



December 20, 2024

## WEEKLY GRASSROOTS NEWSLETTER

\*Voter Voice Campaigns will be suspended during the Congressional Recess in order to gather statistics for the closing of the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress. New Campaigns will be published to align with the legislative priorities set for the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress.\*

There will be NO grassroots newsletters sent out the next two weeks (December 27<sup>th</sup> and January 3<sup>rd</sup>). The next newsletter will be sent on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2025. Have a happy holiday!

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](#).

## **SENATE APPROVES HISTORIC 14.5% PAY RAISE FOR JUNIOR ENLISTED TROOPS**



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

The Senate on Wednesday approved a \$895 billion defense policy that in April will give junior enlisted troops a historic 14.5% pay raise and all other service members a 4.5% pay bump in January.

The National Defense Authorization Act passed the Senate in an 85-14 vote despite opposition from some Democratic senators over a provision that bans coverage of certain gender-affirming care for the transgender children of troops. "This year's NDAA is not a perfect bill, but it nonetheless has some very good things," said Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

The bill outlines \$850 billion in expenditure for the Pentagon, including the significant pay increase for E-1 to E-4 service members. It also authorizes \$33.5 billion for nuclear weapons programs in the Energy Department, and \$11.6 billion for defense-related spending across other agencies.

The Senate Armed Services Committee had sought to add another \$25 billion to the total \$895 billion spending plan, but lawmakers ultimately stuck to the amount requested by President Joe Biden and mandated by last year's debt limit deal.

Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, the top Republican on the committee, led the push for a higher top line, arguing it was needed to fund missile defense, shipbuilding, counter-drone technology and other modernization programs.

“We are currently experiencing the most dangerous national security moment since World War II — one need only scroll through the headlines summarizing this year’s world events,” Wicker said Wednesday. “Congress needed to respond in kind at every possible opportunity.”

Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Senate Republican minority leader, said the legislation represented a “tremendous missed opportunity” to boost defense spending and forced lawmakers to give junior troops a large pay raise at the expense of investments in critical weapons and munitions.

“If this NDAA offers any valuable lesson, it’s that we have a tremendous amount of work to do,” he said. The 14.5% pay raise for junior troops was a compromise between the Senate and the House after months of negotiations. House lawmakers had lobbied for a 19.5% pay hike, citing steep inflation and the rising cost of living, while the Senate countered with a 5.5% pay raise.

The White House opposed singling out junior troops for extra pay, warning of billions in added costs and premature changes to military pay tables that are due to be revised next year. Junior enlisted service members now earn as little as \$24,000 in basic pay but are also provided various allowances, including housing. The Pentagon announced last week that the housing allowance will increase by an average of 5.4% next year.

Lawmakers drafting this year’s defense policy bill made a concerted effort to focus on improving troop quality of life. Other provisions to meet that goal include investments in new barracks and family housing, childcare centers and health care.

The bill also authorizes spending on military hardware. It approves two Virginia-class attack submarines despite the Navy only wanting one and authorizes three Arleigh Burke-class destroyers instead of the two the Navy had requested.

Funding authorization for the Constellation-class frigate was cut from a requested \$1.2 billion to \$50 million as part of \$31 billion in cuts to programs and systems lawmakers deemed too obsolete and costly.

They also refused to expand troop access to in vitro fertilization and require women to register for the Selective Service should there be a military draft — all measures Democrats had advocated for.

More than 20 Democratic senators this week unsuccessfully attempted to amend the final bill to remove a controversial provision that limits treatment for underage children of service members who suffer from gender dysphoria. The provision bans Tricare, the military's health care program, from covering treatments "that could result in sterilization" and was inserted into the defense legislation by House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La. At least 4,000 minor children of service members are receiving gender-affirming care.

## **LEGION SUPPORTS REQUIRING VA TO ESTABLISH CLEAR OBJECTIVES FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION PROGRAMS**

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



American Legion Veteran Affairs and Rehabilitation Director Cole Lyle testifies before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health. Photo by Hilary Ott /The American Legion

### **VA&R Director Cole Lyle shares support for What Works for Preventing Veteran Suicide Act and other legislation during House VA Committee hearing.**

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant program enables VA to provide resources toward community-based suicide prevention efforts to meet the needs of veterans and their families through outreach, suicide prevention services, and connection to VA and community resources.

But there need to be tangible standards for what is working within the Fox program. That's what Cole Lyle, The American Legion's Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation director, shared

during Dec. 17 testimony in front of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health.

Lyle said the Legion supports H.R. 9924, the What Works for Preventing Veteran Suicide Act, which would require the VA secretary to establish clear and measurable objectives for a suicide prevention pilot and grant programs carried out through the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

"Fox grants have allowed organizations to coordinate initiatives related to post-traumatic growth, peer-support services and cultural/faith-based programs," Lyle said. "This upstream approach aligns with The American Legion's Be The One campaign and Buddy Check program, and we strongly support any effort by this committee to address the veteran suicide epidemic. But we also recognize Congress' duty to ensure taxpayer dollars are going to effective programs and organizations.

"The American Legion supports H.R. 9924, which would establish standards for clear and measurable objectives to help evaluate the effectiveness of programs like Fox, and the creation of a standardized methodology for future initiatives."

Lyle, who uses VA for his healthcare, also spoke about the Choice and MISSION Act. He said as a VA patient, he understands both the successes and the frustration veterans feel when they attempt to obtain an appointment, navigate community care and feeling empowered to make their own decisions.

"Congressional intent of the Choice and MISSION Act was to strengthen the VHA's direct care system whilst supplementing it with the important relief valve of community providers," he said. "However, despite large increases in VA full-time employees, the inability of VA to meet access standards and the disregard for the (Asset and Infrastructure Review) Commission has led to a skyrocketing community care budget, which has naturally resulted in debates on balancing funding with the VA's direct care system and adherence to eligibility requirements, which largely encompass the reason we're here today.

"Congress must address the infrastructure problem in the 119th Congress and ensure the VA direct-care system is strengthened as was also the intent of MISSION. But in the absence of current VA capacity, we must keep the individual veteran as our North Star. In the past few years there have been credible reports of VA administrators overruling decisions by providers and patients to keep veterans in the system, in some cases cutting off care entirely. I've personally dealt with trying to use the DC VA and been quoted a long wait time, only to get a faster appointment after I asked to be given the option to use community care."

Lyle said the Legion is a strong supporter of keeping VHA as the coordinator of care for veterans, which is why the organization opposes H.R.s 214, 3176 and 5287 as presently drafted. Lyle said all three would take a veterans VA provider and the veteran out of the equation entirely.

"However, if the VA cannot provide veterans with the care they need, when they need it, community providers are the only realistic solution in the best interest of the individual

veteran,” Lyle said. “This is why we support the Complete the Mission Act of 2024, which amongst other important changes to scheduling, would codify access standards and ensure veterans get the care they need in consultation with their VA provider. Together, they can assess what is in the best medical interest of the veteran and maintain autonomy in their own healthcare.”

Lyle also spoke on both H.R. 6333, which mandates VA pay for all emergency care expenses – not just for those veterans without insurance – and H.R. 8481, which changes the requirement that veterans notify VA within 72 hours from the start of care to 72 hours from discharge.

“It is entirely possible that a veteran could be denied a claim because they were in a coma after a car accident and weren’t able to reach the VA within the required timeframe,” Lyle said. “Both bills help ensure a veteran’s financial and mental health are not affected by the unintended consequences of bureaucratic requirements.”

Addressing H.R. 8347, which directs VA to conduct a study on menopause care furnished by the VA Lyle added, “Women veterans are the largest growing demographic group of veterans, and they often face unique challenges that necessitate gender-specific care. The American Legion has authored numerous articles about the factors that impact women’s health, including menopause, and it remains a priority for us. We support this bill as currently drafted.”

Read Director Lyle’s submitted testimony [here](#).

## ELIZABETH DOLE ACT UPDATES



*Former Sen. Elizabeth Dole visits with National Commander James LaCoursiere Jr. at the Army-Navy Game last weekend.*

On December 12, the Senate passed (via Unanimous Consent) S.141, the *Elizabeth Dole 21<sup>st</sup> Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act*. The reason for the change was because the bill needed some technical changes, which did not affect the bill's CBO score. The Senate opted to send us its own version instead of the HR version because Senate Republicans want to avoid using an HR shell that could be repurposed for messaging related to the "HR bill." This strategy allows the Senate to consider proposed amendments and address any concerns about the bill's content before potentially voting to approve or reject it. The House passed the bill by voice vote, and it will go to the President's desk for signature before the end of the 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.

### **Terry Schow, Utah**

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

This week, Terry attended a farewell reception for Sen. Mitt Romney. He thanked the Senator for his support of veterans and urged him to support Housing of Unhoused Disabled Veterans Act. He also spoke to and thanked Sen. John Curtis and Rep. Celeste Malloy.

*Thank you, Terry, 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, December 20, 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](#)