

National Legislative Division Weekly

CONGRESS

Instead of introducing their own omnibus appropriations bill at the start of the week, Democrats released a one-week continuing resolution (CR) to give promising negotiations time to complete. On Wednesday, the House passed that CR, which keeps the government funded through next Friday. The Senate passed the bill Thursday evening with 71 votes in favor (19 opposed), after defeating an effort by Sen. Lee (R-UT) to extend the CR until March.

In the meantime, House and Senate appropriations leaders announced they had reached a “framework” on Tuesday evening on which the omnibus can be built. This set topline funding, with Defense spending reportedly set at the same level as the FY23 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). By Thursday evening, allocation levels for the 12 appropriations bills had been set.

Theoretically, appropriators will have the omnibus completed before Congress returns next week. Ideally, the House and the Senate will rush to votes during the week, and leave town with the government funded for the rest of the 2023 fiscal year. The House will be taking a long weekend; according to House Majority Leader Hoyer (D-MD) they will not convene again before next Wednesday. House Appropriations Committee chair Rep. DeLauro (D-CT) said Thursday she is “resolute” there will be an omnibus to release on Monday.

SENATE SENDS FISCAL 2023 NDAA TO BIDEN’S DESK

The Senate spent Thursday evening voting down Sen. Manchin’s (D-WV) energy permitting legislation and an amendment submitted by Sen. Cruz (R-TX) and Sen. Johnson (R-WI) reinstating service members who were discharged from the military for not getting the COVID vaccine. The Senate passed the NDAA on an 83 to 11 vote. President Biden is expected to sign the measure, despite the Pentagon’s disagreement with the removal of the military’s COVID-19 vaccine mandate.

If Biden signs the NDAA into law, as he is expected to do, it would be the 62nd straight fiscal year that the defense policy measure has been enacted.

When Armed Services Chairman Jack Reed, (D-RI) noted that the bill is named after the committee's top Republican, James M. Inhofe of Oklahoma, the chamber resounded with applause. Reed said that Inhofe's leadership of the committee, both in the majority and minority, had been "monumental." Inhofe is retiring at the end of this year.

With enactment of the bill, Washington will have authorized spending about \$858 billion on defense programs in this fiscal year, mostly at the Pentagon. That is \$45 billion, or 5 percent, more than Biden asked for in March.

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The total amount of authorized funding would be about 10 percent higher than the fiscal 2022 level, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

The funds have yet to be appropriated, but congressional leaders hope to clear an omnibus spending bill next week.

The final NDAA is noteworthy for several reasons, not least because it would rescind a 2021 Defense Department directive that troops be vaccinated against the coronavirus unless they have an allowable exemption for medical or religious reasons.

It includes several provisions to improve military quality of life that The American Legion supports. First, the bill extends the authority to prescribe a temporary adjustment in the current Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) rates for a military housing area if the Secretary of Defense determines that the actual costs of adequate housing differ from the current BAH rates by more than 20 percent. It also broadens the reach and impacts of the Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) by increasing the eligibility threshold and allowance size from 130% of the Federal poverty line to 150% of the Federal poverty line as a baseline, and authorizes the Secretary of Defense to increase this benefit to 200% of the poverty line when appropriate.

HOUSE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

The HVAC took advantage of the lame duck session to squeeze out a few more hearings and events. However, due to the press of business on the floor, two hearings (on data security and the caregiver assistance program) were cancelled at the last moment.

On Tuesday, Economic Opportunity Subcommittee chair Rep. Levin (D-CA) convened a roundtable to highlight the need to pass the GI Parity Bill. That legislation would expand the types of duty and days members of the reserve component (National Guard and Reserve) could claim to access GI Bill educational benefits. The bill passed the House last January with overwhelming bipartisan support, but has been stalled in the Senate.

Tuesday evening, two subcommittees grilled witnesses on the VA's participation in the federal COVID-19 response. Former VA official Roger Stone called for the VA to be more deeply involved with FEMA and HHS during non-emergency times for purposes of planning and preparedness. He testified that, at the start of the pandemic, officials from other agencies seemed to be unaware of the VA's full set of capabilities and capacity, and turned too quickly to DoD for help. He recommended that the VA obtain more mobile assets for rapid deployment. A VA-centric workforce, possibly through the Public Health Service, should also be created to allow for involuntary deployment of providers in times of need. Stone noted that the VA already has a system for providers to voluntarily deploy from one part of the country to another in times of emergency. When the crisis covers the entire country, he told lawmakers, a workforce devoted to such deployments would be useful.

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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.

William Kramer, New Jersey

This week, we are excited to recognize William Kramer from the Department of New Jersey for meeting with Rep. Sherrill (D-NJ), who is a member of The American Legion, and her staff at the County College of Morris County in New Jersey in his capacity as a member of her Veterans Advisory Board. Mr. Kramer discussed the current status of veterans and national security-related bills and their prospect of passing out of Congress before it ends later this month.

Specifically, Mr. Kramer and Rep. Sherrill discussed a bill to establish a new VA medical site in the district to serve the needs of veterans living in northwest New Jersey. According to Mr. Kramer, the bill is in the Senate, and Rep. Sherrill is meeting with Chairman Tester (D-MT) of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) to discuss moving it through the chamber.

Thank you, Mr. Kramer!

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

There will be no hearings this week.