

National Legislative Division Weekly

CONGRESSIONAL UPDATE

The House was not in session this week. Both chambers observe President's Day with recesses next week.

The Senate finished this week with a Thursday evening vote to pass the March 11 continuing resolution (CR) with 65 votes in favor and 27 votes against (all Republicans). This gives appropriators 21 more days to finish crafting the FY22 omnibus spending bill (see more below).

Tuesday afternoon, the Senate passed the Health Care for Burn Pit Veterans Act by unanimous consent. The bill, sponsored by Senate Veterans Affairs Committee chair Sen. Tester (D-MT) and ranking member Sen. Moran (R-KS), extends the eligibility period for veterans exposed to burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan to apply for VA care and benefits.

FY23 BUDGET PREDICTIONS

The President's budget is, of course, past due for being submitted to Congress. Some expect it will come sometime around the March 1 State of the Union address.

Reuter's is reporting that the Administration might request \$773 billion for the Department of Defense (DoD). Additional spending in the bill for the Department of Energy could drive the total Defense spending bill to more than \$800 billion.

The news agency added that negotiations are still underway between DoD and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). If Russia invades Ukraine, this could also change the calculations.

FY22 OMNIBUS, AND ANOTHER COVID SUPPLEMENTAL?

A number of media outlets have reported that the Biden Administration intends to ask for another \$30 billion supplemental related to the pandemic. According to AP, \$17.9 billion would go towards vaccines and treatments, \$4.9 billion for testing, \$3 billion to cover COVID-related health care for uninsured patients, and \$3.7 billion to prepare for future variants of the novel coronavirus. Apparently, Republican lawmakers want more relief to help small businesses survive the pandemic. There are reports that the Administration will extend the public health emergency (PHE) again in April, meaning it will last at least until July 15. This impacts a number of Medicaid deadlines (and possibly could cause further elimination of student loan interest accumulation).

Both House Appropriations Committee chair Rep. DeLauro (D-CT) and Senate Appropriations Committee (SAC) chair Sen. Leahy (D-VT) reportedly favor considering the supplemental request as a stand-alone bill,

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rather than trying to roll it into the FY22 omnibus spending bill they are in the process of crafting with their Republican colleagues.

Details remain spotty on the FY22 agreement reached last week by Democratic and Republic appropriations leaders. Leahy says it will “provide the biggest increase in non-defense programs in four years.” SAC ranking member Sen. Shelby (R-AL) assured reporters this week that the legacy riders, including those prohibiting federal programs from paying for abortion services, will remain in the final bill.

CONTROLLING THE FEDERAL BUDGET

The House Budget Committee held a hearing on Tuesday to talk about eliminating the debt ceiling. Democrats focused on the anxiety the American people and global financial markets face each time Congress plays political football with it. Republicans focused on what they called runaway spending by the Biden Administration and high levels of inflation. Of the four witnesses, only one, former Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Mick Mulvaney, argued for keeping the debt ceiling. Mulvaney said people only want to eliminate it because it is hard; however, he said, Congress always raises it in the end.

Several speakers, both witnesses and Members, acknowledged that spending growth in entitlement programs such as Social Security and Medicare is unsustainable. They all pointed out that Congress needs to address those issues directly, rather than hold the debt ceiling hostage to gain legislative wins or political points.

Sen. King (I-ME) and Sen. Romney (R-UT) have jointly introduced the Time to Rescue United States Trusts (TRUST) Act to address this issue. The same legislation has been introduced in the House by Rep. Gallagher (R-WI) and Rep. Peters (D-CA). This legislation would create congressional rescue committees to develop recommendations and legislation for those programs covered by trust funds. Congress would then use expedited legislative procedures to consider the results. The bills have substantial bipartisan support in both chambers.

UPCOMING HEARINGS

- There will be no hearings next week.

MEETINGS

- On Monday, February 14, NLD Staff met with a Senior Vice President of the Johnson Healthcare Real Estate Group to discuss pending VA CBOC leasing issues in Congress.
- On Monday, February 14, NLD Staff met with the Serrato Corp CEO to discuss a bill regarding Department of Labor Job Corps opportunities for transitioning servicemembers.

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- On Monday, February 14, NLD Staff participated in VSO monthly meeting to discuss toxic exposure legislation.
- On Tuesday, February 15, NLD Staff participated in VSO TEAM Coalition monthly meeting to discuss toxic exposure legislation.
- On Tuesday, February 15, NLD Staff met with House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC) minority staff to discuss VA's ATLAS Program.
- On Wednesday, February 16, NLD Staff participated in VSO Roundtable to discuss legislative strategy.
- On Wednesday, February 16, NLD Staff participated in HVAC Burn Pit Advocacy Meeting with VSOs.
- On Wednesday, February 16, NLD Staff met with the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee (SVAC) staff to discuss pending VA CBOC leasing issues.
- On Wednesday, February 16, NLD Staff met with Taiwan embassy staff. Their new Director for Veterans Affairs, Julio Ni, just arrived last month and is starting to make the rounds in DC.
- On Wednesday, February 16, NLD Staff visited the Springfield, VA American Legion Post to meet with VA officials, Phillips representatives, and HVAC majority staff to review the ATLAS pod, which is located there.
- On Wednesday, February 16, NLD Staff participated in an Other Than Honorable (OTH) listening session to discuss the challenges and opportunities of accessing VA benefits and services as servicemembers with Other than Honorable discharges.
- On Thursday, February 17, NLD Staff participated in the HVAC subcommittee on DAMA meeting to discuss unaccredited predatory claims consulting companies.
- On Thursday, February 17, NLD Staff met with Rep. Luria's (D-VA) Veterans Policy Advisor to discuss H.R. 475 - Health Care Fairness for Military Families Act of 2021. This legislation seeks to expand TRICARE eligibility to young adult dependents up to age 26 to bring TRICARE in line with private and employer-provided health insurance plans.
- On Thursday, February 17, NLD Staff met with Rep. Barbara Lee's (D-CA) Legislative Director to discuss her bill, which would repeal the 2002 Iraq AUMF. It is included as a provision in the FY22 House Appropriations bill, and TAL is working with coalition partners and members of Congress to ensure it remains. The final FY22 appropriations bill must be passed by March 11, when the latest Continuing Resolution expires.
- On Thursday, February 17, NLD Staff attended the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) Distinguished Speakers Series at Harvard Law School where Sen. Gillibrand (D-NY) offered remarks and participated in a panel discussion regarding burn pits and efforts to provide meaningful support and benefits to members of the military community.
- On Thursday, February 17, NLD Staff attended an event hosted by the National Committee on American Foreign Policy titled: "Assessing Russian Policy in the 21st Century." Tensions are high in Eastern Europe and beyond, as Russian forces gather en masse along the Ukrainian border while NATO allies reinforce their positions in the region. As the international community attempts to avoid war, the speakers discussed how the U.S. can rely on diplomacy to deter a Russian invasion and what Russia's ultimate strategy is in the 21st century.

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- On Thursday, February 17, NLD Staff participated in the HVAC subcommittee on DAMA meeting to discuss National Cemetery Administration's proposed new eligibility criteria for burial and interment at Arlington National Cemetery.
- On Friday, February 18, NLD Staff participated in a meeting with HVAC Majority Staff to discuss the Honoring Our Pact Act.

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