



January 10, 2025

WEEKLY GRASSROOTS NEWSLETTER

Voter Voice Campaigns have been suspended in order to gather statistics from the closing of the 118th Congress. New Campaigns will be published to align with the legislative priorities set for the 119th Congress.

Have you had a recent meeting or phone call with your member of Congress? Report your contact today! Click [here](#) to register your Congressional contact and demonstrate the power of The American Legion advocacy in action.

The American Legion's legislative agenda for the 2nd Session of the 118th Congress is available online. To review our priorities, you can check out our [Advocacy Toolkit](#).

MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

February 22-26, 2025 – The American Legion's 65th Annual Washington Conference will be held at the Washington Hilton Hotel. This conference provides an opportunity for Legionnaires to meet with their respective lawmakers and hear from members of Congress and VA leadership. The National Commander will also address attendees on legislative priorities during the National Commander's Rally. More details, such as agendas and schedules, will be updated [here](#).

LEGISLATIVE PREVIEW: DEFENSE

This article's original publication can be found [here](#).

Overview

As lawmakers settle into the 119th Congress and Washington prepares for a new administration to take over, national security-minded members are already facing a full slate of legislative issues to contend with that portend a busy winter and spring on Capitol Hill.

First, lawmakers will have to contend with fiscal 2025 defense spending, with the continuing resolution currently funding the government (PL 118-158) set to expire on March 14. That's in addition to a reconciliation package, including border security and defense provisions, that Republicans hope to get passed in the early days of the Trump administration.

And having crossed the finish line on the fiscal 2025 defense authorization bill (PL 118-159), members of the Armed Services panels and their staff will be hard at work on next year's version. Some measures, like increased pay for senior officers, are already taking shape for that bill.

Meanwhile, the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East will continue to require attention, with many arms transfers requiring congressional sign-off.

Status

Republicans will need to work with Democrats on the final defense spending bill given House Republicans' thin majority and the need to get 60 votes in the Senate as the budget reconciliation process — which allows final passage with simple majorities — is unavailable for appropriations bills.

Reconciliation is available, however, for the border security policy and certain defense proposals. That measure could include \$20 billion or more in defense funds that lawmakers attempted but failed to include as emergency funds in the fiscal 2025 defense authorization act.

The just-passed NDAA did, however, contain landmark provisions to help military families get by in 2025, including big pay hikes, but top lawmakers want to enact even higher compensation and better benefits for 2026.

That likely means the fiscal 2026 NDAA will contain a renewed push to raise troops' housing allowances in 2026 and a likely effort to raise pay, especially for noncommissioned officers, among other potential moves.

Having boosted pay significantly for the most junior enlisted personnel, some lawmakers are already talking about putting a targeted pay raise for more senior enlisted personnel in the next NDAA, a priority that House Armed Services Chairman Mike D. Rogers, R-Ala., has said is on his radar.

Also likely to be a continued priority this year is bolstering U.S. shipbuilding, as lawmakers contend with lagging shipyards and the need to compete with China's quickly growing Navy — part of the Defense Department's shift in focus from wars in the Middle East to the so-called "pacing challenge" of conflict with Beijing.

The next NDAA, as in previous years, may also serve as a lightning rod for some of the nation's culture war issues.

President-elect Donald Trump and Pete Hegseth, the Army veteran and former Fox News host Trump has tapped to be secretary of Defense, have both panned what they described as wokeism in the military, which includes the department's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, or DEI, programs. Though measures to cut those programs were largely stripped out of the last NDAA, they may resurface.

A major unanswered question this year will be the fate of Ukraine. Locked in a war with Russia that will soon enter its fourth year, Kyiv has heavily relied on U.S. military support to keep Ukraine in the fight.

President Joe Biden had vowed to support Ukraine for "as long as it takes," but Trump has not offered the same no-holds-barred backing and has instead vowed to end the conflict before taking office.

Trump has not publicly committed to a Ukraine policy, but his skepticism on continued military aid, plus the already entrenched reluctance of many Republicans to send Ukraine any additional funds, prompted the Biden administration to surge billions of dollars to Kyiv before the White House changes hands.

But the incoming Trump administration will retain a few billion dollars' worth of presidential drawdown authority to send military equipment from U.S. stockpiles to Ukraine, defense officials have said.

Similarly, Trump has warned that "all hell will break out" if Hamas does not agree to release hostages it has held in Gaza as part of its war with Israel by the time he returns to the White House on Jan. 20, but has not been more specific than that.

In his previous term, Trump was a strong backer of Israel, brokering peace deals between Israel and other nations in the region and formally recognizing Jerusalem as the capital.

Outlook

Top GOP defense hawks will likely be supportive of efforts to quickly pass a border and defense spending package via reconciliation.

Senate Armed Services Chairman Roger Wicker, R-Miss., said late last year he expected bipartisan support for “much-needed investment” in early 2025.

But some House Republicans, like appropriator Andrew Clyde, R-Ga., have signaled unease with increased defense spending at a time when the incoming Trump administration has made cutting government spending a key policy position — even going so far as to create an unofficial “Department of Government Efficiency” before taking office.

Others — like Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, who serves on the Budget and Rules panels — have said they would be open to increasing certain areas of defense spending but only if paired with cuts elsewhere in the military budget.

The Pentagon policy bill is on a slower albeit more predictable track that almost always ends in broad, bipartisan support for the mammoth piece of legislation by the time final passage, likely in November or December, comes around.

While some priorities like shipbuilding, pay for troops, and the typical lists of weapons, vehicles and aircraft are already clear, others will materialize over the coming months as lawmakers seek to insert their own priorities into the bill.

And though there is still some appetite among Ukraine supporters in Congress for continued funding, the current prospects for another supplemental package like those seen in previous years are slimmer than they have ever been.

PACT ACT, YEAR 2: CLAIMS WARNINGS AND ADVICE, AND “THE FOUNDATION” THE MEASURE LAID

The article's original publication can be found [here](#).



American Legion Health Policy Analyst Andrew Petrie describes to student veterans how the PACT Act has evolved and can be expected to continue to do so in the future. Photo by Jeff Stoffer.

SVA Conference attendees hear from American Legion and VFW experts on challenges and opportunities for today's veterans seeking benefits and help after toxic exposure.

The landmark PACT Act of 2022 opened eligibility for VA health care and benefits to some 3.5 million veterans who previously did not qualify for federal support. So far since then, VA has approved more than 1 million claims from those who have suffered from toxic contamination while serving in specific areas at specific times as members of the U.S. Armed Forces, primarily in the post-9/11 era.

A panel discussion Saturday, Jan. 4, shared with attendees of the Student Veterans of America's 17th National Conference some of the opportunities, lessons and threats that have emerged since the expansion of federal accountability to those who were exposed and sickened while serving in uniform.

Representing The American Legion in the discussion was Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Division Policy Analyst Andrew Petrie. He was joined by Veterans of Foreign Wars Assistant Director of Field Operations Cindy Noel, a longtime provider of free VA claims assistance. The discussion was moderated by Kristina Keenan, VFW's

incoming legislative director, who gave an overview of the PACT Act and described it as “a first step” in delivering federal accountability to toxic-exposed veterans.

She explained that the PACT Act aggregated multiple pieces of legislation that addressed “not only burn-pit exposures but radiation exposures from post-World War II, hypertension due to Agent Orange exposure, K2/Uzbekistan, uranium exposures ... but the purpose of the PACT Act was to address mostly Iraq and Afghanistan burn-pit exposures. I say that because since the passage of the bill in 2022, our organizations have received a lot of feedback from veterans saying, ‘You left us out.’ The bill was not intended to cover every single toxic exposure out there, but to be a first step to addressing burn pit and particulate matter exposure in those areas and resolve some of the past exposures that had not yet been addressed. And thirdly, to create a framework for VA, going forward, to constantly be researching and addressing new toxic exposures.”

Marine Corps veteran Petrie, a former SVA chapter president and survivor of a life-threatening toxic-contamination cancer, spoke mainly on the health-care side of the PACT Act; dozens of diseases and adverse conditions became listed as presumably service-connected through the measure, including three new ones approved a week before the veterans gathered in Colorado Springs.

Following the session, Petrie said that work is now under way to identify and count “veterans who were left out of the PACT Act. I am thinking there may be a PACT Act 2.0 in the future, or something along those lines, maybe not something as big as the PACT Act, getting it in little pieces that are not so heavy in funding, not so scary for Congress.”

The PACT Act of 2022, he explained, “laid the groundwork and set us on a path in which we can continue to move forward and ensure that any potential future exposures – because we know that, unfortunately, there’s going to be more as time goes on – the process will become less arduous, with quicker turn-around, so there is not a 40-year wait, like Agent Orange, to be connected to a veteran’s service. So, they can potentially deal with those issues and be compensated for those disabilities they have endured, rather than at the end of their life.”

Noel, an Air Force veteran, has been a claims rep for over a decade and assisted with a claims clinic at the SVA’s conference. She offered the students critical advice about filing for VA benefits and appealing decisions, as well as a warning about so-called “claims sharks” in the private sector who charge veterans for services offered free by service officers trained by organizations like the VFW and The American Legion and accredited by VA.

Noel said aggressive private companies often operate illegally in the VA claims representation space, leaving many veterans with diminished benefits, debts and, worst of all, no results or accountability. “What they do is they promise servicemembers and veterans this large payout, and they can’t back it up,” Noel told the students. “It’s absurd.

They are promising big, and they are not able to do anything. (Accredited VSOs) file claims for free. We're accredited by VA. We actually review medical records. We actually know the law. We know what (veterans) can claim."

Noel explained that veterans have to "do the legwork" to get their initial VA claims filed correctly to avoid delays and disappointment. That means the veteran must collect all possible evidence – medical and military records, even documentation about employment missed due to a condition and e-mail threads – in order to file efficiently and get an answer in a short period of time. "It's so important to get it right the first time," Noel said. "I don't like to go back and forth with VA. I don't think anybody wants to do that."

And, she added, whenever a claim or appeal is denied, or a service-connected disability rating comes in lower than expected, VA lists the reasons and missing information that the veteran would need to get a decision upgraded or changed. Veterans need to read those explanations carefully and meet the conditions to make their cases for a change, she said.

Petrie added that indeed, "sometimes VA makes mistakes." In those cases, veterans can then file a notice of disagreement or a supplemental claim. "Just because VA said something doesn't always make it true, or in accordance with your evidence," Petrie told the students. "Remember, you're your own best advocate. VA, they're doing their job, and they're trying to their best job. But at the end of the day, who's going to fight better for you? Nobody but yourself."

Noel echoed that point, noting that VA decisions will come faster or more accurately, when a veteran works with an accredited service officer to ensure all the correct documentation accompanies a claim. Incomplete documentation is the primary reason for long delays or unsatisfactory results, she said. "Do your legwork. This is your claim."

And while accredited service officers are working night and day against a hurricane of new claims since the PACT Act, Petrie, Noel and Keenan said free representation is available and more sensible than looking to the private sector and paying for it. If a VSO service officer has too heavy a docket, Petrie suggested county or city veterans division for assistance, or simply try another VSO who may have openings.

CARLSON EVANS, PIONEER FOR WOMEN VETERANS, RECEIVED PRESIDENTIAL CITIZENS MEDAL

The article's original publication can be found [here](#).



Past National Commander Denise Rohan accepts the Presidential Citizens Medal from President Biden on behalf of Diane Carlson Evans during a White House Ceremony on January 2, 2025. Photo by Mike Rohan

American Legion Past National Commander Denise Rohan helps accept the honor in the White House, on behalf of all military women.

Diane Carlson Evans was a high school senior when she received her first citizenship award. It was presented by the Buffalo, Minn., American Legion post. More than 60 years later, on Jan. 2, 2025, she was awarded the Presidential Citizens Medal in a ceremony at the White House, once again with support from The American Legion.

The farm girl who joined the Army during the height of the Vietnam War, served as a combat nurse and came home to spearhead the Vietnam Women's Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. dedicated 31 years ago, has become an inspiration to new generations of women in military service.

Unable to travel from her home in Montana, due to health reasons, Carlson Evans selected American Legion Past National Commander Denise Rohan, the first woman elected to lead the nation's largest organization of U.S. veterans, to help accept the medal from President Joseph Biden.

“I accept the PCM on behalf of, and for, my sister veterans who richly deserve this recognition, by the President of the United States, to the thousands of enlisted women, officers, and women of all military occupational specialties serving in the combat theater, and all around the world – all worthy of remembrance and honor for believing we could make a difference serving our country,” said Carlson Evans, whose 2010 memoir, “Healing Wounds: A Vietnam War Combat Nurse’s 10-Year Fight to Win Women a Place of Honor in Washington, D.C.” was published by Permuted Press and distributed by Simon & Schuster.

Rohan, a U.S. Army veteran, joined retired Army Col. Karen M. Gausman and Lennie Susan Enzel, and retired Navy Capt. Judy Brinckerhoff in the ceremony. Afterward, they and Donna Lee Greenwood, her Vietnam-era Army veteran husband Ronald Greenwood, and American Legion Past National Commander’s Aide Mike Rohan paid a visit to the memorial to share the moment with all women who have served.

“My hope is that all military women who served during the Vietnam era, including our civilian sisters who wore a different uniform, feel the healing power of the monument and will share their stories of service with their families and our nation,” Carlson Evans said. “Ours is an inspiring story that can power women’s future. It’s not just for the women of the Vietnam era. It’s for our daughters and granddaughters, for the women who step up to serve today, and for our brother soldiers who united with us in that same patriotic spirit.

“As one woman soldier said, ‘I have the same training as the men. I get the same pay. I signed the same oath. I should take the same risks.’ President Biden’s presentation of the PCM to me confirms at last that our nation is eternally grateful for the dedication, courage and sacrifice made by the military and civilian women in support of our armed forces during the Vietnam era.”

The Presidential Citizens Medal was established Nov. 13, 1969, to recognize an individual “who has performed exemplary deeds or services for their country or their fellow citizens.”

Among its past recipients have been inventors, doctors, educators, diplomats, public officials, astronauts, athletes, lawyers, law-enforcement officers, civil-rights activists, philanthropists and military leaders.

Notable past recipients from the military/veteran community are former U.S. Sen. Bob Dole, a World War II veteran and American Legion member (1989); Gen. Wayne Downing (2008), whose military and national security career spanned from the Vietnam War to the Global War on Terrorism; former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (1992), who served as an American Legion 100th Anniversary Honorary Committee member, with Carlson-Evans; U.S. Marine Corps Col. William Higgins (1992, posthumously), who was taken captive in Lebanon while on a U.N. peacekeeping mission, held hostage and murdered in captivity; Gen. Colin Powell (1989), U.S. secretary of state from 2001-2005, who spoke at the groundbreaking ceremony for the Vietnam Women’s Memorial; and U.S. Navy Adm. and Secretary of Energy James David Watkins (2008), a Vietnam War officer and Chief of Naval Operations.

LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

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.

Kathryn Bates, Washington

Kathryn, for your steadfast advocacy of Legion priorities, we are honored to name you Legionnaire of the Week!

This week, Kathryn attended an in-district swearing-in ceremony for newly elected Representative Emily Randall in Bremerton, WA. Kathryn talked with Rep. Randall's Chief of Staff to get her to visit Port Townsend's American Legion Post when she returns to her district in February/March.

Thank you, Kathryn, for your report and the time you have dedicated to the Legion's legislative priorities.

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 us at grassroots@legion.org with the details.

GRASSROOTS INFORMATION

Interested in what the Legion is advocating for in Congress on ***The Veteran's Role in Supporting the Military?*** Check out our [information papers](#) in the [Legislative Toolkit](#). This is a great starting point for a conversation with your elected officials!

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.

You can find relevant legislation and the Legion's stance on them in the [key legislation section of VoterVoice](#).

***Register for Action Alerts today at
<https://www.votervoice.net/AmericanLegion/Register>***



UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

As of 9:00 am on Friday, January 10, 2024, the following hearings are scheduled:

- Tuesday, January 14, 9:00 am: Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, Nomination Hearing – Nomination of the Honorable Douglas A. Collins to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs
- Tuesday, January 14, 9:30 am: Senate Armed Services Committee, Nomination Hearing – To Conduct a Confirmation Hearing on the Expected Nomination of Mr. Peter B. Hegseth to be Secretary of Defense

HVAC hearings can be viewed at: [Calendar Home | House Committee on Veterans Affairs](#)

SVAC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings - U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs](#)

HASC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings – House Armed Services Committee](#)

SASC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings – U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services](#)

[View The American Legion Legislative Handbook Here](#)