CAREGIVERS AND SURVIVORS

SUMMARY

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers the Caregiver Support Program (CSP), which includes the Program of General Caregiver Support Services (PGCSS) and the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC). These programs are effective at reducing stress on the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) system by allowing veterans who would otherwise be served by inpatient facilities to be cared for at home.

Many caregivers transition to survivors when their loved one dies. Department of Veterans Affairs survivor's Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) has been paid in some form to military survivors since the Revolutionary War. At the time, only officers received the benefit. This discrepancy between officer and enlisted was eliminated in 1917 by the *War Risk Insurance Act*.

ISSUE #1 – Compensation Disparity

A survivor's monthly Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) payment is currently 43% of the basic rate for a 100% disabled veteran. This contrasts with the standard government death payment of 55% of retirement pay. Meaning - Military Survivor DIC recipients currently lag behind other federal program payments by nearly 28 percent. Department of Justice DIC payments are on average 2x military DIC. Congressional DIC payments equal the full compensation of the deceased member, averaging 9x higher than military DIC. Survivor benefit payment rates are less for military than it is for civilian federal employees. Military survivors deserve better.

ISSUE #2 – Remarriage Penalty and Forfeiture of Safety Network

Gold Star Spouses lose all earned benefits when remarrying, including pensions and DIC. This creates a reverse incentive to love again and forces a decision between financial and emotional stability. Spouses cannot even remarry through their church without government involvement because the VA will seek out and remove benefits from spouses who are "holding themselves out to be married" without a marriage license.

ISSUE #3 – Strict Caregiver Program Eligibility Requirement

The caregiver program is effective in reducing long-term care demand at VA facilities, but eligibility requirements and rural access remain a concern. The new requirements for eligibility are incredibly strict, kicking 90% of caregivers off the program. A disabled veteran who can feed themselves even once a week is considered "able" under the current requirements and ineligible for either program.

ISSUE #4 – Lack of Transitional Support

When a caregiver is denied or removed from a CSP program (due to their veteran getting better, dying, or a change in eligibility requirements), they are fully removed from the program without support. This process is

often abrupt and, if the caregiver left employment to care for the veteran, leaves a gap in income. In addition, veterans who require services but are denied due to the strict requirements are left with no recourse other than appeal.

CURRENT LEGISLATION

- ***H.R. 1083/ S. 414 - Caring for Survivors Act of 2023***
  - Streamlines DIC by replacing the set monthly payment to 55 percent of a 100% disability rate. 55% is the standard rate for government employees, and military DIC is currently 28% less than this standard.

- ***H.R. 3651 / S.1266 - Love Lives On Act of 2023***
  - This bill allows survivors to retain benefits upon remarriage at any age and removes the "Holding oneself out to marriage" terminology in 38 USC 103, allowing surviving spouses to remarry without VA oversight.

- ***H.R.3581 – Caregiver Outreach and Program Enhancement (COPE) Act***
  - Expands mental health support for caregivers participating in the PCAFC program
  - Requires notification to participating caregivers about mental health support in Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN)
  - Requires plan for how needs of rural veterans, American Indian or Alaska native veterans, elderly veterans, women veterans, and other underserved veterans will be addressed.

SUPPORTING RESOLUTIONS

- No. 18: Comprehensive Supports for Caregiver Support Program
- No. 24: Caregiver Program
- No. 36: Prevent Gold Star Spouses Loss of Benefits.
- No. 48: Dependency and Indemnity Compensation for Surviving Spouses.

WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO

Congress should acknowledge the sacrifices made by Gold Star families by endorsing the parity of benefits with other federal programs (HR 1083/S 414) and permitting Gold Star spouses to remarry (HR 3651/S 1266). Enhance accessibility to the Caregiver Support Program by lowering Activities of Daily Living requirements and disability rating eligibility, and advocating for the passage of Caregiver bills backed by The American Legion. Additionally, ensure comprehensive access to mental health support for caregivers, recognizing the vital role they play in the well-being of our veterans.

THE ELECTRONIC HEALTH RECORD MODERNIZATION

SUMMARY

- The Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM) rollout is currently in a pause which started in April of 2023. The pause was initiated after reports of veteran harm and deaths in Spokane, WA and elsewhere. A report by the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) in summer of 2022 found that the EHRM Rollout had caused at least 148 incidents of veteran harm.

- During a House Oversight hearing on September 13th, acting program executive of the VA EHRM Office Dr. Neil Evans said that serious discussions for resuming the EHRM rollout will happen in summer 2024.

- VA has encountered many challenges throughout EHRM initial implementation including lost referrals, disappearing prescriptions, inadequate system uptime, and more. Additionally, when the system isn't up, providers have to rely on paper records, adding a substantial amount of time to various tasks.

ISSUE #1 – Training of Staff

VA has experienced many difficulties in staff training as the EHRM rollout has progressed. Initial training modules were so unlike the end user software that it rendered much of the initial training useless. Other issues were with trainers, who were often temporary employees hired recently and only given a crash course on the software themselves before teaching it.

The VA has made good progress on this front. Training modules now look like the final end product, and trainers are increasingly VA employees who have had extensive experience with the system.

ISSUE #2 – System Downtime

The EHRM system is required by government contracts to have a 99.7% or greater amount of system uptime, which is comparable to civilian hospitals. However, during the initial rollout phase the system was averaging between 87 and 97% uptime. This was one of the main reasons that the current pause was put on the rollout.

The VA and Oracle are currently working on this issue. As the rollout resumption is more than half a year away, it remains to be seen if progress is being made on this issue.

CURRENT LEGISLATION

- ***S. 1125/H.R. 2809, the EHR Program RESET Act***
    - aims to restructure and enhance the EHRM program, while also mandating frequent reporting to Congress to increase oversight, accountability, and transparency by requiring the VA to develop clear metrics to guide "whether and how" the agency should deploy the EHR system

at other VA facilities. Additionally, it would require the VA and Oracle Cerner to fix the technology features related to patient safety and delivery issues, as outlined in the recent report from the VA's EHRM Sprint Project Team.

SUPPORTING RESOLUTION

- No. 83: Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record.

WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO

Congress can pass the EHR improvement bills listed above, increasing oversight and accountability in the system. The VA needs to have a new electronic health record system, with the old system being more than 5 decades old and simply unable to meet the realities of the modern medical world.

However, the new system needs to be rolled out in a safe and efficient manner without veteran harm or undue burden on normal VA functioning. So far this has not happened. The current pause in the EHRM rollout should give Oracle, the VA, and Congress time to fix the issues that have popped up.

POLYTRAUMA

SUMMARY

- As defined by Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), polytrauma occurs when a person experiences injuries to multiple body parts and organ systems often, but not always, as a result of blast-related events.

- Chronic Pain (CP) is the most common polytrauma condition among Polytrauma System of Care (PSC) users, highlighting the importance of incorporating interdisciplinary pain management approaches within the PSC, with an effort to reduce reliance on long-term opioid therapy and improve rehabilitation.

- Traumatic brain injury (TBI) frequently occurs in polytrauma in combination with other disabling conditions, such as amputation, burns, spinal cord injury, auditory and visual damage, spinal cord injury (SCI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other medical conditions. The complex morbidities surrounding these associated conditions make treatment and diagnosis very difficult.

- Between 2000 and 2021, the U.S. Department of Defense diagnosed more than 444,300 service members as experiencing at least one TBI during their military service, one of the top issues facing American veterans. According to VA statistics, over 185,000 veterans who use VA healthcare have been diagnosed with at least one TBI.

ISSUE #1 – Substance Use Disorder as a Comorbidity

Among the roughly 30% (6.1 million of 20.3 million) of veterans who use VA services, the prevalence of overdose deaths from non-synthetic opioids roughly doubled between 2001 and 2009, and overdose deaths in this population have continued to rise dramatically, showing a 65 percent increase from 2010 to 2016.

Another study found that between 2010 and 2019, drug overdose mortality increased by 333.4% for overdoses involving stimulants and by 93.4% for overdoses involving opioids.

ISSUE #2 – Lack of Training in TBI care from the VA

Although 71% of nurses agreed with the subjective statement, "nurses on my unit do a good job when providing care to patients with moderate-to-severe TBI," over 77% of nurses disagreed with the subjective statement: "The role of registered nurses in regard to care of patients with TBI is clearly understood in my workplace."

Areas for improvement included: 1) further clarity in the role of a nurse when caring for a veteran patient with moderate-to-severe TBI, 2) behavior manifestations in veteran patients with moderate-to-severe TBI, 3) nursing care plan development for veteran patients with moderate-to-severe TBI, and 4) clinician training for the imminent Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval
of Methylenedioxymethamphetamine [Midomafetamine] (MDMA) assisted therapy.

CURRENT LEGISLATION

- ***H.R. 105 - TBI and PTSD Treatment Act***
  - aims to direct the VA to provide hyperbaric oxygen therapy to veterans for the treatment of Traumatic brain injury and post- traumatic brain disorder.

- ***H.R. 3649 - Veterans National Traumatic Brain Injury Treatment Act***
  - aims to direct the Secretary of the VA to create a pilot program that would provide hyperbaric oxygen therapy to veterans who suffer from traumatic brain injuries and posttraumatic stress disorders.

- ***H.R.6353, Veterans Heroin Overdose Prevention Examination (HOPE) Act***
  - Requires the VA to conduct a review on veteran opioid overdose deaths.

SUPPORTING RESOLUTIONS

- No. 11: Lethal Means and Suicide Prevention
- No. 16: Furthering Research Pertaining to Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTC), and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- No. 17: Continuum of Care and Mental Health Supports
- No. 18: Mental Health Programs for Justice-Involved Veterans
- No. 20: Suicide Prevention Program
- No. 33: TBI/PTSD Suicide Prevention Committee
- No. 52: Antidepressant Harms Analysis
- No. 165: Traumatic Brain Injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Programs

WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO

Congress should prioritize the hiring of VA providers trained in alternative therapies such as MDMA, ibogaine, ketamine, and psilocybin, crucial for treating conditions like spinal cord injuries. Funding for peer support programs, like the Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers (PAWS) Act, must also be guaranteed.

To enhance the mental health of amputee patients, improved collaboration across care areas is essential. The VA should ensure that placing amputee patients in long-term care facilities considers age-appropriateness, acknowledging that many veterans with recent limb amputations are younger than other long-term care residents. This approach safeguards their recovery and reintegration into society.

SAFEGUARDING VETERANS' BENEFITS

SUMMARY

- Unaccredited predatory claims companies are not bound by VA regulations and cannot be penalized by the Office of General Counsel. Veterans are charged exorbitant fees by these "claim sharks" for services that are provided free of charge by The American Legion and other veterans service organizations.

- Retirement benefits and disability compensation are two separate benefits, provided for two different reasons, and therefore should never be conflated. Veterans with service-connected disability ratings less than 50% have their VA disability compensation deducted from their DOD retirement pay.

ISSUE #1 – Predatory Claims Companies

American veterans face exploitation by unaccredited entities charging exorbitant fees, violating U.S. Code. Predatory practices include claims firms charging up to 600% of future VA benefit increases. These entities operate outside VA oversight, leaving veterans vulnerable.

ISSUE #2 – Military Retirees Not Receiving Full Military Retirement Pay

The American Legion highlights a concern for 42,000 military retirees with combat-related injuries facing concurrent receipt disparities. The Major Richard Star Act, supported by the American Legion, aims to repeal the offset, allowing disabled veterans to receive both DoD retirement pay and disability compensation concurrently, addressing an average offset of $1900 per month in 2022, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

CURRENT LEGISLATION

- ***H.R. 1139 / S. 740 Governing Unaccredited Representatives Defrauding (GUARD) VA Benefits Act of 2023***
    - seeks to restore criminal penalties and/or fines on individuals for directly or indirectly soliciting, contracting for, charging, or receiving any unauthorized fee or compensation with respect to the preparation, presentation, or prosecution of any claim for VA benefits.

- ***H.R. 303 Retired Pay Restoration Act***
    - seeks to eliminate the 1:1 offset for veterans with less than a 50% disability, enabling them to receive full retirement and disability payments.

- ***H.R. 1283/S. 344 Major Richard Star Act***
    - aims to remove restrictions, allowing those medically retired with less than 20 years due to combat-related disabilities to collect full retirement pay and disability benefits concurrently.

SUPPORTING RESOLUTIONS

- Resolution No. 1: Oppose Claims Filing by Unaccredited Parties
- Resolution No. 4: The Disabled Veterans Tax
- Resolution No. 224: Support for Concurrent Receipt of Military Retirement Pay & VA Compensation

WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO

The American Legion urgently asks Congress to enact GUARD VA Benefits Act (H.R. 1139 / S. 740) and protect our veterans from unaccredited predatory claims companies who are exploiting veterans by charging exorbitant fees, violating federal laws and regulations.

Additionally, Congress must take action to allow combat-related disabled military retirees to receive full retirement pay and disability benefits concurrently by passing the Retired Pay Restoration Act (H.R. 303) and The Major Richard Star Act (H.R. 1283/S. 344)

THE AMERICAN LEGION
WASHINGTON CONFERENCE
JOIN THE FIGHT

SUICIDE PREVENTION & PEER SUPPORT

SUMMARY

- Veteran suicide remains a top priority for The American Legion (TAL) and is one of the most serious issues facing America today. On average, veterans are twice as likely to die by suicide than the general population, with an average of 17.5 veterans taking their life every day. Reducing the veteran suicide rate is imperative for TAL, exemplified through our Be the One campaign.

- The American Legion strongly believes in the power of peer support and encourages all veterans to "Be the One" who is willing, ready, and able to have a difficult conversation about suicide and other mental health issues. The stigma surrounding mental health affects everyone, and it will take all of us to address it. Furthermore, the large and growing network of community-based peer support groups represents a widely available, inexpensive, and effective means for many veterans to gain social support and engagement in the community.

ISSUE #1 – Lethality of Firearms

The lethality of firearms is imperative to examine, as 72% of veteran suicides were by firearm in 2021. Firearm suicide rate among Veteran women was 281.1% higher than non-veteran women in 2021, and there was a 14.7% increase in women veteran firearm suicide deaths from 2001–2021.

ISSUE #2 – Risk Factor for Suicide

Additional risk factors for suicide include age, homelessness, and gender. Suicide rates were highest among veterans between 18 and 34 years old. Additionally, the suicide rate among homeless veterans who received care from the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) was 186.5% higher than for those without indications of homelessness. For women veterans, suicide rates between 2020 and 2021 have increased 24.1%, while the rate for male veterans increased by 6.3% in comparison.

CURRENT LEGISLATION

- ***H.R.3722, Daniel J. Harvey, Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Servicemember Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide Act***
    - Requires establishment of a pilot program for transitioning service members with the goal of reducing veteran suicide.

- ***H.R. 1639, VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Act of 2023***
    - Establishes Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) pilot program, the Zero Suicide Initiative, to improve safety and suicide care.

- ***H.R.2768, PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program Act***
    - Establishes VA grants for nonprofits, veteran service organizations (VSOs), and other agencies to create peer-to-peer mental health programs.

SUPPORTING RESOLUTIONS

- No. 20: Suicide Prevention Program
- No. 11: Lethal Means and Suicide Prevention
- No. 14: Department of Veterans Affairs Suicide Prevention Programs
- No. 6: Stop Gap in Utilization of Mental Health Services
- No. 17: Continuum of Care and Mental Health Supports
- No. 364: Department of Veterans Affairs to Develop Outreach and Peer to Peer Program for Rehabilitation

WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO

Congress must address the alarming rates of veteran suicide, a top concern for The American Legion. With an average of 17.5 veterans taking their lives daily, the situation demands immediate intervention. The American Legion's "Be the One" campaign emphasizes the power of peer support, leveraging community-based groups as a cost-effective solution to combat the mental health challenges faced by our veterans.

We appreciate and ask Congress for continued support for the ongoing legislative efforts and initiatives, including H.R.3722, H.R.1639, and H.R.2768. We believe these critical measures, along with any additional actions addressing the multifaceted causes of veteran suicides, can make a substantial impact in saving lives.

THE AMERICAN LEGION
WASHINGTON CONFERENCE
JOIN THE FIGHT

National Security Update: Afghan Allies

Issue Summary:

Currently, Afghans who were admitted to the United States under temporary humanitarian parole following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan can only pursue permanent legal status through the asylum system or, for those who directly supported the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan during the last 20 years, the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program. Both options face severe backlogs, long processing times, and logistical obstacles for Afghans who were brought to the United States under emergency circumstances.

The Afghan Adjustment Act (AAA) would establish a pathway to lawful permanent resident status for eligible Afghans and incentivize those admitted to the United States with temporary humanitarian parole status to come forward for security vetting. After completing the additional vetting, including the in-person interview required during the application process, this pathway to status adjustment would provide eligible Afghans in need of protection with stability as they continue to rebuild their lives in the United States. Congress has passed similar bipartisan adjustment legislation in the wake of other wartime evacuations, humanitarian crises, and U.S. military actions including the Vietnam War, Operation Desert Storm, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. [1]

These brave Afghan men and women who fought bravely alongside our servicemembers provided essential services such as translation, map reading, logistical support, and intelligence gathering at great personnel risk to themselves and their families. The Taliban has a "kill on sight" policy for Afghans who is known to have aided or assisted US troops during the war. Many of the Afghans who were not evacuated in August 2021 are still under threat, often running between different safehouses. Conversely, the Afghans in the United States today are under the threat of death should they return to Afghanistan. America committed to bringing our Afghan Allies out of danger and we can never backout on that promise.

A similar version of AAA is inserted in the FY24 defense supplemental bill text under Chapter 3; Subtitle C – Fulfilling Promises to Allies; Sec. 3331-3338:

Summary from the National Immigration Forum: Fulfilling Promises to Afghan Allies

The bill [FY24 Defense Supplemental] would adjust the status of Afghan nationals who were admitted or paroled into the U.S. after July 30, 2021, following completion of a vetting process. This section is similar, but not identical, to the Afghan Adjustment Act of 2023.

- Legal Pathway to Status. Under this section, the legal pathway for Afghan evacuees begins with conditional status, with an opportunity to move into permanent legal status and eventual citizenship. The conditional status will remain in effect for four years based on the date the individual was paroled in (i.e. admitted) to the U.S. or on July 1, 2027. At that point, the government has no more than 180 days to remove the conditional status. The expiration date of an individual's parole will not apply to someone under consideration for conditional status.

There are also provisions to improve the efficiency and oversight of both the refugee program and the SIV program. An additional 2,500 SIVs will be made available for five years totaling 10,000 additional SIVs.[2]

Actions taken:

- NS Staff continues to meet with members of AAA support organizations and members from the House and Senate.
- NS Security Commission Chairman gave remarks at AAA coalition press conference organized at the VFW DC headquarters with Senators Moran, Klobuchar, Coons, and Blumenthal.
- Senator Moran reached out directly to the DC office and requested support on the issue.
- NS Division helped write and edit a National Commander's Message on supporting the Afghan Adjustment Act in January 2023.

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[1] "*The Afghan Adjustment Act"* Office of Congressman Earl Blumenauer, July 14, 2023: https://blumenauer.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/blumenauer.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/one-pager-theafghanadjustmentact.pdf

[2] "*Border Security and Asylum Reform in the Emergency National Security Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2024: Bill Explainer,* National Immigration Forum, Feb. 6, 2024: https://immigrationforum.org/article/border-security-and-asylum-reform-in-the-emergency-national-security-supplemental-appropriations-act-2024-bill-explainer/

National Security Update: Afghan Allies

- AAA was included in 2023 Commander's Testimony and Legislative Priorities

Actions taken (Con't):

- NS Division has attended bi-monthly "Evacuate Our Allies" (EOA) coalition meetings with VSOs, immigration groups, and humanitarian non-profits for 2+ years.
- Helped facilitate a Tango Alpha Lima (TAL) Podcast interview with two members of the Female Tactical Platoon in October 2023.
- NS hosted the members of With Honor, PenFed, and veterans of the Female Tactical Platoon (FTP) at our National HQ in Washington, DC in July 2023.
- NS and Legislative Division attended an Afghan Allies Event for the Female Tactical Platoon (FTP) hosted by the Women's Foreign Policy Group in July 2023.
- Hosted US Army Afghan Veteran, Rebekah Edmonson, who was embedded with the Female Tactical Platoon along with her Afghan counterpart, Commander Mahnaz Akbari of the FTP at the National Security Commission Meeting during the 2023 National Convention in Charlotte, NC.
- **Legion Magazine Story: September 2023**, "Last Chance at the Abbey Gate" Brothers who worked with U.S. forces make a desperate attempt to flee Afghanistan with the help of strangers" and "Road to a New Start" about Afghan allies working through Task Force Movement to get commercial driver's licenses and jobs in trucking.
- **Legion Magazine Story: December 2023**, On Point: The American Legion in Washington/Afghan Adjustment Act

Applicable resolutions:

Resolution No. 16: Recognition for Afghan and Iraqi Combat Translators

What can Congress do:

Prioritize passing the Afghan Adjustment on any moving vehicle of legislation.

Increase the number of Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) for Afghans currently remaining in Afghanistan to migrate to the United States.

Require stringent vetting processes of Afghans and their family's seeking asylum against the U.S. Refugees Admissions Program.

National Security Update: Border Security

Issue Summary:

The FY24 Defense Supplemental contained numerous bipartisan provisions to tighten security around the border, negotiated by Sen. Murphey (D-CT), Sen. Sinema (I-AZ), and Sen. Lankford (R-OK). This is the first piece of legislation introduced that would significantly change immigration laws in more than three decades. These provisions include:

"Shutting Down" the Border:

- This would grant a new emergency authority for DHS to shut down the border.
- Immediately deport most migrants that are encountered at the border, whereas now those migrants are generally allowed in the country to await processing.
- Overhaul of the asylum system and expands ICE detention.

Asylum proposals:

- More demanding "clear and convincing" standard to those entering the country to prove their persecution, whereas now you only have to show significant possibility.
- A fraction would pass the new "clear and convincing" standard while the majority would be deported.
- Asylum officers decide cases, not judges, with a goal of 180-day processing or shorter.

Additional Facts:

- The average immigration judge's caseload has increased from 1,800 during the Obama administration to 2,600 during the Trump era and is now 4,500 under Biden.
- President of the Border Patrol Council said, "This [bill] is better than the status quo, nobody can argue it's not better than what we currently have. Why wouldn't I support [the bill]?"
- U.S. Chamber of Commerce and DHS have come out publicly in support of this bill.

Actions taken:

NS Staff have met with both Republican and Democratic Congressional staffers, particularly those in southern border states, who have expressed frustration over the removal of border security provisions in the FY24 Defense Supplemental Bill and the lack of a House floor vote. Additionally, NS Staff met with several Think Tanks to ascertain their assessments on what could be done to address border and immigration issues. All recent meetings have validated the Resolved clauses contained in the American Legion's position on "Immigration Reform" as being relevant to today's discussions on this border security and related matters. NS Director will be speaking at a Border Security conference in TX during early March of 2024.

Applicable Resolutions:

Resolution No. 23: Immigration Reform

Resolution No. 20: Fully Enforce Immigration Laws

Resolution No. 27: Sanctuary Cities

Resolution No. 29: Commend U.S. Border Patrol

Resolution No.44: Oppose Government Benefits for Illegal Immigrants

What can Congress do:

Pass the bipartisan FY24 Defense Supplemental bill which would increase border security funding and continue to allow for deportations at the border.

Amend the asylum criteria to be more stringent and allow for asylum officers to decide cases instead of immigration courts.

Invest more funding and technology into border security protections and expedite the hiring process of Border Patrol Agents.

Establish proactive measures to help stem the flow of migration and work with foreign governments for assistance in curbing migration routes.

National Security Update: Military Quality of Life

Issue Summary:

In 2022, the National Security Division created the Base Assessment and Servicemember Experience (BASE) Program, with the goal of researching military quality of life challenges and advocating for solutions to these issues. Additionally, the BASE Program seeks to highlight best practices that are working well and advocate for their continued funding. To accomplish these goals, the National Security Division sends a delegation of staff and volunteers to installations across the globe to meet with servicemembers, families, commanders, and base support staff to gather feedback about their quality of life and advocate on their behalf.

Our research has shown that most quality-of-life issues do not exist in a vacuum and that one challenge can lead to problems in another area. For example, the rising cost of childcare can sometimes force military spouses to forego entering the workforce, contributing to higher spousal unemployment rates and families relying on a single income. Additionally, barracks facilities have made recent headlines, and a 2023 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report documented a myriad of issues plaguing these older facilities, such as mold, mildew, vermin infestations, and safety-related concerns. Meanwhile, family housing, which is managed by private housing companies, has seen similar mold and mildew issues and prompted Congress to enact more government regulations and reforms.

Actions taken:

- Wrote six white papers on various QOL topics to include: healthcare, housing, childcare, recruiting, access to healthcare for overseas military and families, and food insecurity.
- Hosted the military branch service senior enlisted leaders (SELs) or representative SELs during the 2023 National Convention.
- Completed the inaugural BASE Program visit to Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, Arizona in October 2023.
- Attended (several virtual and in person) Military Quality of Life Panel hearings. Met with the University of Arizona staff to discuss research and shared observations involving QOL issues across DOD.
- Met with the Defense Health Agency (DHA) to discuss stateside and overseas medical access issues.
- Hosted the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps and VSOs leaders /veterans in February 2024.
- Met with departments to discuss potential BASE program visits to Alaska, Oregon, Texas, and Kansas.
- Met with multiple House and Senate staff members to discuss QOL program details.
- Hosted Congressman Don Bacon's National Security Policy Advisor during the 2024 Washington Conference to discuss findings from the military QOL Panel.
- Hosted officials from the Defense State Liaison Program to discuss QOL issues during Washington Conference 2024.

Applicable Resolutions:

Resolution No. 85: Support for Military Quality of Life Standards

Resolution No. 30: Modernization of the Armed Forces

What can Congress do:

Restore BAH payments to covering 100% of housing costs – up from the currently mandated 95 percent.

Recognize the importance military quality of life plays in an individuals' mental and physical wellbeing.

Increase funding for building new and renovating existing military barracks and family housing and safeguard tenants' rights of those who reside in privatized family housing.

Pass legislation that would expand financial assistance to servicemembers for childcare, increase access through new agreements with private and public childcare facilities and grant military construction authority for building new child-development centers.

Continue to fully fund and retain quality of life programs including, military commissaries and exchanges, MWR programs, educational benefits, spouse employment programs, career development programs, and housing improvements.

National Security Update: The Veteran's Role in Supporting the Military

Issue Summary:

Without a strong, competent, and capable military, no national security exists. The Department of Defense is experiencing its worst recruiting performance since the inception of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) over 50 years ago. Four of the six services missed their recruiting goals in FY 2023. Much of the issue can be traced to a degradation of the relationship between the American people, service members, and the veteran community. The result is an American youth unfamiliar with the value of military service, the military lifestyle, and the benefits of donning the uniform. To bridge this divide and improve America's national security posture for the future, Legionnaires should take a proactive approach to addressing the issue. Recent polls continue to demonstrate trust in the military has declined and this has also contributed to degraded military quality of life amongst members of the military.

During meetings with military branches and the US Coast Guard, the American Legion (and the veteran community as a whole) has been asked to weigh in and help educate Americans on the value of military service by telling their story. As America's most prominent wartime veteran and military support organization, we have led discussions involving the national call to service. Additionally, reduced access to high schools for military recruiters, mainly post-COVID, has decreased recruiting opportunities that previously existed.

Actions Taken:

The National Security Division has conducted extensive research, met with senior members of the services, and attended House and Senate Armed Services Committee meetings on this issue. National Security Staff (NS Staff) wrote a white paper and exchanged ideas with think tanks such as the Center for the Study of the Presidency & Congress.

During the 2023 National Convention, the National Security Commission hosted a Service-level Senior Enlisted Panel where military quality of life, the recruiting crisis and other important topics were discussed, and Legionnaires were asked to help find solutions for the recruiting issues. Additionally, The American Legion recently hosted the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps for a round-table discussion during February 2024, where veterans and leaders from America's largest VSOs discussed recruiting and retention issues. One of the most significant issues identified being the need for mutually supporting efforts and resources between American Legion posts, local bases, recruiters, and the local community.

NS Staff held the first of several meetings with Department / Post Commanders and thought leaders in the national security space. The discussion centered on veterans' role in bridging the Civil-Military divide. Participating Legionnaires represented every conceivable demographic of the organization's membership and were able to share challenges and best practices they engage in to support the local military and their efforts.

Currently, the NS Staff is working toward building a "tool kit" comprised of helpful information designed to assist Departments in developing relationships with local bases, recruiters, and their communities. Participating Legionnaires and members of the Legion family will have access to current, accurate information they can convey to America's youth and adult influencers regarding the value of serving their nation.

Applicable Resolutions:

Resolution No. 85: Support for Military Quality of Life Standards

Resolution No. 48: Rebuilding the U.S. Defense Industrial Base

Resolution No. 30: Modernization of the Armed Forces

What can Congress do:

Prioritize passage of legislation that funds housing, barracks and infrastructure which supports military quality of life.

Pass legislation that elevates and rewards schools which host JROTC, ROTC and civic education programs.

Encourage members of Congress to support revitalization of civilian-military relations in their home districts.

Ensure military compensation is competitive with the private sector to make military service more attractive.

Implement legislation that optimizes transition programs to assist service members returning to their communities.