

# The Elks Government Relations Report

## Items of Interest from the Congress, State Legislatures and the Courts

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### **Guard Troops Destined For More Service in Iraq**

The decision to increase U.S. forces in Iraq means that more than 14,000 National Guard troops will be called up for additional tours, shortening their time between deployments.

For the first time since troops were mobilized after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the Pentagon is abandoning its limit on the time National Guard and Reserve troops can be required to serve on active duty. Until now, cumulative time on active duty for Guard and Reserve personnel could not exceed 24 months.

The news provides added incentives for lodges to step up their "Army of Hope" program to support families of Guard and Reserve personnel who are being called up.

Guard units from Arkansas, Indiana, Oklahoma and Ohio will be among those deployed. The Oklahoma unit, a combat brigade with one battalion currently in Afghanistan, had not been scheduled to go back to Iraq until 2010, and brigades from the other three states not until 2009. Each brigade has about 3,500 soldiers.

Soldiers who usually drill just once a month and for a few weeks in the summer will have to begin intensive preparations right away. The head of the Oklahoma National Guard says one-third of his soldiers lack the M-4 rifles preferred by active-duty soldiers and that there are also shortfalls in night-vision goggles and other equipment. A spokesman for the Arkansas National Guard said the state's 39th Brigade Combat Team is 600 rifles short for its 3,500 soldiers and also lacks a full arsenal of mortars and howitzers. The Arkansas Guard is also concerned that the prospects of duty in Iraq could cause recruiting problems. Over the next year, roughly one-third of the soldiers in the 39th will have their enlistment contracts expire or be eligible for retirement.

### **President's Budget Request Seeks Huge Increases in Military Spending**

The President is requesting \$481.4 billion for the Defense Department in fiscal 2008, a significant increase over current Pentagon spending. In addition, the request includes \$145.2 billion in emergency funds for fiscal 2007, which ends Sept. 30.

More money is sought in nearly all defense accounts, including a 10 percent increase for operations and maintenance and near doubling for military construction. Military services propose spending \$176.8 billion to develop, build and buy ships, planes, tanks and other weapons.

Clearly concerned about becoming overextended in its use of reserve forces, the Pentagon is asking Congress to increase the size of the regular Army by 65,000, to 547,000, and to let the Marine Corps grow by 27,000, to 202,000.

## **General Says Every Marine Will Get a Chance To Fight**

After hearing a lot of complaints from Marines who haven't had a chance to fight, Marine Corps Commandant James T. Conway has issued a directive to commanders to facilitate reassignment to rotational units who have not yet deployed to a combat zone and to support any Marine's request to deploy.

"When they join our Corps, Marines expect to train, deploy and fight," said General Conway. "That's who we are; that's what we do; and we must allow every Marine that opportunity."

## **Elks Serving in Iraq Remember Lodge Members Back Home**

While most lodges focus on remembering hospitalized veterans and supporting the troops deployed overseas, an Elks Lodge in upstate New York got a dusty donation from two of its members who are caring for wounded soldiers in Iraq.

A special American Flag, which Saratoga-Wilton Lodge 161 had given to the 466<sup>th</sup> Area Support Medical Company before their mobilization last year, has come back home. In November, the flag had flown over the medical company's operations base at Camp Adder, an Army base in south-central Iraq. After the flag was taken down, Lt. Col. Richard Jamie Green, a dentist, and Sgt. First Class Pat Rocco, a lieutenant in the Saratoga Springs Fire Department, mailed it back to the lodge.

"The flag is dirty because we had two sandstorms during the week, so that's Iraqi dirt," wrote Green, who is commander of the Glen Falls-based National Guard unit. The unwashed Old Glory, along with the accompanying note and a picture of the soldiers folding it, is now displayed prominently in a framed case at the lodge.

"It's really an honor for us," said past ER and trustee George Matthei. "Our guys, our members, our brothers, are serving their country. And we hope and pray that they get home safe."

## **House and Senate Reinstate Joint Vet Committee Hearings**

The Committees on Veterans Affairs of the House and Senate are reinstating joint hearings to hear comments on the President's budget proposals for the Department of Veterans Affairs. This reverses a decision by the House Republican leadership in the last Congress that dropped the practice.

The President's budget calls for \$84.5 billion for the VA, a 19 percent increase over last year, with new funding to cover escalating costs of medical care. But the budget also calls for an increase in fees and co-payments for treatment of non-service-connected illnesses and disabilities, a proposal opposed by many veterans groups.

## **States Find Tobacco Money Is a Hard Habit To Kick**

States are discovering how addictive tobacco—and the money involved—can be. States are hooked on big money from Big Tobacco and are facing some withdrawal pains.

According to *Stateline*, a service that monitors state government actions, many states are facing a shortfall in the tobacco settlement dollars they have used in recent years to balance budgets and bolster health programs. In exchange for agreeing not to sue R.J. Reynolds, Brown & Williamson, Lorillard and Philip Morris, states have received \$53 billion during the past five years as part of the 1998 multi-state settlement.

Forty-six states are part of the original master tobacco settlement, with payments based on how many cigarettes the tobacco companies sell in each state. (Four states—Florida, Minnesota, Mississippi and Texas—have their own agreements). States can use the money to fund anti-smoking and health care, but during recent lean years, many states used their tobacco money to balance their budgets.

Now, states are taking tobacco companies back to court, claiming they were shortchanged \$813 million last year and fearing they could be stiffed \$1 billion this year when payments are due April 15. The companies say the settlement allows them to cut back on payments under certain conditions, including loss of business to cigarette makers that didn't sign on to the pact.

## **Many States Considering Per-Pack Cigarette Tax Hike**

In 2005, states received \$13.2 billion in tobacco taxes and another \$5.8 billion in payments from the multi-state tobacco settlement. At least a dozen states have legislation pending to increase taxes on cigarettes. Most proposals came from the governors, and money is to be designated for specific programs.

States and the proposed increase per-pack include: Connecticut (49 cents), for health insurance; Delaware (45 cents), to reduce infant mortality; Indiana (25 cents), for health insurance and anti-smoking programs; Iowa (\$1.00), to curb smoking and provide health insurance; Maine (\$1.00), to balance budget; Maryland (\$1.00), to provide health insurance for low-income workers. Mississippi (\$1.00), to cut in half a seven percent sales tax on groceries; Oregon (84.5 cents), for health insurance for uninsured children; Pennsylvania (36 cents, plus a 36-cent tax on cigars), for health insurance; South Carolina (30 cents), to offset cut in state income tax; Tennessee (40 cents), for education programs, and Wisconsin (\$1.25), to pay for anti-smoking programs and to offset cost of tobacco-related illnesses.

## **Teens Turn to Cough Medicine For New Way To Get High**

Teen abuse of prescription and over-the-counter medicines has become entrenched in teen culture. Nearly one in five teenagers report abusing prescription medications, while one in 10 say they have abused cough medicine to get high.

A new study by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America and the MetLife Foundation finds that more than a third of teens and their parents think misuse of legally prescribed pain-killers is safer than abuse of illicit street drugs.

Just Think Twice, a video website produced by the Drug Enforcement Administration offers the facts through black humor—a cartoon character experiences the consequences of abusing cough medicine. The video is gross at times—projectile vomiting, belching, hallucinations—but the message resonates with teenagers: “make up your own mind about cough medicine.”

Lodges that maintain websites should consider linking to the DEA site. Included are games plus a lot of graphic visuals, with teenagers telling their stories about what happened when they or their friends were introduced to such drugs as steroids, meth and marijuana. The address is: [www.justthinktwice.com](http://www.justthinktwice.com)

## **Group Challenges U.S. Position On Medical Use of Marijuana**

A group advocating legal use of marijuana for medical purposes has sued two federal agencies, challenging the government’s position that the substance “has no currently accepted medical use in treatment in the United States.”

Americans for Safe Access, a nonprofit organization based in Oakland, Calif., contends that federal regulators have publicly issued “false and misleading statements” about the medical benefits of marijuana. The lawsuit, which names the Department of Health and Human Services and the Food and Drug Administration, seeks a court order to retract and correct statements that the group called, “incorrect, dishonest and a flagrant violation of laws.”

The FDA made no comment on the suit but said that a statement issued on April 20, 2006, was still current. In that advisory, the federal government asserts that “there is currently sound evidence that smoked marijuana is harmful.” It goes on to say that “no animal or human data supported the safety or efficacy of marijuana,” which is not an approved drug.