



## AFSA Retiree and Veteran Affairs Newsletter

### - THIS WEEK IN CONGRESS: FIRST FIGHTS OVER BIDEN’S BUDGET PLAN

Just a few days after the White House revealed its budget plans for fiscal 2022, a host of Defense Department and Veterans Affairs officials will visit Capitol Hill to justify their spending needs.

Adm. Craig Faller, head of Southern Command, and Gen. Glen VanHerck, head of Northern Command, will testify before several committees this week on needs facing their missions, including a joint appearance before the House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday.

Similarly, Gen. Tod Wolters, head of European Command, will appear before several committees this week to answer budget questions. Other defense officials are expected to testify in coming weeks.

VA Secretary Denis McDonough is expected to make his thoughts on the budget during an appearance before the House Appropriations Committee on Thursday morning. President Biden has called for an increase of more than 8 percent in discretionary spending for VA next year, pushing the total department budget over \$250 billion.

### - PERSONNEL SPENDING CUTS WON’T HELP MILITARY READINESS

Military pay raises and benefits can’t be used to help balance the Pentagon’s budget without risking national security, the head of the House Armed Services Committee cautioned. “I see the challenge within personnel costs, but we have an all-volunteer military,” Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., said during a defense policy event sponsored by the Ronald Reagan Institute. “We are going to have to pay them well and take care of them to make sure we continue to have an all-volunteer military.”

“The notion that we can cut personnel costs to get our way out of our budget problems, I think, is very overstated.” The comments from Smith, the top Democrat on military issues in the House, come just days after President Joe Biden unveiled his initial budget plans for fiscal 2022, including \$715 billion in funding for the Defense Department.

That figure represents a 1.6 percent increase in spending from fiscal 2021 but would amount to a decrease of about 0.4 percent when inflation is factored in. Republicans on Capitol Hill immediately attacked the plan as insufficient for military needs, given ongoing operations overseas and increasing security threats worldwide.

At the same time, some progressive Democrats decried the plan as too large, noting that the Pentagon has seen significant funding increases in recent years while other domestic agencies faced cuts. Congress will spend the next few months debating the proper level of total defense funding and setting personnel spending

priorities for the military. In the budget proposal, White House officials said that trimming down the fiscal 2022 defense budget even further could endanger military pay and personnel support programs. Smith echoed those thoughts on 13 April, noting that in past years defense leaders have suggested smaller pay raises and benefits cuts to help free up money for other readiness and modernization priorities.

He did not specifically mention plans for the fiscal 2022 pay raise. Under the federal formula used to calculate annual pay raises for service members, troops should expect to see a paycheck boost of about 2.7 percent starting next January, unless the president or Congress pushes for a lower figure.

Each 1 percent of pay raises adds about \$6 billion in new defense spending over five years. But instead of finding savings through cuts there, Smith said, officials need to look at ways to maximize recruiting and get more high-demand specialists in the ranks without wasting money.

“I think looking at how we change that recruiting effort is important,” he said. “You may not be able to pass the physical fitness test, but if you’re a computer genius, do we really want to reject you from serving in the military? We need to rethink what we need in terms of personnel to get there.”

The armed services committee chairman also said that White House officials need to rebalance military missions, scaling back some operations in favor of enhanced diplomacy and outreach efforts.

“We need to re-examine the national defense policy,” he said. “I believe that we can protect ourselves ... but we can also meet our national security needs with a much more focused idea of what those national security needs are.” He said that reassessment includes the ongoing U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.

“What we want in Afghanistan is a peaceful, stable government that respects human rights law,” he said. “Our military is not going to be able to achieve that. We’ve been going for 20 years and yet we continue to stick around. Meanwhile, it is an enormous expense.”

Biden has promised to end the U.S. military mission there, but also said meeting the May 1 deadline to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan (a marker set by the previous administration) is unlikely.

## **- VA AND DEPARTMENT OF LABOR RELEASE HIGH DEMAND OCCUPATION LIST FOR THE VETERAN RAPID RETRAINING ASSISTANCE PROGRAM**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is preparing to launch the Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP) as part of its continued effort to support Veterans seeking retraining and economic opportunities in response to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

VA in partnership with the Department of Labor published a list of high-demand occupations. The list is available here and includes healthcare, education, media, engineering, and high tech opportunities.

Covered education programs must provide training for a high-demand occupation. GI Bill approved programs of education, excluding bachelor and graduate degrees, and VET TEC approved training programs are eligible.

The VA will begin working with education institutions to identify eligible training programs and complete VRRAP participation agreements. VA will publish a comprehensive list of approved VRRAP educational institutions and programs on its website to ensure that Veterans know what training opportunities are available under the program.

VA has 17,250 training spots open for eligible Veterans and will soon announce additional details on how Veterans can apply to participate in VRRAP. If you have any questions, please contact the Education Call Center at 888-442-4551 between 7 a.m. - 6 p.m. Central Time, Monday-Friday to speak with a representative

### **- VA WILL NOT COUNT CHAPTER 31 AGAINST GI BILL EDUCATION BENEFITS**

Effective April 1, 2021, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will no longer count the use of Veterans Readiness & Employment (VR&E) benefits (chapter 31) against the 48-month limit on GI Bill education benefits such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The use of GI Bill education benefits will continue to count against the 48-month limit on VR&E benefits.

VA has started to process impacted claims and enrollments with this update, and you will receive a notification letter outlining whether you have more GI Bill entitlement available.

If you have any questions due to this issue, please contact the Education Call Center at 1-888-442-4551, Monday – Friday, 7:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. Central Time. You can also find more information on our website at: <https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill>

### **- DISABLED VETERANS, ACTIVE DUTY CAN GET ADAPTIVE EQUIPMENT FOR AUTOMOBILES**

Veterans with a service-connected disability and injured service members still serving on active duty with an injury that prevents them from driving an automobile may qualify for a VA program to purchase a specially modified motor vehicle. VA assists in paying for adaptive equipment, repairs, replacements, and reinstallations for automobile gear.

Benefits are typically granted to individuals who have a service-connected disability, such as:

- Loss of functional use of an arm, leg, ear or, eye
- A severe burn injury
- Permanent loss of use of a limb
- Ankylosis in one or both knees and hips
- Permanent vision impairment in one or both eyes

A complete list of service-connected disabilities can be found here. Please note that Veterans or active duty must have at least one disability to qualify for disability benefits from the VA.

Approved applicants may receive a one-time payment for up to \$21,058.69 to help with specialized purchases for their automobile. In some cases, a person may receive one or more adaptive-equipment grants so that they can add additional features to their vehicle (power steering, brakes, lift equipment, etc.), allowing individuals easier access to their vehicle.

To obtain benefits, people must file a claim for disability compensation, which the VA must approve before buying a vehicle or adaptive equipment. [Click here to find out how to file for disability compensation.](#)

For those who already filed a claim for VA disability, use VA Form 21-4502 “Application for Automobile or Other Conveyance and Adaptive Equipment” when applying for assistance.

To apply, people must: Complete all items on Section I and II of the form. Submit and send the form to the nearest VA regional office. If approved, VA will complete Section III and return the form. Purchase a vehicle. Once you receive the seller's vehicle and adaptive equipment, complete Section IV and return the form.

In some instances, applicants may only qualify for adaptive equipment. If so, Veterans will need to fill out VA Form 10-1394 "Application for Adaptive Equipment—Motor Vehicle."

## **- WATCH VA BENEFITS NEWS**

Starting this month, watch the new VA Benefits News on YouTube! Each month, our senior leaders will discuss initiatives and updates to benefits and services that directly impact you and your family. Stay in-the-know with VBA by subscribing online today! <https://www.youtube.com/user/vavetbenefits>



## **- YEAR ROUND DISCOUNTS FOR VETERANS, MILITARY**

See our most recent list of Veteran and military discounts that are good year round and will be updated as we learn of more. These discounts are being shared so that Veterans, military members, their families, caregivers and survivors are aware of all resources available to them.

<https://blogs.va.gov/VAntage/85765/veteran-discounts-available-year-round/>

## **- VA TO OFFER COVID-19 VACCINES TO ALL VETERANS, SPOUSES, AND CAREGIVERS**

President Joe Biden signed the SAVE LIVES Act into law on March 24, 2021, expanding VA's legal authority to provide COVID-19 vaccines to all Veterans, regardless of their VA health care enrollment status, as well as Veteran spouses, caregivers and some beneficiaries.

As part of VA's efforts to vaccinate every eligible Veteran who wants to be vaccinated, the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System (SAVAHCS) is offering the COVID-19 vaccine to all Veterans registered in VA health care who wish to receive the vaccine.

Non-registered Veterans, spouses of Veterans, or approved caregivers are encouraged to sign up at <https://www.va.gov/health-care/covid-19-vaccine/sign-up/introduction> to let us know their interest in receiving the vaccine. We will contact those who have signed up for a vaccination appointment. As vaccine stock becomes available we will contact those who have signed up on the website.

## **- APRIL IS SEXUAL ASSAULT AWARENESS MONTH**

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. During the month of April and year-round, VA works to increase public awareness of VA's services and support for Veterans who have experienced "military sexual trauma" (MST), the term VA uses to refer to sexual assault or sexual harassment during military service.

MST includes any sexual activity that you are involved with against your will. Examples include:

- Being pressured or coerced into sexual activities
- Sexual contact or activities without your consent
- Being touched or grabbed in a sexual way that made you uncomfortable
- Comments about your body or sexual activities that you found threatening
- Unwanted sexual advances that you found threatening

Anyone can experience MST, regardless of gender. Like other types of trauma, MST can negatively affect a person’s mental and physical health, even many years later. Visit the VA's Military Sexual Trauma website (<https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp>) to learn more about VA resources that are available to Veterans who have experienced MST.

**- AFSA PROFESSIONAL AIRMEN’S CONFERENCE & INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION**

Get ready for Orlando -- in July? Mark your calendars now... as we'd really love to see you in person! We are certainly hopeful that we are going to be able to gather and meet in person this coming July. The dates are 24-29 July 2021! Please start making your plans now to attend and we'll see you there!



**- AFSA MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION**

AFSA MEMBERSHIP is open to all: UNIFORMED SERVICES: Active Duty, Guard, Reserve, Retired and Veteran Military Members (Joint Services Enlisted and Commissioned Officers), Public Health Services (PHS), and National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) personnel; FAMILY MEMBERS of Uniformed Service Members, and ASSOCIATE MEMBERS: DoD Civilians, Civil Air Patrol, JROTC, Mission Partners/Sponsors and all Military Supporters. Visit: [WWW.HQAFSA.org](http://WWW.HQAFSA.org) for more information and to join.

**- ARE YOU A VETERAN IN CRISIS OR CONCERNED ABOUT ONE?**

Did you know that VA offers same day services in Primary Care and Mental Health at 172 VA Medical Centers across the country? Contact the Veterans Crisis Line (1-800-273-8255 and press 1, Chat, or Text 838255.)