



November 22, 2024

## WEEKLY GRASSROOTS NEWSLETTER

This week, we are asking Legionnaires to contact Congress to request support for the *Senator Elizabeth Dole 21<sup>st</sup> Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act!* This Act passed in the House this week, and is now in the Senate for consideration. The Dole Act is a comprehensive veteran's package that includes several important provisions, including support for home and community-based services, authority to award grants for mental health support to family caregivers, and veteran directed care. *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!

## **LEGION APPLAUDS HOUSE PASSAGE OF DOLE ACT**

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



## **The Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Act will expand quality of care for veterans, support for caregivers and more.**

The American Legion is applauding the House passage of the Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Act, which will improve the quality of health care for our nation's veterans.

In a statement released after the legislation's passage on Nov. 18, American Legion National Commander James A. LaCoursiere Jr. thanked bill sponsor, Rep. Juan Ciscomani, R-Ariz., as well as Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Mike Bost, R-Ill., and Ranking Member Mark Takano, D-Calif.

"This bill includes a number of critical provisions that will expand the quality of care that veterans receive, increase support for caregivers, improve the functioning of the VA, and much more," LaCoursiere said. "I applaud Congressman Ciscomani's leadership in introducing this important bill, and we echo Chairman Bost and Ranking Member Takano's belief that veterans deserve a VA that works with them. We are excited to see this package make it to the finish line in the House, and remain dedicated to serving veterans and their families in the future."

The legislation now moves to the Senate for consideration.

## **VA ACKNOWLEDGES SIGNIFICANT ERRORS IN BUDGET SHORTFALL PREDICTIONS**

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

Veterans Affairs leaders on Wednesday acknowledged mistakes in their predictions this summer of looming funding shortfalls for the department, but insisted the errors were due to workload surges and not budgetary maleficence.

“Our projections could have been more accurate,” VA Under Secretary for Health Dr. Shereef Elnahal told members of the House Appropriations Committee during an oversight hearing on the issue.

“What we’re trying to do now is make sure we work very diligently and ensure that the [next] number we give this committee is much more accurate. And that is taking time.” The response drew sympathy from some Democratic lawmakers on the panel but skepticism from Republican members, who said the discrepancies undermine congressional confidence in the department’s financial stewardship.

“VA’s inability to accurately forecast its budget needs is unacceptable,” said Rep. John Carter, R-Texas, chairman of the appropriations committee’s veterans panel. He blasted senior leaders for stoking “fear that benefits and pensions would be interrupted” and demanded better transparency in future budget requests.

In September, lawmakers approved a \$3 billion stopgap spending bill for the VA after officials had warned that benefit checks could be delayed or halted on Oct. 1 — the start of the new fiscal year — if additional cash reserves were not made available to the department.

Weeks earlier, VA leaders had explained the budget shortfall came as a result of record-high benefits approvals and medical services usage by veterans in the last fiscal year. They also predicted that Congress would need to pass another \$12 billion in funding to cover extra costs in fiscal 2025.

VA saw its highest level of health care appointments ever in fiscal 2024: about 127.5 million, up 6% over the previous fiscal year. More than 796,000 veterans have enrolled in VA health care over the last two years, up 37% over the previous two years.

But earlier this month, VA officials acknowledged they carried over roughly \$5 billion in unspent funds related to benefits accounts from last fiscal year to this fiscal year. Even without the cash infusion approved in September, the department would have held more than \$2 billion in cash reserves to cover spending needs.

The news sparked outrage on Capitol Hill, particularly in regards to the fears of benefits shortfalls.

On Wednesday, VA Under Secretary for Benefits Joshua Jacobs defended those summertime warnings, noting that “a funding shortfall of just \$1 would have prevented VA from processing its September files, delaying monthly disability compensation, pension and education benefit payments to approximately 7 million veterans and survivors.”

“This was a risk we simply were not willing to take,” he added.

And Elnahal said department officials did slow hiring plans for a variety of department positions because of the short-term and long-term budget concerns. He said that has not caused any immediate access or staffing issues, but could if additional funds are not appropriated later this fiscal year.

Both Elnahal and Jacobs also acknowledged that their initial \$12 billion shortfall prediction for fiscal 2025 was too high. They promised a revised budget adjustment target in coming weeks, but did not offer a firm timeline for that.

They also promised an independent assessment of mistakes made in the budgeting process, vowing to share that information with lawmakers. Carter in response promised close oversight of the issue.

“We are with you 100%,” he said. “But you have to keep us informed.”

Congress is facing a Dec. 20 deadline for a budget extension or full federal budget agreement to prevent a partial government shutdown at the end of the year.

Lawmakers typically fund VA medical care and benefits payments more than a year ahead, through an advance appropriations process. Even though the fiscal 2025 budget has yet to be finalized by Congress, VA officials already have more than \$300 billion approved for operations this fiscal year.

## 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.

### Deborah Davis, Alaska

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

Deborah met with Sen. Dan Sullivan (AK) at the local community hall for their Veterans Day ceremonies and events. She spoke with Sen. Sullivan about the Legion's 'Be The One' initiative.

*Thank you, Deborah, 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.

## PHOTO SPOTLIGHT

See below for photos from Dan Burks, last week's Legionnaire of the Week, of Rep. Cliff Bentz attending Post 67's Veterans Day ceremony!



## 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 22, there are no hearings scheduled.

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](#)