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FRA Supports Parity for USCG Personnel

As a long-standing advocate for U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) personnel, the Fleet Reserve Association (FRA) submitted a written statement in conjunction with last week's hearing of the Senate Appropriations' Subcommittee on Homeland Security. FRA asked subcommittee members to provide adequate funding to ensure the Coast Guard can effectively perform its missions and provide pay, healthcare and other benefits and quality-of-life programs for USCG personnel on a par with those enjoyed by Department of Defense (DoD) personnel.

Pay and benefit parity for USCG personnel is an ongoing concern for the Association and FRA is troubled by programs and benefits that are authorized for USCG members, but not adequately funded. The service is often faced with the difficult decision to reduce or eliminate authorized benefits or cut other programs to pay for them.

FRA's top legislative priority for 2012 is to ensure adequate funding for military healthcare programs, including the Coast Guard Health Care Fund, to meet readiness needs and ensure access to quality care for all beneficiaries. The Association opposes proposals to increase TRICARE fees in FY 2013 over and above the 13-percent increase already being levied on USCG retirees enrolled in TRICARE Prime. FRA also expressed concern about low reimbursement rates that deter physicians from accepting TRICARE-covered patients, making it particularly difficult for USCG personnel living in remote areas to find healthcare providers.

FRA noted the 4,013 USCG family housing units that are, on average, more than 40 years old. "The costs of maintaining and recapitalizing these units are compounding and funds are not available to keep pace with essential maintenance and replacement requirements," explained Joe Barnes, FRA's national executive director. "DoD privatized approximately 85 percent of its homes using public-private venture (PPV) authorities, however, the Coast Guard is unable to leverage the same equity." Based on the limited number and substandard quality of the USCG's current housing inventory, most personnel collect Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) to pay for private off-base quarters. (FRA supports reform of DoD housing standards that also affect USCG personnel, particularly mid- and senior-level enlisted members.)

Availability and accessibility to quality, affordable child care is also a major concern. The Coast Guard operates nine child development centers, but many USCG families must rely on subsidies to pay for more costly private-sector care. FRA asked subcommittee members to support the Coast Guard's efforts to assist with child care costs, particularly in remote, high-cost areas, where USCG personnel are often stationed.

FRA's statement also references the Association's support for the proposed 1.7-percent pay hike for active duty service members in FY 2013 and the Administration's call to reduce USCG end strength, without a corresponding reduction in Coast Guard operational requirements. The Association asked the panel to ensure funding is available to adequately man the service to meet significant operational demands.

Visit www.fra.org/testimony to read FRA's full statement.

About FRA

FRA is a congressionally chartered, non-profit organization representing the interests of current and former enlisted members of the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard. In addition to its advocacy work on Capitol Hill in support of enlisted personnel, FRA sponsors a national Americanism Essay Contest and assists its members with disaster relief grants. The Association has also established the FRA Education Foundation that solicits contributions to support scholarship awards to deserving college students.

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