



October 25, 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 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](#).

National Legislative Council updates coming soon!

Election Day is November 5th, and the 119th Congress will be sworn in on January 3rd 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 6th 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!

VA PARTNERS WITH UBER TO DRIVE VETERANS TO MEDICAL APPOINTMENTS, BUT TRAVEL IN RURAL AREAS REMAINS A PROBLEM

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



Army veteran John Polk has been a volunteer driver for 10 years with Disabled American Veterans, giving veterans in Wisconsin rides to doctor appointments at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center and other health care facilities run by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

“If the DAV did not pick up these veterans, they would have a hard time getting to the doctor,” he said.

Without help from Polk, 77, and other volunteer drivers, veterans who do not have transportation — a particular problem in rural areas — would be stranded and unable to make their VA appointments.

“We hear a lot from veterans in rural areas who say that ‘no one wants to help us,’” said Patty Davis, a DAV transportation program manager and coordinator for transportation services at the Milwaukee VA. “I just don’t have the drivers to fill all the areas where services need to be.”

Transportation problems account for 1.8 million missed VA medical appointments annually, costing the agency about \$4.4 billion a year.

The VA, in response, began rolling out VA-Uber Health Connect nationwide in 2024, leveraging the popular rideshare service to fill transportation gaps for veterans. The rollout follows a two-year pilot program that tested and adapted the rideshare service for veterans' medical appointments at VA facilities in several states.

Veterans do not use the Uber app to access rides. Instead, they contact a scheduler at the VA after enrolling in the program.

But the collaboration has hit a dead end for many veterans living in rural and hard-to-reach communities where rideshare services are scarce or nonexistent. Approximately 25% of veterans — numbering more than 4 million — live in rural or highly rural areas, according to the VA.

Polk volunteers once or twice a month to drive into tiny communities in Washington and Waukesha counties in western Wisconsin, where Uber, taxis and public bus service are infrequent or unavailable.

“The addition of the Uber Health program has no impact in these rural communities,” said Polk, a retired major who served in the Army from 1967-1993, with deployments to Vietnam. Polk and other volunteers sometimes are the only transportation for disabled veterans in rural communities.

There's an urban-rural divide when it comes to the availability of ride-sharing services, according to the Pew Research Center. Uber drivers are paid based on the number of rides and rely on frequent calls for service. Ride-sharing in rural areas is slowed by low demand and inconsistent access to the internet for users.

“Uber does not have much of a presence in places like Antelope Valley, where some of the biggest transportation challenges exist for our veterans,” said William Regen Wilson, public affairs consultant with the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs for Los Angeles County.

Antelope Valley is an hour's drive north of Los Angeles, a community at the edge of the Mojave Desert. Wilson said there are significant problems getting people to their VA appointments.

"There is no congressional mandate, and no funds set aside to fix the transportation issues," he said.

Though the Rural Veterans Transportation to Care Act was introduced in early 2024 to qualify more veterans service organizations in highly rural areas for transportation grants, the legislation has yet to be debated in a congressional committee. The legislation's goal is to help give rural veterans without vehicles options for getting to their VA appointments.

Jon Retzer, the assistant national legislative director for the Disabled American Veterans, said legislation for veterans that requires new or additional funding has been slow to advance in Congress this year. The DAV has been supplementing VA's own transportation services since 1989 and has 3,000 trained volunteers nationwide who help with driving veterans to appointments.

In 2023, they transported more than 245,000 veterans to their VA appointments.

The organization also donates vans to the VA for its own transportation services. In 2024, the organization gave 75 new vehicles to VA medical facilities at a cost of \$3 million.

An estimated 5 million veterans, many of them aging, have transportation challenges in accessing VA medical care, according to Indra Sandal, a physician and chief of innovation at James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital and Clinics in Tampa, Fla.

Sandal said some VA hospitals participating in the VA-Uber program are prioritizing the agency's own van service to pick up veterans in remote areas, instead of simply responding to requests on a first-come, first-served basis.

These hospitals then rely on VA-Uber Health Connect to help veterans in urban communities closer to VA medical facilities.

Sandal developed the VA-Uber collaboration for a pilot program that ran from April 2022 to April 2024. The Uber program underwent a test drive to see how well it met demand for getting veterans to scheduled doctor visits.

VA-Uber Health Connect first operated at 10 medical centers in four states — Missouri, Kansas, Tennessee and Kentucky. The main goals for partnering with Uber are to reduce no-shows and missed appointments as well as improve the health care transportation experience, said Terrence Hayes, the VA press secretary.

Veterans have no out-of-pocket costs when using the ride-sharing service and do not need to submit claims for travel reimbursement. The program has grown to 101 medical facilities in 2024, serving more than 50,000 veterans. Plans are underway to make the rideshare service available at every VA medical center.

From May to October 2024, the Veterans Health Administration provided 274,000 rideshare trips to eligible veterans, according to the VA. Use keeps growing.

The VA also renewed its partnership with Lyft, a ridesharing service it used during the coronavirus pandemic. The VA pays the market rates for rideshare services.

When a veteran reaches out to the local VA transportation office for a ride, the VA assesses the veteran's eligibility and ensures there is a VA-authorized appointment in place. To access rides, veterans must have a disability rating of 30% or higher and be receiving care for service-connected injuries.

The transportation office schedules and coordinates rides. The office sends the veteran messages on the ride status.

"I live out here in the desert," said Army veteran Steve Johnson, 66, of Arizona, who has vertigo from a traumatic brain injury that he suffered in military training at Fort Leonard

Wood, Mo. “I’ve heard of this new Uber service with the VA. But Uber doesn’t travel out here. There is no way that a bus can even get close to me.”

Johnson, a private who was medically discharged after serving from 1976-1977, lives near Vail, about an hour’s drive from Tucson. He said he usually drives himself to appointments at the Tucson VA Medical Center. He then submits paper claims for travel reimbursement.

But earlier this year, Johnson said he was experiencing dizziness and feeling weak when his legs gave out as he was walking outside his home. He could not get to his vehicle or drive to his VA appointment.

“The VA told me to call an ambulance,” he said.

Johnson was able to reach a friend to drive him to the VA for care. He said it would help if he had transportation assistance, but he does not expect to see on-demand rides anytime soon in this remote desert community.

“This is where I can afford to live on my budget, and I’m not about to move,” Johnson said. “Where I live seems to be a good fit. It’s quiet, has fewer problems and there’s lots of open space.”

ALABAMA GOVERNOR DISMISSES HEAD OF DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS AFTER AGENCY BOARD REFUSES

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

Gov. Kay Ivey said Tuesday that she was using the “supreme executive power of this state” to fire the head of the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs after the agency board rejected her request to do so.

Ivey sent a letter to Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs Commissioner W. Kent Davis saying she was using her authority to immediately remove him from the position. Ivey's office hand-delivered the letter to Davis' lawyer soon after the State Board of Veterans Affairs, in a 3-2 vote, rejected Ivey's request to remove Davis. Davis had already agreed to vacate the post at the end of the year.

The governor had accused Davis of failing to cooperate with her office and other agency heads and of mishandling an American Rescue Plan grant program. Davis' supporters said no funds were mishandled. His attorney said the governor is retaliating after Davis filed an ethics complaint against the state mental health commissioner during the grant dispute. The complaint was later dismissed.

Ivey wrote in the letter that the Alabama Constitution gives the governor the power to take action to enforce laws whenever needed because of inaction or inadequate action by a subordinate within the executive branch of government.

"For weeks now, I have laid out the case publicly for why new leadership at the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs is necessary, and it is unfortunate it came to forcefully removing this agency head. After what I would now deem as a total failure of leadership at the Department and lack of cooperation, I had to use the mantle of the governor's office to make the change," Ivey said in a statement.

John Saxon, an attorney representing Davis, questioned if Ivey has the authority to remove the commissioner and said they will look at that as they consider their next steps.

"Second, we will look seriously at whether we file a lawsuit under the anti-retaliation provision of the state ethics act. If we do, then I look forward with relish to taking the governor's deposition and seeing how she does under oath when she's unscripted," Saxon said.

Saxon said the governor was upset over the ethics complaint and that the board did not agree to dismiss Davis. "When the governor gets mad, she gets even," Saxon said.

Ivey in an Oct. 18 letter to Davis said the ethics complaint was frivolous and a weaponization of the dispute process.

The dispute between Davis and Ivey began [earlier this year](#). It appeared to be settled when Davis [agreed to resign](#) at the end of 2024. However, the dispute resurfaced when Ivey accused Davis of trying to manipulate board members. The governor called a special board meeting to vote on his immediate removal.

The board narrowly rejected Ivey's request to remove Davis after a 90-minute discussion. Two members abstained from the 3-2 vote.

Davis, who at the time appeared to have beaten back the governor's effort to remove him, said that he was thankful to have the opportunity to answer questions.

"It hurt deeply to be accused of things," Davis told reporters. "So, I'm very grateful today we got to clear the air about some things."

NEW LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL CHAIRMAN

Welcome Paul Espinoza, the new Legislative Council Chairman to serve until the close of Fall Meeting, 2025! He served in the U.S. Army 4 years active with 82nd Airborne Division, and the New Mexico Army National Guard 18 years in various units thru out the State of N.M. (Iraq Veteran). He retired from the military after 22 years. He has held various offices at every level in the American Legion, Including Department (state) Commander of N.M. From 2013 thru 2015, Membership Chairman Department N.M. 2015-2016, Vice Commander Department N.M. 2011-2013, Oratorical Chairman Department N.M. 2009-2012, District 11 Commander, Post 13 Commander, and Post 13 Vice Commander Department N.M., National Security Committee 2014-2016, Americanism Committee 2011-2013. Also a 2011 American Legion College Graduate. He is involved with many VSOs issues including Veterans Services thru out N.M. Espinoza retired from the United States Post Office has a Letter Carrier after 20 years. He has been in the Nation Association of letter Carriers Union for 29 years of 15 years being a Union Shop Steward, and 5 year Area Vice President of N.M. for the Letter Carriers Union. Born in Albuquerque N.M. Espinoza is 30 years married to Cecilia Espinoza, son Paul Jr., and daughter Ashley, along with 2 grandsons. Who are proud and very supportive of him.



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.

Lisa Williamson, Alaska

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

Lisa is being recognized as this month's Power Advocate for VoterVoice. In the past 30 days, she has sent multiple emails about different veteran legislation per day. She is a member of the Legion Auxiliary and is also their Past National President.

Thank you, Lisa, 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 [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, October 25, 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](#)