AMERICAN LEGION

LEGISLATIVE WEEKLY

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WEEKLY GRASSROOTS NEWSLETTER

This week, we are asking Legionnaires to contact Congress to request support for the Afghan Allies Amendment! The American Legion supports this legislation, and we appreciate all the emails you have sent so far. ***Go to the Action Center to quickly email a letter of support.***

Have you had a recent meeting or phone call with your member of Congress? Report your contact today! Click here to register your Congressional contact and demonstrate the power of The American Legion advocacy in action.

The American Legion's legislative agenda for the 2nd Session of the 118th Congress. To review our priorities, you can check out our Advocacy Toolkit.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

July 17th, 3pm Eastern – National Legislative Council Training Session. Zoom link information for the NLC Training Session will be distributed closer to time.

SENATE APPROPRIATORS OK MILITARY CONSTRUCTION-VA SPENDING BILL

This article's original publication can be found here.

The Senate Appropriations Committee approved a bill Thursday that would fund military construction projects and veterans benefits, one of a trio of spending bills the panel advanced during its first markup for fiscal 2025.

The typically bipartisan and noncontroversial Military Construction-VA legislation — a Democratic summary of which was made available just ahead of the markup — was endorsed on a 27-0 vote, approving the measure for floor consideration. The preliminary bill text, issued after the vote, is here and the preliminary report is here.

The bill supports a nearly $359.3 billion topline, which includes both mandatory and discretionary spending. The total is slightly higher than the $355.8 billion (HR 8580) House appropriators are seeking to allocate in their version of the bill.

The Senate bill appears to be devoid of many of the partisan policy riders that prompted the White House to issue a veto threat and House Democrats to nearly unanimously oppose the House bill's passage through that chamber early last month.

Senate appropriators touted the bipartisan process ahead of the bill's approval Thursday. And they pointed to provisions they said would support important veterans health care programs and other critical accounts.

"When our veterans come home, we have an obligation to ensure they get the benefits and care that they have earned — and that's what this bill does with essential funding for our veterans, including critical investments to tackle veteran homelessness, provide mental health services, and get our women veterans the health care they have earned," Appropriations Chair Patty Murray, D-Wash., said in a statement.

Ranking member Susan Collins, R-Maine, expressed concern during the markup that the Veterans Affairs request is "overly reliant on carryover balances," but she praised the bill's investments in military infrastructure and support for veterans.

The VA budget request pulls heavily from unspent dollars carried over from prior years. When that cushion is nearly depleted come fiscal 2026, the administration will have to seek a big increase in discretionary funding for the agency.

Of the bill's $359.3 billion topline, the bulk of funds, or $210.4 billion, would go toward mandatory VA programs, a sum that buoyed the overall funding total. Nearly $129.6 billion is designated for discretionary spending, money that would go toward VA medical care, medical research, information technology, the department's electronic health care record system and more.

Finally, the bill includes $19.3 billion for military construction projects, an increase over the House version, which would provide just under $18 billion. Heading into Thursday, it was unclear how senators would tackle military construction funding, particularly in light of the Senate Armed Services Committee's decision to authorize $12.5 billion for Guam reconstruction in the Senate version of the fiscal 2025 National Defense Authorization Act (S 4638) after Typhoon Mawar struck the island last year. The spending bill summary doesn't specifically mention Guam. The overview states that the legislation would invest in 250 military construction and family housing projects.

Senators also agreed via voice vote to adopt a so-called manager's package of bipartisan amendments that Military Construction-VA Subcommittee Chair Kyrsten Sinema, I-Ariz., said included some additional reporting requirements and other measures. The amendment text and broader bill text wasn't immediately available for review. Another amendment, from Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., that was agreed to aims to ensure veterans are able to participate in states' medical marijuana programs.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE PACT ACT?

By Henry Howard

As the two-year anniversary of the PACT Act approaches, The American Legion held a panel discussion July 11 in the House Veterans' Affairs Committee Room on Capitol Hill evaluating the impact of the far-reaching legislation while looking ahead to ensuring that it continues to serve veterans.

President Joe Biden's signature of the bipartisan law — the Sgt. First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxins Act — ushered in the largest expansion of veterans benefits in a generation. The bill established a presumption of service connection for 23 respiratory illnesses and cancers related to burn pits, Agent Orange and other toxins. More than 1 million PACT Act related claims have now been granted, and over 888,000 veterans and survivors are now receiving new service-connected disability benefits.

"That's an impressive accomplishment, and everyone involved with the Veterans Affairs committees deserves credit," Chanin Nuntavong, American Legion executive director for

Government Affairs, said as he opened the special event. “But there is always more we can and must do to reach those still in need. Efforts are underway to efficiently triage veterans exposed to burn pits and experiencing symptoms. New and emerging FDA-approved technology can evaluate lung function more quickly and more cost effectively than traditional methods, and help streamline the process for those in need of medical care.”

A recurring topic during the panel discussion was encouraging the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Congress to establish standardized screening programs and triaging workflow. American Legion Legislative Director Julia Mathis led the discussion, kicking it off with an update on the implementation by VA.

Retired Army Col. Steve Miska, executive director of the PACT Act for VA, explained that the department’s role is to work in collaboration with partners like The American Legion and screen as many veterans as possible. “We are very focused on the toxic exposure space,” he said. “We’re not going to stop until we get it right.”

Danielle Robinson, the widow of the PACT Act’s namesake, was among the panelists that offered their perspectives. Sgt. First Class Heath Robinson began fighting for his life 10 years after his deployment to Iraq in 2006. Originally, VA denied medical coverage to Heath, stating, “there was no connection between Heath's burn pit exposure and his lung cancer.”

The stage 4 lung cancer “obliterated” Heath’s lungs, Danielle recalled, referring to a term one of his doctor’s used. “I don’t know how Heath was doing it — breathing — his last days with those lungs in his body,” she said, adding that when he was first diagnosed, he was running half marathons.

The initial advice from doctors missed the mark — your body’s changing since you are 30, your testosterone levels are off and others. Danielle stressed that their experience is precisely why the VA needs to incorporate such screening for all veterans who may be at risk.

“Imaging like this could have been very important to him because he went nine months without a cancer diagnosis,” she said. “So if this imaging would have been there for Heath to do — who knows? — he could have been here today. It’s the least we can do for our veterans today.”

Army veteran Cynthia Daniels, a Burn Pits 360 advocate, discussed having to leave her career as a Wilmington (Del.) police officer due to constrictive bronchiolitis, and autonomic nervous system illnesses, which developed from her exposure to burn pits and toxic exposure during her deployment during the Iraq War. “All of a sudden, I would get short of breath just walking upstairs,” she explained. “During traffic stops, walking from one car to the other, I

would have to stop and put my hand on one car, which wasn't like me at all as an avid runner. I could not figure out what was wrong."

Thankfully, a doctor diagnosed the condition but that underscores the need for all veterans to receive proper screening. "I am very grateful for the PACT Act but more work needs to be done," she said. "I am glad that we are talking about that here today."

An issue that remains is how Congress and VA can increase the screening and ensure that care is accessible for even more veterans, especially those who live in rural areas. Miska said options like virtual visits, mobile units and other means that bridge the distance are critical for those living long distances from VA medical centers. "Those are things that Congress can help us reach not just rural veterans but so that we can reach a lot of them." His top priority for Congress: help us get the word out.

"PACT has really helped us make some substantial changes not just how VA delivers care but how we function as an organization," he said. "We're doing things more jointly more than ever before." Robinson closed by saying the PACT Act "is very personal" and reiterated the call for additional action.

"Heath gave 110% into everything he did," she said. "The PACT Act right now is just a start. We have a long way to go to know that they are being diagnosed properly, they're being treated properly and Heath's dying wish on his death bed was that we were going to get that done. He knew it was too late for him but he knew his brothers and sisters needed to be taken care of. So, I ask you all to give 110% into this PACT Act."

CONGRESS INCHES TOWARD REINING IN STRUGGLING F-35 PROGRAM

This article's original publication can be found here.

Congress is moving closer to taking action to rein in the long-troubled F-35 program, which has failed to meet its promises and is facing new problems with the latest generation. Two top Democrats on the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) say they are having conversations about an amendment to the annual defense bill that would reduce the number of aircraft purchased by the Air Force for the next fiscal year.

While the amendment was recently blocked by GOP lawmakers, Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.), ranking member on the HASC, said that was just an initial setback and there is pressure growing on Capitol Hill to finally address the F-35 program. "Every single member with a piece of [the F-35] is starting to feel the heat for a program that is not only way over budget, way over schedule, but still hasn't produced the plane that we want," he said. "The pressure is building."

His amendment aims to tackle the latest problems with the F-35 program, specifically Technology Refresh 3 (TR-3), a hardware and software update for the fighter jet's computer system intended for the newest models under a $16.5 billion modernization

effort called Block 4. Defense contractor Lockheed Martin has struggled to apply the new update, leading to an undisclosed number of F-35s sitting on the tarmac. The Defense Department in July 2023 canceled new orders of the F-35 while Lockheed works on the issues.

Smith's amendment, also backed by Rep. Jen Kiggans, (R-Va.), is included in the House-passed version of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) but not in the defense appropriations bill that funds the NDAA priorities. The provision, blocked by the House Rules Committee, would drop the number of aircraft purchased in fiscal 2025 to 58, which is down from the 68 requested by the Biden administration. The defense appropriations bill increases the number to 76. By reducing the number of aircraft, some $850 million could be redirected to Lockheed to fix the software update issues, in effect incentivizing the contractor to invest in the upgrades.

Smith, who says he has talked to Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) about the amendment, said his provision is a commonsense way to "make the contractors spend the money" to deliver the planes they have promised the Pentagon. But Smith added that the F-35 program speaks to a larger problem that Congress needs to address: keeping down costs for increasingly sophisticated technology for weapons systems.

LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

To recognize the weekly accomplishments of our Legionnaires, we will spotlight an individual every week. These individuals demonstrate exceptional grassroots activism by meeting with/contacting their Congressional Representative/Senator to advocate for veterans. Efforts like these truly make a difference and give veterans a voice in Congress.

LaKesha Stringer, Georgia

LaKesha, for your steadfast advocacy of Legion priorities, we are honored to name you Legionnaire of the Week!

LaKesha was asked and accepted to sit and speak with First Lady Jill Biden regarding Veteran issues. Congressman Sanford Bishop (GA-02) and his office also invited her to speak on a panel at the Congressional Black Caucus in September 2022 in D.C., along with the Secretary of the VA, Chief of Staff to the VA, and the Financial Chairwoman of the VA. LaKesha says "it's an honor to volunteer with TAL and be able to be a part of reforms to shape our Veteran and Veteran Families' lives in a more sustainable, conducive way."

Thank you, LaKesha, for your report and the time you have dedicated to the Legion's legislative priorities.

If you have made a Grassroots effort and would like to be considered for next week's "Legionnaire of the Week," please fill out the Congressional Contact Report Form here. You can also email us at grassroots@legion.org with the details.

GRASSROOTS INFORMATION

Interested in what the Legion is advocating for in Congress on ***The Veteran's Role in Supporting the Military?*** Check out our information papers in the Legislative Toolkit. This is a great starting point for a conversation with your elected officials!

As part of our ongoing Grassroots efforts, LegDiv staff is available to provide **Grassroots Training** tailored to the hosting Department's needs. If you are interested in hosting a Grassroots training event, please contact grassroots@legion.org or ejohnson@legion.org.

Register for Action Alerts today at https://www.votervoice.net/AmericanLegion/Register

LEGISLATIVE DIVISION ACTIVITIES

WELCOME to Julia Funari, our new Legislative Coordinator! Julia comes to us from Eastern Pennsylvania and recently graduated from George Mason University. We are excited to have her on board and welcome her support in our Grassroots program and administrative coordination. She will be managing the email at legislativedivision@legion.org.

The Government Affairs team in DC hosted a panel commemorating the 2-year anniversary of the PACT Act and the emerging technologies that are improving toxic lung injury diagnosis and treatment. Please see the article above for details.

We have been working on preparing for National Convention, to be held in New Orleans August 24-28th. The Legislative Commission meeting will be held on Saturday August 24th! We look forward to hearing from Chairwoman Harris and Chairman Oertel.

UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

As of Friday, July 12, 2024, the following hearings are scheduled:

July 22, 2024, 4:30 PM EST: HVAC Subcommittee on Technology Modernization on "Report Card: Assessing Electronic Health Record Modernization at the Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center."
July 23, 2024, 10:00 AM EST: HVAC and House Small Business Subcommittee on Contracting and Infrastructure joint hearing on “Leveling the Playing Field: Examining the Landscape of Veteran Owned Small Businesses.”

HVAC hearings can be viewed at: Calendar Home | House Committee on Veterans Affairs
SVAC hearings can be viewed at: Hearings - U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
HASC hearings can be viewed at: Hearings – House Armed Services Committee
SASC hearings can be viewed at: Hearings – U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services

View The American Legion Legislative Handbook Here