

VFW Legislative Accomplishments: First Session of the 107th Congress

VFW Priority Goal 1: Strengthen the VA Budget

Fiscal Year 2002 VA-HUD Appropriations Act, Public Law 107-73

- Provides a \$1.5 billion increase in discretionary funding over last year's amount, for a total of \$23.8 billion, with \$21.3 billion going to VA Health Care alone
- Gives VA \$27.3 billion for mandatory spending, which represents an increase of \$2.2 billion over last year's amount and includes money for compensation and pension payments
- Grants an extra \$128 million for the Veterans Benefits Administration to expedite claims processing
- Provides \$121 million for the operation of the National Cemetery Administration
- Grants \$183.2 million for major construction projects, including new cemetery land purchases and a new spinal cord injury center
- Increases funding for medical and prosthetic research by \$20 million

VFW Priority Goal 2: Improve Veterans' Health Care

Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care Programs Enhancement Act

- Lowers out-of-pocket hospitalization expenses by 80% for certain lower income veterans to compensate for regional differences in the cost-of-living
- Requires VA to establish a chiropractic care program nationwide
- Ensures that VA maintains the capacity for specialized care such as mental illness, spinal cord trauma, and prosthetics, in each of the VA's 21 regions
- Creates many new incentive and recruitment programs to help attract and retain VA nurses
- Authorizes VA to grant service dogs for paralyzed and other severely disabled veterans
- Gives Persian Gulf Veterans an additional year of special priority access to the VA health care system

VFW Priority Goal 3: Improve Earned Benefits and Entitlements

Veterans Education and Benefits Expansion Act, *Public Law 107-103*

- Repeals the 30-year limitation on granting service connection for respiratory cancers associated with herbicide exposure in Vietnam and adds Diabetes Mellitus (Type 2) to the list of diseases that can be service connected with exposure
- Allows an additional 10-year period for new service connected diseases related to herbicide exposure and mandates additional studies to review the scientific evidence
- Expands the illnesses presumed to be service connected for Gulf War veterans to now include chronic multi-symptom illness, chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, and irritable bowel syndrome
- Extends the deadline for the granting of new service connected diseases due to Gulf War service and directs new studies to review the evidence. Any veteran who participates in VA's study cannot lose the benefits they are already receiving
- Provides non-service connected pensions to low-income wartime veterans over age 65 automatically without requiring a determination of disability
- Requires VA to improve transition assistance and outreach services to active duty troops
- Increases the Home Loan Guarantee to allow home purchases of up to \$240,000
- Increases the funeral expenses for veterans who die from service connected illnesses to \$2,000 and doubles the burial plot allowance to \$300
- Provides government-issued bronze markers to families that request them for use on marked graves in private cemeteries
- Increases the amount payable for adaptive housing and automobile equipment to \$48,000 and \$9,000 respectively

Veterans' Compensation Rate Adjustment Act, *Public Law 107-94*

- Gives a 2.6 percent cost-of-living adjustment in the rates of disability compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for survivors of such veterans

Veterans' Survivor Benefits Improvements Act, *Public Law 107-14*

- Expands health coverage under the Civilian Health and Medical Program-Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA) for survivors of veterans who died from a service-connected disability
- Includes spouses and children in the Servicemembers Group Life Insurance (SGLI) program. Spousal coverage could not exceed \$100,000 and child coverage could not exceed \$10,000. Upon termination of SGLI, the spouse's policy could be converted to a private life insurance policy

- Makes the effective date of increased maximum SGLI coverage from \$200,000 to \$250,000 retroactive to October 1, 2000

Homeless Veterans Comprehensive Assistance Act, *Public Law 107-95*

- Provides \$1 billion over five years to help end chronic homelessness among the veteran population within a decade
- Encourages better cooperation between state, federal, local, and private organizations to coordinate services to benefit homeless veterans
- Provides a wide range of services including medical and mental health services, substance abuse treatment, dental care, job training and rental assistance vouchers
- Strengthens the Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program

VFW Priority Goal 4: A New GI Bill for the 21st Century

Veterans Education and Benefits Expansion Act, *Public Law 107-103*

- Increases the amount of educational benefits under the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) from the current monthly rate of \$672 for those who serve three or more years to \$800 effective January 1, 2002; \$900 effective October 1, 2002; and \$985 effective October 1, 2003
- Increases the amount of educational benefits under the MGIB from the current monthly rate of \$546 for an obligated period of active duty of two years to \$650 effective January 1, 2002; \$732 effective October 1, 2002; and \$800 effective October 1, 2003
- Increases the rates of Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance from \$608 to \$670 for full-time, \$456 to \$503 for three-quarter-time, and \$304 to \$345 for half-time studies
- Restores and extends the eligibility for VA educational benefits for active duty and reserve component members who were called to active duty service, or who were relocated or assigned duties that prevent them from completing courses
- Allows an accelerated payment of MGIB benefits of up to 60 percent for short-term, high cost training courses that lead to employment in a high technology industry
- Includes certain private technology entities (primarily businesses) in the definition of educational institution so that veterans enrolled in technical courses can qualify for VA educational assistance benefits
- Permits veterans to use VA educational assistance benefits for a certificate program offered by an accredited institution of higher learning by way of independent study

- Allows a Vietnam-era veteran to convert to MGIB benefits if they had eligibility for the Vietnam-era GI Bill as of December 31, 1989, were not on active duty on October 19, 1984, and served three continuous years in the Armed Forces after July 2, 1985

Fiscal Year 2002 National Defense Authorization Act, *Public Law 107-107*

- Allows those who serve six years in a critical military skill and who agree to serve an additional four years to transfer up to 18 months of their Montgomery GI Bill benefits to their spouse or children

VFW Priority Goal 5: Improved Military Quality of Life

Fiscal Year 2002 National Defense Authorization Act, *Public Law 107-107*

- Grants the largest active duty military pay raise in 20 years. Enlisted troops receive at least a 6% raise, and officers at least 5%. There are higher raises of up to 10% for certain enlisted grades and warrant officers
- Increases the amount of the housing allowance by an average of 10% so that military personnel have an out-of-pocket housing expense of only 11.3%
- Fully funds the defense health program and improves the health care benefit
- Reduces the financial burden of permanent change of station (PCS) moves on military families by, among other things, increasing the lodging expense and the per diem rate
- Allows reservists to immediately have access to the Commissary system
- Directs the Secretary of Defense to help military spouses seek educational and employment opportunities
- Provides Survivor Benefit Plan coverage to surviving spouses of all military members who die on active duty and are not yet retirement eligible
- Authorizes disabled military retirees to receive their full disability compensation and retirement pay provided funding is authorized in the future

Fiscal Year 2002 Military Construction Appropriations Act, *Public Law 107-64*

- Provides \$10.5 billion for construction projects, a \$2 billion increase over last year
- Improves military housing by funding \$1.2 billion for new barracks and renovations to existing ones
- Makes needed improvements in military family housing by funding new family housing units and allowing for the improvement of existing structures

- Attends to the specialized needs of the military community, by increasing funding for hospital and medical facilities as well as for improvements to child development centers

VFW Priority Goal 6: Strong National Defense

Fiscal Year 2002 Department of Defense Appropriations Act, *Public Law 107-117*

- Provides the largest single-year increase in defense spending since the 1980s, for a total of over \$343 billion
- Provides \$15 billion specifically for homeland defense to combat terrorism and weapons of mass destruction
- Ensures military readiness by increasing funding for the critical readiness accounts
- Modernizes the armed forces by fully funding military procurement and by providing almost \$7 billion over last year's amount for research and development

S. J. Res 23, Authorization for Use of Military Force, *Public Law 107-40*

- Allows the President to use military force against those nations, organizations, and individuals and the countries that harbor them to prevent any future terrorist attacks against the United States

Other Legislation of Note

H.J. Res. 71, *Public Law 107-89*

- Designates September 11 as Patriot Day to honor the heroes who prevented the fourth hijacking over Pennsylvania and to acknowledge the spirit and resolve of the American people in the days following the attacks

World War II Memorial Act, *Public Law 107-11*

- Expedites the construction of the National World War II Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, DC, ending all new legal and bureaucratic challenges

H.R. 3392

- Renames the national cemetery in Saratoga, NY after the late Gerald Solomon, a strong advocate for veterans and for national defense

S. Res. 143

- Establishes the week of November 11 through November 17 as Veterans Awareness Week and encourages the development of educational curriculums on the important contributions veterans have made throughout our countries history