

National Legislative Division Weekly

AMERICAN LEGION CALLS FOR STATE FUNERAL 'WOODY' WILLIAMS



Hershel "Woody" Williams stands near the memorial for Gold Star families he helped install in the Doncel C. Kinnard Memorial State Veterans Cemetery in Dubar, WV

American Legion National Commander Paul E. Dillard called for President Biden to authorize a state funeral for Hershel "Woody" Williams, the last Medal of Honor recipient from World War II to pass away. Williams, a 72-year member of American Legion Post 177 in Barbourville, WV, died June 29 at age 98.

"Delegates at our national convention in 2018 unanimously [passed a resolution](#) calling for a state funeral to honor the last of these remarkable heroes," Dillard said. "All Medal of Honor recipients are extraordinary and Woody Williams was particularly special to The American Legion. He was a proud Legionnaire who demonstrated legendary valor at Iwo Jima and then spent a

lifetime serving veterans and Gold Star Families. He was a true American hero in every sense of the word. We extend our condolences to his family."

Legislative Division staff have been working with Congress to pass House Concurrent Resolution 7, which was introduced by Rep. Miller (R-WV). It would allow for the last remaining Medal of Honor recipient from World War II to lie in honor in the rotunda at the United States Capitol. During World War II, only 473 US military personnel received the Medal of Honor, 266 of them received it posthumously.

CONGRESS

House appropriators are reaching the finish line on committee work for fiscal 2023 spending bills, with the last two bills -- Transportation-HUD and Labor-HHS-Education -- to be marked up today (9 a.m., 1100 Longworth).

Partisan differences could also arise in debate over the Transportation-HUD bill, hinging on Republican complaints that overall spending in the bill is excessive.

The Transportation Department and the Housing and Urban Development Department would receive a combined \$90.9 billion in discretionary funds, a 12 percent increase from fiscal 2022. However, House appropriators expressed concern Wednesday about HUD's ability to carry out "basic business fundamentals" despite the panel's proposal for substantial increases -- 17 percent -- to the department's funding.

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AMERICAN LEGION SUBMITS STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD BEFORE HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE ON MILITARY NATURALIZATION AND VETERAN DEPORTATION

The American Legion has advocated for those who seek a legal path toward naturalization for more than 100 years. Non-citizen immigrants have served in the U.S. military in every conflict since the nation's inception. Approximately 760,000 have gained American citizenship through military service over the last 100 years. Nearly 24,000 non-citizen immigrants are currently serving in the U.S. military and 5,000 join every year.

The American Legion has testified on this issue twice already during the 117th Congress, once in a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing and once in a House Veterans' Affairs hearing. The American Legion again advocated for these veterans and servicemembers in a statement for the record submitted to the House Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship for a hearing on the oversight of immigrant military members and veterans.

"Every day, brave immigrant service members risk their lives in support of our country," House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., said in his opening remarks. "We rely on them to keep our nation safe and to protect U.S. global interests. In return, we must honor their sacrifices by supporting them and their families, and by giving them every opportunity to become U.S. citizens if they so desire."

The process of gaining citizenship through military service is convoluted, leaving many servicemembers assuming they had earned their citizenship automatically through their service. The branches of the Armed Services needed to work with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to begin the process of establishing citizenship for the servicemember. Oftentimes, the servicemember was unaware of the need to begin the process through USCIS, and the individual service branches failed to inform the servicemember while on active duty. Servicemembers were often left to pursue citizenship on their own with little assistance or guidance.

This resulted in many veterans being deported as a result of minor, non-violent or substance-related crimes, which could result in being barred from naturalization for life, despite meeting all other criteria for citizenship.

"The American Legion believes all non-citizen immigrant veterans should be afforded every opportunity to complete the process toward citizenship before exiting the military," The American Legion wrote in the statement for the record. "Post-service opportunities should also be bolstered for veterans and their family members."

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“The American Legion believes in honoring the promise this nation makes to immigrants who seek naturalization through military service: if you enlist and serve honorably, this nation will make you a citizen.”

Based on resolutions No. 15: Expedited Citizenship Through Military Service; No. 10: Expedited Citizenship Applications For Deported Veterans; No. 19: Oppose Deportation of Non-Citizen Immigrant Veterans; and No. 20: Oppose Deportation Of Immediate Family Members Of Non-Citizen Immigrant Veterans, The American Legion recommended some changes to the subcommittee. These include implementing measures within the Department of Defense to ensure the process of naturalization through honorable military service is completed prior to discharge, reopening 19 field offices abroad to support the naturalization process for deployed servicemembers, providing expedited citizenship applications and the resources to complete the applications to deported veterans if their discharge is honorable and they do not have a felony conviction and establishing a pathway to lawful permanent residence for immediate family members of noncitizen servicemembers and veterans and strengthen the pathway to citizenship.

“Immigrants have served in the United States Military since the founding of our nation. In recognition of their honorable service, we have promised the opportunity to become American citizens. Although the pathway to citizenship has been accomplished for many non-citizen immigrant servicemembers and veterans, there are still many barriers. The American Legion’s position is clear. These brave men and women served our nation honorably. It is only right that we recognize their service with the pathways to citizenship they deserve,” The American Legion concluded.

Watch the full hearing [here](#).

AIR COMMISSION

A bipartisan group of Senators have banded together to kill the Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission before it even has a chance to meet. The nine Senators, led by Veterans Affairs Committee (SVAC) chair Sen. Tester (D-MT), have vowed to block confirmation of the nine commissioners, preventing the commission from officially forming.

Tester is joined by Sen. Manchin (D-WV), Sen. Heinrich (D-NM), Sen. Rounds (R-SD), Sen. Moore Capito (R-WV), Sen. Hassan (D-NH), Sen. Thune (R-SD), Sen. Brown (D-OH), Sen. Murray (D-WA), Sen. Daines (R-MT), Sen. Portman (R-OH) and Sen. Luján (D-NM). They Senators have formally pledged to prevent confirmation votes on the Senate floor. Last month, Manchin, Heinrich, Rounds, and Moore Capito introduced legislation to end the commission completely.

The move is not universally embraced on the Hill. Shortly after the group of Senators released their statement, SVAC ranking member Sen. Moran (R-KS) expressed disappointment the committee will not be holding a hearing to confirm the commissioners. He noted that the underlying statute was passed because “many of the VA’s facilities are empty, underutilized, and severely outdated.” Not confirming the

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commissioners not only shuts down the AIR Commission, he noted, but also ends “possibly our only opportunity to fix this long-standing issue.”

House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC) ranking member Rep. Bost (R-IL) pointed out that the MISSION Act, which created the AIR Commission, passed both chambers with broad bipartisan support. “It is wrong for these Senators to outright refuse to even consider” the nominees, he stated. His statement added that “this decision does an immense disservice to veterans and VA staff who will feel its repercussions for years to come.”

The AIR Commission was the brainchild of past HVAC chair Rep. Roe (R-TN) to “right size” the footprint of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Many of the Department’s hospitals are in aging and even historic buildings, limiting the ability to modernize facilities to meet current health care technology and delivery standards. While the median age of private sector hospitals is 11 years, the median age of VA facilities is 58 years, and 69% of VA hospitals are more than 50 years old. Due to their aging nature, many VA facilities are underused, and are expensive to maintain. Modernization efforts, such as implementation of the new electronic health record system, require extensive renovations that often result in work-arounds to make things work. Some operating rooms cannot accommodate new technologies used for modern surgical techniques at all.

The AIR Commission was supposed to help the VA divest of unacceptable buildings, which often requires an act of Congress. It was also supposed to identify where care will be needed in the future, as the location and density of the veterans population shifts around the country.

Under the statute, the AIR Commission has a tight timetable. Working from an initial list of recommendations from the VA Secretary, the commission was to submit its report to the President in January on restructuring the VA health care system’s facilities. However, the White House only named the final commissioner last week (Thomas Harvey, a former SVAC staffer and VA official).

In addition, the AIR Report submitted by VA Secretary McDonough in March was met with criticism from all sides. (This report was to give the commissioners a starting point for their deliberations.) Notably, stakeholders protested that the number of hospitals and clinics in rural communities would decrease, with a greater reliance upon community partners to care for local veterans. All of the Senators pledging to stop the commission represent states which are largely rural.

Even McDonough has stated that his report is based on market conditions that have changed markedly during the pandemic. Since its release, the Secretary has frequently expressed his belief that the commissioners would veer away from many of his own recommendations.

In a statement making clear their intentions, the group of Senators said, “we believe the recommendations put forth to the AIR Commission...would put veterans in both rural and urban areas at a disadvantage.” They added that Congress will continue to invest in the VA’s health infrastructure, and does not need the commission for those purposes.

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BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR LAWMAKER

The National Legislative Council Chairwoman, Elizabeth Hartman, is pleased to host a training webinar titled “Building a Relationship with your Lawmaker.” Chairwoman Hartman is a Marine Corps veteran and is the Commander of Post 539 in North Carolina. She is a passionate veteran advocate and is looking forward to sharing her expertise on how to effectively support the veteran community. The training will take place on **Thursday, July 7, at 7 PM ET.**

The training will cover a variety of topics, including how to:

- Identify levels of influence
- Distinguish yourself from other constituents
- Establish effective grassroots activities
- Brief your state or district on legislative activities
- Communicate with American Legion Headquarters staff

If you want to get more involved in American Legion grassroots advocacy, please register [here](#).

UPCOMING HEARINGS

- Congress will be out of session next week for the Fourth of July recess. There will be no hearings.

Lawrence Montreuil, Legislative Director
The American Legion