

## National Legislative Division Weekly

### DILLARD PRESSES CONGRESS ON LEGION'S KEY LEGISLATIVE ISSUES



*Commander Dillard Presents The American Legion's 2022 Legislative Agenda before a joint session of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs.*

American Legion National Commander Paul E. Dillard testified March 8 before a joint session of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs. The leader of the nation's largest wartime veterans service organization (VSO) addressed lawmakers on critical issues and legislation veterans are facing. You can watch the full hearing [here](#).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a stark reminder that peace is fragile, Dillard told lawmakers.

“At any time, with or without notice, military personnel may be called upon to defend freedom,” he said during the testimony. “An essential purpose of The American Legion is to ensure that those personnel are not forgotten after the fighting is done.”

Peer support is the backbone on which The American Legion continues to fight for servicemembers and veterans, Dillard said.

Throughout various war eras The American Legion has led campaigns to ensure that servicemembers exposed to toxins receive the proper benefits. Those battles include fighting for government accountability

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to servicemembers exposed to dangerous toxins while in uniform, securing health-care benefits for bomb-test veterans who were exposed to atomic radiation and proving Agent Orange poisoned tens of thousands of Vietnam veterans.

Now The American Legion is fighting for Gulf War and Global War on Terrorism veterans who were exposed to toxic fumes of burn pits in the Middle East.

Dillard called for Congress to take a three-pronged approach in his testimony:

- Concede that exposure occurred to all veterans deployed to identified locations during the Gulf War and the Global War on Terror.
- Establish a list of presumptive illnesses associated with exposure to burn pits and other toxic hazards where scientific evidence exists.
- Create a framework for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to establish additional presumptive illnesses when scientific evidence shows an association.

“Veterans who are suffering now cannot wait decades to receive the care they need and rightfully deserve,” he said. “Whether a veteran was exposed to toxins in the jungles of Vietnam or a combat outpost in Iraq, we in The American Legion all stand as peers who have been down this road before and know the government can do better to accept responsibility and help these veterans as they confront illnesses caused by preventable exposures.”

On March 3, Congress again took action on one of The American Legion’s legislative priorities when the House of Representatives passed the Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2021 — also known as the Honoring Our PACT Act.

Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs (HVAC) Mark Takano, D-Calif., applauded the work of the VSOs for their efforts during the first session of the 117th Congress. Notably, the passing of the Deborah Sampson Act and the Blue Water Navy Veterans Act were signed into law. The American Legion lobbied strongly for both pieces of legislation.

“I want to personally thank the VSO community for the tremendous help you’ve provided during this legislative process,” Takano said. “The work is not over, but I was encouraged to see 42 VSOs send a very strong letter to the House leadership supporting the PACT Act.

“We have big goals,” Takano added. “But I know that with your support and insight here today — along with the support of the administration — we will be able to deliver on them and fulfill the promises we’ve made to the nation’s veterans.”

Suicide prevention continues to remain at the top of The American Legion’s priorities. The organization has led from the front in these efforts by implementing year-round Buddy Checks conducted by American Legion posts and members.

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The Buddy Check program is one of the best examples there is of peer support, Dillard said. Since its spring 2019 launch, The American Legion's Buddy Check program has assisted approximately a half million veterans through outreach services performed by more than 3,600 Legion posts in 2020 and 3,800 in 2021. Some veterans needed food, medicine or help in the home, said Dillard, but many were simply happy to hear another veteran's voice during hard times.

"Isolation is no friend to the veteran who may be confronting post-traumatic stress disorder, possibly at risk of suicide – and in need of connection with others who understand," he told the committees. "That is why we strongly support the expansion of Buddy Check into a national week of outreach by VA.

"A National Buddy Check Week can help bridge the gap between veterans in need and VA services to help them."

Recent surveys have shown that over 60% of veterans who die by suicide lacked consistent contact with VA and 40% were unaware they were eligible for VA mental health services.

"That is why we also strongly support the attachment of trained, peer-support specialists to posts of The American Legion and other veterans organizations around the country," Dillard added.

Sen. Maggie Hassan, D-N.H., applauded the Senate passing bipartisan legislation that she and Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, sponsored together to build on suicide prevention efforts by directing VA to designate a "National Buddy Check Week."

American Legion peer support extends to immigrant veterans. Military service has opened a reliable pathway to U.S. citizenship. More than 760,000 immigrants have become naturalized U.S. citizens since the nation's inception through serving this nation. However, said Dillard, this pathway has become obstructed as citizenship assistance programs have disappeared from military bases.

"U.S. veterans from other nations are serving honorably – and then discharging as resident alien non-citizens," he said. "They come out confused. Why did their service did not bring them citizenship, let alone expedited citizenship they believe was promised to them?"

In the worst cases, they are deported and disconnected from the VA benefits they earned.

Dillard thanked Takano for his leadership on behalf of veterans who served honorably but were later deported because obtaining U.S. citizenship was next to impossible for them while they were in service.

"The American Legion proudly supports the Veteran Deportation Prevention and Reform Act that addresses naturalization during service and protects non-citizen veterans and their families from unwarranted deportation," said Dillard.

Peer support drives much of The American Legion's agenda, Dillard continued.

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Improving VA health-care services for women, fighting for GI Bill education benefits for reserve and National Guard veterans, advocating for better quality of life for military personnel as stories of the deplorable living conditions at the barracks of Walter Reed National Military Medical Center came to light, and demanding that U.S. Coast Guard personnel are protected from pay interruptions in the event of government shutdowns are just some of the ways in which The American Legion continues to fight for veterans.

“Today — as U.S. troops deploy to eastern Europe to defend our allies in case the war expands — history reminds us again that we never know when — or with what notice — men and women will be called upon to fight.

“How we treat them now — and in the years ahead, when the effects of their sacrifices are upon them — is certain to be more than a matter of compassion — but one of national security as well,” said Dillard.

As the largest ground war since World War II rages on European soil, it is disheartening to know that there are WWII veterans alive today that still do not have access to VA health care, Dillard said.

“The American Legion is fighting to correct this lapse with legislation pending in Congress. Our World War II veterans halted the spread of tyranny, securing our democracy for generations to come.”

Fewer than 240,000 WWII veterans remain and hundreds pass away every day, he added.

“Time is running out for these veterans.”

SVAC Chairman Jon Tester, D-Mont., highlighted issues currently being seen in VA’s caregiver program as a result of the department narrowing eligibility.

“I am disturbed by reports that veterans and caregivers ... are being rejected at very high rates,” he said. “What is your membership experiencing with the caregiver program and the application and appeals process?”

American Legion Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission Chairman Ralph Bozella told lawmakers that they are finding that caregivers who apply for those claims are being rejected at a rate of 86% to 87%.

“We don’t know why those caregivers cannot appeal those claims through the VBA system,” he said. “That needs to be fixed. We have to care for those who care for our veterans.”

SVAC Ranking Member Jerry Moran, R-Kan., highlighted the installment of a Project ATLAS pod at American Legion Post 5 in Emporia, Kan. This is the newest test site for the initiative involving The American Legion, VA and Phillips.

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“Anything we can do to help support our veterans, especially in mental health care during this time, we are happy to be involved with,” said American Legion Director of Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Katie Purswell. “The Kansas pod is now complete,” she added, noting they hope to begin seeing patients immediately.

“It’s critical things like the ATLAS pod go through because there are rural veterans and veterans who have trouble with access to internet to be able to go to their appointments,” Purswell said. “It’s vitally important that this pilot succeeds. We need to have more pods like this in other rural communities.”

Takano praised The American Legion for its support of veterans.

“You are a very special voice,” he told The American Legion panel. “Your voice is instrumental and essential in moving the Capitol to do the right thing and to keep our promises.”

### CONGRESS

The House on Wednesday passed a fiscal 2022 omnibus spending package, as well as a four-day stopgap measure extending current funding levels through March 15 to ensure there’s no lapse in appropriations while the Senate works to get the larger measure to President Joe Biden’s desk.

But passage of the omnibus — filed in the wee hours of Wednesday morning and five months after the fiscal year began — did not come without drama. Democratic leaders had to send the bill back to the Rules Committee Wednesday evening to strip \$15.6 billion in funding for immediate COVID-19 needs and move that as a standalone bill (HR 7007) — which ultimately was delayed until next week.

That measure excludes a \$7 billion rescission of state and local funds that some Democrats objected to in the omnibus, leaving nearly half of the emergency spending unpaid for.

The sprawling, 2,741-page omnibus (HR 2471) would appropriate \$1.5 trillion in discretionary spending across the 12 annual bills and \$13.6 billion in emergency spending to address the crisis in Ukraine. It also carries a hodgepodge of unrelated bills that lawmakers are eager to advance on the must-pass vehicle.

### US SPIES EXPECT PUTIN TO ‘DOUBLE DOWN’ ON UKRAINE WAR

The leaders of America’s intelligence agencies testified Tuesday that Russian President Vladimir Putin may intensify his military attack on Ukraine in the coming weeks but faces the prospect of a long-running insurgency there.

The officials said Putin badly overestimated both his ability to subdue Ukraine by force and the strength of the world’s reaction. His response going forward is likely to be a redoubling of his military offensive and more casualties, they told the House Intelligence Committee.

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The officials also said Putin's nuclear threats against the United States and NATO should be taken seriously and would increase if Russian and NATO forces entered direct conflict.

The hearing was called to review the 2022 version of the intelligence agencies' joint assessment of worldwide threats. But, as Michael R. Turner of Ohio, the panel's top Republican, said, "Vladimir Putin has cast a long shadow over this hearing."

### UPCOMING HEARINGS

- On Tuesday, March 15<sup>th</sup>, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will hold a hearing titled, "Hearings to examine combatting authoritarianism, focusing on U.S. tools and responses."
- On Wednesday, March 16<sup>th</sup>, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity will hold a hearing to discuss pending legislation.
- On Wednesday, March 16<sup>th</sup>, the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Personnel will hold a hearing titled, "To receive testimony on the health effects of exposure to airborne hazards, including toxic fumes from burn pits."
- On Thursday, March 17<sup>th</sup>, the Joint Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (US Helsinki Commission) will hold a hearing titled, "Hearings to examine the Baltics under pressure."

### MEETINGS

- On Monday, March 7, NLD Staff participated in VSO monthly meeting to discuss the passage of the Honoring Our Pact Act and upcoming negotiations.
- On Tuesday, March 8, NLD Staff accompanied the National Commander to testify before the joint Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committee on TAL's 2022 legislative agenda.
- On Tuesday, March 8, NLD Staff attended a press conference with President Biden and VA Secretary Denis McDonough during their visit to the VA clinic in Fort Worth, TX. President Biden and Secretary McDonough spoke with VA health care providers about addressing the health effects of toxic exposures such as burn pits.
- On Tuesday, March 8, NLD Staff attended a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing titled, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Assessing the U.S. and International Response." The video and written testimony can be found [here](#).
- On Wednesday, March 9, NLD Staff met with Potomac Strategies to discuss the NDAA language concerning the Troops to Teachers Program.
- On Wednesday, March 9, NLD Staff met with House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) Minority Staff to discuss 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment protections for veterans seeking help through VA healthcare.
- On Wednesday, March 9, NLD Staff attended a House Armed Services Committee hearing titled, "National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activities in the Indo-Pacific Region." The purpose of the hearing was to examine DoD policies, programs, and activities in the Indo-Pacific region in advance of the fiscal year 2023 budget request. A link to the video is [here](#) and a link to the written testimony is [here](#).

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- On Thursday, March 10, NLD Staff participated in a VSO conference call discussing legislative impacts of the 90-10 and borrower defense rule negotiated rulemaking sessions.
- On Thursday, March 10, NLD Staff participated in a meeting with House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) Majority and Minority Staff to discuss potential legislative solutions that address predatory claims consultants.
- On Thursday, March 10, NLD Staff participated in a meeting with VSOs to discuss strategies for the Senate to pass comprehensive toxic exposure.
- On Thursday, March 10, NLD Staff attended an event hosted by the Hudson Institute titled, "Implications of the Ukrainian War for the Indo-Pacific." As the West grapples with Russia's war on Ukraine, there is growing concern in Asia about the broader implications for the security of the Indo-Pacific. The event featured remarks from Professor Yasuhiro Matsuda—one of Japan's leading foreign and security policy experts and a specialist in China, Taiwan, and cross-strait relations. More information and video can be found [here](#).
- On Friday, March 11, NLD Staff met with the office of Rep. Katie Porter (D-CA) to discuss legislative proposals to improve the VA Home Loan program.
- On Friday, March 11, NLD Staff participated in a call with other VSOs to discuss environmental exposures and how they can lead to rare respiratory cancers.

**Lawrence Montreuil, Legislative Director**  
**The American Legion**  
**(202) 263-2981**