

National Legislative Division Weekly

CONGRESSIONAL UPDATE

Wednesday afternoon, news broke that House and Senate Appropriations Committee leaders had achieved agreement on topline spending amounts for FY22 (which began more than four months ago). The absence of any details on the agreement indicate it might be relatively fragile. Appropriators are now (hopefully) working on each of the 12 spending bills, which will be lumped into a single omnibus bill.

The agreement most likely includes the \$25 billion bump in defense spending authorizers provided in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), and probably less domestic spending than was included in the President's budget proposal. Pundits predict that many of the community projects (aka, earmarks) included in House appropriations bills passed last summer will be included in the final spending bills.

In the meantime, the House, on Tuesday, passed another continuing resolution (CR) to keep the government funded through March 11, as the February 18 expiration of the current CR will be long gone before the actual omnibus spending agreement is reached. The Senate is expected to pass the March 11 CR next week. A couple Senators, including Sen. Cruz (R-TX), have indicated they will vote against the CR in protest of funding the vaccine mandate for federal employees, but their positions may have changed due to recent court rulings against the mandate.

TOXIC EXPOSURE LEGISLATION

Last week, Senate Veterans Affairs Committee chair Sen. Tester (D-MT) and ranking member Sen. Moran (R-KS) introduced legislation to expand veterans' access to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) care and services related to toxic exposures.

That legislation was given mixed reviews, as it does not go as far as legislation previously introduced by House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC) chair Rep. Takano (D-CA). Tester's bill, the Health Care for Burn Pit Veterans Act (S. 3541) does expand the eligibility period during which veterans may apply for benefits, and calls for more federal research on the issues. American Legion National Commander Paul Dillard says the bill will "bridge the gap" until Congress can pass more comprehensive legislation.

This week, HVAC ranking member Rep. Bost (R-IL) introduced the same legislation in the House. Bost touted the bill as bipartisan. However, of the 24 initial cosponsors, only one, Rep. Houlihan (D-PA), is a Democrat.

HEALTH CARE WORKFORCE SHORTAGE

It is no secret that the US health care system is facing severe workforce shortages. Even before the pandemic, the country did not have enough nurses, and alarms were being rung about an insufficient number of primary care clinicians to care for an aging population.

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The pandemic, of course, has driven unprecedented numbers of nurses out of the field through burnout and fear for personal safety (both from COVID-19 and from pandemic deniers).

Two Senate committee hearings on Thursday highlighted the importance of expanding and diversifying the health care workforce. Witnesses talked about increasing the student pipeline, and making the field more accessible to those from poorer backgrounds who may not have thought about higher education or who may not be able to afford it. They also discussed the possibility of providing initial training to medical assistants to expand the force, with ongoing incentives and assistance to climb higher up the career ladder.

In a speech Wednesday, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary McDonough repeated his calls for Congress to pass legislation allowing higher pay rates for nurses and physician assistants (the RAISE Act). Speaking at the Charleston, SC, VA Medical Center, McDonough pointed out that nurses can earn thousands of dollars more in the private sector in their own communities. Between nurses leaving to get more money and aging nurses retiring, McDonough estimates that the Veterans Health Administration will need to hire 15,000 nurses a year for the next five years to handle the turnover. The VHA has already received authorization from the White House to raise retention bonuses.

UPCOMING HEARINGS

- On Wednesday, February 16th, the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation will hold a hearing titled, “Hearings to examine the Western Balkans, focusing on supporting peace and prosperity.”

MEETINGS

- On Monday, February 7, NLD Staff attended an event hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) titled: “What to Expect in the FY 2023 Defense Budget.” Panelists discussed their predictions for when the budget request will be submitted, the total level of defense funding it will include, potential shifts in strategic priorities and acquisition programs, prospects for the budget in Congress, and other vital issues facing the Pentagon. More information and a video of the event can be found [here](#).
- On Tuesday, February 8, NLD Staff met with staff from the office of Representative Barbara Lee (D-CA). We discussed the legislative strategy in support of the congresswoman’s bill to repeal the 2002 Iraq Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), which TAL supports.
- On Tuesday, February 8, NLD Staff attended an event hosted by the Hudson Institute, which featured a conversation with Representative Jason Crow (D-CO) titled: “Lessons from the Ukraine Crisis.” Representative Crow is a decorated Army Ranger who served in Iraq and Afghanistan and now serves on both the House Armed Services Committee and the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. More information and a video of the event can be found [here](#).
- On Tuesday, February 8th, NLD staff met with staff in the office of Representative Brownley (D-CA) to discuss women veterans’ legislative priorities.

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- On Tuesday, February 8, NLD Staff met with House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) minority staff to discuss toxic exposure legislation.
- On Tuesday, February 8, NLD Staff attended the HVAC Subcommittee on Disability and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) hearing titled, "Honoring Our Promise: Reviewing the Effectiveness of Services for Survivors and Dependents."
- On Wednesday, February 9, NLD Staff met with Veterans Education Success, a group that works to advance higher education success for veterans, service members, and military families and protect the integrity and promise of the GI Bill and other federal education programs. We discussed was servicemember and veteran education issues of mutual interest.
- On Wednesday, February 9, NLD Staff stented a Senate Foreign Relation Committee hearing titled: "Afghanistan: The Humanitarian Crisis and U.S. Response." Testimony and video from the hearing are available [here](#).
- On Thursday, February 10, NLD Staff met with staff from the office of Representative Andre Carson (D-IN) to discuss ideas for veterans-related bills under consideration by the congressman.
- On Wednesday, February 9, NLC Staff attended the HVAC Subcommittee on Technology Modernization hearing titled, "IT Infrastructure Modernization: Addressing Ongoing Challenges and the Path Forward.
- On Wednesday, February 9, NLD Staff met with other VSOs to discuss the Health Care for Burn Pit Veterans Act.
- On Wednesday, February 9, NLD Staff participated in a meeting with the For Country Caucus to discuss toxic exposure legislative strategies.
- On Wednesday, February 9, NLD Staff met with More in Common, an international initiative that works on strengthening societies against the increasing threats of polarization and social division. More in Common would like to partner with TAL to work on their new research project which is focused on identifying ways for Americans to message and communicate around their American identity.
- On Wednesday, February 9, NLD Staff met with staff from the Veterans Employment and Education Division to discuss and analyze the FY23 VA budget.
- On Thursday, February 10, NLD Staff participated in a meeting with Senator Murkowski's (R-AK) veterans' policy team to discuss recent developments with the Health Care for Burn Pit Veterans Act.
- On Thursday, February 10, NLD Staff participated in a meeting with Representative Gallego's (D-AZ) veterans legislative aid to discuss legislative priorities for 2022.
- On Thursday, February 10, NLD Staff met with HVAC staff to discuss the upcoming joint session of HVAC and SVAC where Commander Dillard will testify before Congress on TAL's legislative agenda.
- On Thursday, February 10, NLD Staff met with Senator Cornyn's (R-TX) professional staff to discuss the Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act (MIOTCRA).
- On Friday, February 11, NLD staff met with staff in the office of Rep. Tony Cardenas (D-CA) to discuss a draft bill related to the new three-digit number ([988](#)) for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

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