AMERICAN LEGION

LEGISLATIVE WEEKLY

November 1, 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!

February 22-26, 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.

National Legislative Council updates coming soon!

Election Day is November 5th, and the 119th Congress will be sworn in on January 3rd at noon! This means there will be some turnover in Congress – some members are retiring, and others will be replaced due to election results. These changes will result in some adjustments to the NLC. Legislative Division staff will be working with the NLC Vice Chairs in each Department to adjust in early December to fill gaps and realign appointees. We will then have training on January 6th for all the new NLC members so that we can hit the ground running and have an increased influence on Congress! If you are on the NLC, stay tuned for further details as we work through this process. If you are a Vice Chair, expect detailed communications from D.C. soon!

K2 VETERANS WITH CERTAIN TYPES OF CANCER MAY SOON QUALIFY FOR EXPEDITED VA DISABILITY CLAIMS

This article's original publication can be found here.

Veterans who were assigned to a remote installation in Uzbekistan early in the Global War on Terrorism and now have cancer in their urinary or reproductive systems may soon be eligible for fast-tracked benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

VA Secretary Denis McDonough announced Tuesday that the department will start the federal process for adding bladder, urethra and other genitourinary cancers to a list of diseases presumed to be caused by serving at Karshi Khanabad Air Base, also known as K2 or Camp Stronghold Freedom, in the Central Asia nation.

The installation, located on a former Soviet military station, was used by U.S. forces as a command-and-control and logistics support facility from 2001 to 2005.

According to media reports by McClatchy, The Associated Press and CBS, the installation was contaminated with numerous toxic substances, including solvents, fuel, lubricants, trace amounts of chemical weapons and depleted uranium, and many veterans have reported cases of brain, colon, thyroid, pancreatic and other cancers after serving there.

"Veterans often describe [it] as a toxic soup of exposures ... a place that jeopardized their immediate [and] long-term health," said McDonough, speaking at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. "[Army] Col. Gordon Peters, a doc who was deployed with those early units, vividly described what he saw, what he says was, quote, 'chemical odor so intense that it seemed as if someone could light a match [and] the entire area would ignite.'"

Any veteran who thinks they have an illness caused by their military service can file a compensation claim with the VA; filings are decided on a case-by-case basis.

However, those with a condition designated as "presumptive" don't have a requirement to prove that their illness is service-connected, a change that can expedite their claim.

According to the VA, 13,002 of the 16,000 veterans who served at K2 have enrolled in VA health care, and nearly 12,000 already have received a disability rating for a linked condition.

The move follows an announcement earlier this year that K2 veterans with chronic illnesses that aren't easily defined -- those with symptoms similar to Persian Gulf War veterans with medically unexplained conditions -- are eligible for the expedited benefits process.

In the past several years, the VA has launched its own internal process to determine whether health conditions may be presumed to be related to military service. Previously, the department relied on input from the National Academies of Sciences, Medicine and Engineering and had no way of determining on its own whether a condition was service connected.

That changed in the lead-up to passage of the PACT Act, which broadened the VA's ability to consider its own claims data, along with scientific research, to grant presumptive status. Since then, it has added a number of conditions, including several rare cancers and respiratory illnesses, to its list of diseases considered related to combat and support duties in the Persian Gulf region, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

The K2 decision is a result of that process.

Last year, the VA announced it would review whether to add certain types of blood cancer, including acute and chronic leukemias and multiple myeloma to the list covered by the PACT Act, the landmark legislation that broadened benefits for veterans exposed to burn pits and other battlefield pollution overseas.

McDonough said Tuesday that the review will be completed next week for those conditions, adding that the "preliminary findings are promising."

"In 2022, we established service connection for asthma, sinusitis, rhinitis and rare respiratory cancers; again today, with [genitourinary] cancers; and soon for multiple myeloma and blood cancers," McDonough said.

Advocates called the announcement about genitourinary cancers among K2 veterans a "clear win," noting McDonough's announcement that he also is committed to continuing research on illnesses among those who served at the base.

The Stronghold Freedom Foundation, which represents veterans who served at K2 as well as surviving families, said the group is grateful that the VA continues to acknowledge the long-term health effects caused by the installation's toxic environment.

"We look forward to continuing working with the VA to ensure all gaps are closed so all veterans and their families are ensured the care and recognition they deserve," Matt Erpelding, the group's executive director, said in a statement.

"We were very encouraged that he said VA is not only working on establishing presumptives for K2 veterans who develop bladder cancer, multiple myeloma, leukemia, and Gulf War Illness, but also laid out his intention to establish a presumption of service connection for every condition associated with deployment to K2," said Randy Reese, executive director of the Disabled American Veterans' Washington headquarters, in a statement.

The VA also announced Tuesday that it set records for providing medical care and benefits to veterans in fiscal 2024, including 127.5 million medical appointments, up 6% from fiscal 2023, and processed 2.5 million disability claims, up 27% from last year.

According to the VA, 6.7 million U.S. veterans or their families now receive benefits from the department.

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB: SECRETARY OF VA'S STATE OF VA BRIEFING

The article's original publication can be found here.

Good morning. Emily Wilkins, thanks for that kind introduction, and for leading this important organization. Let me recognize the Press Club's American Legion Post and its commander, Tom Young, and all the Veterans Service Organizations represented here. Veterans Service Organizations are critical to helping us serve Vets, their family members, caregivers, and survivors.

I want to thank all the journalists who served our country in uniform. Journalists like Thomas Gibbons-Neff, a Marine combat Vet and the son of a combat Vet, who writes powerfully now about the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. I've been particularly struck by his writing on the end of America's deployments to and withdrawal from Afghanistan.

While I want to be careful here as a non-Veteran myself, it struck me that his writing brought to life the painful experiences that thousands of his fellow Afghanistan Vets wrestle with to this day. Navy Veteran Zack Baddorf, founder of the group Military Veterans in Journalism, is helping ensure more Vets go into journalism, a vocation that is so important to our democracy that Vets have sacrificed everything to protect it.

Zach's getting more Vets into newsrooms around the country—improving coverage of Veterans issues and increasing trust in the media. To Thomas and Zack, to all Veteran journalists, and to all journalists—thank you.

Veterans Day is around the corner, so now's a good time to begin preparing our hearts and minds for that celebration—remembering, recognizing, and thanking all those men and women who have fought our nation's wars and defended us during periods of restless peace. But our profound gratitude to Veterans goes beyond Veterans Day, because Vets continue serving this country long after they take off their uniforms.

They've dedicated themselves to building an America that is stronger, freer, fairer for each new generation, that more perfect Union we all seek. Anchored by their commitment to service over self, they continue serving this country, always looking out for one another, with their enduring sense of duty, valor, and love of country. Veterans set the highest example of what it means to be an American citizen. So, at VA, we strive to serve Vets every bit as well as they served—and continue to serve—all of us. Veterans Day is a time to renew that commitment, renew what President Biden calls our country's one truly sacred obligation—to prepare those we send into harm's way, and to care for them and their families when they come home.

Now, when I first spoke to the Press Club four years ago, the country was in a historic public health emergency, and VA's employees were risking their lives to save the lives of Veterans. Despite those challenges, I told you that VA public servants were breaking all-time records, providing more care and more benefits to more Vets than ever before. And each year, I've come back here with a similar report. This year is no different. By nearly every metric, VA's smashing records we set last year. That's even more care, more benefits, to more Vets. And it's not just more care. It's better, world-class care, and it's better health outcomes for Veterans than in the private sector. It's not just more benefits, it's faster, more accessible benefits we're delivering by meeting Vets where they are rather than expecting them to come to us. And it's not just more Vets, its more Vets trusting VA at rates higher than ever before. President Biden, a military family member and the surviving father of combat Veteran Major Beau Biden, has been unrelenting—and forcefully demanding—in his advocacy for Veterans and their families. He has spent his entire career fighting like hell for Vets, just as he charged me and my VA teammates to do four years ago. Under President Biden's leadership, VA has been made into something different—something new.

Nowhere has that been more evident than with President Biden's toxic exposure law—the PACT Act. Because of that law, more than 5.8 million Vets have been screened for toxic exposures. More than 740,000 have enrolled in VA care. And more than 1.1 million Veterans and 11,000 survivors are receiving benefits. The toxic exposure legislation called for a phased-in approach, getting Vets access to care and benefits as late, in some cases, as 2032. But President Biden made it clear that timeline wasn't fast enough for one simple reason—for too long, too many Vets were exposed to harmful substances and waited decades for help. So, he directed us to accelerate implementation so all eligible Vets and their survivors got the care and benefits they deserve—as quickly as possible.

And that has been life-changing for so many families.

We can measure President Biden's record-breaking work on behalf of Veterans—on ending Veteran homelessness, on removing barriers to mental health care, on getting Vets in crisis the support they need when they need it, and more. In fact, you probably saw the press release we put out this morning detailing all of VA's record-breaking accomplishments over the course of the past year. But we can never put a value on the countless miracles that have improved and made Veterans lives better. Numbers and statistics can't adequately describe the impact. Dollars and data can't ever really begin to capture and communicate the values, the personalities, the humanity of the Veterans we have the honor of serving. So, as I prepared for today's speech, I thought, maybe those are the very things we need to talk about. Let me tell you three stories that demonstrate the impact and importance of the work we do, together.

I'll start with Angela Bell. I met Angela in Hampton, Virginia last month. Angela is one of the most generous and courageous people I've ever met. She lost her son, Sean, and has turned her grief into action. Let me tell you a little bit about Sean. Sean knew he wanted to join the military since he was a kid. He was so determined to enlist after graduating high school that at 17 years old he got his dad to sign the parental consent paperwork. And Sean served all over America—Georgia, North Carolina, California—served all over the world, Korea, Afghanistan, Iraq. He married and had a son, Giovanni.

He earned his Bachelor's degree. He earned a Master's. He earned a second Master's and was working on his Ph.D.—he liked to tease his mom, telling her she'd have to start calling him Dr. Bell. Sean was the kind of guy who'd invite other Soldiers over to Angela's house for Thanksgiving because they had nowhere else to go. He'd ask his mom to send him extra care packages while he was on deployment, not for himself, but to share with his brothers- and sisters-in-arms who didn't get anything from back home. He's an example of the selfless Vet I was talking about a few minutes ago.

Well, after Sean came back from his second deployment to Central Command, Angela started noticing some changes. Every time firecrackers went off, he'd jump. Being in

traffic was overwhelming, anxious about other vehicles around him. He was enduring some personal problems, family health issues and more. When Angela tried to get Sean help, he refused, worried about losing his clearance. Sean had served in the Army for 20 years. And just a few weeks before his retirement in 2021, he died by suicide.

Now, I've spoken at many events focused on VA's and our partners' work to end Veteran suicide. I've explained that ending Veteran suicide is our number one clinical priority at VA. I've talked about resourcing and about people and organizations singularly devoted to end Veteran suicide. I've talked about data and processes and what we're doing to try to make a real, substantial difference—promising initiatives. And I've shared story after story about Veterans not just surviving, but getting the mental health care they need and thriving. Yet, none of that will bring Sean back or heal his family's heartbreak. None of that gets to the enormous tragedy of Veteran suicide or gets to the powerful, painful emotions.

So, here's why I'm telling Sean's story, Angela's story. Angela's doing everything she can do so other families don't suffer the same devastation when she lost Sean, when this country lost Sean. "I try to be the face of [those] who [were] left behind," Angela says. "I'm so passionate about telling his story because if it helps one person, whether I know it or not, then I'm doing what I'm supposed to do." She said, "People tell me I'm so strong. I'm not. I'm a mom, advocating and fighting for my kid." Angela's the President of the Hampton Roads Chapter of American Gold Star Mothers, and she often speaks on our work to end Veteran suicide. Thanksgiving was Sean and Angela's favorite holiday. And in his memory, Angela hosts an annual Thanksgiving meal and invites servicemembers, Veterans, and their families to join her. The gathering quickly outgrew her dinner table, and then got too big for her home. This year, Angela's renting a dining hall to host dozens of families from the military community to share a warm Thanksgiving meal together. The community she's built has helped Angela heal. And she heals by helping others, so they're not alone, and so they know there is always, always hope. Those are the kind of people we have the incredible privilege and honor to serve at VA.

But we have so much work to do to keep our promise to Vets. That leads me to my next story. It was almost exactly 23 years ago—October 5th, 2001—when the first US forces arrived at the Karshi-Khanabad air base in Uzbekistan, a former Soviet base known as "K2." K2 Veterans were among the first to deploy after the September 11th terrorist attacks, bravely conducting and supporting combat missions against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. They went to a place at K2 that Veterans often describe as a "toxic soup" of exposures, a place unlike other operating bases occupied by American forces. A place that jeopardized their immediate and long-term health. Colonel Gordon Peters vividly describes what he says was a "chemical odor so intense that it seemed as if someone could light a match and the entire area would ignite." Some K2 Vets returned home and developed disabling illnesses and conditions. Their service is heroic.

Mindful of the passage of time since their heroic service, we've moved aggressively to care for K2 Vets since the PACT Act was passed in 2022.

First, we eliminated the PACT Act phase-in period for presumptive benefits—making all K2 Vets immediately eligible for more than 300 presumptive conditions.

Second, earlier this year, we made all K2 Veterans eligible for VA health care, whether or not they've filed a benefits claim with VA.

Third, after consulting with K2 Vets this summer, we've begun rulemaking to make chronic multi-symptom illness—also known as Gulf War Illness—a presumptive condition for K2 Veterans, fixing a gap in the PACT Act.

Fourth, for every K2 claim, we've made sure the unique toxic exposures at K2—that toxic soup—is taken into account, and each new K2 claim gets reviewed a second time before VA reaches a final decision.

And fifth, we've reached out to every known living K2 Veteran to encourage them to come to us for the care and benefits they deserve.

All of that work has been driven by Veteran and survivor advocates, reporters like you, and a tireless VA team working on toxic exposures, some of the best toxic exposure researchers, scientists, and epidemiologists in the world. Because of that hard work,

13,000 of the 16,000 K2 Vets are enrolled in VA healthcare, nearly 12,000 are service-connected for at least one condition, receiving an average of $30,000 a year in earned benefits. All told, K2 Vets now have higher claim and approval rates than any other cohort of Veterans.

But we have more work to do to get this right. Some K2 Vets still understandably feel overlooked, because they've waited for 23 long years to see their uniquely dangerous service recognized. We still have to do better and be better, for those K2 Vets. That's why, today, I'm proud to announce that VA will begin rulemaking to add bladder, ureter, and other genitourinary—or GU cancers—as new presumptive conditions for K2 Vets and all eligible toxic-exposed Vets. And we aren't stopping there.

Next week, we will complete the scientific review of multiple myeloma and leukemias. The preliminary findings are promising and suggest that VA will be able to make those conditions presumptive for K2 Veterans and all eligible Veterans. And once the final results are in, VA will look to extend that presumption to all biologically linked blood cancers. This may include polycethemia vera—or P. Vera—a condition identified by K2 Vets. We will do so based on biological science and on the results of a PACT Act

presumptive process, without requiring Vets to wait for VA to complete additional studies. And moving forward, I am committed to establishing service connection for any rare condition found in K2 Vets which has a plausible biological link to the toxic soup we know and acknowledge was present at K2.

Because we are a new VA. One that works with Veterans for Veterans. And one that delivers outcomes for Veterans. We will no longer take decades to consider new presumptive conditions, but will instead use the tools provided by the PACT Act as quickly as possible to proactively establish service connections whenever the evidence supports it. We put that promise into action in 2021 when the President directed us to work on a Central Command burn pit presumption, nearly two years before passage of the PACT Act. We put it into action in 2022 when we established service connection for asthma, sinusitis, rhinitis, and rare respiratory cancers—again today with GU cancers and soon for multiple myeloma and blood cancers. We'll continue proving that we're a new VA by using the expedited PACT Act process to look further into that toxic soup at K2. The President considers this unfinished business—and expects VA to establish a presumption of service connection for every condition associated with deployment to K2 – and we're committed to doing so.

We have to keep listening to K2 Vets and all Vets. We have to keep fighting like hell for them. So, thank you to the Vets, advocates, and journalists who have been instrumental in highlighting the heroes who served at K2. You make us better by holding us accountable. We are proud of our accomplishments, these outcomes for Veterans. But we are candid when we come up short—candid with ourselves, with you, with Vets, with Congress, and with the American people. America's Vets deserve our very best, and we'll never settle for anything less. Hold us to it.

Third and finally—let me talk about VA's people—your public servants—who are keeping our country's sacred obligation to Vets. They are the best, most compassionate, highest-performing, and most dedicated workforce in the federal government—in the entire country—folks who want to make real differences in the lives of Veterans. I'm proud and I'm privileged to be on their team.

I'm reminded of that every single day, but it was driven home most profoundly when I was surveying Hurricane Helene's destruction in Asheville, North Carolina. For over a month now, the Asheville VA, the VISN 6 leadership team, and their incident command team have been working around the clock, tirelessly, to support Vets and staff impacted by the storm. Asheville VA's food service employees and the Veterans Canteen Service disaster response team loaded up two tons of food and served 17,000 meals in the first week of recovery efforts, a source of great comfort in the aftermath of the crisis.

Their Volunteer Services have collected thousands of donations from fellow VA employees. And our chaplains have been holding candlelight vigils, a space for

Veterans and VA staff to be together … supporting and comforting one another during this tragedy.

In the hardest hit areas across Western North Carolina, we identified over 2,600 at-risk Vets, Vets undergoing chemotherapy, with spinal cord injuries, requiring oxygen, and other support. We couldn't call many of them because phones were out—cell phones and landlines—so right after the hurricane, VA teams went out to check on unaccounted Vets in-person. They achieved 100% accountability for all at-risk Vets in their care. Given the devastation in those communities, that is an amazing accomplishment. And they continue reaching out to Veterans in the area to make sure they have everything they need.

For VA nurses Melissa Mehaffey and Lisa Sellers, taking care of Vets in this crisis is their duty and it's also about holding tight to hope. Lisa and Melissa have been a pair since starting at VA on the same day ten years ago. They're Haywood County natives and came to work at VA because they have family members who are Vets. "Here," Melissa says, "it's all about the Veteran. The heart of our system is with our patients."

"When we got a name, we knew—those are our people," Melissa said. "We're going to find them, figure out what they need, and help them. We're going to make sure they are ok." She says, "Going out there and taking care of our people … this was our tiny piece of hope." One of the Vets they checked on had been without power, and no one could reach him by phone. He wrote us a letter. "No one but VA," he said, "No one but VA would do something like that … in that moment there was a human connection that no other healthcare system would have even thought of."

Army Veteran and VA employee Corey Anderson feels the same way. Corey was deployed to Kuwait and Iraq from 2005 to 2007, and the devastation he saw in Asheville reminded him of war zones. Corey went to check on one rural Veteran, drove until the road was gone, washed away. So what did Corey do? He parked his car in the middle of the road and hiked the rest of the way. He climbed up the mountainside with a pack full of supplies for the Veterans' upcoming medical procedure. Corey says, "Doing this work means the world to me. I'm a Veteran. My dad, mom, sister, and so much of my family is made up of Veterans. It just means the world to me to do my part." Veterans helping Veterans, there is nothing better. VA's employees across the Southeast and Appalachia—people like Melissa, like Lisa and Corey—worked long hours through two devastating hurricanes, some working multiple shifts or staying overnight at the hospital. They risked their own lives to serve Veterans. Because whether we're in times of calm or chaos, VA's public servants always mobilize around one core mission—saving and improving Veterans' lives. And right now there are Veterans at home, with their families—happy, safe, and healthy—because of them. I am incredibly grateful to each and every one of them.

Now, our mission at VA is far from over. There are huge challenges ahead. And as we look to the future, we're going to continue to do better for Vets. We're going to continue to be better for Vets. This future at VA isn't because of me. In fact, I had asked that this new VA be represented here today at the Press Club by the best face of this new VA: our Deputy Secretary, a combat Veteran, the daughter and granddaughter of combat Veterans, someone who gets her care at VA, and someone who is part of the fastest growing cadre of Veterans at VA: women. The VA is new and more effective because of the Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors we are so blessed to serve—and because of Veterans like Tanya Bradsher who serve their fellow Veterans.

This future is because of the 450,000 VA employees in your communities and neighborhoods across the country who keep Vets at the heart of their care. And it's because of partners like you, too.

I'll close with a final word to the Vets watching today. Your honorable service in uniform sets the example for the rest of the country. You're the keepers of our national ethos—that deep and abiding sense of purpose you learned in serving, your camaraderie and your care for each other, your sense of teamwork that made you stronger, together—in combat and, now, in your communities. That's exactly what we need, what this country needs. Your examples are something that all of us can learn from. So, again, to all Veterans—those of you here today and those watching, thank you for everything. And to the Press Club, my thanks for all that you do holding us accountable to Vets, and telling their stories in the powerful ways that you do. God bless you all. And God bless our nation's servicemembers, our Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

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.

Sarah Tobin, Colorado

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

This week, Sarah hosted a "Meet the Candidate" forum at American Legion Post 5 (Colorado Springs) with all 3 candidates that are running for Colorado's 5th District. These candidates were each given 7 veteran-related questions to prepare answers for ahead of time. These questions related to topics such as rural veteran care, mental health care for veterans, transitioning veterans, and veteran homelessness. They were also asked 5 additional questions from Legionnaires/audience members.

Thank you, Sarah, 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.

You can find relevant legislation and the Legion's stance on them in the key legislation section of VoterVoice.

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

UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

As of 9:00 am on Friday, November 1, there are NO hearings scheduled. Congress is in recess until November 12.

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

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LAWMAKERS ACCUSE VA LEADERS OF EXAGGERATING BUDGET SHORTFALL

This article's original publication can be found here.

House Republican leaders on Friday criticized Veterans Affairs leaders for exaggerating budget shortfall issues earlier this summer after department officials said their future funding concerns are not as serious as they predicted.

In a letter to VA Secretary Denis McDonough, House Veterans' Affairs Chairman Mike Bost, R-Ill., and the House Appropriations Committee's veterans panel Chairman John Carter, R-Texas, accused department leaders of "misinforming Congress" and "inciting a panic among veterans about their benefits being delayed or cut." They said the misleading information undermines public faith in the institution.

In September, lawmakers approved a $3 billion stopgap spending bill for the VA after officials had warned that benefit checks could be delayed or halted on Oct. 1 — the start of the new fiscal year — if additional cash reserves were not made available to the department.

Weeks earlier, VA leaders — including McDonough — said the budget shortfall came as a result of record-high benefits approvals and medical services usage by veterans in the last fiscal year.

They also warned that Congress needed to pass another $12 billion in funding to cover extra costs in fiscal 2025, an issue the two chambers were expected to bring up upon lawmakers' return after the election.

But earlier this week, in an update provided to congressional leaders, VA officials said they carried over roughly $5 billion in unspent funds related to benefits accounts from last fiscal year to this fiscal year. Even without the cash infusion approved in September, the department would have held more than $2 billion in cash reserves.

Still, VA leaders said in a memo to lawmakers that the budget infusion was needed "because if we had even been $1 short, we could not certify our payment files and more than 7 million veterans and survivors would have had delays in their disability compensation, pension, and education benefits."

In a statement Friday afternoon, VA press secretary Terrence Hayes echoed that message.

"Out of an abundance of caution last fiscal year, VA requested additional benefits funding ... Those veterans and survivors rely on those monthly payments, and any delay could have been devastating for them and their families – and that was not a risk that we were willing to take," he said.

A VA spokesperson said that the funding was designed to avoid that kind of "worst-case scenario" and that VA carried over far less money this year than in previous years.

Still, Bost questioned whether the urgency emphasized by VA leaders in recent weeks was sincere.

"VA leaders repeatedly told us that benefits funding was on the verge of running out and veterans could be harmed," he said in a statement separate from the letter. "But it turns out that was never true."

In their update to Congress, VA leaders also said that department health care accounts are not draining as quickly as anticipated, although they anticipate still needing some extra funding to cover the additional workload on the system.

VA saw its highest level of health care appointments ever in fiscal 2024: about 127.5 million, up 6% over the previous fiscal year. More than 796,000 veterans have enrolled in VA health care over the last two years, up 37% over the previous two years.

But it is not clear if that influx of new patients will require the full $12 billion estimated by VA planners earlier this year.

Bost and Carter in their letter lamented the “erroneous” estimates given to lawmakers in recent months and promised a full investigation into the budgeting confusion.

Congress is expected to return to Washington later this month to finish up the current session, before newly elected members are seated in January. Unfinished work includes resolving the federal budget plan for the rest of fiscal 2025. Departments are currently operating under a short-term budget extension set to expire in December.

REPUBLICANS WILL FLIP THE SENATE, CNN PROJECTS, SHIFTING BALANCE OF POWER IN WASHINGTON

The article’s original publication can be found here.

Republicans will win the US Senate majority, CNN projects, shifting the balance of power in Washington and putting the chamber in position to boost Donald Trump’s presidency.

With several races still to be declared, Republicans now have 52 seats in the chamber and will assume control under a yet-to-be chosen Republican leader when the new Congress convenes in January.

The Senate takeover was the first big success of the night for Republicans, and the destiny of the House of Representatives, where the GOP is trying to defend its narrow majority, remains up in the air.

The new GOP Senate will be in a position to back Trump's agenda and to resume the ex-president's significant reshaping of the judiciary with scores of more conservatives.

The Republican march to control started early on election night when West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice was projected to pick up the Senate seat vacated by retiring Democrat-turned-independent Sen. Joe Manchin. Democrats had stopped contesting the seat after Manchin announced he wouldn't seek reelection.

In Ohio, Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown, who has served in the chamber for three terms, will lose his reelection bid, CNN projects, in a state that has gone from a perennial political bellwether during his tenure to a deep red stronghold. The new Republican senator will be businessman Bernie Moreno, a vehement Trump supporter.

And early Wednesday morning, CNN projected that in Montana, Republican businessman Tim Sheehy, a retired Navy SEAL, defeated three-term Democratic Sen. Jon Tester.

Cruz and Scott cruise to reelection

In Florida, GOP Sen. Rick Scott easily dispatched a challenge from Democratic former Rep. Debbie Mucarsel-Powell, who had built her campaign partly on a backlash to the overturning of the federal right to an abortion and Florida's six-week abortion ban. Democrats had hoped that an abortion measure on the state's ballot could boost Democratic turnout, but that measure failed Tuesday night.

The party's best chance to pick up a seat had been in Texas, where national party groups made late multimillion-dollar investments into trying to unseat GOP Sen. Ted Cruz. But the two-term senator will defeat Democratic Rep. Colin Allred, CNN projects, in yet another disappointment for Democrats as they chase the mirage of making inroads in the longtime Republican state.

And in Nebraska, CNN projects that Republican Sen. Deb Fischer will defeat a stronger-than-expected challenge from independent Dan Osborn, who, along with his allies, outspent Republican forces in the state. Her loss wouldn't necessarily have flipped the seat to the Democrats, since Osborn hadn't said which party he'd caucus with in Washington. But with Democrats trying to stave off a GOP majority, an Osborn win would have deprived Republicans of a seat.

Outstanding races

Democrats had always faced a prohibitive path this year in defending their narrow control of the Senate, given the incumbents facing reelection are either in states Trump had carried twice before or narrowly lost in 2020.

There are several key outstanding competitive races that have not been called.

Wisconsin Democratic Sen. Tammy Baldwin, who is running for a third term, is in a tight race with Republican Eric Hovde, in a state also critical to the presidential race.

In another blue wall state critical to Democrats' success up and down the ballot, two national security specialists are facing off in Michigan. Democratic Rep. Elissa Slotkin is seeking to hold the seat being vacated by retiring Sen. Debbie Stabenow. She is facing Republican former Rep. Mike Rogers, the one-time chairman of the House Intelligence Committee who left Congress in 2015.

In Pennsylvania, Democratic Sen. Bob Casey is trying to hold off a challenge from Republican Dave McCormick, who lost out on Trump's backing during the 2022 Senate primary but secured it, and the GOP nomination, this year.

The final numbers in the Senate will also have to await the result from Nevada, where first-term Democratic Sen. Jacky Rosen is up against Republican Sam Brown, an Army veteran who also lost a primary two years ago for the state's other Senate seat. And in Arizona, where Democratic-turned-independent Sen. Kyrsten Sinema is retiring, Democratic Rep. Ruben Gallego is facing Trump acolyte Kari Lake, the 2022 gubernatorial nominee who still refuses to acknowledge her defeat in that race.

There was not much to cheer for Democrats on the Senate map on Tuesday, but Democrat Angela Alsobrooks was projected to beat Maryland's Republican former Gov. Larry Hogan, who was popular in the solidly blue state. Hogan was often critical of Trump, a stand that was challenging for him with deeply conservative Republicans in Maryland's western districts and areas close to the eastern shore. Alsobrooks will become just the fourth Black woman elected to the Senate after Democrat Lisa Blunt Rochester, the third, was projected to win Delaware's open Senate seat earlier in the night.

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.

Rafael Munoz-Cintron, Washington

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

Rafael met with Congressman Adam Smith's office and staff to discuss a health risk occurring at the local VA Puget Sound facility. This building is dealing with issues such as mold, water leaks, and a lack of an HVAC system. When Congressman Smith heard the concerns, the office immediately agreed that the conditions for staff and patients at this facility are unacceptable and thanked them for bringing it to their attention. Congressman Smith's office said they would continue to keep Rafael and other Legionnaires updated on the facility's progress.

Thank you, Rafael, 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.

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UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

As of 9:00 am on Friday, November 8, the following hearings are scheduled:

- November 13, 11:30 AM: HVAC Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Oversight Hearing -- "Our Nation's Hallowed Grounds: Review of America's National Cemetery Funeral Operations for Veterans and Servicemembers"
- November 19, 10:15 AM: HVAC Full Committee Oversight Hearing -- "Restoring Congressional Power Over VA After Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo"

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

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AMERICAN LEGION

LEGISLATIVE WEEKLY

November 15, 2024

WEEKLY GRASSROOTS NEWSLETTER

This week, we are asking Legionnaires to contact Congress to request support for the *Fulfilling Promises to Afghan Allies Amendment* be included in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025. As veterans serving veterans across the country, we know firsthand the moral and national security imperative of keeping our promises to the Afghan nationals who supported the U.S. mission and were admitted to the U.S. under emergency circumstances. *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!

February 22-26, 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.

National Legislative Council updates coming soon!

Election Day is November 5th, and the 119th Congress will be sworn in on January 3rd at noon! This means there will be some turnover in Congress – some members are retiring, and others will be replaced due to election results. These changes will result in some adjustments to the NLC. Legislative Division staff will be working with the NLC Vice Chairs in each Department to adjust in early December to fill gaps and realign appointees. We will then have training on January 6th for all the new NLC members so that we can hit the ground running and have an increased influence on Congress! If you are on the NLC, stay tuned for further details as we work through this process. If you are a Vice Chair, expect detailed communications from D.C. soon!

HERE'S WHAT VETERANS WANT CONGRESS TO PRIORITIZE

This article's original publication can be found here.

From expanded health care access to reducing suicide rates, veterans groups are preparing to lobby the 119th Congress on a host of issues affecting retired service members.

Veterans groups are highlighting long-standing issues, like mental health care and exposure to toxins, but also emerging problems, such as veterans who are incarcerated and don't have access to health care from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

As America marks Veterans Day on Monday, Congress is sitting on two bills that veterans groups want prioritized in the lame-duck session before January: the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act and the Major Richard Star Act.

Both have been introduced in the House, which comes back into session this week after a long election recess.

The Elizabeth Dole act will greatly expand veterans' ability to access care for mental health, dentistry, community and nursing home care, as well as more educational, employment, disability and housing benefits.

The Richard Star bill will ensure veterans who have been severely injured and medically discharged can receive Defense Department retirement and VA compensation benefits. Currently, only veterans who served at least 20 years are eligible for both.

If those bills are not signed into law in the next two months, veterans groups say they are a must-pass in the 119th Congress.

Julia Mathis, a Marine veteran and the legislative director at the American Legion, said the Dole act is an important step toward addressing their No. 1 priority: reducing veteran suicide rates, which remain disproportionately higher than those of the average population.

"Improving the care that veterans are provided [and] ensuring that the sense of community care, belonging, all of that is important for our veterans," she said. "A properly funded VA will ensure that their suicide-prevention programs are wide-reaching and effective."

And Jose Ramos, vice president for government and community relations at the Wounded Warrior Project (WWP), said the Richard Star bill is a priority for his organization.

"They're two distinct pays for two distinct reasons," he said of Defense Department retirement pay and VA benefits. "I lost my arm in 2004 after six years of service. My goal was to serve 20 years of service … and there's a lot of individuals like that. … I think we're unjustly punishing these individuals."

Ramos explained WWP is also focused on several other issues, including making more toxins and illnesses covered under the 2022 PACT Act, which expanded treatment for toxic exposures during military service.

Allison Jaslow, CEO of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), said some members of Congress have discussed cutting down the toxin exposure fund in the PACT Act, and she was concerned that a GOP-dominated Washington might take steps to slash it.

Camp Lejeune victims

Eric Flynn, a lawyer with Bell Legal Group, one of the primary firms working on Camp Lejeune litigation, is also looking to next year's Congress.

The Camp Lejeune Justice Act of 2022 allowed service members exposed to contaminated water at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C., from Aug. 1, 1953, to Dec. 31, 1987, to sue for damages.

But Flynn said the bill needs an update, pointing to new legislation that will tweak language to ensure a jury trial can move ahead for Camp Lejeune victims. The Department of Justice has prevented jury trials because the language is ambiguous on the matter.

The new bill, Ensuring Justice for Camp Lejeune Victims Act, will also expand cases to cover all district courts in the 4th Circuit Court jurisdiction instead of just the one federal court in North Carolina in a bid to speed up cases.

Flynn said he is pushing for the bill to be passed in the lame-duck session but will continue to advocate for it in the next Congress if needed.

"A lot of this comes down to a sense of justice on the part of these men and women who have suffered so extraordinarily," he said. "What people want is [to] have a jury hear their stories."

So far, around 200 veterans have been compensated under a quick payment program, but more than 500,000 are awaiting relief.

Reproductive health care

Jaslow also said she was watching and waiting to see how Republicans would move on issues such as reproductive health care and gender-affirming care for service members.

Under President Biden, the VA created opportunities for abortion counseling and, in rare cases, abortion services for rape and incest victims or for those whose lives may be threatened by a pregnancy.

Republicans have attacked the VA measures as violating the Hyde amendment, which prohibits taxpayer funds from going toward abortion services.

A push for change is likely with President-elect Trump taking the White House in January and Republicans capturing the Senate and likely the House as well.

The GOP-controlled House passed an appropriations bill for military construction and veterans affairs this year that would ban abortions at the VA in most cases and would also block hormone therapy and surgery for transgender veterans at the department. The VA currently allows for hormone therapy for veterans and supports gender-affirming care, though it does not carry out those surgeries.

“One of the biggest things we’re watching is like, what are we going to have to fight back against?” Jaslow said. “Everybody’s taking stock right now of what the new landscape is going to be.”

Other priorities

IAVA is also supportive of efforts to expand alternative treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder, including psychedelics, and repealing the 2001 and 2002 authorizations for the use of military force (AUMF) against global terrorism and Iraq. The Senate passed AUMF repeals in 2023.

A new issue is also being brought to Congress: veterans who are incarcerated and can’t get the VA treatment they need to improve their lives.

Jim Seward, director of the Veterans Justice Commission, has been working on this issue for the past two years. His commission was created in 2022 by the nonpartisan Council on Criminal Justice.

The VA had previously provided incarcerated veterans with care but stopped doing that in 1999 as a way to cut costs. The updated rule at the time specifically said veterans in the care of another government institution are no longer eligible for VA medical benefits.

Seward said veterans without adequate access to care are stuck in a dangerous feedback loop.

“We train our troops when they’re in combat and they face violence, they respond with violence,” he said. “Many veterans say when they come home, they feel like they’re expected to just turn off the switch, and they have no mission, and they kind of get lost in their head.”

“They often cope with substances, and those co-occurring disorders can lead to their criminal justice involvement and then once inside, if they’re not getting treated,” he added, “it’s harder [to treat] post-traumatic stress disorder.”

Veteran representation

Veterans groups and advocates may have some luck when it comes to getting their priorities passed in the next Congress, as the incoming class will include at least 78 veterans in the House and 18 veterans in the Senate. Several more veterans are in races that have yet to be called, but those figures already mean former service members can see themselves well represented on Capitol Hill.

Seth Lynn, a founder of the nonpartisan Veterans Campaign, an organization that trains veterans running for office, told The Hill that as the numbers are, veterans account for nearly 20 percent of all members.

“It’s a really healthy number,” Lynn said. “It looks like we’re going to have eight women veterans in Congress, which is the highest number ever.”

TRUMP PICKS DOUG COLLINS TO HEAD THE VA

The article’s original publication can be found here.

President-elect Donald Trump has nominated one of his previous attorneys and former GOP House member Doug Collins to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Collins, 58, a staunch Trump supporter and frequent Fox News guest, served in Congress representing a Georgia district from 2013 to 2021. Collins is an Air Force Reserve chaplain and served in Iraq.

“Doug will be a great advocate for our Active Duty Servicemembers, Veterans, and Military Families to ensure they have the support they need,” Trump said in a statement Thursday evening.

A Trump administration VA is expected to roll back a Biden administration policy that allows the agency to provide abortion counseling and, in some cases, the procedure itself, in the wake of the Supreme Court’s Dobbs decision.

If confirmed, Collins will have to grapple with financial issues at the agency stemming from a bipartisan 2022 law that expanded benefits for veterans exposed to Agent Orange and other toxins. That’s made the agency responsible for the care of more veterans than ever, and generated billions of dollars in budget shortfalls.

Collins also will inherit the VA’s beleaguered electronic health records overhaul that proved to be a thorn in the side of the Trump and Biden administrations. The project is billions of dollars over budget, is on pause indefinitely and has been tied to at least four veterans’ deaths and a slew of safety risks — an issue Collins will likely have to address in his Senate confirmation process.

On Thursday, Collins pledged to slash regulations and cut “corruption” in a post on X.

“We’ll fight tirelessly to streamline and cut regulations in the VA, root out corruption, and ensure every veteran receives the benefits they’ve earned,” Collins said. “Together, we’ll make the VA work for those who fought for us. Time to deliver for our veterans and give them the world class care they deserve.”

Collins helped defend Trump in his first House impeachment over Ukraine aid. Trumped faced two articles of impeachment — abuse of power and obstruction of Congress — and the Senate later voted to acquit him on both counts.

The Collins choice is part of a growing trend of Trump rewarding those who have been loyal to him. Collins also represented Trump in matters relating to Congress’ investigations of Trump’s efforts to overturn the 2020 election.

Collins ran unsuccessfully for Senate in 2020, getting knocked out of a primary against Sen. Raphael Warnock (D-Ga.) and former Sen. Kelly Loeffler (R-Ga.). Trump had

previously pushed GOP Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp to select Collins to fill an empty seat, but Kemp picked Loeffler instead.

Collins opted not to run for a Georgia Senate seat in 2022 in a race that Herschel Walker, the former NFL running back, ultimately lost to Warnock.

LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

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Daniel Burks, Oregon

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

This week, Daniel has been in contact with Representative Cliff Bentz (OR-2). Throughout the week, Daniel discussed with Rep. Bentz and his staff about the Congressman attending their post's Veterans Day event in Ontario, Oregon at Post 67. Rep. Bentz attended their ceremony as well as joined the post for lunch and discussion.

Thank you, Daniel, 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.

ON CAPITOL HILL

Several Legislative and VA&R Division staff members joined forces with staff members from The Elizabeth Dole Foundation, PVA, VFW, and TAPS to meet with Congressional staff members regarding the upcoming vote on the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act.

Additionally, Legislative and VE&E Division staff met with Rep. Velazquez (D-NY-7) to discuss the VET-First Contracting Amendment to the NDAA and other veteran small business legislative priorities for the 119th Congress.

GRASSROOTS INFORMATION

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UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

As of 9:00 am on Friday, November 15, the following hearings are scheduled:

- November 20, 9:00 am: HVAC Subcommittee on Technology Modernization -- "VA Cybersecurity: Protecting Veteran Data from Evolving Threats"
- November 20, 2:30 pm: HVAC Subcommittee on Health -- "Life After Limb Loss: Examining VA Amputee Prosthetics Care"

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

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AMERICAN LEGION

LEGISLATIVE WEEKLY

November 22, 2024

WEEKLY GRASSROOTS NEWSLETTER

This week, we are asking Legionnaires to contact Congress to request support for the *Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act!* This Act passed in the House this week, and is now in the Senate for consideration. The Dole Act is a comprehensive veteran's package that includes several important provisions, including support for home and community-based services, authority to award grants for mental health support to family caregivers, and veteran directed care. *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!

February 22-26, 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.

National Legislative Council updates coming soon!

Election Day is November 5th, and the 119th Congress will be sworn in on January 3rd at noon! This means there will be some turnover in Congress – some members are retiring, and others will be replaced due to election results. These changes will result in some adjustments to the NLC. Legislative Division staff will be working with the NLC Vice Chairs in each Department to adjust in early December to fill gaps and realign appointees. We will then have training on January 6th for all the new NLC members so that we can hit the ground running and have an increased influence on Congress! If you are on the NLC, stay tuned for further details as we work through this process. If you are a Vice Chair, expect detailed communications from D.C. soon!

LEGION APPLAUDS HOUSE PASSAGE OF DOLE ACT

This article's original publication can be found here.

The Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Act will expand quality of care for veterans, support for caregivers and more.

The American Legion is applauding the House passage of the Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Act, which will improve the quality of health care for our nation's veterans.

In a statement released after the legislation's passage on Nov. 18, American Legion National Commander James A. LaCoursiere Jr. thanked bill sponsor, Rep. Juan Ciscomani, R-Ariz., as well as Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Mike Bost, R-Ill., and Ranking Member Mark Takano, D-Calif.

"This bill includes a number of critical provisions that will expand the quality of care that veterans receive, increase support for caregivers, improve the functioning of the VA, and much more," LaCoursiere said. "I applaud Congressman Ciscomani's leadership in introducing this important bill, and we echo Chairman Bost and Ranking Member Takano's belief that veterans deserve a VA that works with them. We are excited to see this package make it to the finish line in the House, and remain dedicated to serving veterans and their families in the future."

The legislation now moves to the Senate for consideration.

VA ACKNOWLEDGES SIGNIFICANT ERRORS IN BUDGET SHORTFALL PREDICTIONS

The article's original publication can be found here.

Veterans Affairs leaders on Wednesday acknowledged mistakes in their predictions this summer of looming funding shortfalls for the department, but insisted the errors were due to workload surges and not budgetary maleficence.

"Our projections could have been more accurate," VA Under Secretary for Health Dr. Shereef Elnahal told members of the House Appropriations Committee during an oversight hearing on the issue.

"What we're trying to do now is make sure we work very diligently and ensure that the [next] number we give this committee is much more accurate. And that is taking time." The response drew sympathy from some Democratic lawmakers on the panel but skepticism from Republican members, who said the discrepancies undermine congressional confidence in the department's financial stewardship.

"VA's inability to accurately forecast its budget needs is unacceptable," said Rep. John Carter, R-Texas, chairman of the appropriations committee's veterans panel. He blasted senior leaders for stoking "fear that benefits and pensions would be interrupted" and demanded better transparency in future budget requests.

In September, lawmakers approved a $3 billion stopgap spending bill for the VA after officials had warned that benefit checks could be delayed or halted on Oct. 1 — the start of the new fiscal year — if additional cash reserves were not made available to the department.

Weeks earlier, VA leaders had explained the budget shortfall came as a result of record-high benefits approvals and medical services usage by veterans in the last fiscal year. They also predicted that Congress would need to pass another $12 billion in funding to cover extra costs in fiscal 2025.

VA saw its highest level of health care appointments ever in fiscal 2024: about 127.5 million, up 6% over the previous fiscal year. More than 796,000 veterans have enrolled in VA health care over the last two years, up 37% over the previous two years.

But earlier this month, VA officials acknowledged they carried over roughly $5 billion in unspent funds related to benefits accounts from last fiscal year to this fiscal year. Even without the cash infusion approved in September, the department would have held more than $2 billion in cash reserves to cover spending needs.

The news sparked outrage on Capitol Hill, particularly in regards to the fears of benefits shortfalls.

On Wednesday, VA Under Secretary for Benefits Joshua Jacobs defended those summertime warnings, noting that “a funding shortfall of just $1 would have prevented VA from processing its September files, delaying monthly disability compensation, pension and education benefit payments to approximately 7 million veterans and survivors.”

“This was a risk we simply were not willing to take,” he added.
And Elnahal said department officials did slow hiring plans for a variety of department positions because of the short-term and long-term budget concerns. He said that has not caused any immediate access or staffing issues, but could if additional funds are not appropriated later this fiscal year.

Both Elnahal and Jacbos also acknowledged that their initial $12 billion shortfall prediction for fiscal 2025 was too high. They promised a revised budget adjustment target in coming weeks, but did not offer a firm timeline for that.

They also promised an independent assessment of mistakes made in the budgeting process, vowing to share that information with lawmakers. Carter in response promised close oversight of the issue.

“We are with you 100%,” he said. “But you have to keep us informed.”
Congress is facing a Dec. 20 deadline for a budget extension or full federal budget agreement to prevent a partial government shutdown at the end of the year.

Lawmakers typically fund VA medical care and benefits payments more than a year ahead, through an advance appropriations process. Even though the fiscal 2025 budget has yet to be finalized by Congress, VA officials already have more than $300 billion approved for operations this fiscal year.

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Deborah Davis, Alaska

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

Deborah met with Sen. Dan Sullivan (AK) at the local community hall for their Veterans Day ceremonies and events. She spoke with Sen. Sullivan about the Legion's 'Be The One' initiative.

Thank you, Deborah, 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.

PHOTO SPOTLIGHT

See below for photos from Dan Burks, last week's Legionnaire of the Week, of Rep. Cliff Bentz attending Post 67's Veterans Day ceremony!

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