

National Legislative Division Weekly

GRASSROOTS ACTION UPDATES

Recently, two critical bills began picking up momentum in the House of Representatives: The *Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act of 2023* (H.R. 542) and the *HOME Act of 2023* (H.R. 3848). Both bills, which have strong support from The American Legion, are expected to be held for a vote with the *COPE Act* (H.R. 3581), another Legion-supported bill. By passing this package of legislation, Congress has an opportunity to provide indispensable support for Nation's our 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. To see next week's full schedule in the House, you can click [here](#).

We continue to monitor activities in Congress for a possible government shutdown. We continue to advocate for the *Pay Our Troops Act* (H.R. 5641), which currently has 113 bipartisan cosponsors. With the government only narrowly avoiding shutdown twice for fiscal year 2024, it is critical that we ensure our troops have peace of mind and timely pay regardless of when appropriations bills are finalized.

Additionally, we are giving our support to the *Keep Our Border Agents Paid Act* (S. 2999), which would ensure that U.S. Customs and Border Protection and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement are paid in the event of a government shutdown.

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.

VETERAN CLAIMS FOR BENEFITS SURGE SINCE PACT ACT BECAME LAW



This article was written by Linda F. Hersey for [Stars and Stripes](#).

WASHINGTON — An influx of claims for illnesses related to toxic exposures is contributing to a surge in requests by veterans for disability benefits and medical compensation, said Willie Clark, deputy undersecretary for field operations at the Veterans Benefits Administration.

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Claims made under the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act, or [PACT Act](#), now account for nearly 40% of all claims filed by veterans for service-related disabilities since the legislation was enacted in August 2022.

“The PACT Act has spurred an unprecedented rise in the number of claims processed,” Clark said at a news conference Wednesday, adding approval rates of claims for benefits and services top 75%. The law extends benefits and health services to qualifying veterans from the Vietnam War, Gulf War and post-9/11 conflicts, and coverage spans 23 medical conditions presumed to be caused from exposure to toxic and hazardous substances.

Bradford Blodgett, a Vietnam veteran, learned about PACT Act benefits at his local Veterans of Foreign Wars post in Connecticut, where a veterans service officer helped him fill out forms related to Agent Orange exposure.

Blodgett, 82, has multiple myeloma, a blood cancer that attacks bone marrow and is associated with Agent Orange exposure. The cancer has perforated his ribs and hollowed several vertebrae, requiring surgery, radiation and chemotherapy.

Blodgett received notice in November 2022 that he was approved for 100% disability related to multiple myeloma. The first check arrived a month later — just in time for Blodgett to cover the property taxes on his Connecticut home.

“My parents were at risk of losing their home due to their inability to pay the taxes,” said Grace Blodgett, his daughter. “The benefit has made a huge difference in their lives. They can afford their groceries and heating, pay their taxes and cover other bills.”

Veterans submitted 1.2 million claims related to the PACT Act from August 2022 through Nov. 18, according to VA figures. Non-PACT claims numbered 1.8 million during the same time.

The Veterans Benefits Administration processed more than 10,200 claims in a single day in mid-November — setting a record for the agency. The number represented all claims filed. The agency has undertaken a push to hire up to 2,000 more processors to handle the larger volume of claims. Additional staff has enabled the VA to cut by nearly half a backlog of more than 600,000 claims from a year ago.

“Veterans are getting the message that we want them to file PACT Act claims and that doing so will not reduce their current disability rating or their existing benefits,” Clark said. Qualifying veterans are eligible for benefits to cover medical conditions that are presumed to be caused from exposure to hazardous and toxic materials during military service, including from radiation and burn pits.

Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., said his office has been working to make certain that veterans know about VA screenings for exposure and how to reach out for help to apply for benefits.

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“The PACT Act expands access to VA health care for upwards of 3.5 million post-9/11 veterans, many of whom were exposed to toxic burn pits in Iraq, Afghanistan and other conflict zones around the world,” said Carper, a Navy veteran of the Vietnam War.

Marcellus Beasley, who was exposed to fumes from burn pits during his military service, applied for PACT Act benefits at his local Department of Veterans Affairs office in Wilmington, Del.

Beasley, who served in the Air Force during the Persian Gulf War, said he spent 90 days in Iraq, where he was exposed to burn pits the size of football fields. Trash, sewage, tires and other hazardous materials were incinerated with jet fuel.

“I developed large scales on my skin. If you can imagine how a lizard sheds its skin, that is what was happening to me,” said Beasley, 60. “No one was thinking about covering their face because of the smoke, and the burn pits were everywhere.”

After Beasley left the service, he was diagnosed with psoriasis, a chronic skin condition presumed to be caused from his exposure to burn pits that spewed toxic fumes into the air.

He said he applied for PACT Act benefits with the VA’s help in October 2022 and was approved by January 2023.

“I made an appointment at the VA and met with someone who was almost like a coach and mentor. He helped me provide the in-depth information needed on the form about what happened,” Beasley said.

He now has a full disability rating for medical conditions related to post-traumatic stress disorder, high blood pressure, back and shoulder injuries — and the psoriasis, which requires daily medication and twice monthly injections.

“When we submitted the claim for the PACT benefit and that got approved, it pushed my disability rating to 100%,” Beasley said. “I think I would have been denied if I tried to do this on my own. Servicemen and women are used to being tough and handling things on their own. In this case, the service was free, and I got the help I needed.”

CONGRESS TAKES PROMISING STEPS TO FINALIZE THE 2024 NDAA



The long-awaited National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of fiscal year 2024 could be finalized and held for a vote as early as next week. Conferees from the House and Senate met on Wednesday, November 29th to negotiate and resolve differences between their respective versions of the colossal spending bill. Although the House and Senate still have a long list of conflicts to hammer out, House Armed Services Chairman Roger Wicker R-AL-3), pictured to the left, said he was “optimistic we will find a reasonable compromise” as Wednesday’s conference began. (R-AL-3) said he was “optimistic we will find a reasonable compromise” as Wednesday’s conference began.

The bill, which proffers \$886 billion of the United States’ funds for fiscal year 2024, is the crucial to many national security issues. On top of allocating funds for tactical gear and weaponry, the legislation has a profound effect on military quality of life and readiness. Notably, the current text of the 2024 NDAA will provide a substantial raise for service members. Members of grade E-4 with less than 2 years of service will be earning \$3010.50 per month, which is 25% more per month than the \$2393.40 monthly check that servicemembers of the same status and tenure received in 2022.

Additionally, both the Senate and House versions of the NDAA include augmented support for military families. To alleviate the stress of relocation for military families, both bill texts expand the ability of military spouses to be reimbursed for necessary licensure and recertification so that they may easily continue work. The current text also has provisions to guarantee that servicemembers living in high-cost areas are given a cost-of-living allowance of 5%, a provision which is not guaranteed by current public code.

During conference this week, Congress will also have an opportunity to enact critical mental health measures for servicemembers, their families, and veterans. Mental health check-ups in schools. Bill text calls for a variety of studies to be done on the efficacy of current mental health measures, including the impact of Transition Assistance Programs (TAP) on recently separated servicemembers, the accessibility of mental health providers for active-duty members, and on the value of non-clinical mental health services. The current NDAA also requires mental health check-ups for children enrolled in Department of Defense-operated schools and calls on the Department of Defense to improve mental health conditions for mothers in the military health system.

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Although the Congress still has many obstacles to overcome before the supposed NDAA vote next week, The American Legion applauds the conferees for their optimism and compromise. As the 118th Congress enters its 2nd Session, we hope to see national security and the wellbeing of servicemembers prioritized.

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.

Rafael Munoz-Cintron, Washington

This week, we are honored to recognize the steadfast advocate Rafael Munoz-Cintron, Department of Washington, as the Legionnaire of the Week.

Mr. Munoz-Cintron spoke with key staff members from the office of Congressman Adam Smith (D-WA-9), who is the ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee. He informed the staffers of the Legion's opposition to the PLUS Act and discussed the benefits of the GUARD Act.

Mr. Munoz-Cintron, we sincerely appreciate the time and dedication you've given to The American 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 me at kryan@legion.org.

LEGISLATIVE DIVISION UPDATES

This week, the Legislative Division (LegDiv.) met with the Evacuate Our Allies Legislative Committee to discuss the *Afghan Adjustment Act*. LegDiv. staff also attended a roundtable with other veteran service organizations with Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY-8) to discuss legislative priorities.

The team also held meetings with the congressional office regarding basic housing allowance legislation and home loans. The American Legion has given support to [H.R. 6225](#), a bipartisan bill to ensure activated reserves may receive home loan benefits.

Finally, LegDiv. staff continued work on details of Washington Conference in February and the Commander's Testimony in March.

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.

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UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

On December 4th at 3:00pm EST, The Housed Veterans' Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Technology Modernization will hold a hearing "Reexamining VA.gov." A link to watch this hearing can be found [here](#).

On December 5th at 10:00am EST, The Housed Veterans' Affairs Committee will hold a markup of pending legislation. A link to the markup can be found [here](#).

On December 6th at 10:00am EST, The Housed Veterans' Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations will hold hearing "Background Checks: Are VA's HR Failures Risking Drug Abuse and Veteran Harm?" A link to watch this hearing has not been posted.