

National Legislative Division Weekly

CONGRESS

Top House and Senate leaders met with President Biden, on Tuesday, to discuss raising the federal debt ceiling. According to Senate Majority Leader Schumer (D-NY), the only person at the meeting who saw letting the US government default on its loans was House Speaker McCarthy (R-CA). On the Senate floor Wednesday morning, Schumer said he and House Minority Leader Jeffries (D-NY) both took default “off the table,” and “even [Senate Minority] Leader McConnell [(R-KY)] said, unequivocally, no matter what, the US will not default.”

A second White House meeting on the debt ceiling scheduled for Friday was abruptly cancelled late Thursday.

Due to the lack of action on the debt ceiling, the House Armed Services Committee (HASC), on Tuesday, abruptly delayed its planned markup of the FY24 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The move came just hours before press briefings on the subcommittee sections were to start, and days before the subcommittees were due to meet for their markups. The full committee markup was to take place on May 23; it will now occur sometime in mid-June, according to committee staff.

Last Friday, the Senate Armed Services Committee also announced a delay to its FY24 NDAA markup plans. Until then, it looked like they would be marking up around the same time as the HASC. The SASC’s delay is also due to the deficit discussions.

The House Appropriations Committee is expected to start marking up some of its bills next week. However, the lack of progress on debt ceiling negotiations could mean that some of the bills will be delayed. It is almost certain that the Military Construction/Veterans Affairs (Milcon) spending bill will be released and marked up next week. Homeland Security, Legislative Branch, and Financial Services could also see action. The Defense and Energy/Water bills, which had previously been rumored to be in the first batch of bills, have apparently been postponed until sometime in June.

COULD TROOPS GETS A 100% HOUSING ALLOWANCE JAN. 1? WHAT THAT WOULD MEAN

Original Article: [Here](#) (Military Times)

Troops with families could get \$100 to \$184 more money each month, on average, if the Defense Department were to boost Basic Allowance for Housing levels from 95% to the full 100% of their housing costs — eliminating the cost share that troops now shoulder.

A recent DoD analysis, mandated by Congress, shows that if Pentagon leaders did decide to restore the full BAH level, as many lawmakers want, troops without dependents would get from \$82 extra to \$164 extra per month, on average.

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In 2015, defense officials reduced the amount of housing allowances they pay to military families from the full cost to 95% of their rental costs, as determined by the Basic Allowance for Housing formula. The cost-saving measure was authorized by Congress, but it wasn't required.

But due to economic conditions, concerns have grown about the affordability and availability of housing for military families. The rapidly rising cost of housing even persuaded defense officials to implement a temporary BAH increase at the beginning of fiscal years 2022 and 2023 to help service members find affordable, quality housing.

As a result, lawmakers have been urging defense officials to again have BAH cover 100% of troops' housing costs, which DoD can do without legislation.

Congress also required DoD to analyze how much money the 5% boost would put in the pockets of average service members, based on rank and dependent status, as well as what it would cost the department. It won't come cheap. Paying the full cost of housing would add up to \$1.1 billion in DoD outlays in 2024 if the full BAH were restored in January. That's in addition to the \$26.8 billion in BAH currently paid to about 1 million service members.

DoD's analysis, obtained by Military Times, shows, for example, that an E-5 with dependents would see an extra \$111 a month, on average; an O-2 with dependents, would get an average of \$118 more.

Department analysts also looked at the costs of gradually implementing a boost in the allowance, but their report doesn't include recommendations about whether the department or Congress should act.

The current 5% out-of-pocket housing cost "reduces the buying power of service member families, especially in high cost areas of the United States," lawmakers stated in their 2022 report requiring the DoD analysis.

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The DoD analysis also looked at what it would cost to restore the full BAH benefit over five years. The full implementation in 2024 would cost DoD an extra \$1.1 billion in that year. Over the five years through 2028, it would add an estimated \$7.5 billion (which includes inflation in housing costs).

If DoD increases the BAH gradually — by one percentage point each year for five years — service members would get less money at the start — ranging from \$19 a month to \$31 a month, on average. But it would cost DoD less: an extra \$214 million in 2024 and an extra \$4.4 billion over the five years.

While the monthly BAH increase would apply to all eligible for the allowance, troops living in privatized housing wouldn't see it because their full BAH generally goes directly to their housing landlord. The rent for privatized housing is set at the BAH rate.

Generally, about two-thirds of service members live in the civilian community. Service members may choose to rent or buy a dwelling in the civilian community that costs less than the monthly BAH and can pocket the extra money. If they choose to rent or buy a dwelling that costs more than BAH, the extra expense comes out of pocket.

The allowance is designed to offset the costs of local median rents and average utilities. BAH rates are adjusted each January based on surveys and information collected about rent and utilities for different types of houses in more than 300 military housing areas in the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii.

In 2023, BAH rates rose an average 12.1%, the largest year-over-year percentage jump in the allowance in at least 15 years.

The Government Accountability Office has reported that DoD needs to improve the way it calculates troops' housing allowances and defense officials are in the process of reviewing those procedures.

LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

In an effort 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.

Cynthia Boehnlein, Ohio

This week, we are excited to recognize Cynthia Boehnlein from the Department of Ohio for meeting with the office of Rep. Miller (R-OH). Ms. Boehnlein and Rep. Miller's Military Legislative Assistant, Chris Mitchell, discussed H.R. 592 – the Department of Veterans Affairs Electronic Health Record Modernization

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Act. This legislation, which The American Legion supports, would prohibit the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) from carrying out certain activities under the Electronic Health Record Modernization Program until certification of system improvements and facility readiness.



Ms. Boehnlein meets with the office of Rep. Miller (R-OH).

Thank you, Ms. Boehnlein!

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 me at kisaacson@legion.org.

UPCOMING HEARINGS

- On Wednesday, May 17, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health will hold a hearing titled "VHA Recruitment and Retention: Is Bureaucracy Holding Back a Quality Workforce?"
- On Wednesday, May 17, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity (EO) will hold a hearing titled "The Transition Assistance Program: Steps to Ensure Success for Servicemembers as they Enter Civilian Life."
- On Wednesday, May 17, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) will hold a hearing to examine the President's proposed budget request for fiscal year 2024 and 2025 advance appropriations requests for the Department of Veterans Affairs.