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2017 IFPTE Issue Brief

115th Congress

Protecting our nation's Veterans – it is the least we can do

Overview - If there is one issue before Congress that should be bipartisan it is protecting the interests of our Veterans. From providing quality Veterans health care through the Veterans Administration (VA), to protecting the benefits that come with the GI bill, to ensuring that Veterans preference hiring and retention protections stay in place in the federal government, all of these matters and others that impact the lives of our Veterans should be addressed fairly and without partisanship. However, there have been some Veterans concerns, such as efforts to privatize the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), attack worker protections for VA employees, and erode Veterans Preference, that have unfortunately put Veterans in the middle of partisan Hill battles.

Dr. David Shulkin – a good choice for the VA in an era of increased rhetoric to privatize VA health and other critical services

Despite President Trump's and some in Congress statements in support of privatizing the veteran health care services, IFPTE is pleased that Dr. David Shulkin is the Administration's pick to head the VA. He will bring a reasoned and thoughtful approach to VA health care services that is needed now more than ever. Unfortunately, proposals aimed at partial privatization to ending VA health care altogether in favor of vouchers have been put forward in the past Congress, and are expected again in the current Congress. IFPTE believes this would be a huge mistake. More than 6 million Veterans currently receive "high-quality" care, according to a September, 2015 blue ribbon panel created by the MITRE Corporation.¹ While finding problems within the VA that clearly need to be addressed, including management bloat, the report also concluded that wait times for care, "do not seem to be substantially worse than non-VA waits," and that Veterans generally receive higher quality care than what the private sector would provide. These findings are confirmed by Veterans themselves, 64% percent of whom were opposed to privatizing VHA services according to a November, 2015 Vets Voice poll. While IFPTE acknowledges that there needs to be improvements to the Veterans health system, privatization is the wrong answer.

Veteran employment is great for the taxpayer – It is true that the investment taxpayers have made in our former military personnel who are now employed in the private sector, State and Local governments and within the federal government provide veterans with the training, knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to hit the ground running upon entering civilian employment. This is particularly true with jobs that are highly complex and technical in nature, compared to non-veterans who require the training necessary to properly perform many of the highly technical jobs in today's economy. When it comes to Veterans who enter government service or work for government contractors providing services to the taxpayers, the background and expertise that Veterans bring to their jobs provide a savings for the taxpayer.

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Veterans Preference - Many of the veterans who currently work for the federal government are assisting our current fighting men and women at the Department of Defense (DOD), while thousands more are serving their fellow Veterans at the Veterans Administration (VA). Many of these jobs are very complex, require specialized skills and the unique skill sets necessary to work directly with veterans, some of whom are coming back home with the physical and mental injuries that result from war. Despite these unique skill sets, some lawmakers on Capitol Hill are attempting to do away with and/or erode Veterans Preference. Sadly, the Fiscal Year 2016 (FY16) National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which was ultimately signed into law, included language that waters down Veterans Preference in a Reduction-in-Force (RIF) situation. While IFPTE objected to that provision, it ultimately became law. IFPTE urges all lawmakers to reject all efforts to end or otherwise diminish Veterans Preference.

Other Key bills from last year's Congress that could reemerge in the 115th Congress:

1. *Career-Ready Student Veterans Act of 2015* (HR 2360, S 1938), sponsored by Senators Blumenthal (D-CT) and Tillis (R-NC) and Representative Takano (D-CA), to ensure that schools receiving GI Bill funds from Veterans are properly educating and preparing students for employment by requiring that institutions meet state-specific criteria for accreditation, certification or licensure in programs such as law, teaching, criminal justice, nursing, psychology, medical assisting, dental assisting and surgical technology. **IFPTE Position: SUPPORT**
2. *Veterans Education Relief and Reinstatement Act of 2015* (HR 3991, S 2253), sponsored by Sens. Blumenthal (D-CT) and Tillis (R-NC) and Reps. Takano (D-CA) and Gibson (R-NY), enabling the government to reinstate GI Bill benefits for students whose schools close midterm. In some cases Veterans are left with exhausted GI Bill benefits when a college they are attending closes and files for bankruptcy protection. **IFPTE Position: SUPPORT**
3. *Veterans' STEM Education Program* (HR 3949), sponsored by Rep. Mark Veasey (D-TX) to authorize additional Post-9/11 GI Bill education dollars for veterans pursuing study in the STEM fields. **IFPTE Position: SUPPORT**
4. *Veterans Employment, Education, and Healthcare Improvement Act* (HR 3016), sponsored Rep. Brad Wenstrup (R-OH) to cut the housing stipend in half if a parent transfers their Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits to his or her child. **IFPTE Position: OPPOSE**

ⁱ The MITRE Corporation Report, *Independent Assessment of the Health Care Delivery Systems and Management Processes of the Department of Veterans Affairs*, September 2015