



AFSA NEWSLETTER

Protecting and defending the quality-of-life benefits for the
"TOTAL AIR FORCE" Enlisted Corps and their families since 1961

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FY 2008 NDAA to be Addressed When Congress Returns. The House and Senate are scheduled to return to Washington during the first week of December to begin a 3-week mini-session that will wrap up the first session of the 110th Congress. Besides dealing with 11 unfinished appropriations bills, one matter of great concern to many AFSA members is the need for Congress to complete the FY 2008 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). This legislation is needed to authorize spending to enact defense-related programs. The NDAA will address changes in pay and benefits (including a 3.5 percent military pay raise) and matters such as Combat-Related Special Compensation, military health care, troop level authorizations, weapons systems procurement, program adjustments, and new programs. Sources in both chambers of Congress are optimistic that the bill can be completed in early December.

Probable Continuing Resolution. With few days remaining until the end of the first session of the 110th Congress, Congress most likely will not be able to complete the remaining appropriations bills needed to fund government programs for 2008. Therefore, it is likely they will fashion some type of omnibus, consolidated appropriations bill for 2008 spending. To date, the only completed 2008 appropriations bill is the \$471 billion Defense spending measure. The main issues in addressing such funding bills are disagreements on funding levels, deciding which programs to fund, and debate about "earmarks" (often called "pork barrel projects") attached to the appropriations bills. AFSA urges Congress to focus on taking care of the business of the people, and to get the job done before it goes home for the holidays.

Medicare/TRICARE Payment Problem. How much should doctors be allowed to receive for covered services under Medicare? This is a critical issue because many doctors might stop treating Medicare and, therefore, TRICARE for Life patients if they deem the payments they receive for services insufficient. Also, it is important to remember that TRICARE reimbursement rates are tied to Medicare reimbursement rates. Cuts in these rates could force doctors to refuse to accept either Medicare or TRICARE patients.

The problem? The current formula, called the Sustained Growth Rate (SGR), was enacted as part of the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 (amending the Social Security Act) to control the growth in aggregate Medicare expenditures for physicians' services. The intent of the change was to protect the long-range health of the Medicare program. However, in each of the last few years, congressional action has postponed implementation of the formula because it threatens Medicare and TRICARE beneficiaries by creating the probability that doctors would refuse to provide care under either program. Under SGR, however, each time an annual adjustment (i.e., "cut") is forestalled, the SGR system programs an even greater cut in physician reimbursement for the following year. If allowed to be implemented for 2008, the SGR would, in effect, cut physician reimbursement rates by 9.9 percent for the coming year. Clearly, Congress needs to take action on this problem within the next three weeks to protect beneficiaries in 2008.

The fix? While the leaders of both parties in Congress agree that they need to stop implementation of the SGR again for 2008, there is a disagreement about how to address the situation. Democratic leaders are

essentially calling for a two-year fix; Republicans want a one-year fix. While they discuss it, the clock is ticking.

Fix it once and for all. AFSA feels that it should be abundantly clear at this point that the SGR formula simply is not viable. If implemented as intended, it could well destroy the health care provider pool under Medicare and TRICARE. We would strongly encourage Congress to investigate replacing the SGR formula with an annually or periodically indexed adjustment so payment rates would better reflect actual increases in physician practice costs.

Suicide in the Military. The President has signed into law, the "Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act," Public Law 110-110. This new law recognizes that suicide among veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a serious problem. It directs the VA to vigorously address the problem, not only for those combat veterans returning from recent battles, but also for elderly veterans who are at high risk for depression and experiencing high rates of suicide. The new law calls for a comprehensive program for suicide prevention among veterans. This program is to include staff education, health assessments of veterans, designation of suicide prevention counselors, implementation of "best practices" research, sexual trauma research, a 24-hour mental health care program, a toll-free hotline staffed by mental health care professionals, and an outreach program for veterans and their families.

Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Public Law 110-110 would complement the already-in-place National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255). While anyone in crisis is encouraged to call this number, a veteran calling the Lifeline should indicate he or she is a veteran. They then immediately will be connected to VA suicide prevention/mental health professionals. Veterans needing help may also visit a nearby VA medical center or any veterans' center in their area.

"Military OneSource." The Department of Defense has set up a program to address the needs of active duty, guard, and reserve members during the 180-day period after they separate from active duty and transition back to civilian life. The programs available during this period include such issues as applying for college, becoming a parent, budgeting, challenges facing military couples, credit management, deployment, depression, family relationships, fitness and nutrition, grief and loss, selling and buying homes, issues with alcohol, men's and women's health, military family life, military spouses, paying for college, relocation, single life, stress management, and talking with kids. For more information, click [HERE](#) to visit Military OneSource or call toll free in CONUS at 800-342-9647. Overseas, call 800-3429-6477. To call collect from overseas, call OCONUS Collect 484-530-5908.

"TurboTap" Transition Assistance Web Tool. Another tool for those transitioning to civilian life is the TurboTap program. This Web site provides resources and sources of information you and your family may need to address various aspects of the transition from military service to civilian life. Offered by numerous government agencies at one Web site, this important resource can assist interested parties with such issues as job search, translating military experience into civilian success, hiring veterans, etc. For more information, click [HERE](#).

LEGISLATION INTRODUCED SINCE LAST NEWSLETTER:

S. 2330, the “**Veterans Homelessness Prevention Act**,” introduced by Sen. Barack Obama, D-IL, would authorize a pilot program within the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Housing and Urban Development with the goal of preventing at-risk veterans and veteran families from falling into homelessness by expanding the supply of low-cost permanent housing for very low-income veteran families; and providing supportive services through such housing to support the needs of such veteran families. This is the companion bill of H.R. 4161 (below).

S. 2377, the “**Veterans Health Care Quality Improvement Act**,” by Sen. Richard Durbin, D-IL, would amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the quality of care provided to veterans in Department of Veterans Affairs medical facilities, encourage highly qualified doctors to serve in hard-to-fill positions in such medical facilities, establish quality assurance standards, and ensure sufficient officials to support quality improvement of VA health care.

S. 2383 (no title), sponsored by Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-MN, would require a VA pilot program providing mobile care and services for veterans in rural areas. Such a mobile system would transport VA physicians, nurses, mental health specialists, casework officers, benefits counselors, and any other such personnel the VA Secretary considers appropriate for the purposes of the pilot program.

H.R. 4161, the “**Veterans Homelessness Prevention Act**,” introduced by Rep. Al Green, D-TX, would authorize the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, in coordination with the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, to carry out a pilot program to prevent at-risk veterans and veteran families from falling into homelessness, and for other purposes. This is the companion bill to S. 2330 (above).

H.R. 4169, the “**American Braille Flag Memorial Act**,” by Rep. Todd Tiahrt, R-KS, would authorize the placement in Arlington National Cemetery of an American Braille tactile flag to honor blind members of the Armed Forces, veterans, and other Americans. This is to support the estimated 175,000 blind veterans, and the average 16 percent of those whose injuries in Operations OIF and OEF result in severe vision loss.

H.R. 4204, the “**Veterans Suicide Study Act**,” sponsored by Rep. Leonard L. Boswell, D-IA, would conduct a study of suicides among veterans since 1997 and report to Congress no later than 180 days after enactment of this legislation.

H.R. 4219, the “**Immediate Benefits for Wounded Warriors Act of 2007**,” by Rep. Joe Donnelly, D-IN, would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, at the request of an eligible member of the Armed Forces, to assign a temporary disability rating of 30 percent upon the date of separation for members diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury. Once the member’s disability level is established, if the disability is higher than 30 percent, the veteran would receive the difference for payments already received; if the disability level is less than 30 percent, the veteran would not have to pay the difference to the government.

H.R. 4231, the “**Rural Veterans Health Care Access Act of 2007**,” by Rep. Steve Kagen, D-WI, would require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish and carry out a pilot program to provide mental health counseling to eligible veterans at facilities other than medical facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

H.R. 4247, the “**Strengthening the Transition and Reintegration Of the National Guard and Reserves (STRONGR) Act**,” introduced by Rep. Adam Smith, D-WA, would improve certain compensation, health care, and education benefits for individuals who serve in a reserve component of the Uniformed Services. It would extend transitional health care coverage to one year for mental health care; increase the amount of

basic educational assistance on a par with the active duty program; provide for nonreduction of pay while a reservist who is also a Federal employee is serving on active duty; and provide assistance to State and local governments that continue to pay employees who serve on active duty in a reserve component of the Uniformed Services.

OTHER IMPORTANT NEWS:

AF Chief to be Awarded AF Cross. Almost 40 years after the fact, Chief Master Sergeant (Ret.) Dennis M. Richardson will finally be awarded the Air Force Cross for his extraordinary heroism during a March 14, 1968, mission in Southeast Asia. Details of the mission were unavailable at press time but will be published as more information is released from official AF channels.

William H. Pitsenbarger Heroism Award. MAJCOMs are reminded that submissions for the William H. Pitsenbarger Award of Excellence are due to be sent directly to AFSA Headquarters no later than March 1, 2008. The awards are for individual acts of heroism, on or off duty, during the period 1 January to 31 December 2007. Individual MAJCOMs will receive nominations from their subordinate organizations, hold their own selection boards, and forward the nomination package for their (one) nominee to AFSA Headquarters. A selection board, approved by the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, will be held at AFSA Headquarters. The Pitsenbarger Award will be formally presented on August 27, 2008 during the Air Force Honors Banquet which follows the AFSA 2008 Professional Airmen's Conference. For criteria, deadlines, and specific MAJCOM procedures consult your MAJCOM Award and Decorations monitor.

CCAF Resource Tool Available. The Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) has launched the Credentialing and Education Research Tool, or CERT, an online research tool that links CCAF degree programs with nationally recognized professional certifications relevant to specific career fields. According to CCAF, this tool allows Airmen to find information related to their particular CCAF degree and career progression goals. They can investigate equivalent civilian jobs, professional certifications, professional organizations, and Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) testing opportunities. Those interested can read more by clicking [HERE](#).

Scholarships. The Air Force Sergeants Association (AFSA) and the Airmen Memorial Foundation (AMF) joined together to conduct a scholarship program to financially assist the undergraduate studies of eligible, dependent children of the Total Air Force which includes Air Force Active Duty (AFAD), Air National Guard (ANG) , and Air Force Reserve Command (AFRC) enlisted members in active duty, retired, or veteran status. Applications are screened and verified for eligibility prior to submission to the respective selection committee(s). The AFSA and AFSA International Auxiliary programs have membership requirements, but there are no association membership requirements for the AMF or CMSAF programs.

Eligibility: Scholarships are for Air Force enlisted members dependent children and Air Force Sergeants Association International Auxiliary members.

Applications for the upcoming academic year are available between November 1 and March 31. Completed application packages with all required documents can be sent to AFSA Headquarters between January 1 and March 31, incomplete packages or packages received after March 31 are ineligible for consideration.

AFSA, AMF (including the CMSAF Scholarship Program), and AFSA International Auxiliary award scholarships valued from \$500 to \$3,000 to students attending an accredited academic institution. The grant amount and total number of scholarships awarded are dependent upon funds available. To date, over \$1.3 million dollars in scholarships have been awarded to Air Force dependent children.

Retiree Cost-of-Living Adjustment. Earlier, we reported that military retirees, Social Security recipients, and other federal annuitants will receive a 2.3 percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA), effective December 1, 2007 (to be reflected in the January 2, 2008, payments).

DFAS further explains that retirees being paid on an account where the retiree first became a member of the Uniformed Services before Sept. 8, 1980, and retired before July 1, 2007, will receive a full COLA increase of 2.3 percent.

The COLA increase for retirees being paid on an account where the retiree first became a member of the Uniformed Services on or after Sept. 8, 1980, will be as follows:

- 2.3 percent for those retiring before Jan. 1, 2007
- .3 percent for those retiring in the first quarter calendar 2007
- 2.3 percent for those retiring in the second quarter calendar 2007
- 0.2 percent for those retiring in the third quarter calendar 2007
- No increase for those retiring in the fourth quarter calendar 2007

Retirees being paid on an account where the retiree first became a member of the Uniformed Services on or after Aug. 1, 1986, and retired on or before Jan. 1, 2007, but elected to receive a Career Status Bonus at 15 years of active service will receive a COLA increase of 1.3 percent.

Retirees being paid on an account where the retiree first became a member of the Uniformed Services on or after Aug. 1, 1986, retired on or after Jan. 1, 2007, and elected to receive a Career Status Bonus at 15 years of active service will receive COLA as follows:

- 1.3 percent for those retiring before Jan. 1, 2007
 - 1.3 percent for those retiring in the first quarter calendar 2007
 - 1.3 percent for those retiring in the second quarter calendar 2007
 - No increase for those retiring in the third or fourth quarter calendar 2007
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VA Benefits COLA. Separate legislation applied the same 2.3 percent cost-of-living adjustment rate to certain VA benefits. Monthly VA Service-connected Disability Compensation rates (veteran-alone rate) effective December 1, 2007, for the various disability levels will be:

100 percent:	\$2,527
90 percent:	\$1,517
80 percent:	\$1,349
70 percent:	\$1,161
60 percent:	\$921
50 percent:	\$728
40 percent:	\$512
30 percent:	\$356
20 percent:	\$230
10 percent:	\$117

Note: Veterans with dependents will receive higher rates.

The rate for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation for eligible surviving spouses of military veterans who died on or after January 1, 1993, will increase to \$1,091 per month. The rates for children and parents may vary. If the veteran died before January 1, 1993, the amount varies depending on the deceased veteran's pay grade.

EHRI Wall of Achievers. Air University's Enlisted Heritage Research Institute, located at Maxwell-Gunter AFB, Alabama, has a display called the "Wall of Achievers." This wall displays photos of over 140 former Air Force enlisted members who achieved fame in civilian careers or attained star ranks in the military services. Of note on the wall are President George W. Bush, USAF Chief of Staff General Larry D. Welch, Brigadier General Chuck Yeager, Johnny Cash, Chuck Norris, Gene Autry, Flip Wilson, Charlton Heston, and many others.

Major General Thomas F. Deppe, the vice commander of Air Force Space Command, at Peterson AFB, Colorado, was recently inducted into the "Wall of Achievers." Of special note, General Deppe is the current longest-serving Airman, having served nearly 41 years. Click [HERE](#) to read more about his special honor.

Guard and Reserve Virtual Personnel Center "Dashboard." An enhancement to the virtual Personnel Center-Guard and Reserve (vPC-GR) is scheduled to launch in December and will put Air National Guard and Reserve Airmen in the driver's seat of their personnel transactions. This new program will streamline

the way Airmen manage their vPC-GR account profiles, submit new requests, check the status and coordinate on existing transactions. Click [HERE](#) to read more on this important new program.

Airman Battle Uniform (ABU). In its latest Airman's Roll Call, the Air Force provides information and guidance on the Airman Battle Uniform. Click [HERE](#) to read more.

AAFES "Gifts from the Homefront" Program. "Gifts from the Homefront" gift certificates can be sent to deployed troops by clicking [HERE](#) or calling 877-770-4438. From there, BX/PX gift certificates will be sent to individual service members (designated by the purchaser) or distributed to "any service member" through the Air Force Aid Society, American Red Cross, Coalition to Salute America's Heroes, Fisher House, Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society, Operation Homefront, Operation Interdependence® or USO.

PFE Manual Development Opportunity. The Air Force has announced a unique opportunity for enlisted members to develop the Promotion Fitness Exam. In its November 25, 2007, press release, the Air Force Personnel Center announced it is now accepting applications for PFE project support. Nomination packages will be accepted until December 14 to select subject matter experts for three Performance Fitness Examination projects beginning in March 2008.

Nominees must be a chief or senior master sergeant, or a senior master sergeant select with documented outstanding duty performance in supervisory, management, and leadership positions.

Each major command may submit four to six Airmen; except Air Force Special Operations Command may submit two to four Airmen, and Air Force Reserve Command may submit one or two Airmen. Field operating agencies, direct reporting units, and joint commands may each submit one or two Airmen.

Nominations should be e-mailed via encrypted e-mail to afpc.testing@randolph.af.mil and include the nominee's:

- Name, rank and Social Security number;
- Primary and other awarded Air Force Specialty Codes;
- Civilian and professional military education;
- Complete organization mailing address and e-mail address; and
- DSN duty phone and fax number.

Nominations must also include the complete name and address of the nominee's commander along with DSN duty phone and fax numbers and the commander's e-mail address.

Project dates are March 3-21, April 7-25, and May 5-23 and will all convene at the Air Force Occupational Measurement Squadron at Randolph AFB, Texas. Travel and per diem costs for these temporary duty

assignments will be funded by AFOMS, and nominees must be available for each TDY period, though they will only be assigned to one PFE project.

Senior NCOs are ineligible for the project if they have a spouse or an immediate family member in or married to someone in the Air Force below the grade of master sergeant.

Once selections are made, AFOMS will notify each project member's commander.

Air Force's new "**Email for Life.**" New email address scheme could affect how AFSA communicates with its members. Click [HERE](#) to read the full story.

For access to the "click [HERE](#)" links, please visit www.afsahq.org