



November 15, 2024

## WEEKLY GRASSROOTS NEWSLETTER

This week, we are asking Legionnaires to contact Congress to request support for the *Fulfilling Promises to Afghan Allies Amendment* be included in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025. As veterans serving veterans across the country, we know firsthand the moral and national security imperative of keeping our promises to the Afghan nationals who supported the U.S. mission and were admitted to the U.S. under emergency circumstances. *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** – 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!

## **HERE'S WHAT VETERANS WANT CONGRESS TO PRIORITIZE**

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



From expanded health care access to reducing suicide rates, veterans groups are preparing to lobby the 119th Congress on a host of issues affecting retired service members.

Veterans groups are highlighting long-standing issues, like mental health care and exposure to toxins, but also emerging problems, such as veterans who are incarcerated and don't have access to health care from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

As America marks Veterans Day on Monday, Congress is sitting on two bills that veterans groups want prioritized in the lame-duck session before January: the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act and the Major Richard Star Act.

Both have been introduced in the House, which comes back into session this week after a long election recess.

The Elizabeth Dole act will greatly expand veterans' ability to access care for mental health, dentistry, community and nursing home care, as well as more educational, employment, disability and housing benefits.

The Richard Star bill will ensure veterans who have been severely injured and medically discharged can receive Defense Department retirement and VA compensation benefits. Currently, only veterans who served at least 20 years are eligible for both.

If those bills are not signed into law in the next two months, veterans groups say they are a must-pass in the 119th Congress.

Julia Mathis, a Marine veteran and the legislative director at the American Legion, said the Dole act is an important step toward addressing their No. 1 priority: reducing veteran suicide rates, which remain disproportionately higher than those of the average population.

"Improving the care that veterans are provided [and] ensuring that the sense of community care, belonging, all of that is important for our veterans," she said. "A properly funded VA will ensure that their suicide-prevention programs are wide-reaching and effective."

And Jose Ramos, vice president for government and community relations at the Wounded Warrior Project (WWP), said the Richard Star bill is a priority for his organization.

"They're two distinct pays for two distinct reasons," he said of Defense Department retirement pay and VA benefits. "I lost my arm in 2004 after six years of service. My goal was to serve 20 years of service ... and there's a lot of individuals like that. ... I think we're unjustly punishing these individuals."

Ramos explained WWP is also focused on several other issues, including making more toxins and illnesses covered under the 2022 PACT Act, which expanded treatment for toxic exposures during military service.

Allison Jaslow, CEO of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), said some members of Congress have discussed cutting down the toxin exposure fund in the PACT Act, and she was concerned that a GOP-dominated Washington might take steps to slash it.

## **Camp Lejeune victims**

Eric Flynn, a lawyer with Bell Legal Group, one of the primary firms working on Camp Lejeune litigation, is also looking to next year's Congress.

The Camp Lejeune Justice Act of 2022 allowed service members exposed to contaminated water at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C., from Aug. 1, 1953, to Dec. 31, 1987, to sue for damages.

But Flynn said the bill needs an update, pointing to new legislation that will tweak language to ensure a jury trial can move ahead for Camp Lejeune victims. The Department of Justice has prevented jury trials because the language is ambiguous on the matter.

The new bill, Ensuring Justice for Camp Lejeune Victims Act, will also expand cases to cover all district courts in the 4th Circuit Court jurisdiction instead of just the one federal court in North Carolina in a bid to speed up cases.

Flynn said he is pushing for the bill to be passed in the lame-duck session but will continue to advocate for it in the next Congress if needed.

"A lot of this comes down to a sense of justice on the part of these men and women who have suffered so extraordinarily," he said. "What people want is [to] have a jury hear their stories."

So far, around 200 veterans have been compensated under a quick payment program, but more than 500,000 are awaiting relief.

## Reproductive health care

Jaslow also said she was watching and waiting to see how Republicans would move on issues such as reproductive health care and gender-affirming care for service members.

Under President Biden, the VA created opportunities for abortion counseling and, in rare cases, abortion services for rape and incest victims or for those whose lives may be threatened by a pregnancy.

Republicans have attacked the VA measures as violating the Hyde amendment, which prohibits taxpayer funds from going toward abortion services.

A push for change is likely with President-elect Trump taking the White House in January and Republicans capturing the Senate and likely the House as well.

The GOP-controlled House passed an appropriations bill for military construction and veterans affairs this year that would ban abortions at the VA in most cases and would also block hormone therapy and surgery for transgender veterans at the department. The VA currently allows for hormone therapy for veterans and supports gender-affirming care, though it does not carry out those surgeries.

“One of the biggest things we’re watching is like, what are we going to have to fight back against?” Jaslow said. “Everybody’s taking stock right now of what the new landscape is going to be.”

## Other priorities

IAVA is also supportive of efforts to expand alternative treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder, including psychedelics, and repealing the 2001 and 2002 authorizations for the use of military force (AUMF) against global terrorism and Iraq. The Senate passed AUMF repeals in 2023.

A new issue is also being brought to Congress: veterans who are incarcerated and can’t get the VA treatment they need to improve their lives.

Jim Seward, director of the Veterans Justice Commission, has been working on this issue for the past two years. His commission was created in 2022 by the nonpartisan Council on Criminal Justice.

The VA had previously provided incarcerated veterans with care but stopped doing that in 1999 as a way to cut costs. The updated rule at the time specifically said veterans in the care of another government institution are no longer eligible for VA medical benefits.

Seward said veterans without adequate access to care are stuck in a dangerous feedback loop.

“We train our troops when they’re in combat and they face violence, they respond with violence,” he said. “Many veterans say when they come home, they feel like they’re expected to just turn off the switch, and they have no mission, and they kind of get lost in their head.”

“They often cope with substances, and those co-occurring disorders can lead to their criminal justice involvement and then once inside, if they’re not getting treated,” he added, “it’s harder [to treat] post-traumatic stress disorder.”

## **Veteran representation**

Veterans groups and advocates may have some luck when it comes to getting their priorities passed in the next Congress, as the incoming class will include at least 78 veterans in the House and 18 veterans in the Senate. Several more veterans are in races that have yet to be called, but those figures already mean former service members can see themselves well represented on Capitol Hill.

Seth Lynn, a founder of the nonpartisan Veterans Campaign, an organization that trains veterans running for office, told The Hill that as the numbers are, veterans account for nearly 20 percent of all members.

“It’s a really healthy number,” Lynn said. “It looks like we’re going to have eight women veterans in Congress, which is the highest number ever.”

## **TRUMP PICKS DOUG COLLINS TO HEAD THE VA**

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

President-elect Donald Trump has nominated one of his previous [attorneys and former](#) GOP House member Doug Collins to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Collins, 58, a staunch Trump supporter and frequent Fox News guest, served in Congress representing a Georgia district from 2013 to 2021. Collins is an Air Force Reserve chaplain and served in Iraq.

“Doug will be a great advocate for our Active Duty Servicemembers, Veterans, and Military Families to ensure they have the support they need,” Trump said in a statement Thursday evening.

A Trump administration VA is expected to roll back a Biden administration policy that allows the agency to provide abortion counseling and, in some cases, the procedure itself, in the wake of the Supreme Court’s Dobbs decision.

If confirmed, Collins will have to grapple with financial issues at the agency stemming from a bipartisan 2022 law that expanded benefits for veterans exposed to Agent Orange and other toxins. That’s made the agency responsible for the care of more veterans than ever, and generated billions of dollars in budget shortfalls.

Collins also will inherit the VA’s beleaguered electronic health records overhaul that proved to be a thorn in the side of the Trump and Biden administrations. The project is billions of dollars over budget, is on pause indefinitely and has been tied to at least four veterans’ deaths and a slew of safety risks — an issue Collins will likely have to address in his Senate confirmation process.

On Thursday, Collins pledged to slash regulations and cut “corruption” in a post on X.

“We’ll fight tirelessly to streamline and cut regulations in the VA, root out corruption, and ensure every veteran receives the benefits they’ve earned,” Collins said. “Together, we’ll make the VA work for those who fought for us. Time to deliver for our veterans and give them the world class care they deserve.”

Collins helped defend Trump in his first House impeachment over Ukraine aid. Trumped faced two articles of impeachment — abuse of power and obstruction of Congress — and the Senate later voted to acquit him on both counts.

The Collins choice is part of a growing trend of Trump rewarding those who have been loyal to him. Collins also represented Trump in matters relating to Congress’ investigations of Trump’s efforts to overturn the 2020 election.

Collins ran unsuccessfully for Senate in 2020, getting knocked out of a primary against Sen. Raphael Warnock (D-Ga.) and former Sen. Kelly Loeffler (R-Ga.). Trump had

previously pushed GOP Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp to select Collins to fill an empty seat, but Kemp picked Loeffler instead.

Collins opted not to run for a Georgia Senate seat in 2022 in a race that Herschel Walker, the former NFL running back, ultimately lost to Warnock.

## 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.

### Daniel Burks, Oregon

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

This week, Daniel has been in contact with Representative Cliff Bentz (OR-2). Throughout the week, Daniel discussed with Rep. Bentz and his staff about the Congressman attending their post's Veterans Day event in Ontario, Oregon at Post 67. Rep. Bentz attended their ceremony as well as joined the post for lunch and discussion.

*Thank you, Daniel, 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.



## **ON CAPITOL HILL**

Several Legislative and VA&R Division staff members joined forces with staff members from The Elizabeth Dole Foundation, PVA, VFW, and TAPS to meet with Congressional staff members regarding the upcoming vote on the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act.



Additionally, Legislative and VE&E Division staff met with Rep. Velazquez (D-NY-7) to discuss the VET-First Contracting Amendment to the NDAA and other veteran small business legislative priorities for the 119th Congress.



## 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, November 15, the following hearings are scheduled:

- November 20, 9:00 am: HVAC Subcommittee on Technology Modernization -- "VA Cybersecurity: Protecting Veteran Data from Evolving Threats"
- November 20, 2:30 pm: HVAC Subcommittee on Health -- "Life After Limb Loss: Examining VA Amputee Prosthetics Care"

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](#)