**16 May 2017 – AFSA Division 6 Legislative Update**

**1. Hearing on Military Personnel Issues. On Wednesday, 17 May, Lt Gen Gina M. Grosso, the AF/A1 will testify before the House Armed Services Committee:**

***"Military Personnel Posture: FY 2018"***
Subcommittee on Military Personnel
(3:30 pm – 2118 Rayburn – OPEN)

Witnesses:

Lieutenant General James C. McConville
Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1
United States Army

Vice Admiral Robert Burke
Chief of Naval Personnel
United States Navy

Lieutenant General Mark A. Brilakis
Deputy Commandant for Manpower and Reserve Affairs
United States Marine Corps

Lieutenant General Gina M. Grosso
Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel and Services
United States Air Force

**2. SECDEF Mattis Welcomes Back SECAF Wilson.**Defense Secretary Jim Mattis ceremoniously swore in Heather Wilson as the 24th Secretary of the Air Force at the Pentagon May 16, 2017.

“If we wanted to do one thing to Webster’s Unbridged Dictionary to define a Patriot with no words, we could put up Heather Wilson’s picture right next to the word, and we would explain what a patriot truly is,” Mattis said. “On behalf of the entire Air Force community, on the behalf of the Department of Defense -- welcome home.”

Wilson, who was administratively sworn in as secretary May 12, 2017, has more than 35 years of professional experience in a range of leadership and management roles in the military, higher education, government and private industry.

Mattis called Wilson well suited to lead the Air Force and said he needs her ideas and wisdom as the Air Force begins a new chapter.

Mattis said he, Wilson and Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David L. Goldfein are committed to restoring the readiness of the force, modernizing and advancing new capabilities to meet future threats, and developing exceptional leaders to command the finest combat force in the world.

“History is not predetermined or static. History hangs on a hinge. Air supremacy is not America’s ordained right and there are other hands pushing on history’s door,” Mattis said. “By Secretary Wilson’s leadership, by the superior service of America’s Airmen…they push in vain…the U.S. Air Force must be better than anyone else.”

Goldfein and Wilson first served together as cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy where they both took the oath of office for the first time as members of the same class.

“Here we stand together again as you repeat these same sacred words. What a journey it has been, and what a journey it will be,” Goldfein said. “We follow in the footsteps of service secretaries and chiefs of the past who have put their heart and their soul into building the most combat capable and lethal Air Force the world has ever known.”

From the start, Wilson said she is focused on not taking air and space power for granted.

“We have got a lot of work to do under the guidance of Secretary Defense Mattis and with the support of the United States Congress we will restore the readiness of the force so that we can win any fight, anytime, anywhere,” Wilson said. “We’re going to cost effectively modernize the force and drive innovation to bring new capabilities to the service of liberty, and underpinning it all will be a commitment to people. Thank you to the Airmen who protect the freedom we enjoy. You and your families represent the best of what it means to be an American.”

[**http://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1184549/mattis-welcomes-new-secaf-home/**](http://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1184549/mattis-welcomes-new-secaf-home/)

**2. VA Improper Payments Up Again Last Year**. This is just another area that the Trump Administration is targeting for correction: the improper, excessive, or illegal payment of VA dollars for services. An article in *Task & Purpose* explains, “The Department of Veterans Affairs cost taxpayers $5.5 billion dollars in improper payments last year, according to [a new report by the Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General](https://www.va.gov/oig/pubs/VAOIG-16-04416-231.pdf) published Monday. An improper payment is any payment that “should not have been made or that was made in an incorrect amount under statutory, contractual, administrative, or other legally applicable requirements,” according to the report.

“The findings, published on May 15, reported an increase in improper payments from $5 billion in 2015 to $5.5 billion in 2016. It also found that two VA programs failed to keep their rate of mistaken payments below 10%, and six of its programs failed to meet reduction targets set last year.

“The two biggest offenders for the department were VA Community Care and Purchased Long Term Services and Support, which had improper payment rates of 75% and 69%, respectively. That means that with VA Community Care, three out of every four payments made were incorrect. What’s more, the improper payment rate for these two programs actually increased from the year prior, when VA Community Care had a rate of 54.77% and PLTSS of 59.14%, despite the fact that the inspector general made explicit recommendations in 2015 to help improve payment processes for these two specific programs.

“This is far from an isolated problem, and it’s one that goes well beyond the VA. For the fourth year in a row, the federal government has increasingly wasted money on improper payments — incorrectly spending $144 billion in 2016, compared to $137 billion in 2015, according to the [Federal News Radio.](https://federalnewsradio.com/agency-oversight/2017/01/improper-payments-rose-144b-2016/)”

To read more, go to: <http://taskandpurpose.com/veteran-affairs-improper-payments/>

**3. GAO Cites Improper Separation of Servicemembers**. The *Military Times* tells us, “Nearly one in four troops booted ​for misconduct over a five-year period received other-than-honorable dismissals despite evidence of existing mental health conditions that may have warranted other considerations, according to a new Government Accountability Office report released Tuesday.

The findings cover nearly 92,000 service members separated for misconduct from fiscal 2011 through fiscal 2015. Investigators found that of those, more than 57,000 (about 62 percent) suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury or other mental health conditions.

Despite that, almost one-quarter of that group was given other-than-honorable discharges, making them ineligible for certain health benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

GAO researchers said that existing screening and counseling policies do provide protections against improper dismissals, but also criticized Air Force and Navy offices for failing to follow those policies.

The report, mandated by Congress in the fiscal 2015 National Defense Authorization Act, is the result of a two-year investigation and comes as VA officials work to expand health offerings to veterans ineligible for traditional services, in light of high suicide numbers among vulnerable veterans.”

You can read the entire article at: <http://www.militarytimes.com/articles/gao-report-bad-paper-dod-discharges>

<http://thehill.com/policy/defense/333667-watchdog-report-thousands-discharged-for-misconduct-had-mental-health>

4. Veterans Choice Program Scam. Military Times: There's a phone line that has been set up to scam veterans who happen to misdial the Veterans Choice Program phone number.

The only difference between the phone numbers rests in the area code, warns the[Department of Veterans Affairs](http://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/37881/attention-veterans-imposter-phone-line-attempting-to-access-credit-card-information-from-choice-program-users/). The Veterans Choice Program phone number is 1-866-606-8198. The scammer's number replaces 866 with 800.

VA officials say the scam phone number will not provide any information on the Choice Program or its eligibility criteria, but it will offer a $100 rebate for the caller's credit card information. The VA says they would never ask for this information, nor would they ever offer incentives through the Choice Program.

Also the real Veterans Choice Program hotline will automatically tell the caller that they have reached the "U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs." The fake number will only tell callers they reached the "Veterans Choice Program" after the caller asks.

The VA is currently working with the Office of the Inspector General to get the scam phone line shut down through legal action.

Information on the Veterans Choice Program can be found [here](https://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact/). You can also find further protection against identity theft by going [here](https://www.va.gov/IDENTITYTHEFT/index.asp)or contacting 1-855-578-5492. The Veterans Affairs Safety Service toll-free number operates every weekday from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m. EST and has a voicemail for after hour messages.

Source: <http://www.militarytimes.com/articles/va-warns-veterans-that-scammers-are-trying-to-take-advantage-of-choice-program-users>

**4. Legislation of Interest.**

**S. 1125,** by Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., would amend the Higher Education Act of 1965 to provide Federal Pell Grants to Iraq and Afghanistan veteran's dependents.

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