

National Legislative Division Weekly

GRASSROOTS ACTION UPDATES

The American Legion is urging Congress to include vital language in the Defense Supplemental to support our Afghan allies. To support the Legion's efforts and protect the brave men and women who fought by our sides, please click [here](#).

Last session, three critical bills began picking up speed in the House of Representatives: The *Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act of 2023* (H.R. 542), the *HOME Act of 2023* (H.R. 3848), and the *COPE Act* (H.R. 3581) bill. If the Senate agrees to pass this Legion-backed legislation, Congress has an opportunity to provide indispensable support for our Nation's veterans and their family caregivers. If you would like to contact your representatives in support of H.R. 542, H.R. 3848, and H.R. 3581, you can visit our [grassroots actions center](#) to identify and email your elected official.

The American Legion supports the Pay our Troops Act and encourages all Legionnaires to contact their members of Congress and ask them to support the legislation. Click [here](#) to reach out today.

LEGISLATIVE WINS FOR THE LEGION IN 2023



The 118th Congress was challenged by an onslaught of unprecedented challenges in 2023. While these obstacles were certainly a hindrance to House and Senate's [productivity](#), many lawmakers worked hard to pass legislation for veterans in spite of the chaos.

While The American Legion hopes to see more of our priorities passed during the second session of this Congress, we are extremely grateful that many of our priorities were included in the NDAA and two stand-alone bills were signed into law by President Biden. With support from the Legion, S. 777 and S. 30 became public law this summer less than 6 weeks apart.

The bills, both of which were introduced by Senator Jon Tester (D-MT), take critical steps to ensure the financial and physical wellbeing of our nation's veterans. *S. 777*, also known as the *Veteran's COLA Act of 2023*, requires the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) to increase wartime disability compensation, clothing allowances for disabled veterans, and certain compensation for dependents and surviving spouses and children. The amounts payable must increase in conjunction with the cost-of-living increases. As law, this will directly improve the quality of life for veterans and military families across the country.

S. 30, the *Fiscal Year 2023 Veterans Affairs Major Medical Facility Authorization Act*, reached the President's desk about a month after the *Veteran's COLA Act of 2023*. S. 30 approves the construction of

National Legislative Division Weekly

several VA hospitals and medical facilities and provides the budget to do so. According to the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs (SVAC), the aim of this bill is to improve upon the "historic infrastructure investments" that came with the PACT Act.

The second session of the 118th Congress will commence in the coming week, and there are at least 12 bills with Legion support that have passed one chamber. 10 bills have passed the House and are waiting their turn in the Senate, and 2 have passed the Senate and must be approved in the House. S. 316 aims to repeal the authorizations for use of military force (AUMFs) in Iraq, a long-standing priority for The American Legion. On the other hand, S. 656 would establish commercial driver educational programs through VA if it were to pass the House as well.

Of the bills that have passed the House, 2 provide support for caregivers, 4 strengthen education and employment benefits, 2 focus on disability compensation and benefits, 1 ensuring that veterans have equal access to the second amendment, and 1 improving housing allowances and aid for homeless veterans.

CONGRESS NEGOTIATING BUDGET AS DEADLINE LOOMS

After narrowly avoiding government shutdown in the fall of 2023, Congress passed a novel and slightly controversial short-term funding measure.

This solution is known as the "laddered" continuing resolution (CR). Rather than extending 2023-level spending through one set date for government programs, as a traditional CR would, the laddered approach provided 2 separate expiration dates for 2023-level spending to provide Congress with more negotiation time for certain programs. The deadlines are January 19, 2024 and February 2, 2024. The latter deadline applies to Homeland Security, Labor-HHS-Education, Homeland Security, and a few other bills.



On the other hand, the quickly approaching January 19th deadline provides for Transportation-HUD, Agriculture, Energy-Water, and finally, Military Construction-VA (MilCon-VA) appropriations. The House and Senate have reached a deal on a \$1.59 billion topline for spending, but the details of how this money will be spent is still up in the air.

The original Senate version of Milcon-VA appropriations includes \$19 billion for military construction projects and \$134.7 billion in discretionary funds for VA. On the other hand, the House budget provides \$17.4 billion for military construction and fully funds the VA by providing \$137.755 billion.

National Legislative Division Weekly

In the next few weeks, the House and the Senate will attempt to pass all 12 annual spendings, either as individual bills or as packages. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), pictured above, pleaded with her fellow congressmen saying, “We have to come together, do the hard work of governing, and hammer out bipartisan spending bills that actually reflect what we think our nation needs.”

If Congress is unable to pass all of the spending bills or a combination of them, they will either be forced to pass another CR or to shut down the unfunded parts of the government. Even if MilCon-VA is not passed, VA will continue to operate medical centers, process VA benefits and applications for headstones and burial benefits, and make decision at the Board of Veterans’ Appeals. However, these operations will adhere to 2023 appropriations levels. Moreover, without congressional authorization, Department of Defense construction and maintenance projects could become inactive without the proper funding.

Although some lawmakers remain skeptical that Congress will successfully meet these deadlines, leaders in both chambers and parties seem to agree that a compromise on the top line needs to be made as soon as possible.

LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

In an effort 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.

K. Robert Lewis, Department of Connecticut

Congratulations to the first Legionnaire of the week for 2024, Mr. Robert K. Lewis of the Department of Connecticut!

Mr. Lewis has been selected to join Congressman Joe Courtney’s (D-CT-2) Veterans’ Advisory Roundtable. As part of this role, Mr. Lewis met with Congressman Courtney’s staff this week to discuss predatory actors and the increase in claims that has occurred since the PACT Act’s passage. Finally, Mr. Lewis brought up the approaching funding deadlines and how his home state would be affected during a shutdown.

Mr. Lewis, thank you for helping us start strong for 2024. Your advocacy and participation is crucial to a successful session.

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 me at kryan@legion.org.

National Legislative Division Weekly

LEGISLATIVE DIVISION UPDATES

This week, Legislative Division (LegDiv) staff returned to the office on Wednesday, focusing heavily on Washington Conference. LegDiv staff began inviting members of Congress and speakers for the event, and detailing the run-of-show for the Commander's Call.

LegDiv staff also completed a variety of quote requests for congressional press releases this week.

Finally, LegDiv staff worked with other divisions to finalize priorities for the second session of the 118th Congress.

As part of our ongoing grassroots efforts, NLD staff will be traveling to posts around the country 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.

UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

On January 17th at 2:00 p.m. ET, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations will hold a hearing titled, "VA Revolving Funds: Are Veterans Being Shortchanged?" This hearing can be watched [here](#).