



# **POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: SVAC CHAIR STEPPING DOWN, FUNDING & APPROPRIATIONS PROGRAM UPDATES.**

## **LEADERSHIP OF THE SENATE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE TO CHANGE HANDS**

Sen. Johnny Isakson (GA), Chair of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee will step down at the end of the year, citing health issues. Isakson, 74, was reelected to the Senate in 2016 and his term runs through 2022. A special election will be held to fill the remaining two years of Isakson's term during the next regularly scheduled election, meaning that both of Georgia's Senate seats will be up for grabs in 2020.

Isakson has been lauded on both sides of the aisle for his service and is widely considered the most courteous and amenable presence in a bitterly partisan chamber. The retirement of Sen. Isakson leaves a large hole in the Senate's institutional knowledge base that, with regards to the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, will attempt to be filled by Sen. Jerry Moran (KS), who's next in line for the gavel.

Sen. Moran might be a familiar figure to veterans' service organizations and other groups involved in policy, since he is a former chairman of the Military Construction-VA Subcommittee of Appropriations from January 2017 until April 2018. He led a record funding increase for the VA in the department's 2018 appropriations bill, which authorized \$78.4 billion in discretionary funds.

Moran's past priorities signal what he could focus on as chairman and the growing concern around mental health and suicide will certainly be a top priority. In March, Moran teamed up with the committee's top Democrat, Jon Tester of Montana, to introduce a bill improving the VA's mental health services. The legislation would increase the number of mental health professionals, expand telehealth, and increase access to alternative therapies.

## **FUNDING AGREEMENTS & APPROPRIATIONS**

Since before the Summer recess Congress has been attempting to pass spending legislation to prevent a government shutdown come October 1st. The House passed 10 of the 12 appropriations bills before the summer recess in hopes that this would provide enough time for Congress and the President to broker a deal on the spending caps due to the specter of sequestration. Not only did they pass 10 of their 12 bills but they also cobbled them together for the Senate as two minibus bills. The leadership of both chambers of Congress as well as the Executive Branch then came to a budget agreement, consequently below the top-line spending levels previously passed by the House.

The Military Construction and Veterans' Affairs appropriations bill will most likely become contentious this year which very well may affect VA Homeless Programs caught in the crossfire. The Senate and House will conference on the many pieces of spending legislation that will need to be passed before the end of the fiscal year or Continuing Resolutions (CR) sunset, the major issue being a hang up on border wall funding. The current appropriations package from the Senate funds the wall at around 12.2 billion dollars, 5 billion of which is directly funded in the DHS appropriations bill in addition to 3.6 billion that was redirected from the 2019 Military Construction & VA (MilCon/VA) budget as well as 3.6 billion in the 2020 MilCon/VA budget to replace those funds. Since returning from summer recess the Senate had been slow moving on passage of appropriations bills but finally passed them out of committee on mostly party line votes due to the afore mentioned issue as well as a few others.

Both chambers have recognized the difficulties that are ahead and have passed a stop-gap Appropriations Continuing Resolution or CR. The President signed the CR the evening of September 27th, essentially delaying the funding feud deadline seven weeks to November 21st, just before the Thanksgiving holiday. Both chambers are currently set to take a 2-week hiatus from session into mid-October but with recent revelations these schedules are subject to change.

## **H.R.4285 - DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS EXPIRING AUTHORITIES ACT OF 2019 (SSVF)**

This bill included the authority extender for the SSVF program which expires at the end of the 2019 fiscal year, the program is re-authorized in this legislation through 2021. The bill was passed in the House on September 18th and in the Senate on September 24th by unanimous consent. The bill awaits the signature of the President.

## **VA AWARDS MORE THAN \$30 MILLION IN GPD GRANTS**

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will award \$30 million under the new Grant and Per Diem (GPD) program Oct. 1, to 128 organizations to provide wraparound supportive services to Veterans who were previously homeless or at-risk of losing their housing.

Recipients competed for the case management grants under a Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) published March 21. The funding will support case management services from Oct. 1, 2019, to Sept. 30, 2021. This NOFA was the first for this new grant program, which was authorized under Public Law 114-315.

VA also recently renewed \$2.4 million for 11 GPD special needs grants to fund operational costs for community organizations that serve the most vulnerable Veterans.

## **HUD-VASH APPLICATION WINDOW CLOSES**

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2019 (Public Law 116-6, approved February 15, 2019) provides \$40 million in funding for the vouchers being made available. HUD announced the availability of those funds that will support approximately 5,000 new vouchers back on July 5th. The Registration of Interest due date for PHAs was August 19th, 2019.

## **2019 POINT IN TIME COUNTS**

The most recent count of the Homeless population has yet to be reported by HUD, but those numbers are expected in early December 2019.