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STATEMENT

BY

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FOR THE JOINT HEARING OF THE  
SENATE AND HOUSE COMMITTEES  
ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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Chairman Murray and Miller, on behalf of the 110,000 members of the Air Force Sergeants Association, I thank you for this opportunity to offer the views of our members on the FY 2013 priorities for the Second Session of the 112th Congress. This hearing will address issues critical to those serving and who have served our nation.

For more than 50 years, the Air Force Sergeants Association has proudly represented active duty, guard, reserve, retired, and veteran enlisted Air Force members and their families. Your continuing effort toward improving the quality of their lives has made a real difference and our members are grateful. In this statement, I have listed several specific goals that we hope this committee will pursue for FY 2013 on behalf of current and past enlisted members and their families. The content of this statement reflects the views of our members as they have communicated them to us. As always, we are prepared to present more details and to discuss these issues with your staffs.

How a nation fulfills its obligations to those who serve reflects its greatness. Since 1973 with the inception of the all volunteer force, we have continued to meet our objectives in recruiting. It is evident that today's treatment of the military influences our ability to recruit future service members, since a significant percentage of those wearing the uniform today come from of military families.

It is important that this committee view America's veterans as a vital national resource and treasure rather than as a financial burden. As you deliberate on the needs of America's veterans, this Association is gratified to play a role in the process and will work to support your decisions as they best serve this nation's veterans. We believe this nation's response for service should be based on certain principles. We urge this committee to consider the following principles as an underlying foundation for making decisions affecting this nation's veterans.

#### GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. Veterans Have Earned a Solid Transition from Their Military Service Back into Society: This country owes its veterans dignified, transitional, and recovery assistance. This help should be provided simply because they faithfully served in the most lethal of professions. For example – America lost 36,500 in the Korean War, 58,000 died in the Vietnam conflict; another 4,484 were lost in Iraq and most recently, more than 1,800 in Afghanistan.

2. Most Veterans Are Enlisted Members: Enlisted veterans served with great pride and distinction. Our volunteer force has deployed over 3.3 million servicemembers and over 900,000

have deployed more than once during the last eleven years. 45,000 of those who have deployed have Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI). 700,000 children of our servicemembers have had one parent deployed during their lifetime. We should factor in the unique circumstances of enlisted veterans, especially in the area of the needs of the servicemember and their families once they have completed their tour of service to our country

3. Decisions on Veterans' Funding Should be Based on Merit: Funding for military veterans must, of course, be based on fiscal reality and prudence. However, Congress and, in turn, the VA must never make determinations simply because "the money is just not there" or because there are now "too many" veterans. Funding for veterans' programs should be viewed as a national obligation—a "must pay" situation. If congress can vote, fund, and send our servicemembers to war, they need to facilitate, fund, and provide care for those who have returned.

4. Remember that the Guard and Reservists are Full-fledged Veterans Too! In Iraq, Afghanistan, and around the world, reserve component members are valiantly serving their nation, ready to sacrifice their lives if necessary. Since September 11, 2001, record numbers have been called up and continue to support operations. Nearly half of U.S. forces that served in Iraq have been guardsmen and reservists. Without question, enlisted guard and reserve members are full-time players as part of the "Total Force." Differences between reserve component members and the full-time force, in terms of VA programs or availability of services, are well overdue for review and updates.

5. The VA Must Openly Assume the Responsibility for Treatment of the Maladies of War: We are grateful for VA decisions in recent years that show a greater willingness to judge in favor of the service member. The VA focus on health care conditions caused by battle should be on presumption and correction, not on initial refutation, delay, and denial. It is important that the decision to send troops into harm's way also involves an absolute commitment to care for any healthcare condition that may have resulted from that service. Many veterans call and write to this Association about our government's denial, waffling, and reluctant recognition of illnesses caused by conditions during past conflicts. We applaud past decisions of your committees toward reinforcing a commitment to unconditional care after service, and encourage you to do the same in the future.

6. Taking Care of Families: Taking care of families is as essential as taking care of our Veterans. This is especially true for family members who now serve as the primary caregivers of ill or injured Veterans. By taking care of these family members, we honor a commitment made by our country to our Veterans and military members.

## ADMINISTRATION'S FY 2013 PROPOSAL

Proposed FY 2013 Funding: The Administration requested \$140.3 billion for VA in FY 2013; \$76.3 billion for mandatory benefits like disability compensation and \$64 billion is in discretionary funding, primarily for the Veterans Health Administration. These amounts represent a welcomed 10.5 percent increase over FY 2012 levels but falls roughly \$4 billion short of funding levels recommend by The Independent Budget, a document co-authored by the VFW, AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, and Paralyzed Veterans of America. AFSA endorses the Independent Budget because we believe this careful review of Veterans programs reflects a more accurate assessment of the funding VA will need in the coming year.

With thousands of service members slated to be released by DoD in the coming months, many of them will turn to the VA for their care. None of these patriots should be turned away or their care delayed and it is imperative that VA receives a full complement of resources to address this shift in the nation's obligation. We strongly urge these committees to review the Administration's proposed funding levels and boost them where appropriate.

**Sequestration:** Our members are concerned with the prospect of sequestration and how it could undermine VA funding in the coming years. Due to an unintended conflict in law, VA could still face a two percent cut in their medical care budget as a result of last year's budget deficit reduction agreement. Such a cut would severely impair the department's ability to provide the life-saving healthcare America's veterans have earned and deserve.

Although assurances have been given this will not happen, nevertheless, this discrepancy exists and it must be resolved soon, and with absolute certainty. Our Veterans deserve no less. The Air Force Sergeants Association endorses Chairman Miller's bill, H.R. 3895, the "Protect VA Healthcare Act of 2012," and the Senate companion measure, S. 2128, offered by Senator Jon Tester which provides this clarity.

We urge you not to delay in advancing this important legislation, and call on Congress as a whole to pass it as quickly as possible so Veterans and the department won't be left wondering when, or if the rug will be pulled out from underneath them.

#### VETERANS HEALTH CARE

**Wounded Warriors:** Nearly 48,000 service members have been wounded in action over the past eleven years. Thousands of others have suffered service-connected illness and injuries in related support actions. As a nation, we have no greater responsibility than to care for our warriors now suffering from the maladies of war. We are pleased that the budget continues to show high levels of support for Wounded Warrior care. We hope this support never wanes.

Continued emphasis and funding is needed for VA programs that address Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the two "signature injuries" of the most current conflicts. Oftentimes TBI and PTSD do not produce visible signs until long after the battle is over. Nor are they easy to treat. There is no "one size fits all" treatment and VA must research and ensure a variety of effective ones are readily available. At the same time, greater numbers of Veterans are returning from the battlefield with significant visual and auditory impairments. We are concerned that VA may not have adequate resources to address the influx of Veterans with auditory and visual disabilities, and believe this area of care merits further study by these committees.

**Care for Women Veterans:** We applaud the actions of your committees in recent years for championing women Veteran issues! The unique health care requirements of women Veterans must be addressed with a sense of higher urgency from Congress. According to a recent VA Fact Sheet, more than 1.8 of the nations 22.2 million Veterans are women. Currently, women make up more than 19 percent of the active duty Air Force and approximately 21 percent of the Air Force Reserve (Air Force Personnel Center). We currently have more than 214,000 women serving in the DoD today, many of whom served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Of those who have served, VA estimates that more than 40 percent have already enrolled for healthcare, a percentage that is expected to double in the next 20 years. They too suffer from the same effects of battle as

many of their fellow male service members; such as PTSD, TBI, and Wounded Warrior issues that come with wearing the uniform. As the number of women veteran's increases, VA must be funded accordingly to meet their specific health care needs. We have been transitioning over the years away from the large male population of previous wars and conflicts and we must absolutely make sure that we do not neglect the needs of these women who have volunteered to serve our country.

**Defense Centers of Excellence:** VA should actively support the efforts of many Defense Centers of Excellence (DCOE) which have been created to address specific areas of military related medicine. Their participation with each of the individual DCOE's will contribute to the diagnosis and treatment of the many types of severe injuries Veterans are experiencing as a result of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**Family Caregivers:** Family Caregivers provide crucial support in caring for Veterans and AFSA greatly appreciates the work of these committees in passing the "Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010" (P.L. 111-163), now commonly known as the "Caregiver Bill." This important piece of legislation provides a monthly stipend, respite care, mental and medical health care, and secures necessary training and certifications required for caregivers to meet the specific needs of injured OEF/OIF Veterans. VA recognizes that Family Caregivers in a home environment can enhance the health and well-being of Veterans under VA care. The families of these injured Veterans want to provide this care and the Caregiver Bill turned that into a reality for many. Anything we can do to further alleviate the burden they have accepted would be most appropriate.

At the same time, AFSA strongly supports the full expansion of the caregiver program to include Veterans of other engagements. There should be no distinction in the sacrifices made by a severely disabled veteran or their family, regardless of where or when they served. The service of our veterans from previous wars must be honored similarly, and Congress must support and oversee a timely and fair implementation of P.L. 111-163 that provides these caregiver benefits to veterans of all eras.

**Support the judicious use of VA-DoD sharing arrangements:** AFSA supports the judicious use of VA-DoD sharing arrangements involving network inclusion in the DoD health care program, especially when it includes consolidating physical examinations at the time of separation. It makes no sense to order a full physical exam on your retirement from the military and then within 30 days the VA has ordered their own complete physical exam with most of the same exotic and expensive exams. The decision to end that duplication process represents a good, common-sense approach that should eliminate problems of inconsistency, save time, and take care of veterans in a timely manner. Initiatives like this will save funding dollars. However, AFSA recommends that these committees closely monitor the collaboration process to ensure these sharing projects actually improve access and quality of care for eligible beneficiaries. DoD beneficiary participation in VA facilities must never endanger the scope or availability of care for traditional VA patients, nor should any VA-DoD sharing arrangement jeopardize access and/or treatment of DoD health services beneficiaries. One example of a successful joint sharing arrangement is the new clinic with ambulatory care services being in Colorado Springs, Colorado. This will aid the large number of veterans remaining in the area and support the

increases in Colorado Springs as a result of BRAC initiatives. The VA and DoD each have a lengthy and comprehensive history of agreeing to work on such projects, but follow-through is lacking. We urge these committees to encourage joint VA-DoD efforts, but ask you to exercise close oversight to ensure such arrangements are implemented properly.

**Support VA Subvention:** With more than 40 percent of veterans eligible for Medicare, VA-Medicare subvention is a very promising venture, and AFSA offers support for this effort. Under this plan, Medicare would reimburse the VA for care the VA provides to non-disabled Medicare-eligible veterans at VA medical facilities. This funding method would, no doubt, enhance elderly veterans' access to VA health care and enhance access for many veterans.

**Other Healthcare Issues:** Other Veteran's health-care issues not addressed in this statement but included in our Associations top priorities are:

- Limit user fees and prescription co-pay increases at VA medical facilities
- Require the VA to accept licensed civilian medical/dental provider prescriptions
- Pursue the VA to have chiropractic care where possible

## GENERAL VETERANS ISSUES

“Seamless” Transferable Medical Records - Speedier Claims Processing and Improved Accuracy: For many veterans, association with the VA begins with the claims process. Proposed increases in funding and manpower mentioned in the Administration's budget plan are admirable. The backlog for compensation and pension, education and appeals claims is a disgrace! At the time this testimony was prepared, VA's Monday Morning Workload Report showed more than 1.4 million claims were pending. 600,979 or 66 percent have been pending for more than 125 days and this is unacceptable! I don't profess to be an expert here, but I am aware larger VSOs have already made recommendations to these committees in this area—changes my organization can and will support. One thing is clear: the record numbers of veterans generated by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq underscore the importance of accelerating DoD and VA plans to seamlessly transfer medical information and records between the two federal departments. The implementation of a true, Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record is long overdue and a welcomed step into the 21st century. At the same time there needs to be greater emphasis on accurately processing initial claims, which would reduce appeals and secondary submissions. Most important, it would better serve the needs of Veterans who rely on the timely approval of VA benefits and services.

**Transition Assistance Program:** The VOW To Hire Heroes Act made the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), an interagency workshop coordinated by Departments of Defense, Labor and Veterans Affairs, mandatory for service members to help them secure meaningful employment at the end of their service. We appreciate the efforts of these committees to make sure all separating members receive this important transition benefit. At the same time, AFSA is concerned with the fact that the content of TAP has changed very little in the last 25 years. We understand the Department of Labor plans to unveil a new program in the near future, and we

encourage Members of Congress to ensure it provides Veterans with current information and tools they need to successfully transition out of the military and into the civilian sector. We hope the new program will place greater emphasis on the participation of military spouses because they too play a key role in the successful transition of the entire military family.

**Policy Consistency:** We appreciate your committees' efforts to reduce the pervading feeling among veterans that our government's approach to providing adequate service to an ever-growing number of veterans is to shrink the number of patients by excluding more classes of veterans. Please continue to resist any effort that limits Priority 8 veterans who deserve to have the VA option available to them--even though they may not be inflicted with service connected disabilities.

**Provide a Written Guarantee:** Many veterans are frustrated and disappointed because existing programs they thought they could depend on have been altered or eliminated due to changing budget philosophies. That has created a perception among service members and veterans that the covenant between the nation and the military member is one-sided--with the military member/veteran always honoring his/her obligation, and hoping that the government does not change the law or the benefits upon which they depend. We urge your committees to support a guarantee in writing of benefits to which veterans are legally entitled by virtue of their service. This would demonstrate that the government is prepared to be honest and consistent with its obligation to its service members and "Keep America's Promise to America's Military"

**Modification of Enhanced Per Diem for State Veterans Homes:** The State Veterans home program continues to be the preferred provider of long term care for veterans providing over 30,000 beds in 140 state veteran's homes in all fifty states. This is over fifty percent of our veteran's long term population. Veterans Affairs has formed an ongoing partnership with state governments and the State Veterans Homes, yet it is essential that Congress and the VA recognize that veterans often need a level of care greater than what the per diem reimbursement rate provides. The current challenge is the enhanced per diem program that went into effect twenty three months ago. These homes are an excellent federal investment since the states provide funding for two-thirds of total operating costs.

The State Home program for severely disabled veterans was approved by Congress in 2006 to allow veterans with disabilities rated 70 percent or greater to have the same no-cost access to State Veterans Homes that they already have to VA-operated nursing homes and community nursing homes. Unfortunately, the new program's implementing regulations did not achieve the congressionally-mandated purpose of providing parity between State Home reimbursement rates and the reimbursement rates provided to private contract nursing homes. As a result, many State Homes that admitted severely disabled veterans suffered financial losses and others interested in providing services to these Veterans found they could not afford to provide such care. More importantly, many of these Veterans have been effectively prevented from the choice to receive their long term care at State Veterans Homes.

To correct this problem, the House on October 11, 2011, voted unanimously to approve language authored by Representative Mike Michaud (D-ME) and Chairman Miller which would modify the program by allowing VA to enter into contracts or agreements with State Homes for the care of any veteran with a service-connected disability rated 70 percent or greater. This provision was included in H.R. 2074 which addresses several other veterans-related issues. Identical language

was included in S. 914, authored by Senator Mark Begich (D-AK) and approved unanimously by the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee back on June 29, 2011. Unfortunately, the Senate has not moved any further action on either S. 914 or H.R. 2074, and we urge them to pass this legislation and resolve this longstanding problem.

**Protect VA Disability Compensation:** Despite being clearly stated in law, veterans' disability compensation has become an easy target for former spouses and lawyers seeking money. This has been allowed to transpire despite the fact the law states that veterans' benefits "shall not be liable to attachment, levy, or seizure by or under any legal or equitable process, whatever, either before or after receipt by the beneficiary." Perhaps, enactment is needed to protect the probator against court-orders or state legislation that would award VA disability dollars to former spouses or third parties in divorce settlements.

**Homeless Veterans:** Ending homelessness among Veterans is a top priority for the President, VA Secretary Shinseki, many other federal agencies and this Association. Thanks to your efforts, VA now has the resources to attack this problem head-on and they appear to be succeeding. Recent figures show homelessness among the nation's Veterans declined by about 12 percent during a one-year period ending January 2011, from 76,000 to 67,500. This news is encouraging but 67,500 veterans without a place to call home are still way too many. Of particular concern: homeless Veterans, men and women, that have young children because we understand their numbers are increasing. We urge your continued support for VA's homeless assistance programs like vouchers for housing and the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans hotline which are critical to finally ending homelessness among Veterans. No one who has served this Nation in uniform should ever have to be living on the streets.

**Legitimate, Sincere Veterans Preference:** Commendable moves in recent years by VA and the Department of Labor have enhanced the job preferences available to Veterans. However, we need to ensure that OPM guidelines that allow selective hiring practices within the federal government are removed. Some Veteran applications are never even considered for employment in the federal government, due to allowed restrictive qualification wording and narrowed hiring practices. We continue to urge your committees to support any improvement that will put "teeth" into such programs so that those who have served have a "leg up" when transitioning back into the civilian workforce. One example of giving veterans a preference is the recently created Civilian Expeditionary Workforce (CEW). By meeting the goals of DoD and the administration, we can at the same time hire qualified veterans who have already gained the experience from the vast deployments in previous years who are willing to serve their country in this capacity as a full time government employee.

**Concurrent Receipt:** AFSA continues its advocacy for legislation that provides concurrent receipt of military retired pay and veterans' disability compensation for all disabled retirees without offset. Under current statues, retirees with 50 percent or greater disabilities will receive their full retired pay and VA disability in FY 2014. Congress should now focus on eliminating this unjust offset for veterans with lesser disabilities and in particular, individuals who were medically retired with less than 20 years of service due to a service-connected illness or injury. They are not treated equally!

Support of Survivors: With current military deployments and increasing casualties, it is imperative that we plan to properly take care of those who may be left behind if a military member makes the ultimate sacrifice. We commend these committees for previous legislation, which allowed retention of Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC), burial entitlements, and VA home loan eligibility for surviving spouses who remarry after age 57. However, we strongly recommend the age-57 DIC remarriage provision be reduced to age 55 to make it consistent with all other federal survivor benefit programs.

We also endorse the view that surviving spouses with military Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) annuities should be able to concurrently receive earned SBP benefits and DIC payments related to their sponsor's service-connected death. We want to thank Congressman Joe Wilson, (R-SC) for introducing H.R. 178 and Senator Bill Nelson, (D-FL) for introducing S. 260 which would repeal the SBP-DIC offset. We also thank the 177 and 49 cosponsors (respectively) who are co-sponsoring this important legislation.

As you know, the fiscal year 2008 NDAA (Public Law 110-181) created the Special Survivor Indemnity Allowance (SSIA) for surviving spouses' whose military Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) annuities were being offset, in whole or in part, by Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) which are paid by the Department of Veterans Affairs. It also applies to the widows of members who died on active duty whose SBP annuity is partially or fully offset by their DIC. Congress approved this legislation in lieu of repealing the SBP/DIC offset.

SSIA began as a \$50 monthly payment on October 1, 2008, and was scheduled to increase by \$10 each year through 2013 when the benefit expired. In 2009, a provision in the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act (Public Law No: 111-31) extended the allowance another five years and increased projected monthly rates. Provisions in the House version of FY 2012 NDAA would have extended the benefit through 2021, and raise monthly rates slightly through FY 2017, but the provision was dropped in Joint Conference. Needless to say we were disappointed with this action and continue to call on Members of Congress to eliminate this unjust offset altogether.

Finally, it is time to end the government's practice of electronically withdrawing the last paycheck of military retirees upon their death. Automatically withdrawing these funds can inadvertently cause essential payments to bounce and place great financial strain on a beneficiary already faced with the prospect of additional costs associated with their loved one's death. Congressman Walter Jones, (R-NC) introduced the "Military Retiree Survivor Comfort Act," H.R. 493, in January 2011 which would allow survivors to retain the full month's retired pay for any month the retiree was alive for at least 24 hours. To offset the cost associated with his proposal, a provision of the bill would delay the first Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) annuity payment until the month after the retiree dies. Congress passed a similar law in 1996 allowing surviving spouses to retain Veterans disability and VA pension payments issued for the month of the veteran's death. AFSA strongly believes military retired pay should be treated no differently.

Veterans Status for Certain Reserve Component Members: AFSA supports full veteran status for Reserve component members with 20 years or more of service, who do not otherwise qualify for Veterans status under current law. The House on October 21, 2011, passed H.R. 1025, which was introduced by Representative Tim Walz (D-MN). We greatly appreciate Senator Mark Pryor's leadership for introducing a Senate companion measure, S. 491, the "Honor American's



Guard-Reserve Retirees.” We urge the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee to approve this legislation which would grant this status to these deserving individuals that are “veterans” in every sense of the word!

National Cemeteries: VA’s National Cemetery Administration (NCA) is responsible for providing final honors to many of our Nation Veterans. Thanks to your efforts, many expansion projects and construction projects have been completed, are underway or are being planned to ensure everyone who served this Nation in uniform has a final resting place. The NCA has come under fire recently due to a series of audits that revealed over 240 mismarked or unmarked graves and eight veterans or their loved ones buried in the wrong place at 13 cemeteries nationwide. I want to publicly thank Rep. Jon Runyan (R-NJ), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, for holding a recent oversight hearing on the matter which stressed the importance of fixing these mistakes at National Cemeteries. As he correctly noted at that hearing, “We have a solemn obligation to cherish the memory and heroic actions of our veterans by holding ourselves and our organizations to the highest of standards.” It is our mutual duty to honor our fallen heroes as best as we know how, with all the resources we can muster, and these oversight hearings should continue until each of these problems are resolved.

Clark Veterans Cemetery: The United States left Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines in 1991 following destruction of the base by the Mount Pinatubo volcanic eruption and the collapse of base agreement negotiations. No provisions were made for the perpetual care of its military post cemetery, known as the Clark Veterans Cemetery (CVC).

The CVC was established in 1948 by moving remains and head stones of over 7,000 graves from several older U.S. military base cemeteries located throughout the Philippines to include Fort McKinley in Manila, Sangley Point Naval Station and two cemeteries located on Fort Stotsenberg. Over 5,000 alone were disinterred from the old Fort McKinley cemetery to make room for a new World War II American Military Cemetery and Memorial on the same site, forever linking the Clark and new Manila Cemetery. The Air Force continued military burials at Clark until November 1991. The CVC then fell into disrepair with overgrown vegetation, vandalism, ash damage and looting. In 1994 the local VFW Post restored the cemetery as best they could and began a program of maintenance as well as burial of our veterans. Today, over 8,600 American veterans and their families are interred, veterans who served in every war since the Civil War, to include the Iraq War. It is an abandoned and forgotten American Military Cemetery with over a hundred years of history as rich as any other of our nation’s military cemeteries.

Recently, Rep. Frank Guinta (R-NH) introduced H.R.4168, the “Caring for the Fallen Act” which would designate the appropriate entity, the American Battlefields Monuments Commission (ABMC), to care for the Clark Veterans Cemetery. ABMC manages the Manila American Cemetery and Cabanatuan POW Memorial, both a short equidistant drive from the CVC. ABMC is our nation’s professional organization for the care and administration of all of our overseas memorials and cemeteries. Ironically, the Air Force turned over the Clark cemetery records to the ABMC in 1993, but not the cemetery. The appropriation and authorization that created CVC in 1948 is the same one that created the ABMC cemetery in Manila. The two are eternally linked. The ABMC site in Manila would not exist today if those previously interred were not

moved to Clark. Clark itself is historic with a Monument to 1,055 Unknown Dead from the 1900-1906 Spanish and Philippine American Wars. The ABMC is the logical manager on the basis of history, cost, competence, and law; 36 U.S.C. 21 already provides the authority and wide latitude. ABMC does not own its land; there are no sovereignty or control issues. We are told the Philippine government is receptive to a lease or similar usufruct type agreement.

The "Warrior Ethos" embedded in the character of our uniformed men and women demands that we never forget the sacrifices of those who have served this Nation. ABMC says a "decision rests with the Congress" and we hope you will act favorably on H.R. 4168 to help ensure the Veterans interred at Clark Veterans Cemetery are properly honored for generations to come.

POW/MIAs: AFSA remains committed to provide the fullest possible accounting of missing military members from all past and future military actions, and promotes international compliance in recovery efforts. We urge the members of these committees to fully support and fund the efforts of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC), a joint task force within DoD whose mission is to account for Americans who are listed as Prisoners Of War (POW), or Missing in Action (MIA).

Full accounting for those Missing in Action is not just a term for us, it is a commitment to the memory of those missing in action and their families. We, as a nation, owe these families our very best efforts to account for all missing members of our Armed Forces.

## EDUCATION

Post 9/11 GI Bill: Arguably the best piece of legislation ever passed by Congress and thanks to the efforts of many of you here, the Post-9/11 GI Bill is providing unprecedented educational opportunities for the thousands of men and women who served in uniform since 9/11 and many of their family members. For years, GI Bill benefits have helped to strengthen our country's workforce by raising the skill levels of Americans who have served in our military and are returning to civilian life and extending the benefit to eligible family members will produce similar returns.

Providing in-state tuition rates at federally supported State universities and colleges—regardless of residency requirements, is an important goal for AFSA due to the rise in service members and their families returning to institutions to further their education and numerous PCS moves involved with the CONUS. A few AFSA members were caught off guard by changes enacted last year that required them to pay a significant portion of their children's out-of-state tuition rates because the benefit no longer covers the entire tuition amount. Ideally these institutions would cover the student under VA's Yellow Ribbon program, lowering out of pocket expenses for the service member, but the truth of the matter is not all schools do. For the ones that do participate, the school identifies which of their programs are Yellow Ribbon-covered, along with how many students they will accept under the program and how much they can pay each student so there are additional limitations. As the likely alternative given the nation's current fiscal situation, Congress should urge VA to conduct greater outreach to colleges and institutions on its Yellow Ribbon program.

Oversight of Educational Benefits: AFSA is concerned with statistics that show the cost of sending a veteran to a for-profit school is more than double the cost of a public university, and that eight of 10 educational institutions collecting the most VA benefits are for-profit schools. By

no means are we suggesting impropriety with these or any other educational institutions receiving federal money. Many institutions are offering high quality degrees that service members can use in conjunction with their military careers or aid them in employment once they separate. But given the tremendous sum of money involved, all of them tax dollars; we owe it to the American taxpayer to ensure they are getting the best “bang for their buck.” That said, AFSA endorses S. 2179, the “Military and Veterans Educational Reform Act of 2012” which was recently introduced by Senators Jim Webb (D-VA), Tom Harkin (D-IA), Tom Carper (D-DE), Claire McCaskill (D-MO) and Scott Brown (R-MA) to make critical reforms to protect the integrity of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the military’s Tuition Assistance Program. By extending accreditation protections currently in place for federal student aid recipients to veterans using the GI Bill, S. 2917 takes much-needed steps towards strengthening the protections currently in place for veteran and military students seeking to use their taxpayer subsidized benefits. It also builds a stronger support network to help our service members and their eligible family members navigate the complicated process of picking a school.

Arm Students with Information: AFSA believes users of VA educational benefits do not have access to the information they need to make sound academic decisions. The findings of a recent Senate investigation confirm many Veterans become victims of potential fraud, waste and abuse at the hands of schools that consistently fail to deliver on their educational promises. By arming students with better information about degree expectations, use, and graduation rates, we believe they can, and will make better choices with their earned benefits. DoD recently mandated this type of counseling for users of Tuition Assistance Programs; VA should suit. The department already offers similar counseling as part of its Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment Program (Chapter 36). S. 2917 would require DoD and VA to provide this in person, one-on-one educational counseling to veterans and members of the Armed Forces. Until such time as this or similar legislation is passed, VA may be able to expand their current program, on a voluntary basis, to users of GI Bill benefits.

Education Benefits for Survivors and Dependents: VA’s Survivors & Dependents Assistance (DEA) Program (Chapter 35) provides education and training opportunities to the spouse and eligible children of certain Veterans. Whereas most VA educational programs increased payment rates in recent years, the DEA program has not. As a result, the value of this benefit continues erodes as college costs continue to climb. Congress should boost these rates to more closely match the current cost of a four-year public university which was recently estimated by the National Center on Education Statistics to be \$19,620 per year in 2011.

Retirement Benefits: The Administration’s proposed FY 2013 budget calls for higher TRICARE fees, the establishment of new ones and the creation of a BRAC-like panel that will review current military compensation and recommend changes (most likely reductions) for Congress to consider. The President and many senior civilian leaders repeatedly said they will not balance the budget on the backs of Veterans. We took them at their word but now this is in fact, exactly what they are proposing to do. Apparently they lost sight of the fact that military retirees are Veterans, and we ask that you bear this in mind as deliberations on the Administrations proposed budget move forward.

Senior military leaders often speak of the importance of “Keeping the faith” with military members, particularly where earned benefits are concerned—benefits like retired pay and healthcare. Right now, Airmen are asking “Where is the faith?” And they are looking to you, the Members of Congress, to provide that answer. “Passing the buck” to service members instead of fulfilling promised benefits will only serve to undermine long-term retention and readiness. Part of the success of the all-volunteer force can be directly attributed to the robust benefits we provide military members in return for their service and sacrifice. Not just them, but their families too. Do we want to risk this? We call on Congress to oppose these fee increases and to honor the commitments made to those who have served and are now serving. All of whom are Veterans.

## CONCLUSION

Chairman Murray, Chairman Miller, in conclusion, I want to thank you again for this opportunity to express the views of our members on these important issues as you consider the FY 2013 budget. We realize that those charged as caretakers of the taxpayers’ money must budget wisely and make decisions based on many factors. As tax dollars dwindle, the degree of difficulty deciding what can be addressed, and what cannot, grows significantly. However, AFSA contends that it is of paramount importance for a nation to provide quality health care and top-notch benefits in exchange for the devotion, sacrifice, and service of military members, particularly while the nation remains at war. So too, must those making the decisions take into consideration the decisions of the past, the trust of those who are impacted, and the negative consequences upon those who have based their trust in our government.

We sincerely believe that the work the House and Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committees do is among the most important on the Hill. Year after year, these two committees have illustrated the value of non-political cooperation with the full focus of your efforts on the well-being of those serving this nation. On behalf of all AFSA members, we appreciate your efforts and, as always, are ready to support you in matters of mutual concern.

The Air Force Sergeants Association looks forward to working with you in this Second Session of the 112th Congress.