



VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

**NO ONE DOES MORE FOR VETERANS.**

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Tell Members of Congress to go Beyond Thank You  
and that Less Equals More is Bad for Veterans.

*Why draconian budget caps and sequestration means Less benefits and services which Equals More instability, burden and adverse health outcomes for veterans, service members and their families.*

The Budget Control Act of 2011 set arbitrary budget caps to reduce the federal budget's discretionary spending by \$1.2 trillion over nine years—equally divided between defense and non-defense programs. The federal budget would be further reduced by a 10 percent, across the board cut, if federal agencies exceed these budget caps. Since the budget caps were established in 2010, and were not based on actual or projected needs for affected agencies, they no longer reflect the realities of defense and veterans programs.

As a result, the arbitrary budget caps have significantly limited the government's ability to carry out programs that have seen spikes in demand, such as military training and VA health care. To the VFW, sequestration is the most significant readiness and national security threat of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and despite almost universal congressional opposition to such haphazard budgeting, no member of the House or Senate has introduced legislation to end it.

Over the past two years, countless pieces of legislation have been introduced to improve the lives of our Nation's veterans. Unfortunately, outdated budget caps, the fear of sequestration, and congressional budget rules requiring veterans to exchange one benefit for another have prevented these important bills from becoming law. Many of these bills are urgently needed and would significantly improve the well-being of veterans, service members and their families.

Put simply, less funding for critical benefits programs and services means more stress and more financial burden for our military, our veterans, and their communities. Our Nation has a long-standing obligation to provide for the needs of those who have already sacrificed so much for our well-being. It is past time for Congress to go beyond "Thank You," and prioritize those who have worn our Nation's uniform.

End sequestration, so **LE\$\$** doesn't equal **MORE.**

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## **Consolidation of Community Care Program Less Consolidation = More Confusion**

**Issue:** VA has too many community care programs with distinct eligibility requirements that confuse veterans, health care providers and VA staff.

**Background:** Over the years, Congress and VA have created eight different programs and authorities for providing veterans private sector health care options when VA care is not readily available, including the Choice Program, project ARCH, fee-basis, and emergency care reimbursement.

**The Impact:** Veterans who are unable to access VA care are sent to private sector providers under authorities with different processes and requirements. As a result, veterans are unable to determine when they are eligible for private sector care, and confusion by private sector doctors leads to veterans being improperly billed for care VA is required to cover. The lack of a system wide program with clear and veteran-centric eligibility standards limits VA from providing veterans the care and services they have earned and deserve.

**Where It Stands:** A number of common sense and bi-partisan bills to consolidate VA's community care authorities have been introduced in the House and Senate. These bills have failed to pass due to budget rules requiring Congress to cut one veterans benefit to pay for another.

**What Needs to be Done:** Congress must readjust draconian budget caps that impede VA's ability to provide veterans timely access to high quality, comprehensive, and veteran-centric care and pass legislation to improve VA community care programs, without having to cut other veterans programs.

**Commitment:** Will you sponsor legislation to end sequestration and renegotiate the Budget Control Act of 2011 budget caps to ensure VA is able to provide veterans timely access to the health care they have earned?

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## Caregiver Benefits Less Assistance = More Financial Instability

**Issue:** Caregiver Benefits are currently provided to only Post-9/11 veterans.

**Background:** VA provides a monthly stipend, mental health and medical care, and respite care for caregivers of severely disabled Post-9/11 veterans, but not to caregivers of veterans of previous eras. The VFW believes that severely wounded and ill veterans of all conflicts have made incredible sacrifices, and that all family members who care for them are deserving of equal recognition and support.

**The Impact:** Family caregivers who choose to provide in-home care to veterans who were severely disabled in the line of duty choose to put their lives and careers on hold, often accepting great emotional and financial burdens. The lack of a monthly stipend or supportive services impacts a caregiver's ability to provide in-home care and often results in veterans receiving more costly long-term care in an institutional setting.

**Where It Stands:** In 2014, VA reported to Congress that it could provide caregiver training and benefits for all eras of veterans, but funding would need to be increased. Congress has introduced legislation to expand caregiver assistance to all generations, but it fails to pass because of the lack of funding. Family members of veterans who would otherwise qualify for caregiver assistance still suffer, leaving them in financial and emotional distress.

**What Needs to be Done:** Congress must readjust outdated budget caps which prevent VA from expanding much needed veterans programs, and pass legislation to expand eligibility for caregiver benefits to veterans of all eras who have a severe service-connected illness or injury without taking funding from other veterans benefits or programs.

**Commitment:** Will you cosponsor legislation that will end sequestration and replace the current budget caps with limits that match the needs of veterans, so caregiver benefits can be provided to all generations of eligible veterans?

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## Toxic Exposure

### Less Research and Data = More Long Term Health Effects

**Issue:** Congress fails to provide treatment and compensation to veterans exposed to toxins.

**Background:** Service members are exposed to toxins when they are in war zones. In Vietnam, veterans were exposed to Agent Orange; in the First Gulf War it was burning oil wells; and in Iraq and Afghanistan burn pits present health care hazards.

When serving stateside, service members have been exposed to contaminated drinking water in places like Camp LeJeune, Ft. McClellan and others.

The Department of Defense and Congress waited decades before recognizing the health risks to these exposures and because proper data hasn't been collected on the health effects for these exposed populations, treatment and compensation are hard to receive.

**The Impact:** When exposures to toxic substances aren't fully researched, veterans and their families face significant out-of-pocket expenses for the care they need as a result of the exposure they experienced. Additionally, having to keep both VA and private doctors does not ensure quality care is provided in a seamless manner. Also, some children of those veterans have faced birth defects because of their parent's exposure.

**Where It Stands:** Expansion of presumptive exposure to Agent Orange for Blue Water Navy veterans, health registries for veterans and family members who may have been exposed to contaminants, and research on the health effects of exposure and possible treatments fail to pass into law.

**What Needs to be Done:** Remove arbitrary budget caps so comprehensive research can be conducted, treatments can be developed, and compensation can be provided for veterans and family members who suffer from diseases and illnesses related to toxic exposure.

**Commitment:** Will you support and vote for legislation that will properly research illnesses and provide care and compensation to those who have been adversely affected by toxins?

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## GI Bill Benefits

### Less Education Benefits = More Student Loans

**Issue:** Budget caps are causing Congress to look at GI Bill benefits to pay for other programs and services.

**Background:** In the past year, Congress has introduced bills which would take funding away from the GI Bill and instead use it for funding other programs.

**The Impact:** The monthly stipend provided by the GI Bill is meant to offset the daily costs of living that non-traditional students face. Any reduction in these benefits will place an increased burden on student veterans and their families. Congress and the American people promised a cost-free education, and any reduction in benefits breaks that promise and places more financial burden on our veterans.

**Where It Stands:** Because of arbitrary budget caps, Congress has targeted the GI Bill to pay for other veterans benefits.

**What Needs to be Done:** Remove the arbitrary budgets that are forcing Congress to look at programs like the GI Bill as a fund to pay for other programs, and provide VA with proper resources so all programs and benefits can be fully funded.

**Commitment:** Will you sponsor or cosponsor legislation that will replace the arbitrary budget caps with funding that will fully support VA's mission?

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## **Military Discharge Upgrades Less Reviews = More Mental Health and Homelessness Concerns**

**Issue:** Veterans who have been separated from military service under other-than-honorable (OTH) conditions for adjustment or personality disorders cannot access VA mental health care for conditions that may have contributed to their discharges.

**Background:** Since September 11, 2001 more than 30,000 veterans were administratively discharged under OTH conditions for adjustment or personality disorders, many of which were likely caused by a traumatic event, that lead to PTSD, MST or TBI.

**The Impact:** These discharges have multiple negative effects. Veterans have difficulties finding meaningful employment, access to quality health care, especially mental health care, and other benefits afforded veterans.

**Where It Stands:** In 2015, DOD issued a directive that allows discharge review boards to give “liberal consideration” to the mental health issues being a reason for the lesser discharges to be upgraded for Vietnam era veterans. Legislation has been introduced to grant the same consideration to all generations; other legislation would mandate a certified mental health care provider be on the review boards; while another bill calls on a review of all service members who served in combat and were discharged with an OTH to have their discharges reviewed.

**What Needs to be Done:** End sequestration and remove arbitrary budget caps so the cost of these reviews and potential access to benefits provided by these upgrades can be funded.

**Commitment:** Will you introduce or cosponsor legislation to end sequestration and increase the budget caps so veterans with OTHs can have a fair review of their discharges?

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## **Military Readiness Less Training = More Risk in Combat**

**Issue:** Because of arbitrary budget caps and the fear of sequestration, the military has been forced to reduce funding for military training, which puts troops at an increased risk of injury or death.

**Background:** In 2011, Congress passed the Budget Control Act (BCA). BCA mandated cuts to the budget, placed arbitrary budget caps on spending, and added the threat of sequestration if spending rose above the caps. This has forced military leadership to reduce spending across the board including critical training and flight time.

**The Impact:** Cuts to training have made our military less ready for the various combat missions our military faces around the world. Flight training time has been reduced, increasing the risk of accidents and jeopardizing mission success. Maintenance delays of aircraft, ships and armored vehicles put our military's readiness at risk.

**Where It Stands:** The Armed Services Committees of both the Senate and House call for more money to be added to the Defense budget, but the Senate and House Budget Committees oppose those increases. Caps placed on the budget because of sequestration were calculated without knowledge of the increased future costs. The same caps are preventing additional funds from being given to the Defense Department without cuts to other defense and non-defense related spending.

**What Needs to be Done:** End sequestration and remove arbitrary budget caps so Congress can provide adequate funding to ensure our troops are properly trained for the current and future demands on our military.

**Commitment:** Will you sponsor or cosponsor legislation that will end sequestration and set budget caps at a level that will provide DOD with the resources it needs to properly train our military members?

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## **Military Compensation** **Less Military Benefits = More Military Family Instability**

**Issue:** The military pay and benefits system continues to be a target of DOD and Congress, because the fear of sequestration prevents DOD from meeting its mission requirements and properly paying service members at the same time.

**Background:** By passing the Budget Control Act (BCA), Congress forced DOD to reduce spending across the board. Hit especially hard has been military retirees' health care costs and service members' compensation.

**The Impact:** Military retirees now pay more for their health care, and the Prime Service Areas have shrunk, forcing certain retirees to absorb even more costs. Active Duty service members have seen a reduction in their Basic Allowance for Housing, below the Consumer Price Index (CPI), and threats to other benefits like cost-free health care, education programs, on-base child care and commissaries. These reductions add to the financial stress service members face and reduces the morale of an overworked military.

**Where It Stands:** Since the passage of the BCA in 2011, Congress has approved pay raises at levels below the CPI, as well as reductions in the rate of growth for military housing allowances and on-base programs. Congress has also increased retirees' health care out-of-pocket costs.

**What Needs to be Done:** End sequestration and remove the arbitrary budget caps so Congress and DOD don't have to choose between funding mission requirements or funding pay and benefits that support our military service members' and their families' quality of life.

**Commitment:** Will you introduce or cosponsor legislation that will end sequestration and adjust the budget caps to allow for DOD to meet its mission requirements and properly compensate our service members?



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## Compensation Offsets Less Compensation = More Financial Hardship

**Issue:** Retirees and survivors are being short changed on compensation benefits.

**Background:** Concurrent Receipt affects those military retirees who also receive VA Disability Compensation. Veterans who served for at least 20 years must also have a VA rating of at least 50% or more in order to collect both full retirement annuity and VA compensation. For those who are retired with less than a 50% rating or are medically retired with less than 20 years under Chapter 61, Concurrent Receipt is not allowed. This means that thousands of dollars are denied to those retirees annually, because Congress disallows service-connected retirees to receive both benefits at once.

When service members retire, they can opt to pay into a Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP), so if they die before their spouse, the spouse will continue to receive some annuity. If a veteran dies of a service-connected disability, their spouse qualifies for Dependent and Indemnity Compensation (DIC). If a surviving spouse qualifies for both, their SBP amount will be reduced by the amount provided by DIC.

**The Impact:** Whether it is a concurrent receipt or SBP/DIC offset, veterans and their families' incomes are drastically impacted by these offsets that take away all or part of one earned benefit because a veteran or surviving spouse qualifies for another benefit.

**Where It Stands:** Both of these issues have perennial support in Congress, with each piece of legislation drawing more than 100 cosponsors year after year.

**What Needs to be Done:** End sequestration and remove arbitrary budget caps so funds can be made available allowing disabled retirees and surviving spouses to receive their benefits in full.

**Commitment:** Will you support legislation that will end sequestration and set responsible budget caps, and work to ensure that no disabled retiree or surviving spouse has an earned benefit taken away from them?