



October 18, 2024

## WEEKLY GRASSROOTS NEWSLETTER

This week, we are asking Legionnaires to contact Congress to request support for H.R. 7543 – *Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act!* This legislation aims to rectify GI Bill inequality for National Guard and Reserve servicemembers. *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.

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 (NEW DATE)** – 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](#).

### **National Legislative Council updates coming soon!**

Election Day is November 5<sup>th</sup>, and the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress will be sworn in on January 3<sup>rd</sup> at noon! This means there will be some turnover in Congress – some members are retiring, and others will be replaced due to election results. These changes will result in some adjustments to the NLC. Legislative Division staff will be working with the NLC Vice Chairs in each Department to adjust in early December to fill gaps and realign appointees. We will then have training on January 6<sup>th</sup> for all the new NLC members so that we can hit the ground running and have an increased influence on Congress! If you are on the NLC, stay tuned for further details as we work through this process. If you are a Vice Chair, expect detailed communications from D.C. soon!

### **CANCELED APPOINTMENTS, UNEXPLAINED MIXUPS – VETERANS FACING CHALLENGES GETTING VA MENTAL HEALTH CARE**

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



The former [Army](#) medic sat, staring at his computer screen, waiting for a VA therapist to hop on the video call. He had spent months trying to get the appointment, months of his wife pushing him to get help, and he was alone.

Five minutes late.

The vivid nightmares had started again. The bouts of rage over the soldiers he tried to save and those he couldn't. It had been nine years -- really nine years? -- since he'd tried to end his life with a loaded pistol that jammed, and he knew he was slipping back to a dark place. Maybe the doctor wouldn't show up and he wouldn't have to go through with the conversation.

Ten minutes late.

Marcus Bagwell had been receiving medical care at the Oklahoma City Veterans Affairs Medical Center when he worked up the courage to start looking for a mental health appointment. It wasn't easy to acknowledge he needed the help in late 2021, that he couldn't white-knuckle it anymore.

Fifteen minutes late.

And then he got a notice. The appointment had been canceled. All the nerves, all the bucking-up to get the help he needed, and then nothing.

Two months later in 2022, he managed to book another appointment, and the same thing occurred: Bagwell dialed in for the appointment; the VA canceled. Then it happened a third time.

The reasons given varied, but the results were the same, meaning Bagwell went six months without treatment.

"When they started canceling appointments on me, it made me feel like, 'Hey, listen, they don't give a s\*\*t. Why should I?'" Bagwell said in an interview. "My wife [said], 'No, we're not going down this rabbit hole again. We're doing mental health.'"

Her support led him to the online therapy service BetterHelp, and Bagwell now pays out of pocket for the care he needs.

The Department of Veterans Affairs actively encourages veterans to enroll in VA health care, and officials, including VA Secretary Denis McDonough, voice pride in the department's expertise treating combat-related mental health conditions. In 2023 alone, nearly 11% of the nation's 18.1 million veterans sought mental health services at the VA, having 19.6 million behavioral health "encounters" with the VA, including appointments, walk-ins and emergency room visits.

But veterans say they often can't get individual therapy appointments to accompany psychiatric medical care, and when they do connect, the treatment often is derailed by appointment cancellations and scheduling problems, according to more than a dozen veterans and current and former VA employees interviewed by Military.com.

They shared remarkably similar stories of working up the courage to seek help -- something that historically has not been easy in a community skeptical of mental health treatment -- and waiting months for sessions as multiple appointments were canceled, either at the start of a telehealth session or on arrival at a medical center or clinic.

Sometimes they'd be blamed, accused of failing to show up for appointments they didn't know about, or told they'd canceled the appointments themselves.

In the past 18 months, a former Army sergeant seeking mental health treatment at the VA Puget Sound Health System has had seven of 16 behavioral health appointments canceled, according to records provided by his mother to Military.com.

According to the records, the former soldier's appointments were canceled every month from July through November 2023.

"He keeps trying to go back in to school. He is having difficulty. He just wants to know what is wrong," his mom, Meredith, said. "He felt like he was not being taken seriously [and] is just frustrated by the delay."

Data provided by the VA showed that from 2020 through 2023, the cancellation rate for mental health appointments across facilities averaged 10.6%, with a high of 12.1% in 2020 early in the COVID-19 pandemic to 9.2% in 2023.

But individual medical centers may have bigger issues. Data obtained by the Americans for Prosperity Foundation through an ongoing Freedom of Information Act lawsuit showed that at 14 representative facilities across the U.S., from January 2020 to late May 2021, the cancellation rate was nearly double the VA provided figures, at 21%, although the time frame coincided with the height of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on non-urgent care.

The foundation funds training, education and policy research for libertarian and conservative causes, including Concerned Veterans, an affiliated advocacy group that supports broader access for veterans to private health care.

Any cancellation can affect continuity of care and have a negative impact on a veteran's health, however. They may even contribute to suicide among veterans, although exactly how many is unknown. The number is not zero, however, according to families.

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### **System Overload or Performance Pressure?**

Theories on the causes of cancellations vary. VA employees who spoke with Military.com said provider shortages are the root cause, while others point to the lack of a centralized scheduling system or pressure to keep veteran care inside the walls of a VA facility.

The VA has 32,199 mental health workers, including psychiatrists, psychologists, licensed professional mental health counselors, marriage and family therapists, peer support specialists, nurses and physician assistants, on staff, and officials say they are hiring more.

But the VA struggles to recruit clinicians, especially to rural locales and areas with underserved populations, and it competes with the private sector, where, in many places, quality care commands cash-only payments. According to the VA Inspector General in September, 66 of the VA's 140 health systems reported severe shortages of psychiatric providers.

Dr. Shereef Elnahal, the VA under secretary for health, said late last year that while the Veterans Health Administration was pulling back on overall hiring, it would continue to recruit mental health professionals and ambulatory care providers.

"We already have been working to increase our mental health workforce. But we know we're still not yet at what the evidence says should be the mental health staffing level at all our medical centers," Elnahal said in a call with reporters on Dec. 20.

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### **Escalating Demand**

VA officials said patient requests for mental health care have grown steadily in the past 10 years at a rate that far exceeds demand for overall health services, and they have shifted toward a more proactive approach that includes case management, outreach and

"stepped-care," meaning it may begin a patient with group therapy, self-help or brief sessions and proceed to more intensive treatment as needed.

The VA also has hired more mental health providers -- including 4,106 last year.

"There is nothing more important to us at VA than providing veterans with the mental health care they need, whenever and wherever they need it," VA Press Secretary Terrence Hayes said in an email on Sept. 19.

"Over the past few years, veteran mental health appointments have increased, the number of veterans receiving support for mental health has increased, wait times have decreased, and cancellations are down -- meaning that veterans are getting the care they need when they need it," Hayes said.

He said trust in the system has risen among veterans and wait times for mental health care declined an average of 7% from April 2023 to April 2024, "at a time when VA is delivering more care to more veterans than ever before."

## **SENATE RANKINGS: 5 SEATS MOST LIKELY TO FLIP**

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

The battle for the Senate majority has hit its final month as Republicans race to end their four-year stint in the minority.

The GOP needs to win only one of two competitive races in red states — Montana and Ohio — to do just that, barring a surprise loss elsewhere. According to [Decision Desk HQ](#) and The Hill, Republicans have a 72 percent chance of retaking the upper chamber.

The bigger question is whether Republicans can strike gold beyond those two contests and stretch their success across the battleground map.

Outside of West Virginia, which both parties concede will go red, here are the top five seats likely to flip into GOP hands:

## Montana

Sen. Jon Tester (D) is in the fight of his political life as he stares down what has easily turned into the toughest reelection battle of his career.

Tim Sheehy, one of the top Republican recruits this year, has opened up a consistent polling advantage over the three-term Democratic incumbent. A survey by The New York Times and Siena College released last week showed Sheehy with an 8-point lead over Tester — a margin that has remained relatively consistent since August.

That lead hasn't dissuaded Democrats from continuing to pour money into the state, with both sides set to spend nearly \$30 million in the coming weeks. Republicans have made clear they will continue to spend in Montana regardless of whether Democratic groups keep pouring money in — which GOP operatives hope remains the case.

Despite their faith in Tester, Democrats admit the outlook is bleak as he faces the daunting task of picking off enough supporters of former President Trump to put him over the finish line. According to the Times/Siena poll, Trump leads Vice President Harris by 17 percentage points in Montana.

“It's going to be a political miracle if he wins,” said John LaBombard, a former top aide to Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (I-Ariz.) and former Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.) and a Democratic strategist with ROKK Solutions. “But Jon Tester, I believe, is capable of political miracles.”

## Ohio

The fight between Sen. Sherrod Brown (D) and Republican Bernie Moreno is showing signs of tightening as Democrats race to limit the damage in November.

Brown maintained a consistent lead throughout the summer, buoyed by an ad bonanza in an attempt to define Moreno. But Republican forces have answered in the past month, with Moreno going up with ads and groups run by top lieutenants of Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) set to spend \$80 million there between Labor Day and Election Day.

Now, Brown is attempting to hold Moreno off in the home stretch. Democrats are trying to further bruise Moreno on abortion after his recent comments to supporters that it is “a little crazy” for suburban women to base their vote on the issue.

Helping the sitting Democrat is the financial muscle he has to get that word out; Brown announced he raised more than \$30 million in the third quarter.

But recent surveys indicate this race is a pure toss-up. According to a recent internal poll at the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC), the race is deadlocked at 46 percent — marking a 2-point turn toward Moreno in roughly three weeks.

A new Washington Post poll also showed Brown leading by 1 percentage point while Trump leads Harris by a 7-point margin in what once was the preeminent swing state.

“Simply by praying Trump wins by double digits. His path to victory is not about him,” one national GOP operative said about Moreno’s road to winning.

The operative added Moreno’s closing message is a simple one. “Put your jersey on. Trump needs me in the United States Senate.”

## **Wisconsin**

Perhaps no state has raised the eyebrows of political watchers in recent weeks more than Wisconsin, where Republican Eric Hovde is making a late charge to unseat Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D) and nab a seat in “blue wall” territory.

Alarm bells have been going off in Democratic circles in recent weeks as the sizable lead Baldwin had throughout the campaign has turned into a narrow advantage over Hovde, a wealthy businessman who can help bankroll his campaign in the final weeks.

The Cook Political Report last week shifted the race from “lean Democrat” to “toss-up.”

But after one close Wisconsin race after another over the past eight years, Democrats argue this is always where the race was going to end up.

“Wisconsin has Wisconsin’d,” one Democratic operative in the state told The Hill, saying it’s a 2-point race and that independent and men without a college education “remembered they’re Republicans and came home” to the GOP. “It’s not shocking.”

“The question is: Can Tammy hold the Republican-leaning voters she has picked up over the years, and what does the money look like? If Hovde and the NRSC spend at



the clip they're doing, they're going to outspend Tammy Baldwin in the last month, and that's a scary reality."

Republicans say the gap has closed in part because Baldwin has been unable to differentiate herself from the Democratic brand writ large; one GOP operative labeled her a "generic" Democrat. They also believe some attacks, including over her decision not to disclose her partner's assets and clients, have stuck.

"It's a coin flip," a Republican strategist involved in Senate races said.

## Michigan

On the face of things, Republicans should have as good of a chance in Michigan as any non-Montana or Ohio state on the map.

Former Rep. Mike Rogers (R-Mich.) has been widely touted as a top GOP recruit this cycle, especially for an open seat that's being vacated by Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D). The Wolverine State is also among the preeminent swing states on the map, giving Republicans a clear opening against Rep. Elissa Slotkin (D-Mich.).

Michigan, though, has been stubborn for the party when it comes to Senate races. No Republican has won a seat there since 1994. Yet, it's not halting their hopes there as the GOP continues to pour money into the race and flood the airwaves.

Last week alone, Rogers and GOP outside groups spent \$7 million compared to \$5.3 million for Democrats amid private concerns from Slotkin that Harris's standing in the state is not strong enough.

The major question right now is whether Rogers can close the gap. According to the latest The Hill/Emerson College survey, Slotkin leads by 5 percentage points. Trump and Harris are knotted up at 49 percent in the same poll.

"It's still going to be a bit of a challenge," the GOP operative involved in Senate races said.

## Pennsylvania

The Keystone State has emerged as the preeminent swing state on the 2024 presidential map, but whether that will ring true for the Senate race as well is a major

question as Republican David McCormick attempts to deny Sen. Bob Casey (D) a fourth term.

Much like the Wisconsin and Michigan races, Republicans have been encouraged in recent weeks that McCormick — buoyed by heaving spending by his camp and McConnell's allies — is narrowing what has been a consistent Casey lead.

In the past week, GOP forces spent \$9 million on the race, which has garnered the second-highest ad spending and reservation totals of any Senate contest, behind only Ohio.

This has prompted some Republicans to become increasingly bullish that this could be the year they take down the longtime senator, whose name casts a long shadow in the state.

“This is a dogfight, and I think McCormick is closing,” said Matt Beynon, a GOP strategist and longtime aide to former Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.), whom Casey unseated in 2006. “I’m hopeful for the first time, because with Casey, it’s usually pretty fatalistic. It’s like running against a Kennedy in Massachusetts.”

The Hill/Emerson’s latest survey released last week also shows Casey holding a 2-point advantage — putting the race within the margin of error.

But toppling Casey remains a tall task. According to the latest Decision Desk HQ forecast, the Democrat has a 72 percent chance to win reelection, with some Republicans in the state remaining pessimistic that McCormick can win.

“I’m feeling good about Pennsylvania’s chances across the board right now. I’m confident about the current standing. ... And I feel great about the row offices,” one Pennsylvania-based Republican operative told The Hill, adding that McCormick is the lone exclusion of that group and that he still hasn’t gotten enough traction.

“He hasn’t been able to move the needle,” they added.

## **NEW LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL CHAIRMAN**

Welcome Paul Espinoza, the new Legislative Council Chairman to serve until the close of Fall Meeting, 2025! Paul is from New Mexico.



## 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.

### William Powell, Washington

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

This week, William spoke to Representative Marilyn Strickland and her Deputy Chief of Staff at Post 94. At the post meeting, she informed the Legionnaires about the PACT Act and VA healthcare, and how important it is to support veterans in rural areas. She also committed to coming to his county's Resource Fair later in the month.

*Thank you, William, 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).

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



## **UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS**

As of 9:00 am on Friday, October 18, there are NO hearings scheduled. Congress is in recess until November 12.

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](#)