

National Legislative Division Weekly

GRASSROOTS ACTION UPDATES

Recently, 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 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 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.

THE PROGRESS OF VA SUICIDE PREVENTION GRANTS



Veteran suicide prevention is a long-standing priority for The American Legion, other veteran service organizations (VSOs), and the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees. Because the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) has not been able to decrease the suicide rate over the past two decades, VA and Congress are looking to community care partners to save the lives of servicemembers.

The Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program (SSG Fox SPGP) allows the VA to fund community-based prevention programs for three years at a time in an effort to reach more at-risk veterans. Of the first grantees chosen in 2022, 3 were chosen to testify before Congress this week to discuss their experiences with the SSG Fox SPGP.

Subcommittee Chair Mariannette Miller-Meeks (R-IA-1), a former healthcare provider herself, opened the hearing by encouraging VA to continue to look for creative and holistic approaches to suicide prevention. "As a 24-year Army veteran," says the Congresswoman, "I have seen the unique challenges

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that many of my fellow veterans and servicemembers face... It is imperative that we work on solutions, such as the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program, to give veterans and their family members the support that they so desperately need.” Ranking Member Julia Brownley (D-CA-26) echoed Chair Miller-Meeke’s desire for continued innovation, and placed attention on female veterans, whose suicide rate almost doubled between 2001 and 2021.

The first statement in the hearing came from Dr. Erica Scavella, who represents the VA. Dr. Scavella emphasized the need for a public health approach to the veteran suicide crisis and emphasized that it is not just a clinical issue. Social determinants must be considered, according to the Doctor, and individual engagement outside the VA system is necessary.

While the other panelist shared the success of their community care initiatives, they were quick to emphasize the importance of the VA system and infrastructure to the long-term treatment of suicidal ideation. Members of Congress also requested that VA become more involved, and even questioned whether the VA should be receiving funding for these programs.

Rep. Chris Deluzio (D-PA-17) requested that Dr. Scavella’s office send a report to Congress detailing how many veterans who are referred to VA receive care. Rep. Derrick Van Orden (R-WI-3) was more pointed in his criticism, calling VA an “abject failure” in its suicide prevention efforts and questioning why VA funding isn’t placed directly into these community programs.

Missy Meyer, the Director of Community Integration at America Warrior’s Project (AWP), provided her opening remarks after Dr. Scavella. Ms. Meyer said AWP was able to provide suicide risk assessments to over 1,050 veterans under the SSG Fox SPGP. Ms. Meyer lamented that her organization struggled to access necessary resources to save this veteran and others, risking valuable time to save lives. She suggested that SSG Fox grantees receive expedited access to care.

To Ms. Meyer, the program is overly transactional, and VA’s work with SSG Fox grantee should be relational. Ms. Meyer encouraged VA to find a way to follow up with veterans who have received care from SSG Fox SPGP grantees, saying that VA follow-up and engagement is critical to at-risk veterans. Across the board, subcommittee members seemed to agree with Ms. Meyer that VA should take a more hands-on approach to the Grant program.

The next panelist, Ken Falke, is the founder of Boulder Crest Foundation. Boulder Crest aims to help veterans can grow and thrive, rather than just cope, in the aftermath of trauma. Mr. Falke used his opening remarks to encourage VA to remove funding caps for the SSG Fox SPGP and to include traumatic brain injury (TBI) centers in the grant program. Like Ms. Meyer, Mr. Falke believes that VA should be more involved with the grantees’ work. “We need to expand the collaborative partnership with the VA,” declared Mr. Falke.

Later in the hearing, Mr. Falke attempted to assuage Ranking Member Brownley’s concern about addressing suicide among woman veterans, saying that Boulder Crest has implemented women-only programs, and about 27% of veterans enrolled in Boulder Crest programs are women.

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Finally, Project Founder of Sheppard Pratt Health Systems Joyce King delivered her opening statements. Ms. King's organization treats social determinants of suicide risk, including unemployment and homelessness, in tandem with clinical determinants. Although Ms. King did not comment on VAs role or relationship with grantees, she did share data displaying the importance of a holistic, public-private approach to veteran suicide prevention.

Ranking Member Brownley's closing statement seemed to tie together the concerns of Congress and the SSG Fox SPGP recipients. The Congresswoman said the VA is expected to engage in a positive way to ensure that the SSG Fox SPGP and other grant programs are "data-driven, continuous improvement models."

CONGRESS PASSES NDAA IN THE ELEVENTH HOUR

On December 13th, after months of negotiation and division, the Senate overwhelmingly agreed to pass the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for 2024.

87 out of 100 Senators voted in favor of the bill, displaying the conference committee's success in creating a bill that is acceptable across party lines. However, this show of congressional unity came at the very last minute, leaving the House with just one day to send the bill to President Biden's desk before recess.

In the original version of the NDAA, House leaders included many social and cultural amendments which were stripped from the bill passed by the Senate. Despite the changes to the text, the NDAA conference bill still had strong support across the House of Representative.

Early on Thursday morning, with less than a day to spare before recess, the House voted in favor of the critical spending package, allowing it to become law.

The bill includes a 5.2% pay raise for servicemembers, makes critical improvements to basic allowance for housing (BAH), and ensures cost-of-living allowances for servicemembers stationed in high-cost regions. On top of improvements to military quality of life, the bill makes critical authorizations to protect our allies and foreign interests.

Notably, the bill funds the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative through 2027, allowing \$300 million to be extended to Ukraine in 2024. The NDAA also ensures the United States' commitment to NATO, especially against the threat of Russian expansion. While containing the Russian threat remains a geopolitical priority, the NDAA takes many steps to strengthen American positioning in the Pacific.

\$14.7 billion is allocated to the Pacific Deterrence Initiative through 2024, which helps sustain a U.S. military advantage over China. Moreover, the bill authorizes increased engagement and military cooperation with Taiwan to deter Chinese military operations.

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To further secure our posture in the Pacific, the NDAA enables the United States to engage in a partnership with the United Kingdom and Australia known as AUKUS. AUKUS bolsters Australia's role in stabilizing the region and maximizes American and British capabilities in the Indo-Pacific when needed.

The bicameral and bipartisan work of the NDAA conference is critical, and provisions for our nation's security can now be signed into law and authorized by President Biden before the new year.

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.

Tynetta Runnels, Texas

Congratulations to Tynetta Runnels, Department of Texas. Because of her ongoing advocacy efforts and relationships with multiple lawmakers in Texas, Ms. Runnels has been selected as Legionnaire of the Week. This week specifically, Ms. Runnels met with Congressman Marc Veasey (D-TX-33) to address mental healthcare issues and VA staffing shortages. She and the Congressman risked potential new means for VA funding and potential congressional partners for supporting veterans' access to mental healthcare.

Tynetta, your work on behalf of Legionnaires and Veterans across the United States. The Legislative Division is grateful for advocates like you and is ready to support your efforts in any way we can.

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

Before recessing until January of 2024, Congress passed the NDAA to secure defense funding through the coming fiscal year. The NDAA secured many of The American Legion's legislative priorities and helped bolster American national security.

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On Wednesday, December 13th, the Legislative Division helped organize the Legislative Chairwoman's Quarterly Call. Legislative Division staff briefed National Legislative Commission Members, National Legislative Council Vice Chairs, and National Legislative Council members on current legislative activities and congressional outlook for the coming session. We thank all of those who were able to attend.

Throughout the week, we met with a variety of congressional offices, including Rep. Mike Levin's (D-CA-49) quarterly VSO roundtable.

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

There are no hearings scheduled for the remainder of the year.