both military retired pay and veterans' disability compensation with respect to any service-connected disability, b) repeal provisions phasing in the full concurrent receipt of such pay through December 31, 2013, and c) make eligible for the full concurrent receipt of both veterans' disability compensation and either military retired pay or combat-related

special pay those individuals who were retired or separated from military service due to a service-connected disability. The measure currently has **60** cosponsors. A companion measure, **H.R. 333** – the “Disabled Veterans Tax Termination Act” – was introduced by Representative Jim Marshall (GA) on the same day. This measure would: a) allow retired members of the Armed Forces who have a service-connected disability rated less than 50 percent to receive concurrent payment of both retired pay and veterans' disability compensation, b) eliminate the phase-in period for concurrent receipt, and c) extend eligibility for concurrent receipt to chapter 61 disability retirees with less than 20 years of service. This legislation currently has **72** cosponsors. Senator Reid (NV) introduced **S. 546**, a bill to amend title 10, United States Code, to permit certain retired members of the uniformed services who have a service-connected disability to receive both disability compensation from the Department of Veterans Affairs for their disability and either retired pay by reason of their years of military service or Combat-Related Special Compensation. This proposal has **31** cosponsors. The American Legion will continue to urge expanding benefits for *all* service-connected disabled military retirees in the 111th Congress. President Obama submitted to Congress his “topline” budget in which he specifically addressed the Disabled Veterans’ Tax and his intentions to allow more service-connected disabled military retirees receive more of their VA compensation and military retirement pay without offsets. **ACTION:** The American Legion is publicly thanking cosponsors. **POSITION:** The American Legion supports the full repeal of the Disabled Veterans’ Tax in the 111th Congress.

TOPIC 4: VA Budget for FY 2010

BACKGROUND: National Commander Dave Rehbein addressed a Joint Session of the Veterans’ Affairs Committees on September 11 to present the views of The American Legion regarding matters that will come before the 111th Congress. Normally, the annual budget process for Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 would be well underway. However, this year the Administration opted not to develop a budget because there will be a new Administration in January 2009. Therefore, the FY 2010 budget will not begin to be fully developed until the VA budget transition team for the new Administration begins its work after Election Day, November 4. The President’s Budget Request is normally submitted to Congress on the first Monday in February. Thus, Commander Rehbein’s testimony opened the VA appropriations process for FY 2010. The American Legion’s legislative portfolio supports VA health care funding that is *sufficient, timely and predictable*; ending the ban on Priority 8 enrollment; a seamless transition from DOD to VA, including reserve component service members; long-term care of aging veterans; medical and prosthetics research; construction of state-of-the-art medical facilities; technology for electronic medical records; reduction of the outrageous disability compensation claims backlog; veterans’ employment rights, veterans’ hiring preference by government and government contractors, and veteran-owned and service disabled veteran-owned small businesses in government procurement programs; job training for veterans with military occupational specialty skills not readily transferable to the private sector; care for homeless veterans; and proper administration of new GI Bill benefits. President Obama sent a “topline” budget to Congress that provided some insight into the budget request he is crafting for April 2009. The “topline” figures for VA are rather promising -- \$56 billion in discretionary and \$57 billion in mandatory -- \$113 billion in

FY 2010. This is a significant increase (\$4.9 billion) in VA funding. However, the budget document contained very little details and no legislative initiatives. **ACTION:** On March 10, The American Legion testified before the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees to give its views on the President's budget request. **POSITION:** The American Legion funding request for this portfolio includes \$42.8 billion for medical care, including medical and prosthetic research; \$3.3 billion for major and minor construction; \$2.7 billion for information technology and \$2.8 billion for VA general operating expenses.

TOPIC 5: Flag Amendment

BACKGROUND: The American Legion remains committed to protecting Old Glory from acts of physical desecration and overturning *Texas v. Johnson* (1989). During the Washington Conference, efforts were taken to determine the official positions of lawmakers currently listed as "unknown." **ACTION:** On April 30, Representative Jo Ann Emerson (MO) introduced House Joint Resolution 47, a constitutional amendment to prohibit the physical desecration of Old Glory. H.J. Res. 47 currently has 7 cosponsors. have Senator David Vitter (LA) is expected to introduce in the Senate a constitutional amendment in line with The American Legion's language on May 6. **POSITION:** The American Legion fully supports a proposed constitutional amendment to prohibit the physical desecration of Old Glory.

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NATIONAL SECURITY AND FOREIGN RELATIONS

DIRECTORS NOTES: We are finishing preparations for the NEC. The American Legion has now raised \$154,500 for Operation Comfort Warriors. Second comfort item donations are being arranged for WRAMC and Bethesda Naval Medical Center. We are also coordinating for donations to comfort Wounded Warriors at FT Bliss and FT Gordon. With those donations we will have committed approximately \$123,000 of the donated amount with plenty more wounded warrior units on our list to eventually reach.

NSFR will be operating from Indianapolis next week. **Enjoy your weekend!**

NATIONAL SECURITY

TOPIC 1: American Legion Comforts Wounded Warriors

By Craig Roberts (Media Relations Manager-Washington, DC, Office of The American Legion) SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES | Thursday, April 23, 2009

Life can be good inside a hoodie. It is warm and snug in there - a cozy cocoon isolated from peripheral intrusion. In there, with the cowl snugged up and a pair of iPod earbuds plugged in, a guy can forget - at least for a little while - the pain of a relationship gone bad, or that his left leg has been blown away in Iraq by an improvised explosive device. The American Legion wants to make sure every wounded warrior has the so-called "comfort" items, such as a hooded sweat suit or portable music player, that he or she needs or wants. That is the purpose of the Legion's recently inaugurated Operation Comfort Warriors. The launch of Operation Comfort Warriors (OCW) was prompted when the American Legion learned that not all the wounded warriors being treated at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and elsewhere were in possession of the comfort items, specifically sweat suits, which they wanted. The military did not normally provide such items, and the Red Cross had run short. Now, it may seem odd that a patient in a carefully climate-controlled hospital would wish to wear a sweat suit, but it makes sense when regarded in context. Health care centers house many heat-sensitive pieces of medical equipment. To maintain their proper operation and prevent failure, some of these critical machines must be maintained in air-conditioned breezes. That is why hospital rooms are often uncomfortably cool. So, imagine the chills felt by a bedridden wounded warrior who does not care to remain huddled permanently beneath blankets and whose internal thermostat may have been knocked totally out of whack by severe injuries. The donning of a hooded sweat suit is a natural wish. The Red Cross wish-list message was dispatched immediately to Legion leaders and, on Dec. 2, their national commander, David K. Rehbein, announced the Operation Comfort Warriors launch. The operation's fundraising goal was ambitious: \$50,000 by the year-end holidays that were less than a month away. Yet, one week later, \$30,000 had been raised and, with a little more publicity, more than \$100,000 arrived - that is, double the original goal had been gathered as the New Year began. By April 1, the funds neared \$150,000. All funds donated to Operation Comfort Warriors are used to purchase comfort items. The money is used solely to purchase clothing, DVDs, electronic games and other items for wounded warriors recuperating at the Walter Reed and Bethesda National Naval Medical Centers,

and elsewhere. Currently, as many as 11,000 wounded soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines are recuperating in military medical installations. Approximately 700 are housed locally at Walter Reed and Bethesda, with the vast majority at the Army facility. Many wounded warriors have not yet received the comfort items they need and deserve. The American Legion, in concert with American Red Cross colleagues, is working as quickly as possible to remedy this. The American Legion's enthusiasm for Operation Comfort Warriors is shared by others. For instance, in mid-January the day before she was to offer a keynote speech at a Legion-hosted inaugural banquet and ball, TV actress Marg Helgenberger volunteered to deliver comfort items to heroes at Walter Reed. The "CSI" series star was scheduled to visit for one hour. She stayed three. She also asked the Legion to allow her to donate her talents to an Operation Comfort Warrior publicity campaign. As some fortunate heroes learned one cold day at Walter Reed, life inside a hoodie can be good - especially if a beautiful woman is offering a warm smile just outside. **POSITION:** The American Legion is committed to supporting the troops. **ACTION:** Operation Comfort Warrior will continue to provide for service members needs as much as is possible.

TOPIC 2: Napolitano Apologizes Directly to The American Legion for Report

BACKGROUND: Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano apologized directly today to Commander Dave Rehbein, head of the American Legion, after a recently leaked DHS intelligence report suggested that right-wing extremist groups might recruit military veterans returning from overseas deployments. The 45-minute meeting occurred at DHS headquarters in Washington this afternoon. A detailed account of the meeting from the American Legion states that "Hunched forward with head bowed, the Secretary of Homeland Security looked the National Commander of The American Legion straight in the eye and said, very quietly, 'I'm sorry, Dave.'" "The report was not worthy of this department, or of veterans," Napolitano said to Rehbein, according Legion spokesman Craig Roberts, who attended the meeting. "It was very badly written and should never have been released," she said. The secretary "was very contrite" and that both her words and body language reflected her sincerity, Roberts said in an interview.

In her own written statement after the meeting Napolitano said, "We connected meaningfully about the important issues that have emerged over recent days, and I offered him my sincere apologies for any offense to our veterans caused by this report." Rehbein was an early and vocal critic of the leaked DHS report and insisted on meeting with the secretary to get an explanation of it. During the meeting the Legion also presented Napolitano with a Blue Star Banner in recognition of DHS employees who are military active duty guard and reservists currently deployed overseas. The department's Office of Intelligence and Analysis distributed the report to state and local law enforcement on April 7. It regularly publishes intelligence analyses on domestic and international threats to the nation's borders and infrastructure. While it does not cite any specific threats, the report states among other things that: "The possible passage of new restrictions on firearms and the return of military veterans facing significant challenges reintegrating into their communities could lead to the potential emergence of terrorist groups or lone wolf extremists capable of carrying out violent attacks." Since the report's unauthorized release, Napolitano made a series of television appearances to apologize to veterans for the report and explain it. She has also faced lawsuits and calls for her

resignation. **POSITION:** The American Legion will always stand up for service members and veterans. **ACTION:** The American Legion will continue to stand up for service members and veterans.

TOPIC 3: Army Campaign Plan for Health Promotion, Risk Reduction and Suicide Prevention

BACKGROUND: The Army's new Campaign Plan for Health Promotion, Risk Reduction and Suicide Prevention will seek to make rapid improvements in the Army's existing health promotion and risk reduction programs, systems, and processes with a goal of reducing suicides and improving the mental, physical and spiritual health of the Army community. The Campaign Plan will be implemented by the Army Vice Chief of Staff's Suicide Prevention Council which is comprised of representatives from across the Army staff. In support of the overall campaign plan, the Army Suicide Prevention Council will be empowered to review Army doctrine, organization, training, material, leadership, personnel and facilities that are connected to health promotion, risk reduction and suicide prevention to ensure the Army is optimizing its resources to promote Army wellness. The Army has many programs dedicated both to health promotion, risk reduction and suicide prevention. From the current Suicide Stand-Down and Chain Teach to the establishment of the Army Suicide Prevention Task Force, to increases in behavioral health resources, the Army is engaged in a service-wide effort to combat the rise in suicides within its ranks. The Army Campaign Plan for Health Promotion, Risk Reduction and Suicide Prevention is a comprehensive, multidisciplinary effort to analyze and improve our current programs to ensure they're focused, coordinated and effective.

POSITION: The American Legion supports full funding for service member health care and quality-of-life needs. **ACTION:** The suicide rate in the Army is both saddening and alarming. The American Legion will monitor the effectiveness of the new Army programs to deal with the issue of suicide.

TOPIC 4: President Barack Obama Signs Legislation to Establish Anniversary of 9/11 as a National Day of Service and Remembrance

BACKGROUND: WASHINGTON, D.C.– On Tuesday, April 21, 2009, President Barack Obama signed into law the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, which for the first time includes federal authorization to establish September 11 as an annually recognized National Day of Service and Remembrance. “Today President Barack Obama created a historic, enduring and compassionate legacy that truly honors the 9/11 victims and their families, first responders and rescue and recovery workers, the soldiers who have taken up arms to defend our freedom and safety, and the many volunteers who spontaneously contributed their efforts in the immediate aftermath of 9/11,” said David Paine, founder and president of MyGoodDeed.org, the nonprofit group that led a seven-year campaign to formally establish 9/11 as an annually recognized day of service and remembrance. “There isn’t a better or more fitting way to remember 9/11 than for all of us as Americans to voluntarily set aside time on the anniversary of the September 11 attacks to help others in need.” Under the new law, the anniversary of 9/11 would be observed annually in ways somewhat similar to Martin Luther King Jr. Day, although it intentionally will not be a federal holiday. “We do not wish to see it ever become a state or federally designated day off,” said Paine. “Instead, we hope that individuals,

businesses and organizations will be inspired on their own to voluntarily engage in community service, perform good deeds of any nature, and participate in other private and organized activities in remembrance of the events of 9/11.” To support this observance, the new legislation authorizes the Corporation for National and Community Service, which oversees federal national service programs, to make grants and provide other assistance to community nonprofits and other groups that want to organize 9/11 service and remembrance activities.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

TOPIC 1: Heavy Battles Are Raging With Taliban In Pakistan

BACKGROUND: Heavy fighting raged for a third day in Pakistan’s northwest on Thursday as civilians flooded from the area and the Pakistani military reported some gains in pushing back Taliban insurgents.

The Pakistani military secured mountain passes to the west and south of Buner, a district 60 miles from the capital, according to its spokesman, Maj. Gen. Athar Abbas, who spoke at a news briefing at the military headquarters in Rawalpindi. Helicopter gunships also rocketed Taliban positions in the north of Buner, where the militants had apparently fortified positions in areas adjoining their stronghold in the Swat Valley.

While government forces consolidated control of Buner’s main town, Daggar, General Abbas said it could take still another week for the operation to clear the whole district of militants, as the military was proceeding slowly to defuse booby traps and avoid civilian casualties.

The militants continued to unleash attacks, hitting a checkpoint belonging to government paramilitary forces from the Frontier Corps in northern Buner, and seizing several police stations across the region, including two in the upper reaches of Swat.

Suicide car bombers also tried to hit government troops in the south of Buner but were destroyed before they could reach their targets, General Abbas said. About 50 members of the police and paramilitary forces were still being held hostage by the Taliban in Buner.

Still, the government and the military repeated their support for the peace agreement forged in February with militants, under which the government agreed to install Shariah courts, based on Islamic law, throughout seven districts in the Malakand region, including Swat and Buner.

“The army has faced extreme criticism in the last two to three months, but we think that the peace agreement is a good agreement,” General Abbas said. “If peace can be brought in the region without further destruction, then it will be a victory for all. But the other side is violating from Day 1. We have kept informing the government of the violations.”

Maulana Sufi Muhammad, who helped negotiate the accord for the militants, said the government had violated the peace agreement and warned that continuing the military operations would further inflame the militants and increase the spread of the Taliban.

“The government has violated the peace deal by starting military operations and sending troops to the area,” he told a meeting of elders in the district of Dir, where the Taliban have also been active. He called on the government to re-establish peace and said that if that failed, he would make the same demands for Shariah law from a future government.

Compounding Pakistan's problems, ethnic gang warfare raged in the southern port city of Karachi, leaving more than 30 people dead in two days of street violence. Meanwhile, officials warned of a tense situation in the southwest, in Baluchistan Province, where the government has failed to calm public anger over the killing of three nationalist leaders.

In Karachi, paramilitary rangers were deployed to stem the street violence. About 34 people have been killed and 42 wounded in the violence, which began when a group of gunmen opened fire on an outlying settlement in the north of the city, local news agencies reported. About 20 vehicles were set afire, local reporters said.

Karachi, a sprawling city of some 14 million, and a melting pot of Pakistan's ethnic groups, has for decades been racked by ethnic, gang and drug-related violence. Concerns have grown recently that radical Islamists and Taliban sympathizers have established an increasingly aggressive presence in outlying Pashtun neighborhoods and frequently clashed with supporters of the MQM, a secular, immigrant-based party that dominates many of the central urban neighborhoods. **POSITION:** The American Legion opposes the spread of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons or long-range ballistic missiles which may be used by terrorists, terrorist organizations, communists or aggressor nations. **ACTION:** The American Legion supports legislation and foreign policy that specifically targets diplomatic, economic and educational programs to promote greater and peaceful democratic reforms in countries within the Arabian Gulf and Middle Eastern Region.

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NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION

TOPIC 1- VA&R Testimony on Pending Legislation in the Senate

BACKGROUND: Assistant Director Ian de Planque of the Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Division (VA&R) of The American Legion offered testimony this week before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee on a broad variety of benefits legislation currently pending in the Senate. With in depth commentary on the individual bills submitted in writing, oral testimony focused on aspects deserving more individual attention.

As was the case with previous testimony before the House Veterans Affairs Committee, there remains a good deal of focus on the interpretation of Title 38 USC § 1154. Senator Akaka's proposed legislation would clearly direct the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that the intent of Congress to give special consideration to the veracity of a veteran's lay testimony in the establishment of events in combat is to be considered of broad enough scope to extend to service-members in a combat zone.

The same exigencies of combat conditions that rendered record keeping difficult for proving exact events that happen in combat should be recognized to apply to the difficulties of establishing the presence of a service-member in combat. What is important to remember is the intent of Congress to recognize the difficulty to meticulously documenting events consistent with the conditions and hardships of combat.

ACTION: VA&R Division monitors the development of legislation which affects veterans and veterans' benefits. In the course of this, the VA&R Division is often called upon to provide testimony and comment before Congress on the views and aims of this organization. The views and aims of the veterans this organization represents, which is to say all veterans of this country, must be presented in a manner that enables Congress to properly understand the complexities of the issues involved in making their decisions.

POSITION: The specific positions on the various pieces of legislation commented upon are a matter of record. Of particular import as presented by Assistant Director de Planque, were the increased focus by some of this legislation on improving the system for transitioning veterans, the renewed attention to the effect of service connected conditions on the Quality of Life, as well as the hope that the interpretation of section 1154 be applied equitably to all service-members serving in a combat zone, as the non-linear modern battlefield makes even the ability to record exposure to combat as difficult as the previous understanding of recording the events and circumstances which took place in combat.

TOPIC 2 – VSOs Meet With QTC Management

BACKGROUND: QTC is a private medical services company that has been under contract with the VA since 1998 to provide Compensation and Pension (C&P) examinations for ten VA Regional Offices in the following states: Texas, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, Utah, Massachusetts, Washington, and California. QTC also provides examinations in support of VA's Benefits Delivery at Discharge

(BDD) program as well as the Department of Defense Disability Evaluation System (DES) pilot expansion. C&P examinations are performed by QTC's network of more than 15,000 providers in their private office or at one of 36 examination clinics operated by QTC. In the past three years, QTC has performed approximately 330,000 C&P examinations for VA.

ACTION: On April 28th, the deputy director for claims service and representatives from VFW, DAV, VVA, PVA, and AMVETS met with QTC management and received a comprehensive briefing on the service QTC provides VA. QTC 's main goal for holding the meeting with the six major veteran service organizations (VSO) was to build a stronger relationship with the VSO community and to encourage feedback, both positive and negative, from the VSOs in an effort to improve the service it provides to VA and our nation's veterans.

POSITION: The American Legion looks forward to developing a closer relationship with QTC with the end goal of helping QTC improve the work product it provides VA. To that end, VA&R will solicit American Legion Department Service Officers (DSOs), in states where QTC conducts C&P examinations, on QTC provided C&P examinations. We will specifically ask for feedback on what DSOs like about QTC examinations as well as areas that need improvement.

TOPIC 3 – VA Updates VSOs on Pension Management Centers

BACKGROUND: The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) met this week with VSOs to provide updates of the status and progress of the consolidated Pension Management Centers (PMCs). These centers, located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and St. Paul, Minnesota were created by VA to centralize the processing of pension claims. The intent of VA was that by centralizing the location, the efficiency could be improved, and that with centers targeted on a limited scope, a certain type of claim, accuracy of processing could be improved.

The time of claims processing in the three centers is stabilizing to meet VA target numbers for the processing of these types of claims. Furthermore, the accuracy as determined by VA's internal review is noted to have risen from an approximate 50% accuracy rate when the transitioning began to rates over 95% for accuracy at the three management centers.

The PMCs are also beginning to integrate two more pieces to their consolidation centers. The PMCs are now accepting from several sources, DIC and death pension claims; as well as multiple issue claims of which DIC and/or pensions are one component of the claim. These claims are being consolidated to these centers from several ROs now, and will expand to include all RO's over the course of the upcoming year. The end state planned by VA will be to consolidate to the PMCs all pension, death pension, and DIC claims, as well as multiple issue claims that have one of those claims as a component.

ACTION: The meetings were attended by national VA&R staff members. The American Legion participates in meetings with several facets of VA to facilitate a better

exchange of information and concerns between the VSOs and VA. VA&R representatives participated in the question and answer period with VA staff from all three locations to address concerns voiced by DSOs about their interactions with these PMCs.

Issues brought up by The American Legion, such as difficulties in tracking files, confusing VCAA letters that were difficult for veterans to read, and direct communication numbers for the VSOs to reach the VA for status information on the claims were recognized by VA, and in most cases identified as issues that they were aware of and attempting to roll out solutions to. Still, these concerns were noted by VA officials for further investigation.

POSITION: The American Legion, by resolution, opposed the consolidation of the processing of original pension claims and has closely monitored this consolidation process. The centralization of processing raises issues of communication and access to the necessary information that DSOs need to provide proper advocacy for the veterans they represent. VA&R is examining ways in which that communication, vital to the advocacy process, can best be maintained in an environment such as the presently existing model.

TOPIC 4 - World TEAM (The Exceptional Athlete Matters) Sports Face of America Bicycle Ride

BACKGROUND: On April 25-26, Three American Legion National Headquarters Staff participated in the Face of America 110-mile Bike Ride, sponsored by World TEAM (Exceptional Athlete Matters) Sports. Represented by active duty service members, wounded warriors recovering at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Brooke Army Medical Center as well as distinguished rider General Robert Magnus, Former Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, the two-day event began in Bethesda and finished in the hills of Gettysburg.

ACTION: During the course of the ride, The American Legion staff met several wounded warriors that used hand cycles and were newly fitted with prosthetics' that they were adjusting to. One soldier said originally his medical team advised him not to participate in any sports for several months. He asked to change his medical team and his new doctor Brooke Army Medical Center allowed him to participate in the ride and said to get out and exercise. Of the 300 riders, some have participated in Road to Recovery's Cycling Program and it changed their lives and showed them that they can do the same things they did before their injuries. Over the course of the two-days, National staff encouraged the cyclists to participate in the upcoming Road to Recovery Ride, on May 25-30, from the US Capital to VA Beach.

POSITION: The VA&R division is focused on improving support for veterans during their time of transition and rehabilitation and will continue to provide opportunities for mutual support from Departments and local legionnaires.

TOPIC 5 - Meeting on the proposed regulation to increase Enrollment Income Threshold by 10% (Priority Group 8's).

BACKGROUND: Public Law 110-329 is providing VA additional funding to allow expanded enrollment opportunity for certain Priority 8 veterans. Currently, Priority 8 changes are being implemented on New Enrollment System and VistA platforms. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) plans to have 270,000 veterans enrolled by FY2010.

The means of contacting these veterans include, sending letters to veterans rejected since 2003, and educating veterans on eligibility via advertisements and outreach events. Effective June, 15, 2009, VA will commence to sending out letters to veterans with valid addresses. They are also in contact with the postal system to obtain valid addresses. VA has also devised a plan to implement various forms of effective communications, to include press releases, conference calls, press interviews, and training sessions. VA has also begun generating monthly facility/VISN reports showing Priority 83/8g veterans likely to convert to Priority 8b/8d.

ACTION: The Deputy Director for Health Care attended the meeting on April 29, 2009 and reports, that The American Legion will partner with VA to notify and educate veterans on eligibility for enrollment for VA healthcare. One of the means to accomplish this will be incorporating the enrollment calculator on The American Legion's national website under The American Legion's logo. The website will also include the income threshold.

**NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND
REHABILITATION COMMISSION**

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Week Ending 5/1/2009