



February 14, 2025

## WEEKLY GRASSROOTS NEWSLETTER

This week, we are asking Legionnaires to contact Congress to request support for the *Major Richard Star Act!* This act aims to allow combat-injured veterans to receive both their earned retirement pay and disability compensation without offset. *The American Legion supports this legislation, and we appreciate all the emails you have sent so far. Go to the [Action Center](#) to quickly email a letter of support to your members of 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.

## MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

**February 22-26, 2025** – The American Legion's 65<sup>th</sup> 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](#).

## **HOUSE MILITARY PERSONNEL PANEL EYES REFORMS TO RECRUITING EFFORTS**

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



Last year, House Armed Services Committee members focused on getting [better pay and benefits](#) for troops in their personnel policy discussions. This year, the goal is to help [bring more troops into the ranks](#) to enjoy those quality-of-life boosts.

“When it’s year over year and you’re not hitting your recruiting goals, that becomes a crisis,” Rep. Pat Fallon, R-Texas, the new chairman of the committee’s military personnel panel, said in an interview with Military Times. “Our greatest resource in the military is our personnel flat out, so we need to make sure we have great folks coming in.”

Fallon, [an Air Force veteran](#) in his third term in Congress, takes over the Armed Services’ personnel subcommittee after one of the most significant legislative years for troops and their families in decades.

Lawmakers in 2024 approved [a massive pay raise for junior enlisted troops](#) — set to go into effect this April — along with boosts to medical care access, day care opportunities and military spouse assistance programs, all in an effort to help boost recruiting and retention.

The effort seems to be paying off already, with Army recruiting reporting strong numbers in the final months of 2024 and retention across the services continuing to remain strong.

But Fallon said his subcommittee already has plans for several more hearings on the topic, to see what other improvements can be made. That will include ways to improve outreach to young Americans to encourage them to enlist.

“That’s what we want to focus on,” he said. “We need access in the high schools. We need ROTC units to be allowed at all colleges. ... If you get access to young people and they realize what the military can do for them, you’re going to get more people to consider it.”

Fallon said he is also working on a legislative proposal guaranteeing citizenship for immigrants who honorably serve in the military for six years. In the past, such military service has made the naturalization process easier, but not an ironclad promise.

He expects work on the annual defense authorization bill to start at the end of this month, with numerous hearings to follow. Fallon said he will push for several new recruiting and retention incentives in the annual measure, along with a variety of quality-of-life issues benefitting currently serving families.

“I think the recommendations from last year were wonderful, but I don’t think our work is done there yet,” he said, referencing improvements to military housing stipends that were not included in legislation in 2024.

The annual defense authorization bill typically takes 8 to 11 months to navigate through Congress, with the House Armed Services Committee unveiling its initial priorities typically in mid-May. Fallon said his panel will be closely monitoring policy priorities outlined by the White House to see how they can be included in the next bill.

## **LAWMAKERS SLAM VA FOR ‘RINSE-AND-REPEAT CYCLE’ OF DELAYS IN FIXING PROBLEMS ADMINISTERING THE GI BILL**

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



Republican lawmakers blasted Department of Veterans Affairs officials for mistakes in administering the GI Bill that led to delays in rolling out its digital platform and delivering direct deposits to veterans to help pay for books and student housing.

Problems in managing operations at the VA’s educational services are the result of the agency prioritizing its large bureaucracy over veterans, Rep. Derrick Van Orden, R-Wis., said at a hearing of a House Veterans’ Affairs Committee’s subpanel on economic opportunity.

“We on this committee are going to make sure that every dollar allocated by this Congress goes to help a veteran and not a bureaucrat,” Van Orden said Tuesday, as lawmakers examined “bureaucratic barriers” to administering the GI Bill during a 90-minute hearing.

Established in 1944, the GI Bill helps veterans and their families cover bills for higher education and training that lead to new jobs and careers.

Van Orden said the work by former VA Secretary Denis McDonough, who left office in January, to improve educational services and other programs for veterans was undermined by “a lot of career officials at the VA.” The agency employs nearly 475,000 people.

“This is going to stop. I am excited to have a new veterans affairs secretary,” Van Orden said, referring to Doug Collins, an attorney, pastor and Air Force Reserve chaplain confirmed by the Senate last week.

The VA is in the process of implementing a modernized GI Bill digital platform to make it easier for veterans to apply for and receive their benefits. A 2024 report by the VA Office of Inspector General found a lack of planning had led to delays and higher costs for the platform.

Van Orden and other lawmakers also rebuked the VA for intimidating colleges and job training programs through so-called risk-based surveys conducted to ensure their compliance with federal regulations when participating in the GI Bill benefits. Some schools withdraw rather than go through the reviews, Van Orden said.

Ken Smith, acting executive director for VA’s education service, said the department does not try to target specific schools for the risk-based surveys but strives to ensure veterans are receiving appropriate education and training.

“It is not our goal to drive schools out of the market,” he said.

The Defense Credit Union Council in written testimony urged the VA to modernize its electronic payment processing system and improve communications with financial institutions when there are direct deposit errors in the system.

The council, which represents not-for-profit, member-owned financial cooperatives that provide financial counseling, direct deposit services, loan programs and educational workshops, said the VA needs to speed up the transmission of payments for tuition assistance, books and housing.

Jason Stverak, chief advocacy officer for Defense Credit Union Council, described the role of defense credit unions as helping veterans manage their benefits, including for tuition assistance, VA home loans and disability compensation.

Veterans are experiencing delays in receiving disability and GI Bill benefits when using VA direct deposit, which should make the delivery of payments go faster, he said.

Smith said the VA is focused on completing the digital platform for administering benefits through the GI Bill.

About half of original claims are now submitted electronically, the VA said. Nearly 75% of supplemental claims are completed online.

The VA processed nearly 2 million claims in fiscal 2023, according to the VA.

Van Orden also referred to a closed-door session of a House VA subcommittee hearing Monday that identified “billions of dollars in waste that VA is responsible for because of inadequate planning or no planning at all.”

Though Van Orden did not identify the subcommittee or topic, he said the subcommittee chairman is Rep. Tom Barrett, a freshman Republican lawmaker from Michigan. Barrett is the new chairman of the House VA Committee's subpanel on technology modernization.

Barrett criticized the VA for "IT systems that go exponentially over budget and fail to deliver. We ask questions and don't get specific answers."

He described a "rinse-and-repeat cycle" that VA leaders goes through after every election with new House VA Committee members who raise the same concerns.

"The institutional members of VA wait us out," said Barrett, a 22-year Army veteran.

But Smith emphasized gains the VA has made in improving educational services.

"I commit to you I will work to get it right," he said, adding he has been in his position for just one week.

Smith said the VA is focused on making continuous improvements and leveraging technology to ensure veterans have "customer experience excellence."

Digital modernization efforts launched in August 2022 enabled education claims to be submitted electronically for the first time, he said.

Rep. Juan Ciscomani, R-Ariz., asked about the VA's progress in advancing financial assistance for veterans pursuing their commercial trucking licenses and for taking information technology courses, also known as VET-TEC, that will lead to jobs in high-demand fields.

"Transition from the military looks different for every person out there," Ciscomani said. He called on the VA to bring a sense of urgency to implementing these programs.

Smith acknowledged the VA's education service needs better processes and procedures.

"We can look at technology as an enabler," he said. "We are not there right now. We need to look at things within our control, provide reinforcement and improve our learning curve."

## **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.

## Rachael Henske, Maryland

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

This week, Rachael met with Rep. Jamie Raskin (MD) to discuss how to promote veteran access to mental health care benefits. They also discussed the MISSION act and the PACT Act.

*Thank you, Rachael, 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](mailto: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](mailto:grassroots@legion.org) or [ejohnson@legion.org](mailto: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, February 14, the following hearings are scheduled:

- Wednesday, February 19, 9:30 AM: Senate Veterans Affairs Committee – Hearing to Consider Pending Nominations

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](#)