

U.S. Sen. Mikulski: FY15 Spending Bill Keeps Promises to Veterans, Invests in Quality Education, and State Waterways

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From the office of U.S. Sen. Barbara Mikulski:

MIKULSKI ANNOUNCES FY15 SPENDING BILL KEEPS PROMISES MADE TO AMERICA'S VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES

Mikulski fought to include change in law allowing federal funding to be appropriated in the federal checkbook a year in advance for veterans pensions, spousal support, compensation for service-related injuries and education beginning in FY16

Advance funding makes sure veterans aren't held hostage by government shutdowns, gridlock or uncertainty

Legislation builds on reforms to end the backlog in access to critical care and benefits veterans have earned and deserve

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senator Barbara A. Mikulski (D-Md.), Chairwoman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, today announced the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act of 2015 keeps promises made to veterans with reforms in funding and benefits claims and investing in healthcare, job assistance and housing.

The legislation has passed both the Senate and the House of Representatives and now heads to the White House to be signed into law by the President.

"I believe our support for our military on the field must be matched by support for our veterans at home," Senator Mikulski said. "Our brave men and women who fought for our freedom shouldn't have to fight for a job or fight the red tape of bureaucracy for healthcare when they return home. That's why I am working hard every day in the Senate to meet compelling human need for our veterans and military families by ensuring the federal government maintains its commitment to veterans. Voting for this bill is a vote to support our patriots and keep our

commitments to them, regardless of gridlock in Congress. Promises made must be promises kept.”

ADVANCE APPROPRIATIONS FOR VETERANS BENEFITS

Senator Mikulski fought to include a change in law to authorize funding a year in advance for veterans pensions, spousal support, compensation for service-related injuries and education benefits. This change in law will ensure that beginning in fiscal year (FY) 2016, veterans and military families have certainty in the benefits they've earned and deserve, regardless of shutdowns or gridlock in Congress. Advance funding would provide certainty for veterans benefits including compensation for illnesses and injuries while serving in the military such as combat wounds, hearing loss and PTSD. It also includes advance funding for pensions for those that have been permanently disabled while serving in the military, education benefits including the G.I. Bill ensuring military veterans get assistance with college education, housing, books and board while in school, and spousal support for deceased veterans.

“Today we have forged a new way forward for veterans that changes the lawbooks to provide certainty in the federal checkbooks for the benefits veterans have earned and deserve,” Senator Mikulski said. “This means that beginning next year, veterans will receive their benefits regardless of shutdowns, slamdowns and gridlock in Congress. Veterans and their families should not have to question whether they will get their benefits if the government cannot work together to get the job done. This change in law will better ensure that promises made to veterans are promises kept.”

ENDING BENEFITS CLAIMS BACKLOG

The legislation also builds on the Senator's 10-Point Checklist for Change included in the fiscal year (FY) 2014 Omnibus to end the benefits claims backlog and ensure veterans and their families have access to the care and benefits they've earned and deserve. The reforms would continue a surge effort until the backlog is eliminated, introduce systemic and structural changes to workforce management and claims processing procedures, and increase focuses and resources on the claims appeals process.

In order to help prevent a claims appeal backlog, the legislation includes \$5 million in additional funding for the Board of Veterans Appeals and mandates that the VA develop and submit a strategic plan to the Appropriations Committee, including metrics and a staffing model, to transform the appeals process.

Specifically addressing the claims backlog and appeals process, the legislation:

Provides \$40 million for training and hiring initiatives including targeted funding for struggling regional offices for both claims and appeals personnel and to expand the Veterans Claims Intake Program scanning system;

Provides \$20 million for hardware upgrades at regional offices to increase efficiency of the electronic claims process system;

Provides \$5 million to increase funding for the Board of Veterans Appeals;

Lays the groundwork for structural and systemic changes by requiring a National Academy study on Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) business processes, managerial structure and workforce strategies to prevent future claims processing backlogs;

Directs VBA, in coordination with the Office of Policy and Planning, to provide the Committee with a workforce analysis by regional office to define a multi-year, strategic hiring strategy;

- Requires the VBA to provide quarterly briefings on its transition to the paperless claims processing system;

Directs VBA to send an email on how to file a fully developed claim and access the transition assistance program to every veteran who signs up for membership on the VBA eBenefits electronic claims processing website.

The legislation also requires the Department of Defense (DOD) and VA establish and transmit to Congress a coherent governance plan to modernization and enhance interoperability of Electronic Health Records (EHR) between each agency and private medical facilities supporting veterans. Despite multiple agreements in the past between VA and DOD to focus on this issue, these agencies have both failed to make the necessary improvements. The bill fences 75 percent of EHR funding until an action plan has been established and transmitted to Congress and a project lead has been appointed.

The backlog of veteran's compensation claims for service-related disabilities has soared to record levels over recent years. VA reported 639,446 pending claims as of as of December 8, 2014, of which 46 percent have been pending for more than 125 days and are considered to be backlogged. Claims are often more complex due to more complex injuries.

And, while the situation is improving, the backlog at the VA's Baltimore Regional Office continues to be worse than the national average with 65 percent of claims backlogged and a wait time of 221 days.

MILITARY CONSTRUCTION

The legislation provides funding for the construction of mission critical and quality of life facilities for U.S. military personnel and their families serving around the world, including schools, hospitals, child care centers and family housing. It also includes funding for veterans medical care and benefits, and for VA facilities throughout the country. The Related Agencies funded in the bill include Arlington National Cemetery, The American Battle Monuments Commission, the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, and the Armed Forces Retirement Homes.

JOB ASSISTANCE

The legislation invests in our veterans after serving our country by helping them to find jobs. This funding includes \$237 million for the 300 Vet Center and 80 mobile Vet Centers across the country, which helps veterans adjust to civilian life through counseling, outreach and referral services.

Senator Mikulski has been a strong advocate for veterans and military families. She led the fight for the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration program to help vets reintegrate into civilian lives and connect with potential employers and was a vocal proponent of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011, which provides veterans with job training and education while encouraging businesses to hire disabled and unemployed veterans.

HELPING HOMELESS VETERANS

This bill funds a major priority of Senator Mikulski to eliminate veterans' homelessness. It provides \$1.6 billion to targeted programs in the Veterans Administration to get homeless veterans off the streets and help them get back on their feet. While only nine percent of the U.S. can claim veteran's status, nearly 12 percent of homeless persons are veterans.

SUPPORTING VETERANS HEALTH CARE

This legislation builds on veterans access to health care addressed in the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act that was passed by Congress in July and signed by the President in

August. The bill includes \$5 million for the VA Inspector General to continue a nationwide investigation throughout all Veterans Integrated Service Networks of scheduling practices and procedures.

This bill also makes sure we are meeting our commitment to our most recent generation of veterans, those who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. It contains \$4.2 billion to meet the health care needs of these veterans. The VA reports that over one million Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have used the VA health care system since 9/11.

Additionally, the bill includes important funding to improve current health care programs for veterans. It provides \$589 million for medical and prosthetic research and charges the VA to integrate complementary and alternate medicine to ensure American's heroes receive the full spectrum of treatment available.

WOMEN'S HEALTH

This legislation also addresses the cultural roadblocks female veterans encounter in the VA by providing specific direction to start reforms to increase access to women veterans.

The bill:

- Requires VA to conduct a system-wide review on the number of gender-specific healthcare providers currently in the system in order to better understand how to properly staff these healthcare providers;
- Mandates the VA to collect and analyze gender specific data. The VA cannot change what it does not know and stratification of data will allow the VA to better understand the demand mix and how to meet current and future demands;
- Encourages the VA and DoD to establish a working group at the Joint Executive Committee, focused solely on strengthening transition programs for women service members transitions from active duty to veteran status;
- Requires the VA to continue to operate the Women Veterans Call Center to respond to questions and concerns and provide information to female veterans and their families;
- Directs the VA to increase and strengthen the number of mental health services for both women and men veterans suffering from the effects of Military Sexual Trauma.

MIKULSKI ANNOUNCES FY15 FUNDING BILL INCLUDES FUNDING FOR QUALITY EDUCATION FAMILIES CAN COUNT ON FROM PRE-SCHOOL THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

"Education is the opportunity ladder of this nation," Senator says. "Every child deserves their chance to get a foothold on that ladder."

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senator Barbara A. Mikulski (D-Md.), Chairwoman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, today announced that the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act of 2015 will protect children and families by strongly supporting funding for critical national child care and education programs including Head Start, Child Care Development Block Grant, universal Pre-K, IDEA/ special education and Pell Grants.

The legislation has passed both the Senate and the House of Representatives and now heads to the White House to be signed into law by the President.

"Education is the opportunity ladder of this nation. Every child deserves their chance to get a foothold on that ladder," Senator Mikulski said. "In order to out-innovate the rest of the world,

we must first out-educate. This legislation will help ensure that America's children, regardless of the zip code they live in, will have access to quality child care and education they can count on from pre-school to K-12 through higher education."

Pre-School

High quality early childhood care and education have been proven to have positive, lasting effects for children and families. They also support the nation's long-term economic security by preparing the next generation of workers, entrepreneurs and business leaders for the jobs of tomorrow.

This legislation includes increased funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). This builds on recent passage of her bipartisan legislation, the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014 which was signed into law last month. This new law refreshes and reforms the critical CCDBG program to help families access safe, affordable, quality child care that gets kids ready for school. CCDBG serves more than 1.5 million children each month, including 19,000 in Maryland, while their parents work or attend school.

Specifically, the CCDBG legislation requires stronger inspections of child care programs; requires comprehensive background checks for providers; strengthens health and safety standards by requiring child care workers be trained in CPR and first aid, prevention of SIDS and child abuse and responding to food allergies; promotes stability by ensuring families can stay in child care programs for an entire year so that if working parents get a small raise that puts them above the income threshold their children are not kicked out of the program; and improves program quality through training the childcare workforce in developmental, physical and nutritional needs of kids and gets kids ready for school.

- **Child Care:** The bill includes \$2.44 billion for CCDBG, which helps working families access and afford child care. This \$75 million increase will help implement bipartisan legislation introduced by Senator Mikulski and recently signed into law by the President.

- **Head Start:** The bill provides Head Start \$8.6 billion. This maintains the investments we made earlier this year through the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 by continuing to provide funding for Early Head Start Child Care Partnerships, which will help serve children and families from before birth through age three. In Maryland, Head Start funding ensures that approximately 11,000 children and their working families have access to early childhood education and support services.

- **Preschool Development Grants:** The bill includes \$250 million in funding for grants to states to help them develop, enhance or expand high quality preschool programs for children aged four and up. Senator Mikulski is also a co-sponsor of the Strong Start for America's Children Act, which would provide universal, voluntary pre-kindergarten. Additionally, the State of Maryland recently won a \$15 million grant to support the expansion of pre-kindergarten as provided by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014.

"Working parents across Maryland and the nation rely on child care that is that is available, affordable, reliable, safe and exceptional. That's what every parent wants for their children," Senator Mikulski said. "We accomplish three things: promote stable and continuous care, ensure program integrity and accountability so that parents have peace of mind, and improve overall quality and coordination of early childhood programs. Through these efforts, we are fighting for children to succeed in school and beyond."

K-12

- **Special Education:** The bill increases funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B by \$25 million. This program provides formula grants to assist states and schools in

covering the cost of providing special education and related services to children with disabilities between the ages of three and 21. IDEA Part B serves almost 6.6 million special needs students nationwide, including more than 100,000 students in Maryland.

- Gifted and Talented: The bill provides \$10 million in funding for the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act, which is the only federal program that provides dedicated funding to states, districts and institutions of higher education to develop curricula and implement teaching strategies to meet the unique needs of gifted and talented students. It especially focuses on disadvantaged gifted students who often go unnoticed in and are not being challenged in school. This builds on an investment made earlier this year in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 when funding for Javits was restored.

Higher Education

With college tuition on the rise nationwide, this spending bill takes steps to make college more affordable:

- Pell Grants: The bill provides \$22.5 billion in funding for Pell Grants. Combined with mandatory funds, the bill will support an estimated maximum award of \$5,830. Pell Grants help nearly 8.8 million college students across the country, including more than 112,000 Maryland students access higher education. Pell can be used to pay for tuition, fees, books, and living expenses.

- “Ability to Benefit”: The legislation reinstates the ‘Ability to Benefit’ provision to ensure students who do not have a high school diploma or GED but want to attend college will now be eligible to receive federal student aid. In order for a student to be eligible, they must be enrolled in a career pathway program at a community college that provides education, training, counseling, and support services concurrently. Ability to Benefit increases opportunities for low-income adults seeking new skills and job re-training, and helps reduce the skills gap.

Throughout the year, Senator Mikulski has embarked on a Maryland College Affordability Tour, meeting with administrators, teachers and students to discuss the many challenges students and families face in paying for higher education, along with the impact on jobs and communities.

As the cost of higher education continues to rise at unprecedented rates and U.S. student loan debt balloons to roughly \$1 trillion – a sum larger than Americans’ total collective credit card debt – Senator Mikulski is committed to finding new ways to make college a more attainable prospect for a greater number of Maryland students.

MIKULSKI ANNOUNCES FY15 SPENDING BILL INCLUDES INCREASED PUBLIC INVESTMENTS IN MARYLAND’S WATERWAYS THAT CREATE & SUSTAIN PRIVATE SECTOR JOBS

Bill includes \$70.3 million in federal checkbook to support Maryland economy and jobs

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senator Barbara A. Mikulski (D-Md.), Chairwoman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, today announced the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act of 2015 includes \$70.3 million for U.S. Army Corps of Engineers projects in Maryland making public investments in waterways that support private sector jobs.

The legislation has passed both the Senate and the House of Representatives and now heads to the White House to be signed into law by the President.

“These public investments in Maryland’s waterways create and sustain private sector jobs. This federal investment in the lives and livelihoods of those who depend on clean and open waterways will keep businesses open and keep Marylanders working,” Senator Mikulski said. “The Corps’ dredging of the Port of Baltimore keeps our economy rolling. The Port means jobs, from the dock workers who unload the ships to the manufacturers who rely on cargo transported by

the ships. It's also crucial in preparing us for the bigger ships that will soon be sailing through the widened Panama Canal. These investments make our country safer and Maryland's economy stronger."

Senator Mikulski has been a longtime advocate of promoting job growth through Maryland's ports and waterways. The bill includes \$23.725 million for annual maintenance dredging of the Port of Baltimore shipping channels, a major economic engine for America and Maryland, supporting more than 25,000 jobs across the state – including 14,630 direct jobs. These jobs generate \$3 billion in salaries to for hardworking Marylanders and their families and \$304 million in state and local taxes. Among U.S. ports, Baltimore is the largest Port for international automobiles and receives the top rank for handling light trucks, farm and construction machinery, and imported forest products, sugar, aluminum and gypsum.

The spending bill includes funding for the following U.S. Army Corps of Engineers projects throughout Maryland:

\$23.725 million for annual maintenance dredging of the Port of Baltimore's 50 foot shipping channels making it one of the few East Coast ports deep enough to accommodate the super container ships coming through the Suez Canal and soon from the Panama Canal next year. The channel goes up the Chesapeake Bay from the Virginia Capes to Fort McHenry, a distance of 175 miles. This project was first authorized in 1970. Federal funding was appropriated for deepening between fiscal years 1987 and 1990. The deepening, from 42 feet to 50 feet, was completed in October 1990. The Maryland Congressional Delegation fought for \$227 million in federal funding for the deepening to plan for the Port's future and keep it competitive. They have provided another \$270 million to subsequently maintain the 50 foot depth and keep the Port open for business and protect Maryland jobs.

\$22.355 million for the C&D Canal for annual maintenance dredging of its shipping channels, which serve as a shortcut for vessels traveling between Baltimore and points north. Approximately forty percent of the Port of Baltimore's shipping traffic goes through the C&D Canal that connects the Chesapeake Bay with the Delaware River. This funding includes \$5.25 million for the Pearce Creek Dredge Material Containment Facility to complete remediation of this dredge placement site in Cecil County.

\$15.1 million for the continuation of the Poplar Island environmental restoration project, which is taking clean dredged materials from the shipping lanes leading to the Port of Baltimore and using it to stabilize the shoreline, create habitat area and restore the wetlands of one of the Chesapeake Bay's most valuable island ecosystems off of Talbot County. The Maryland Congressional Delegation, led by Senator Ben Cardin, recently reauthorized the expansion of Poplar Island in the Water Resources Reform and Development Act (Public Law 113-121). Chairwoman Mikulski and Senator Cardin are now fighting for funding for Poplar's expansion in the President's fiscal year 2016 budget request.

Poplar Island is the Port's only operational dredge placement site. Without the expansion coming online, the Port will be forced to overload the existing site which will compromise the environmental benefits of this project, or the Corps would reduce its annual dredging of the Port's channels. The later will put the operations of the Port in jeopardy by requiring reduced ship drafts causing a rippling effect across the State of Maryland's economy.

\$600,000 to continue ship simulation modeling in the Baltimore Harbor shipping channels for channel widening to more efficiently accommodate super container ships from the Suez and Panama Canals. The current widths prohibit these mega ships from passing each other.

\$325,000 for Baltimore Harbor drift removal to remove trash and debris from the Port of Baltimore's shipping channels.

\$450,000 to allow the Army Corps of Engineers Baltimore District to investigate conditions of federal channels when bay pilots and the public raise concerns about shoaling.

- \$2.5 million for the Chesapeake Bay Oyster Restoration program to continue efforts to increase the oyster population in the Chesapeake Bay by building new oyster habitat in the Choptank River in a DNR designated permanent sanctuary. Once oyster reefs are established, larvae will be carried by the tidal cycle to open harvest areas for the watermen.

- \$900,000 million for Assateague Island to prevent and repair island erosion caused by the Ocean City jetties.

- \$1.5 million for the Wicomico River for maintenance dredging of the upper river channels where the Port of Salisbury is located, the second largest port in Maryland handling petroleum products and grain. This waterway also supports barge traffic crucial to maintaining adequate fuel supplies for the Delmarva Peninsula.

- \$156,000 for Cumberland to support the operation and maintenance of a project that protects Cumberland, MD and Ridgeley, WV against flooding.

- \$100,000 for the Chesapeake Bay Comprehensive Plan, to develop a plan for the restoration and conservation of the entire Chesapeake watershed.

- \$1.87 million for the operation and maintenance of Jennings Randolph Lake in Garrett County, which provides flood control and recreation to Western Maryland and water quality and water supply for Montgomery and Prince George's Counties.

- \$500,000 for the Anacostia Watershed Restoration to study and develop plans to implement restoration projects identified in the regional Anacostia Restoration Plan completed in 2010. Montgomery and Prince George's Counties both receive \$250,000.

- \$140,000 for annual levee system inspections on seven levees in Prince George's County; two in Kitzmiller in Garrett County; and three in Cumberland in Allegany County.

- \$62,000 for the Army Corps of Engineers Baltimore District to coordinate the operation of the Jennings Randolph Lake project.