AMERICAN LEGION

LEGISLATIVE WEEKLY

July 5, 2024

WEEKLY GRASSROOTS NEWSLETTER

This week, we are asking Legionnaires to contact Congress to request support for the Dole Act! 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

Link information for the NLC Training Session will be distributed closer to time.

VA SECRETARY CONCERNED ABOUT COSTS

This article's original publication can be found here.

Leading veterans organizations pressured lawmakers this week to approve an omnibus bill to expand community services for aging and disabled veterans as the top official for the Department of Veterans Affairs criticized its $1.7 billion price tag.

“I have concerns about new programs that don’t come with new money,” VA Secretary Denis McDonough said Tuesday about the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act, which contains 22 provisions for providing veterans’ health benefits and services in community-based settings and at home.

Hours after McDonough discussed the omnibus bill at his monthly news conference, a coalition of veterans organizations held their own news conference at the Washington headquarters of the Veterans of Foreign Wars to voice support for the bill. Participants included the Disabled American Veterans, American Legion, Elizabeth Dole Foundation, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors and Wounded Warrior Project, among others.

“With the November elections approaching, the next few weeks are the last and best opportunity for Congress to pass meaningful legislation supporting veterans,” the coalition said in a joint statement about the Dole Act.

The bill was introduced in May by Rep. Juan Ciscomani, R-Ariz., and it has 27 Republican co-sponsors. No hearings have been scheduled on the legislation, which was referred to the House committees on Veterans’ Affairs, Natural

Resources and Armed Services. But opposition from some Democratic lawmakers has raised doubts about passage of the bill.

“House Republicans have hijacked a historically bipartisan, bicameral process for veterans’ packages to push their main priority of privatizing VA health care,” Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif., said earlier this month. McDonough questioned how to fund the bill. “There are a lot of provisions in the bill and none of them come with new funding,” he said. “And I’ve discussed a lot about making sure that we’re meeting all the demands for VA in the context of the budget agreement – and it’s a very generous budget agreement.” The proposed VA spending plan for fiscal 2025 is $369.3 billion, a 10% increase from 2024.

“I know the secretary has concerns about the funding VA will require. However, creating or expanding programs before funds are requested and approved is a standard legislative process,” said Randy Reese, the executive director of the Disabled American Veterans in Washington. “Veterans have waited long enough, and we demand Congress send the Dole Act to the president’s desk immediately. VA should then seek Congress’ approval for the necessary appropriations to implement the legislation.” McDonough in recent weeks has talked about the challenge of continuing to fund VA health programs as the demand for private care increases.

“Either [the VA] purchases the care for the veteran in the community, or we ensure that the VA has all the capacity in-house to provide that care,” he said. “That gets more difficult as more veterans are referred” to private doctors for their care. Nurses and other staff at VA facilities recently warned jobs at VA hospitals and clinics have remained vacant with little or no attempt to fill them. VA nurses staged a rally this month outside VA headquarters in Washington to call attention to chronic staff shortages at department health care facilities. The nurses claimed the VA is intentionally not filling positions for nurses and other staff to keep costs down, an assertion the VA denied.

Reese said Tuesday that the goal of Disabled American Veterans and other veterans groups is not to take away resources from VA hospitals and clinics but to address deficiencies in the delivery of health care to veterans in greatest need. He said the bill has provisions that cover more services for enabling disabled and aging veterans to live at home and in their communities, in lieu of round-the-clock nursing home care.

Heather Ansley, chief policy officer at Paralyzed Veterans of America, said her organization supports the bill because it increases coverage for at-home care for veterans with catastrophic disabilities.

“When veterans hit the current cap [on reimbursements], they are often forced to make decisions that tear them away from their families and their

communities because of an arbitrary limitation on their ability to receive care in their homes," she said.

Kathleen McCarthy, press secretary for the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, said GOP bill sponsors anticipate the cost of the Dole Act could be covered by an extension of the VA home loan funding fee. "This is a bipartisan effort that has been used to fund new VA programs for decades," she said. The VA fee is a one-time payment borrowers pay on VA-backed or VA-direct home loans, according to the agency. "The VA does not have legal authority to reallocate savings from funding fees to other budgetary accounts," said Terrence Hayes, the VA press secretary. "Savings associated with funding fees are associated with a mandatory budgetary account distinct from the accounts that would be used to fund and implement other provisions in the Elizabeth Dole Act." Fee collections finance VA credit programs and are not considered government revenues for the federal budget deficit or surplus calculations, he added.

The projected $1.7 billion price tag of the omnibus bill covers community programs and home services for 10 years. Negotiated by the chairmen of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs committees, the sweeping package includes proposals to expand end-of-life home care, extend high-tech job training and connect homeless veterans with telehealth services.

"The men and women who have served and sacrificed for our nation have earned a VA that works with them — not against them," Rep. Mike Bost, R-Ill., chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, said when the bill was introduced. Proposed measures also would bring greater urgency to providing intensive mental health treatment for veterans in crisis, according to lawmakers and veterans advocates.

"The Dole Act condenses dozens of critical provisions found in several bills introduced over the past year that are of utmost urgency to the lives of America's veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors," Reese said.

HOUSE APPROVES SPENDING BILLS

This article's original publication can be found here.

The House on Friday approved a trio of government funding bills that the White House has already threatened to veto if they land on President Biden's desk, setting the stage for a bitter spending fight later this year.

The three measures — funding foreign operations and the departments of Defense, State, Homeland Security — have virtually no chance of becoming law amid opposition from the White House and Democrats in the House and Senate over the spending levels, partisan policy riders and poison pill amendments.

But Republicans, nonetheless, have sought to clear their version of the spending bills to put the party in a stronger negotiating position during talks with Democrats down the road.

The bills were approved in largely party-line votes: The Pentagon measure passed 217-198, the State Department/foreign operations bill cleared 212-200, and the Homeland Security measures crossed the finish line in a 212-203 vote.

Republicans also voted to add some controversial, partisan amendments to the trio of bills, fueling further opposition among Democrats. In the DHS measure, for example, the chamber voted 193-173 in favor of a measure that would prohibit money from the funding bill to be used to pay the salary of DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

Other amendments, however, floundered on the floor, including a number of measures that sought to cut off aid for Ukraine. An amendment led by Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) that called for prohibiting funding for Ukraine, for example, failed in a 76-335 vote.

The Pentagon legislation appropriates $833 billion in discretionary spending, marking a 1 percent bump from fiscal 2024.

The State Department/foreign operations, meanwhile, proposes a roughly 11 percent cut in discretionary spending — or $7.6 billion — and allocates 19 percent less funding than Biden's budget request.

The Homeland Security legislation allocates $64.8 billion in discretionary spending.

With the three spending bills clearing the chamber on Friday, House Republicans have officially moved four of the dozen fiscal year 2025 appropriations bills over the finish line. Earlier this month, GOP lawmakers approved a measure to fund the Department of Veterans Affairs and military construction, despite the White House issuing a veto threat.

The push for progress on the appropriations process comes as GOP leaders are trying to make good on an ambitious government funding timeline Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) laid out in October, shortly before he was elected to the top job.

Johnson at the time said he wanted the House to complete consideration of all 12 fiscal year 2025 appropriations bills by July, an aspirational timetable for the

fractious GOP conference that has struggled with intraparty agreements all Congress.

If the House does not clear the dozen bills by August recess, Johnson said in October, lawmakers should not leave Washington for the district work period.

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.

Philip Kiley, Connecticut

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

Philip recently met with staff from Congressman Joe Courtney's office in Norwich, CT.
The Congressman's staff holds a regular Veteran Advisory Board meeting and Philip sits on that Board. Philip discussed the VA-sponsored PACT Act Open House in Waterford, CT, and sought to honor a member of Post 21 who is 100 years old and a World War II Veteran. Philip also highlighted the importance of H.R. 8371 (The Elizabeth Dole Act mentioned at the top of this newsletter). Rep. Courtney supports this legislation, though he is not yet a cosponsor.

Thank you, Philip, 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 paper 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

On Monday, July 1, 2024, Leg Div Staff:

Met with Rep. Norton's (District of Columbia) office to discuss various legislation, including the Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act, the Veteran Education Assistance Adjustment Act, and the End Veteran Homelessness Act.

Talked with Congressional staffers and VSO colleagues about veteran housing and homelessness legislation and policy, specifically regarding the recent Supreme Court's decision in *Grants Pass v. Johnson,* and how it will impact homeless veterans.

Welcomed Julia Funari, our new Legislative Coordinator aboard.

On Tuesday, July 2, 2024, Leg Div Staff:

Spoke with Sen. Tillis (NC) office about the American Legion's position on the definition of a Gold Star family.

Participated in the 118th Congress Four Corners VSO Education monthly meeting to highlight several veteran education bills that the Legion supports.

Attended the VSO Monthly Health Care and Mental Health Suicide Prevention meeting, which contained a presentation from WellHive covering VA's External Provider Scheduling (EPS) process, as well as discussed mental health suicide prevention bills.

Met with Sen. Manchin's (WV) office to discuss the Star Act.

On Wednesday, July 3, 2024, Leg Div Staff:

Coordinated a call between Executive Director Nuntavong and Sen. Klobuchar (MN) regarding the NDAA.

On Thursday, July 4, 2024, Leg Div Staff:

The office was closed for Independence Day.

On Friday, July 5, 2024, Leg Div Staff:

Continued preparing for the PACT Act Panel to be held July 11 in Cannon 360.

UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

As of Friday, June 28th, at 10:00am, the following hearings are scheduled:

- HVAC, DAMA Sub - July 10th, 10:15am

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

You are receiving this email because you signed up for alerts from American Legion.

Click here to unsubscribe from this mailing list.

Powered by votervoice PART OF FiscalNote