

National Legislative Division Weekly

GRASSROOTS ALERT: TELL CONGRESS TO PAY OUR TROOPS

With a government shutdown looming, our servicemembers are facing the prospect of not being paid even as they serve across the globe, unless immediate action is taken.

The *Pay Our Troops Act* will protect military servicemembers and certain Department of Defense civilian employees and contractors should the government shut down on October 1st, and we need your help to make this a priority in the House of Representatives!

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.

SUBSTANDARD LIVING CONDITIONS FOUND IN MILITARY BARRACKS

Mold, bedbugs, unsafe drinking water, nonexistent heating and air conditioning. This nauseating list only provides a small glimpse into the poor barrack conditions investigated by the Government Accountability Office.



On September 19th, the [Government Accountability Office \(GAO\) publicly released its 118-page report](#) on the potentially unsafe living conditions of unaccompanied military housing, and revealed the incompetency of the Department of Defense's maintenance, improvement, and oversight measures.

Unaccompanied military housing, a term that is used interchangeably with barrack by the GAO, is [used primarily by junior-enlisted service members](#) who are required to live in the facilities. These servicemembers, usually teenagers who recently completed high school, have not been consulted or surveyed by the Department of Defense (DOD) about their living conditions in the barracks, [according to the GAO Director of Defense Capabilities and Management Elizabeth Field](#). While the DOD claimed their lack of surveyance and data collection was because junior-enlisted members were unreliable or did not respond to inquiries, GAO found that these young men and women were eager to share their experiences.

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According to [Ms. Field's testimony](#) to the House Armed Services Committee Quality of Life Panel on Wednesday, September 27th, mold is the most common problem and goes unresolved in many buildings despite frequent reporting. On top of the obvious health issues, one servicemember told Ms. Fields team that the lack of response to the issue made residents feel “[expendable – like they didn't matter](#).” GAO also heard reports of bed bugs and broken air conditioning, making it virtually impossible to get the needed sleep for quality training and work. A resident described his room, infested with bedbugs and unprotected from extreme temperatures, as “suffocating.”

The barracks' insufficiencies are impacting residents' nutrition as well. Where DOD standards require each room to have a kitchenette, the military services' standards do not reflect that requirement. GAO toured many units that only had a microwave and small refrigerator. Servicemembers in these residences said that they weren't getting proper nutrition, [since they could only microwave meals and had rely in part on fast food](#).

These conditions are not only undignified and disrespectful to the people who have enlisted to serve our country, but they also have clear, [negative implications for servicemembers' readiness](#). [Officials at these installations have confirmed](#) that the low morale, insufficient sleep, poor nutrition, and health issues caused by mold are making it difficult for servicemembers to perform during work and training.

The report did not stop with physical health and safety implications; the conditions in barracks threaten the physical safety and security of residents as well. Many installations had completely [non-operational fire alarm systems](#) with no published timeframe for repair. Moreover, many doors and windows were broken which infringed on many servicemembers feeling of security. [In some cases](#), these unsecurable entrances had been used by intruders to enter and assault servicemembers. “Sexual assault happens in the barracks more often than people think,” [one servicemember told Ms. Fields](#) in a discussion on these issues.

This information led the GAO to a total of [31 recommendations](#) to DOD ranging from oversight measures to updating nearly nonexistent health standards. While DOD did full agree to 23 of these and partially to 8, [they have not yet taken action to implement](#) any of these recommendations.

The GAO will continue to monitor the steps taken by DOD to improve oversight and recommends that Congress [turns their 31 points into legislation](#).

BILLS TO ENSURE MILITARY PAY DURING SHUTDOWN ARE INTRODUCED

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With just two days left in the fiscal year 2023 and Congress unable to pass a budget for 2024, the possibility



of a government shutdown is increasingly threatening. All federal agencies whose appropriations bills have not been passed will only perform [essential functions](#), and staff [will not receive any compensation](#) until their budget is passed. During the last shutdown, the Department of Homeland Security had yet to receive its budget. This meant that the Coast Guard was left without pay for that time. Unfortunately, legislation to correct this issue fell through the cracks.

Now, years later, the issue has been compounded. Once again, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [does not have a passed budget](#). However, unlike the 2019 shutdown, the Department of Defense (DOD) also [does not have a budget](#) for this year. This means that, across all five branches of the armed services, over [1 million military members and furloughed civilian employees](#) will be asked to go without pay for the duration of a shutdown. These servicemembers will continue to work on behalf of our country without a sure date of pay, which can be especially harrowing for [junior-enlisted servicemembers who often live from paycheck to paycheck](#).

As both houses of Congress scramble to pass stopgap measures to prevent a total shutdown, some lawmakers have started introducing emergency legislation to guarantee military pay if DHS and DOD do not receive funding by October 1st. In the House of Representatives, the [Pay Our Troops Act](#) (H.R. 5641) was introduced on September 21st, a little over a week before the potential shut down. The bill, which has garnered about 60 co-sponsors, would provide appropriations for servicemembers and civilian employees in the Armed Forces in the event of a fiscal year 2024 shutdown. By using unappropriated treasury funds, H.R. 5641 would guarantee that military personnel until regular appropriations legislation is passed for DHS and DOD.

The American Legion will continue to monitor the status of appropriations and emergency military pay legislation in both the House and the Senate. National Commander Daniel J. Seehafer has issued a statement in support of H.R. 5641, which can be [read here](#).

If you would like to advocate for this bill, you can use [this link](#) to encourage your representatives to pass the *Pay Our Troops Act*.

At The American Legion, pay parity for the Coast Guard will remain a legislative priority even after the current appropriations debacle is resolved. As stated by [Past National Commander Vincent J. “Jim” Troiola](#), the Coast Guard “should be paid whether or not their funding comes from DoD. It’s a national security issue. We must take care of our servicemembers and their families.”

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In the meantime, The Legislative Division encourages you to use the [Grassroots Action Center](#) to stay up-to-date and in-the-know on our current priorities.

GOP DEBATE – NATIONAL SECURITY POSITIONS

This debate was streamed on [Fox.com/live](#), and all following quotes and events reflect the live event. A transcript of the event can be read [here](#).

On September 27th, the second Republican Presidential Debate was held. The seven candidates who were present included Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, Former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum, Former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, Former Vice President Mike Pence, South Carolina Senator Tim Scott, and entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy. Although veterans' issues and military personnel issues went unmentioned, here are the key points on topics affecting national security and defense:

The Government Shutdown

The likelihood of a government shutdown on October 1st has been largely blamed on the extreme polarization and partisanship of members of Congress. In the debate on Wednesday, moderator Ili Calderon touched on the divide within the candidates' own party, asking Former Governor Christie if voters should "blame populist Republicans" if the government shuts down. Chris Christie, after a short digression, claimed, "it is to the blame of everyone in Washington, D.C. who has failed to do their jobs."

Christie, along with Governor DeSantis, spoke of the possibility of shutdown as a symptom of mismanagement and unnecessary spending in the previous two administrations, referring frequently to the national debt and "wasteful" spending. These were the only two candidates to respond to the question before the topic changed to immigration and border policy. None of the candidates mentioned the effect of the shutdown on military personnel or operations.

Immigration Policy

Calderon began the discussion by asking Former Vice President Pence if he would work with Congress to reach permanent solution for Dreamers in DACA were permanently ended by the supreme court. Before answering the question, Pence proudly stated that during the Trump Administration he helped reduce illegal immigration and asylum abuse "by 90 percent." After Calderon re-presented her original question, Pence said that if he were president, he would "be ready on day one to get Congress to step up and secure the southern border of the United States."

Governor DeSantis also was able to touch on immigration during his previous response about an impending government shutdown. DeSantis claimed, "They have shut down our national sovereignty by allowing our border to be wide open." Vivek Ramaswamy reiterated DeSantis' point, claiming that a border wall is not enough and the U.S. has to "seal that Southern border" to prevent drug trafficking. He referred to fentanyl brought across the U.S.-Mexico border as a product of "bio-terrorism."

In the first debate, DeSantis claimed he authorize lethal force at the border, and label drug cartels coming from Central and South America as international terrorist. Once again, in agreement with Ramaswamy's

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declaration of bioterrorism, he said “Mexican drug cartels are going to be treated like the foreign terrorist organizations that they are.” This language clearly aims to escalate the level of defense at the Southern border.

The War in Ukraine

Dana Perino introduced the topic of Ukraine a little over halfway into the debate. Perino said “Today the Republican Party is at odds over aid to Ukraine.” After mentioning that the total cost of the war to the U.S. sits at \$76 billion, she asked DeSantis, “Is it in our best interest to degrade Russia’s military for less than 5% of what we pay annually on defense, especially when there are no U.S. soldiers in the fight?”

DeSantis then implied that the U.S. would end its involvement. “We are not going to have a blank check. We will not have U.S. troops,” said the Governor. In DeSantis’ view, these funds are better spent in defense of the U.S.-Mexico border. But Former Governor Haley and Senator Scott quickly voiced disapproval of DeSantis’ isolationist. Scott said that “our national vital interest is in degrading the Russian military.” Haley dove deeper, claiming that American defense of Ukraine would not only contain Russia, but also China.

Ramaswamy, in what seems to be a pattern, had the most extreme point of view. He claimed that Putin’s status as “an evil dictator does not mean that Ukraine is good.” Ramaswamy said our involvement only strengthened a Sino-Russian alliance and accused Volodymyr Zelenskyy of supporting Nazis. (This accusation comes after Zelenskyy and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau gave a standing ovation to a Ukrainian World War II veteran; but, [it was not until after the ceremony that President Zelenskyy and Prime Minister Trudeau were made aware that the man had served in a Nazi unit.](#))

Christie pushed back against the idea that we were strengthening a Sino-Russian alliance with our involvement. Rather, Christie claims that this alliance already exists and “we must fight against it” instead of “cuddling up to Vladimir Putin.”

As of now, the Democratic National Convention has not scheduled its debates. The next Republican primary debate will be held November 8th in Miami, Florida. The American Legion will continue to publicize its agenda and hopes that all presidential candidates reflect and respect our communities’ priorities.

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.

Patricia Harris, North Carolina

This week, we have the honor of spotlighting Chairwoman Patricia Harris of the Department of North Carolina. Patricia has recently been appointed the Chairwoman of the National Legislative Commission.

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An Army Veteran who served in the Gulf War, Mrs. Harris is now dedicated to uplifting women veterans' and works to end domestic violence, prevent homelessness, and empower our women veterans.

Chairwoman Harris, the Legislative Division is looking forward to working and learning from you.

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

On Tuesday, the Legislative Division hosted the Legislative Chairman's Quarterly Call to review and update our priorities for the 118th Congress. We appreciate those of you who were able to attend. The quarterly call can be [viewed here](#).

This week, the Legislative Division submitted a statement for the record for the House Veterans Affairs Committee hearing "VA's Federal Supremacy Initiative: Putting Veterans First?". This statement can be [accessed here](#).

Additionally, Legislative Division Staff attend the House Armed Services Committee Quality of Life Panel's hearing on unaccompanied housing conditions and privatized housing initiatives. The content of this hearing is discussed at-length on the first page.

Finally, the National Commander published a letter in opposition to H.R. 1822 - the *PLUS for Veterans Act*. This letter can be read [here](#).

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

On Wednesday, October 4th at 10:00 AM, the Senate Appropriations Committee will receive a closed briefing on U.S. assistance to Ukrainian Air Defenses.

On Wednesday, October 4th at 2:30 PM, the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee will hold hearings to examine security on the Korean Peninsula. You can watch this hearing [here](#).

On Wednesday, October 4th at 3:00 PM, the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee will hold a hearing titled "VA Accountability and Transparency: A Cornerstone of Quality Care and Benefits for Veterans." You can watch this hearing [here](#).