

Veterans

As a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, Sen. Brown is fighting to provide our nation's veterans with the resources and services they have earned, including improved health care, timely delivery of benefits, improved outreach, and enhanced education and job training benefits.

Passing a National Defense Authorization Act to Benefit Servicemembers and Their Families

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2013 cleared the Senate in December and was signed into law by President Obama on January 2, 2013. Among the many provisions it contains are provisions that directly affect Ohio's Active Duty, Guard and Reservist servicemembers, military retirees and veterans, and their families. The NDAA:

- Authorizes a 1.7 percent pay increase and extends bonuses and special pay for our men and women in uniform;
- Preserves TRICARE while allowing for a modest increase in TRICARE pharmacy co-pays in 2013 and a cap on pharmacy co-pays beginning in 2014 that would allow fees to rise by no more than the annual retiree Cost-Of-Living-Allowance (COLA).
- Requires that new commanders assess the climate of their organizations with regard to sexual assault shortly after assuming command and then annually and thereafter requires the Department of Defense (DoD) to make information about resources available to report and respond to sexual assaults widely available throughout the DoD.
- Requires the DoD to develop a comprehensive policy on the prevention of suicide among servicemembers. It also requires the Defense Secretary to establish a position within his office to be responsible for overseeing all suicide prevention and resilience programs of DoD military services;
- Ensures the continued maintenance of an additional 32 C-130 or C-27J tactical airlift aircraft, like those at the Mansfield Air National Guard Base and the Youngstown Air Reserve Station, to meet the Army's requirement of 40 dedicated aircraft to support Time Sensitive/ Mission Critical direct support airlift.

Helping Veterans Find Employment

Just as we invest in our servicemembers while they are on the battlefield, we should do the same when they return home. But despite their service to our nation, an unacceptably high number of veterans struggle to find work. That is why it is imperative that we do a better job of connecting veterans with the support services they deserve.

Among these efforts is the implementation of the *VOW to Hire Heroes Act*, a new law that provides tax credits for employers who hire unemployed veterans and helps connect veterans with job opportunities. By helping to connect employers with unemployed veterans, Sen. Brown is working to ensure that Ohio's veterans and businesses take full advantage of the benefits provided, including a tax credit of up to \$5,600 for hiring veterans who have been looking for a



job for more than six months, as well as a \$2,400 credit for hiring veterans who are unemployed for more than four weeks, but less than six months. There is also a tax credit of up to \$9,600 for hiring veterans with service-connected disabilities who have been looking for a job for more than six months.

The *VOW to Hire Heroes Act* includes the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program (VRAP), a joint Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Labor training initiative. VRAP provides unemployed veterans between the ages of 35 and 60 the opportunity to pursue training for new careers in high demand occupations. From welders, to paralegals, to teacher's aides, VRAP offers wide ranging opportunities for veterans seeking work.

Working to Reduce the VA Claims Backlog

Far too many veterans cannot access the benefits they have earned in a timely fashion. In fact, more veterans than ever are contacting the VA to secure their benefits—since 2008, the department has seen a 48 percent increase in claims. Too many of these claims, especially those from Ohio veterans, are backlogged. This means that veterans—many of whom are seeking assistance to deal with service-connected injuries—are left waiting. These delays are compounded by the fact that too often veterans must wade through the VA application on their own.

In May, Sen. Brown introduced the *Veterans Services Outreach Act*, which would require the VA to notify veterans filing for claims electronically that there are advocates standing by who are ready to help. Specifically, the bill would require the VA to provide information about important, time-saving assistance available from VA-approved organizations including Ohio's county-based veterans' service commissions and veterans' service organizations. Sen. Brown also pressed Department of Veterans Affairs Sec. Shinseki to cut down on the VA claims backlog that has delayed veterans' benefits and compensation claims for Ohioans.

Claims efficiency is not enough. They must be fair. Ohio continues to lag behind the rest of the country regarding the amount of benefits received by individual veterans. From dead last a few short years ago, Ohio's ranking has improved, but that progress is not enough. Sen. Brown continues to work with the VA, including a continuing conversation with the VA Secretary and the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, to come up with the policies and resources needed to make timelier and fairer decisions for Ohio's veterans.

Seeking an End to Veteran Homelessness

The U.S. must enact an all-hands-on-deck approach to combating veterans' homelessness—from the VA, to state and local governments, to non-profit and public service groups. In March, Sen. Brown met with Chanel Curry, a formerly homeless and current U.S. Army Reservist now living in Cleveland, who testified before the Veterans Affairs Committee regarding veterans'

homelessness. The hearing was titled “Ending Homelessness Among Veterans: VA's Progress on its 5 Year Plan.” Chanel’s story is similar to that of too many servicemembers. They serve bravely in uniform—but face difficulties when they return home. Our men and women in uniform, like Chanel, have served us in so many ways, and when they return from service, we must repay the favor. That includes ensuring that not one veteran is forced to live on the street.

Ensuring Veterans Receive the Educational Benefits They Earned and Deserve

Thanks to the Post-9/11 GI Bill, military servicemembers and veterans are able to take advantage of tuition assistance benefits—but some for-profit colleges are attempting to take advantage of men and women in uniform by flooding them with deceptive and aggressive marketing and recruitment pitches. Sen. Brown applauded an Executive Order issued in 2012 that will help crack down on deceptive and misleading practices targeted at veterans utilizing their GI Bill educational



benefits, as well as provide better information to military servicemembers so they can make informed choices about their educational future.

In advance of Ohio public universities and community colleges’ transition from the quarter system to the semester system, Sen. Brown called on the U.S. Department of Veterans’ Affairs (VA) to ensure that Ohio veterans receive their GI Bill benefits without interruption. Higher education administrators from many of the 17 schools transitioning this past summer expressed concerns about the delivery of GI Benefits that provide for tuition and housing stipends for Ohio’s veterans. In a letter to VA Sec. Shinseki, Brown urged the VA to coordinate with Ohio’s colleges and universities to ensure a smooth transition.

Helping Veterans Pursue a STEM Education

The United States has a shortage of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) graduates and with so many veterans taking advantage of expanded GI Bill benefits, we want to encourage them to capitalize on their military experience by pursuing STEM degrees while providing them additional benefits to help alleviate the financial strain studying a STEM field can entail. In August, Sen. Brown introduced the *GI Bill STEM Bump Up Act*, which would provide additional support and incentives for veterans pursuing degrees in STEM fields. By providing veterans through the GI Bill additional financial support, for high demand career fields we can better serve our nation and our veterans.

Assisting Veterans Affected by Natural or Other Disasters

The Honoring America's Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act of 2012 provides a number of important benefit improvements to America's veterans including, after more than 30 years, providing benefits for those adversely affected by the contaminated water at Camp Lejeune. Sen. Brown authored a section of the bill, based on his Veterans Disaster Assistance Bill, which provides the authority for the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs to declare natural disaster status similar to other agencies like the Small Business Administration and the United States Department of Agriculture. Once the Secretary declares a natural disaster under Public Law No: 112-154 the VA may:

- Provide additional Grants for Disabled Veterans for Specially Adapted Housing;
- Extend Subsistence Allowance for Veterans Completing Vocational Rehabilitation Program;
- Waive Limitation on Program of Independent Living Services and Assistance.

Record Investment in the Department of Veterans Affairs

As Congress continues to face tough budgetary battles, it is critical that resources for veterans remain complete and not part of the political rancor in Washington. Sen. Brown is working with his colleagues to ensure that any budget cuts do not affect the VA or its services to veterans.

Ensuring Veterans Make Ends Meet in Today's Economy

Congress passed a law in late 2012 to increase veterans' compensation through a Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA). Sen. Brown cosponsored the *Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2012* which will affect several important benefits, including veterans' disability compensation and dependency and indemnity compensation for surviving spouses and children. It is projected that more than 3.5 million veterans and survivors will receive compensation benefits in Fiscal Year 2013. The Veterans' COLA Act of 2012 will:

- Give veterans and their families an extra \$500 in benefits for the 2013 year;
- Adjust cost-of-living rates for almost 4 million veterans and their families to guarantee that their benefits grow along with inflation hikes;
- Increase disability compensation for veterans and dependency and indemnity compensation for surviving spouses and children;
- Supplement the previous Act with a 1.7 percent increase; and
- Adjust to allow disabled veterans accepting clothing allotments to use the benefits of Veterans' COLA.