

National Legislative Division Weekly

GRASSROOTS ACTION UPDATES

The American Legion is urging Congress to pass the *Love Lives On Act* (S. 1266 / H.R. 3651). Without this bill, Gold Star Spouses over the age of 55 are forced to choose between remarriage and their survivor benefits. To ensure that surviving spouses can be married without repercussions, you contact your representatives in support of S. 1266 or H.R. 3651 by [clicking here](#).

Last session, three critical bills passed 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.

The American Legion is also proud to support S. 3546, the *Veterans Mental Health and Addiction Therapy Quality of Care Act*. S. 3546 aims to evaluate the quality of mental health services at the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) and non-Department providers. If you would like to contact your representatives in support of this bill, H.R. 542, H.R. 3848, or H.R. 3581, you can visit our [grassroots actions center](#) to identify and email your elected official.

The American Legion has released its legislative agenda for the 2nd Session of the 118th Congress. To review our priorities, you can check our [Advocacy Toolkit](#).

CONGRESS AND SENIOR ENLISTED LEADERS DISCUSS MILITARY SPOUSE EMPLOYMENT AND CHILDCARE

On January 31st, the Military Quality of Life panel of the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) hosted a public hearing with the Senior Enlisted Advisors to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Services to discuss the major issues facing service members and their families.



CMSSE Bentivegna greets SMMC Ruiz Jan 31, 2024

The hearing followed a series of roundtables held last year by the panel with Pentagon officials, military advocates, and military families. During these meetings, lawmakers developed strategic legislation to address the complaints of servicemembers and support senior leaders' efforts to improve quality of life.

It was clear from the beginning that the goals of Chairman Don Bacon (R-NE-2) and the other congressional panelists were in line with those of the senior enlisted members. Across the board, members of Congress and the Armed Forces representatives were focused on improving five critical areas: pay and compensation, healthcare, housing, childcare, and support for spouses.

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In the words of Air Force Veteran and Ranking Member Chrissy Houlahan (D-PA-6), “You may recruit the soldier, sailor, airman, marine, or guardian. But to retain them, you must retain their families.” Echoing the Ranking Member’s point, Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA) Michael R. Weimer cited both military spouse employment as a major obstacle for military families. With relatively frequent relocations and uncertainties about childcare, a topic which was referenced frequently in the hearing, military spouses are often forced to give up employment or are unable to find jobs easily. When restricted to one income, military families often face increased levels of financial uncertainty.



Representative Chrissy Houlahan (D-PA-6)

According to SMA Weimer, the Army is actively pursuing military spouse employment partnerships and has created a Career Advancement Council. Congress is working parallel to the Department of Defense (DOD) to improve employment prospects for military spouses. *The Military*

Spouse Hiring Act, which was introduced with strong, bipartisan support in the House and Senate in March of 2023, aims to encourage employers to hire military spouses, who might otherwise be passed over since they cannot commit to long-term placements. Under the legislation, businesses who hire qualified military spouses can claim a tax credit to offset the wages paid to the individual. Although the bill has not made much progress, the American Legion continues to support this bill and other efforts to support military spouses.

According to the hearing’s participants, inadequate childcare contributes to low quality of life and financial strain for military families. SMA Weimer, Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy (MCPON) James M. Honea, Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps (SMMC) Carlos A. Ruiz, Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force (CMSAF) Joanne S. Bass, and Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force (CMSSF) John F. Bentivegna all referenced the impact that childcare has on their service members and discussed ways to improve child development centers (CDCs).

Ranking Member Houlahan agreed with the senior enlisted advisors that childcare should be a pillar of compensation. The congresswoman emphasized the growing number of women in the Armed Forces and the increased likelihood that they are single parents as factors that are compounding the existing inadequacies in CDCs.

During this discussion, SMA Weimer highlighted the successful childcare system at Fort Bliss, headquartered in El Paso, Texas. At the installation, the average wait time for childcare is only a few days. According to SMMC Ruiz, the Marine Corps has also implemented a system to effectively and swiftly re-employ spouses working in CDCs upon PCS to a new duty station. Moreover, CMSAF Bass said the Air Force has given civilian CDC employees childcare subsidies, which has increased staffing and retention.

The hearing, which lasted approximately two hours, covered many more topics, and displayed a reassuring level of cooperation and amiability between the Armed Forces and Congress. This collaboration will continue to be critical in order to uplift our service members and their families.

FATAL ATTACK ON U.S. SERVICE MEMBERS ON JORDAN-SYRIAN BORDER

On January 28th, 2024, three United States soldiers lost their lives in an aerial attack at a military base in Jordan, near the Syrian and Iraqi borders. According to the Department of Defense, the soldiers were Sergeant William Jerome Rivers of Carrollton, Georgia, Specialist Kennedy Ladon Sanders of Waycross, Georgia, and Specialist Breonna Alexsondria Moffett of Savannah, Georgia. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III offered his condolences saying, “These brave Americans and their families are in my prayers, and the entire Department of Defense mourns their loss.”



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Source: Al Jazeera | January 29, 2024



The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an Iran-linked armed group, claimed responsibility for the drone attack
Iran denied any involvement



There are still several questions about how the attack occurred, but the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a coalition of militias supported by Iran in the region, claimed responsibility. The attack impacted container housing units at Tower 22, a logistics hub working closely with the al-Tanf garrison across the Syrian border.

The White House has blamed Iran for the attack and vowed to “hold all those responsible to account at a time and in a manner of our choosing.” Iran rejects the accusation, claiming it had any involvement or knowledge prior to the attack. However, this attack is just one example of many that display the increasing tension between Iranian-backed militias and the United States.

Iran’s current Ayatollah, Ali Khamenei, has promised to lend Hamas “political and moral support” in its war with Israel, although the Ayatollah refused to become directly involved. The refusal to become directly involved is most likely to avoid a legitimate war against the United States of America, but the move still positions Iran as a clear antagonist to the United States and its allies.

Increased activity by Houthi militants in Yemen, who are also supported by Iran, also signals an escalation in US-Iranian Tensions. The rebel group has carried out multiple attacks since November of 2023 on merchant and military ships in the Red Sea. In the early days of January, the United States and Great Britain retaliated by striking Houthi-controlled regions with Tomahawk land attack missiles. President Biden has

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also taken steps to register Houthi rebels as terrorists, a move that would isolate them from funding and weapons supply.

The tragic passing of Sgt. William Rivers, Spc. Kennedy Sanders, and Spc. Breonna Moffett are the first American fatalities that have occurred since the Hamas attacks escalated tensions in the regions.

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 Core, Arizona

Mr. Core, we are thrilled to name you Legionnaire of the Week! As the Commander for American Legion Post 12, Mr. Core hosted Rep. Paul Gosar (R-AZ-9) at a local charity event. Rep. Gosar, Mr. Core, and other Legionnaires discussed obstacles to VA claims and value of The American Legion's service officers.

Rep. Gosar seemed supportive of the Post's mission to ensure all veterans can access a VA facility, regardless of whether they live in a rural or urban environment.

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, we worked with policy associates across divisions to solidify the Legion's stances on HVAC minority and majority priorities. Additionally, the Legislative Division (LegDiv) staff spent time finalizing logistics and media opportunities for Washington Conference, collaborating with media and communications staff in Indianapolis on Know Before You Go and other key elements. LegDiv staff also set aside time this week to help assemble the National Commander's Testimony for March 13th.

As part of our ongoing Grassroots efforts, LegDiv staff is available 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 relevant hearings scheduled in the coming weeks.