

## National Legislative Division Weekly

### GRASSROOTS ALERT: TELL CONGRESS TO PAY OUR TROOPS

The American Legion is continuing to monitor the *Afghan Adjustment Act*, which has been introduced and negotiated in the House and the Senate. We encourage Congress to pass this legislation and keep our promise to our Afghan Allies.

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.**

### HOUSE PASSES TRIO OF LEGION-SUPPORTED BILLS



With only one more week until recess, the House of Representatives passed three bills supporting veterans' quality of life.

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*The COPE Act*, sponsored by Rep. Jen Kiggans (R-VA-2), led the way on December 5<sup>th</sup>. The bipartisan bill permits and encourages the VA to support veterans' family caregivers through counseling and training.

Specifically, the bill allows the Secretary to award grants for mental health treatment for family caregivers and requires that these grants be "distributed equitably" across urban and rural communities. When speaking about her first bill, Rep. Kiggans said, "By ensuring [caregivers] can properly take care of themselves, this bill will improve the lives of our nation's heroes and solidify the support system they need to age with dignity.

The next day, the House continued its good work by passing both *the Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act*, supporting caregivers and home healthcare for veterans, and *the HOME Act* to more funding to protect homeless veterans.

Rep. Julia Brownley (D-CA-26) wrote *the Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act* to address deficiencies in the VA's homecare and caregiver programs by increasing the number of affordable alternatives to VA nursing home care. The bill also improves the quality of noninstitutional care and creates many community care programs including the "Veteran-Directed Care program" and the "Homemaker and Home Health Aide program."

The Veteran-Directed Care program allows the Secretary of VA to create partnerships with aging and disability resource centers, independent living centers, and Native American or Tribal organizations supporting the elderly. These partnerships could be used as decided and directed by individual veterans.

While the Veteran-Directed Care program expands community options, the Homemaker and Health Aide permits these partnerships to be made with home health agencies and aides to further expand veterans' options.

Rep. Brownley's bill echoes the concerns raised in Rep. Kiggan's *COPE Act* and ensures that family caregivers will be given more resources and access to counseling services.

The American Legion Legislative Division is proud to see that these two bills have been received in the Senate. Even more exciting is that they are joined by *The HOME Act*, which was introduced by Rep. Lori Chavez-DeRemer (R-OR-5) and was passed by the House on December 6<sup>th</sup>.

*The HOME Act*, also known as *the Housing Our Military Veterans Effectively Act*, increases the maximum rate of per diem payments homeless veterans may receive. These payments are to be made by existing entities that have received grants to help homeless veterans under section 2012 of title 38, U.S. Code.

Rep. Chavez De-Remer's bill also provides flexible funds that may be used to provide food, shelter, hygiene items, tablets, phones, and other items that increase stability and safety for veterans. These funds are also to be used for transportation of the veteran "for appointments with service providers, the conduct of housing searches, and the obtainment of food and supplies." After her bill passed, Rep. Chavez-DeRemer said, "Our veterans stepped up to serve our country, and it's our responsibility to care for them in return."

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We appreciate the House Veterans' Affairs Committee's hard work to push these bills to the Senate and look forward to continued advocacy in the second session.

### THE LONG-AWAITED NDAA CONFERENCE REPORT

On Thursday, November 7<sup>th</sup>, The House and Senate Armed Services Committees announced that the conference for the fiscal year 2024 (FY2024) National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) was completed.

The Chairman and Ranking Members of the Committees wrote a statement applauding the work of their conference. "Through months of hard-fought and productive negotiations," said the conference leaders, "we have crafted a bipartisan and bicameral conference report that strengthen our national security and supports our servicemembers."

Just to name a few effects of the [3,093-page report](#), the FY2024 NDAA details the appropriations for the Department of the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force, guides research and development within the Department of Defense, and determines personnel benefits and recruitment strategy.

Among its most crucial provisions, is the 5.2% pay raise for service members, the [largest pay raise](#) that the U.S. military has seen in twenty years.

This pay raise is increasingly critical for our junior enlisted who are struggling to keep up with inflation, which increased the cost-of-living [by 8% in 2022](#). [A 2023 report by the RAND Corporation](#) declared that between 25% and 32% of servicemembers were struggling to purchase food, and that this problem was worse on bases where junior-enlisted servicemembers live.

With the cost-of-living continuing to rise across the United States, the pay raise is crucial to ensuring that our servicemembers not only have basic access to nutrition but can also achieve a higher quality and standard of living on and off base.

Thankfully, improving living conditions for military personnel was a matter on which both sides of the conference agreed. On top of the much-needed pay increase, members of the conference agreed to increase access to basic housing allowances (BAH).

BAH is an allowance provided to some servicemembers living off base, depending on the cost of property in the area, pay grade, and whether the servicemember has dependents. The FY2024 NDAA allows servicemembers whose barracks or vessels are undergoing maintenance to use BAH for temporary housing, especially members in pay grades below E-6. The NDAA also ensures that, if the Secretary of the VA deems a region to be high-cost, servicemembers in the area will receive a 5% cost-of-living adjustment.

Many of The American Legion's Legislative Priorities for the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress have been included in this bill. Although the process was arduous, we are grateful to have a bill that not only increases our security apparatus but also protects and uplifts military families.

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## 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.

### Thomas Drake, New York

Congratulations to Mr. Thomas Drake, Department of New York, for receiving Legionnaire of the Week!

This week, Mr. Drake went to the office of Congressman Jamaal Bowman (D-NY-16). In his meeting he spoke to staff to ensure that the Congressman is both aware and supportive of The American Legion's legislative priorities.

Mr. Drake, thank you for your support The American Legion. Your time and attention are very appreciated by the Legislative Division.

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](mailto:kryan@legion.org).

## LEGISLATIVE DIVISION UPDATES

This week, The Legislative Division carried out its annual holiday reception. Our peers and supporters attended, including many members of Congress. Among them, Representative Seth Moulton (D-MA-6), Representative Don Bacon (R-NE-2), pictured below, Representative Mikie Sherrill (D-NJ-11), and Senator Todd Young (R-IN) gave remarks.

LegDiv. staff had various meetings on national security issues. Members of the team spoke with other advocates about Citizenship for Service and met with a working group on the

Our team also spent time this week handling healthcare and memorial matters. Staff attended monthly meetings on mental healthcare and attended briefings on the expansion of Arlington cemetery.

As the staff continued to meet with Congressional offices and other advocacy groups, we also prepared for the Legislative Chairman's Quarterly Call on Wednesday, December 13<sup>th</sup>.

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](mailto:grassroots@legion.org) or [ejohnson@legion.org](mailto:ejohnson@legion.org).



## UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

Dec. 12<sup>th</sup> 10:30am: HVAC Subcommittee on Health will hold the hearing “SSG Fox Suicide Prevention Grants: Saving Veterans’ Lives Through Community Connection. This hearing can be livestreamed [here](#).