AMERICAN LEGION

LEGISLATIVE WEEKLY

September 27, 2024

WEEKLY GRASSROOTS NEWSLETTER

This week, we are asking Legionnaires to contact Congress to request support for H.R. 7543 – *Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act!* This legislation aims to rectify GI Bill inequality for National Guard and Reserve servicemembers. *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 to your members of Congress.***

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 is available online. To review our priorities, you can check out our Advocacy Toolkit.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

March 2-5, 2025 – The American Legion's 65th Annual Washington Conference will be held at the Washington Hilton Hotel. This conference provides an opportunity for Legionnaires to meet with their respective lawmakers and hear from members of Congress and VA leadership. The National Commander will also address attendees on legislative priorities during the National Commander's Rally. More details, such as agendas and schedules, will be updated here.

VA SURPASSEES GOAL FOR HOUSING HOMELESS VETERANS FOR FISCAL 2024

This article's original publication can be found here.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has housed more than 43,000 veterans experiencing homelessness this fiscal year.

Today, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs announced that between October 2023 and August 2024, it housed 43,116 veterans experiencing homelessness, surpassing its fiscal year 2024 goal to house 41,000 veterans one month before the end of the fiscal year. VA has also ensured that 96.3% of the veterans housed so far this fiscal year have not returned to homelessness, and engaged 38,476 unsheltered veterans to ensure they have access to the housing and other wraparound services they need.

The number of veterans experiencing homelessness in the U.S. has fallen by over 4% since early 2020 and by more than 52% since 2010.

"No person who has served this country should ever have to experience homelessness," said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. "As a result of this year's efforts, more than 43,000 formerly homeless veterans now have access to the homes that they deserve. And make no mistake: we won't rest until every veteran has a safe, stable, accessible, and affordable home to call their own."

VA has also made progress in combating veteran homelessness in the Greater Los Angeles area, providing 1,647 homeless Veterans with permanent housing so far this fiscal year — the most of any city in America (for the third year in a row) and exceeding VA's FY 2024 goals for this region by 2.6%. Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority's recent Point-in Time count revealed a 22.9% reduction in veterans experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles between 2023 and 2024.

This week, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness released the federal government's first ever framework for homelessness prevention and launched a new series spotlighting local and federal efforts to prevent homelessness. Last month, VA awarded more than $800 million in grants via its Supportive Services for Veteran Families and Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem programs, and in July, awarded over $26 million in grants to support legal services for veterans facing homelessness. Additionally, last month, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and VA announced policy changes that will help more veterans receive housing assistance under the HUD-VA Supportive Housing program.

VA's efforts to combat veteran homelessness are grounded in reaching out to homeless Veterans, understanding their unique needs, and addressing them. These efforts are built on the evidence-based "Housing First" approach, which prioritizes getting a veteran into housing, then providing or connecting them with the wraparound services and supports they need to stay housed, including health care, job training, legal and education assistance, and more.

Every day, VA staff and VA's community partners nationwide help veterans find permanent housing, such as apartments or houses to rent or own, often with subsidies to help make the housing affordable. In some cases, VA staff and partners help veterans end their homelessness by reuniting them with family and friends.

Visit the VA.gov/homeless to learn about housing initiatives and other programs supporting veterans experiencing homelessness.

HOUSE LAWMAKERS URGE SUPPORT FOR CAREGIVER SERVICES TO HELP DISABLED VETERANS STAY OUT OF NURSING HOMES

The article's original publication can be found here.

House lawmakers on Wednesday urged the swift passage of legislation to better support family caregivers and home health aides who help veterans with serious disabilities continue to live at home and stay out of institutional care.

Rep. Mike Bost, R-Ill., who is chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, said he soon plans to bring to the floor the Sen. Elizabeth Dole Act, which would increase funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs for noninstitutional alternatives to nursing home care.

The legislation also would address the needs of family members serving as full-time caretakers, including providing them with mental health care services, respite care, home health aide and other assistance. It was introduced by Rep. Julia Brownley, D-Calif., in 2023, and would authorize agreements with non-VA medical and social service agencies to offer community and at-home services that are comparable to what veterans receive in nursing homes.

Expenditures for at-home care cannot exceed 65% of what the cost would be if the veteran lived in a nursing home. The change would increase the amount to 100% under the Sen. Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act.

The program provides elderly and disabled veterans — or their designated family caregiver — with a small monthly budget to pay for help with daily living activities, such as bathing, dressing and meal preparation, so they can continue to live at home.

Some veterans and their advocacy groups said there is a lack of sufficient services to support caretakers in the community.

“My husband requires supervision at all times, and I manage every aspect of his life. Our lives are full of medical appointments, countless hospital stays and the never-ending medication management,” said Vanessa Chism, caretaker for her husband, Cody, an Army veteran medically retired in 2011 after serving in Iraq.

“Cody is here physically, but I have lost my husband to traumatic brain injuries,” she said. Her husband suffers from seizures, chronic pain and cognitive impairment. But Chism said she has struggled to gain and keep access to VA-sponsored programs and services that enable her husband to live at home with her and their three children.

Bost cited new findings from the nonprofit Rand Corporation on challenges and hardships of families that are caring for veterans with serious disabilities.

The Rand study found there are more than 14 million caregivers of veterans and service members, representing 5.5% of the U.S. adult population. Most caregivers surveyed by Rand spend up to 30 hours per week providing care for veterans with illnesses and injuries from military service. Caregivers are often isolated and experience high level of stress and burnout, Bost said.

“Veterans caregivers play an unseen role in supporting loved ones. Many face emotional, financial and physical hardships,” he said.

Bost said he is hearing from constituents that they cannot find respite care after they qualify for it.

Provisions of the Elizabeth Dole Act would require the VA to award grants to improve the mental health assistance for caregivers, who might be forced to reduce work hours or end careers, he said.

Some financial help from the VA is already available through stipends, but it often falls short, Bost said.

Colleen Richardson, executive director of the VA's caregiver support program, said the VA is prioritizing respite for caregivers and has seen program use increase by more than 270% since fiscal 2022.

She said the VA funds a program called comprehensive assistance for family caregivers. The program pays a monthly stipend to family caregivers with seriously disabled veterans and provides access to health insurance through the VA's civilian health and medical program, also known as CHAMPVA.

Recipients also can receive travel reimbursement to veteran's health care appointments and qualify for 30 days of respite care per year, when it is available.

Richardson said there is assistance for veterans to hire home health aides and other caregivers who are not family members.

The VA also has started a virtual program for providing online therapy sessions for family caregivers and will complete more than 14,000 appointments this year, she said.

The Congressional Budget Office issued a report in 2023 on the costs of providing "all-inclusive" non-VA care for seriously disabled and elderly veterans to continue living at home and in their communities. Expanding in-home assistance, caretaker support and other community-based services could grow spending as much as $119 million through 2033, according to the report.

How the VA manages its budget has come under closer scrutiny by lawmakers.

Congress just passed an emergency spending measure to close a $3 billion shortfall at the VA for fiscal 2024, which ends Sept. 30.

But lawmakers also criticized the VA for not anticipating greater spending needs after passage of Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act. Also known as the PACT Act, the law provides benefits to veterans who developed illnesses from burn pits, radiation and other toxic exposures during military service.

A $12 billion shortfall is projected for 2025, as the VA has enrolled thousands of additional veterans in VA health care since 2022 and provided compensation for their illnesses and disabilities connected to military duty.

More veterans who are seeking care drives a need to hire 5,000 additional workers to cover rising demand for services. The VA also anticipates higher costs for popular prescription drugs, especially for treating diabetes and obesity.

Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif., said he supports Congress providing the assistance veterans need to remain at home. He described the Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act as transformative for veterans and their families.

He said caregivers are an indispensable component of the complex system of support and health care that disabled veterans need.

“I too want to see this legislation enacted as soon as possible,” he said.

Takano said he also supports awarding Social Security credits to family members who are full-time caretakers for disabled relatives, which is not addressed in the bill.

Credits are based on a person’s earnings and work history over a lifetime, and are used to determine retirement benefits, Medicare coverage and other services. But they do not consider individuals who leave jobs and careers to work as full-time caretakers for disabled family members.

Takano said the VA also must be provided funding to build capacity, modernize infrastructure and meet veterans’ health care needs at its facilities.

He urged a balance of money for VA care at hospitals and clinics and non-VA care delivered at home and in the community

THIS WEEK ON CAPITOL HILL

This week, the following bills had the motion to reconsider laid on the table and Agreed to without objection and have thus passed in the House and/or the Senate:

- H.R 522: Deliver for Veterans Act
- H.R 7323: Montgomery GI Bill Selected Reserves Tuition Fairness Act of 2024

- S. 656: Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act of 2023

Additionally, the following bill passed through Congress and made its way up to the President to officially become law!:

- H.R. 9468: Veterans Benefits Continuity and Accountability Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2024

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.

Wayne Perra, New Hampshire

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

Wayne met with the Veteran Affairs Aide from Senator Maggie Hassan's office to discuss veterans affairs and membership in the New Hampshire area. He also discussed the possibility of getting grants to augment the Department's Service Officers.

Thank you, Wayne, 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

UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

As of 8:00 AM on Thursday, September 26, there are NO hearings scheduled.

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