

National Legislative Division Weekly

AMERICAN LEGION TESTIFIES BEFORE CONGRESS

The American Legion testified at two hearings this week. The first hearing was a House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) on Tuesday, March 29, where Director of National Security, Mario Marquez, testified on pending legislation. A link to the video can be found [here](#).

Marquez specifically testified on citizenship for service, which is an area especially meaningful for him. Marquez immigrated to the United States with his family from Mexico in 1974.



Director of National Security, Mario Marquez, testifies before the House Veterans' Affairs DAMA Subcommittee.

“I was raised to appreciate the opportunities this nation could provide us in the form of the American Dream,” he told lawmakers. “I felt that as the eldest son, it was my duty to take the oath ‘to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic.’”

Marquez enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1989. He served as a Landing Support Specialist, Drill Instructor, Combat Service Support Chief, Company Gunnery Sergeant, Operations Chief, First Sergeant and Sergeant Major. The pinnacle of his career was serving as the III Marine Expeditionary Force Sergeant Major, the largest overseas-positioned Marine Corps combat force.

He retired in December 2020 after more than 31 years of service.

During his time in the Marine Corps, Marquez became a naturalized U.S. citizen through his military service.

“While my military career is filled with fond memories that my family and I are proud of, I would be remiss if I did not address the difficulties experienced when going through various stages of the naturalization process,” he said.

Marquez detailed his own struggles with the naturalization process. From intense deployment schedules, overseas postings, hours-long drives to immigration offices, cancelled or missed appointments and lost paperwork, he and his family struggled for nearly three years as they fought to obtain his citizenship. Once

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he became a naturalized citizen, Marquez and his wife were able to apply for her permanent residency. They struggled through the process for another four and a half years.

He is not alone in his experience.

That is why for more than 100 years, The American Legion has advocated for those who seek a legal path toward naturalization. Non-citizen immigrants have served in the U.S. military in every conflict since the nation's inception. Approximately 760,000 have gained American citizenship through military service over the last 100 years. Nearly 24,000 non-citizen immigrants are currently serving in the U.S. military and 5,000 join every year.

The second hearing was a House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations on Wednesday, March 30, where Deputy Director of Health Policy, Tiffany Ellett, testified on pending legislation. A link to the video can be found [here](#).



Deputy Director of Health Policy, Tiffany Ellett, testifies before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee on Oversight and Investigation.

The American Legion's testimony focused on several bills and draft legislation concerning congressional oversight of VA.

CONGRESS

As expected, lawmakers greeted Monday's White House submission of its FY23 budget proposal with varying levels of criticism. Republicans want more defense spending; Progressive Democrats want less defense, but more domestic spending; others oppose the proposed tax increase on very high earners; and so on. While the Biden Administration would raise defense spending, the increase would be less than current inflation rates.

The Senate may be closing in on another COVID supplemental spending bill. Senate Majority Leader Schumer (D-NY) on Thursday said negotiators are "getting close to a final agreement" on a bipartisan

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package. In a positive sign, the full Senate agreed to invoke cloture on the yet-to-be-released bill by unanimous consent Thursday afternoon.

On Tuesday, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported out bipartisan legislation to prevent any President from leaving NATO without the advice and consent of the full Senate. The legislation, crafted by Sen. Kaine (D-VA) and Sen. Rubio (R-FL), now goes to the Senate floor for a vote.

TOXIC EXPOSURES

On Tuesday, Senate Majority Leader Schumer (D-NY) declared his intention to ensure the Honoring Our PACT Act receives a vote from the full Chamber this year.

The Senate has passed legislation dealing with toxic exposures, but only to extend the eligibility period in which veterans can apply for benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The Honoring Our PACT Act is far more comprehensive. It adds 23 service presumptions, codifies a new framework for identifying and approving future service presumptions, and boosts research into toxic exposures, among other provisions.

The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee (SVAC) held a hearing on the legislation later that day. All of the Democratic committee members called for quick passage of this legislation. Several Republicans, however, expressed concern that the legislation would bring so many more veterans into VA health care that existing veterans would be unable to receive care on a timely basis. Veteran advocates who testified replied that the VA should receive more resources and they are sure the Department will be able to care for everyone.

This was a different tact from the arguments that occurred in the House. There, many Republicans argued that the price tag is simply too high, and there are no offsets in the budget. At vote time, however, 34 Republicans joined all 222 Democrats in voting to pass the bill on a bipartisan basis.

UPCOMING HEARINGS

- On Tuesday, April 5, the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) will hold a hearing titled, “Fiscal Year 2023 Defense Budget Request.”
- On Wednesday, April 6, the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) will hold a hearing titled, “Hearing to examine suicide prevention and related behavioral health interventions in the Department of Defense.”
- On Wednesday, April 6, the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies will hold a hearing titled, “FY 2023 Department of Veterans Affairs Budget Hearing.”

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MEETINGS

- On Monday, March 28, NLD Staff attended an event titled: “Freedom Over Tyranny: A Conversation with Senator Joni Ernst.” The senator led a bipartisan Senate delegation to Poland and Germany last week to meet with service members, military leaders, NGOs, civil servants, and refugees from Ukraine. More information and video are [here](#).
- On Monday, March 28, NLD Staff met with the Enlisted Association of the National Guard to discuss data collection on reserve mobilizations from 2019 to 2021. NLD Staff expressed the utility of this information in supporting the passage of the GI Bill Parity Act.
- On Monday, March 28, NLD and VA&R Staff conducted testimony prep.
- On Monday, March 28, NLD Staff met with the staff from the office of Rep. Murphy (R-NC) to discuss legislation to protect veterans against predatory claim consultants.
- On Monday, March 28, NLD Staff attended a VA briefing to discuss the Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 VA budget request.
- On Monday, March 28, NLD Staff participated in VSO weekly meeting to discuss the introduction of the Honoring Our Pact Act in the Senate.
- On Monday, March 28, NLD Staff met with House Veterans’ Affairs Committee (HVAC) Minority staff to discuss automation and the claims process at the VA.
- On Tuesday, March 29, NLD and VA&R Staff conducted testimony prep.
- On Tuesday, March 29, NLD Staff attended a Department of Defense (DoD) briefing to discuss the FY23 Defense budget request.
- On Tuesday, March 29, NLD Staff monitored a White House Briefing on President Biden’s trip to Europe.
- On Tuesday, March 29, NLD Staff attended a press conference with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), and Rep. Raul Ruiz (D-CA). The conference also included remarks from John Feal, Jon Stewart, and other veterans’ advocates. All speakers voiced the need to pass the Honoring Our Pact Act in the Senate. This landmark legislation extends VA benefits to servicemembers who have illnesses due to exposure to burn pits and other toxins.
- On Tuesday, March 29, NLD Staff accompanied Director of National Security, Mario Marquez (Ret. USMC), to testify before the HVAC Subcommittee on Disability and Memorial Affairs (DAMA). In his testimony, Marquez discussed the American Legion’s support for legislation that would seek to prevent the deportation of non-citizen veterans. He also expressed his support for 14 other bills which would improve the VA Claims Process and Survivor Benefits.
- On Tuesday, March 29, NLD Staff attended the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee (SVAC) hearing titled, “VSO and VA discussion regarding PACT Act.” TAL submitted a Statement for the Record (SFR) for this hearing.
- On Wednesday, March 30, NLD Staff attended a HASC hearing titled, “National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activity in Europe.” Witness statements and video are [here](#).
- On Wednesday, March 30, NLD and VA&R Staff visited Capitol Hill where the Deputy Health Policy Director was testifying before an HVAC Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee hearing on pending legislation.

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- On Wednesday, March 30, NLD Staff monitored an SVAC hearing titled, “Improving Quality of Care” where lawmakers and witnesses discussed issues with the caregiver program regulations.
- On Thursday, March 31, NLD Staff participated in an event hosted by The American Conservative which featured prominent elected officials, scholars, and business leaders. They discussed setting up an agenda for a responsible American foreign policy, in light of the invasion of Ukraine, that keeps our nation and its interests secure.
- On Thursday, March 31, NLD Staff spoke with Econ Focus about the impact of the Forever GI Bill legislation on veterans’ enrollment in post-secondary institutions.
- On Thursday, March 31, NLD Staff met with HVAC Economic Opportunity staff to discuss potential sanctions the VA is placing on the University of Arizona – Global Campus for undisclosed violations. If these sanctions go into effect, over 5,000 student veterans will lose access to the GI Bill.
- On Thursday, March 31, NLD Staff monitored an HVAC Full Committee hearing on domestic extremism in the veteran community.
- On Thursday, March 31, NLD Staff met with staff from the office of Majority Leader Schumer (D-NY) to discuss toxic exposure legislation in the Senate.
- On Thursday, March 31, NLD Staff met with Sen. Daines’s (R-MT) veterans policy team to discuss the Honoring Our PACT Act, which passed the House with bipartisan support, and is now in the Senate.
- On Friday, April 1, NLD Staff attended an event hosted by the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) titled, “Assessing the FY 2023 Defense Budget Request.” More information and video are [here](#).
- On Friday, April 1, NLD Staff met with the HVAC Economic Opportunity Staff Director to discuss small business priorities. HVAC staff expressed interest in holding a joint HVAC/Small Business Committee hearing on veterans’ entrepreneurship and access to capital.
- On Friday, April 1, NLD Staff met with Disabled American Veterans (DAV) to discuss Title II of the Honoring our PACT Act.
- On Friday, April 1, NLD Staff participated in a VSO meeting to discuss the Honoring Our PACT Act legislative strategy in the Senate.
- On Friday, April 1, NLD staff met with Rep. Dr. Ruiz’s (D-CA) staff to discuss toxic exposure legislation.

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