

National Legislative Division Weekly

GRASSROOTS ALERT: TELL YOUR SENATORS TO SUPPORT THE STRONG VETERANS ACT

Our most sacred responsibility, as a nation and as veterans, is to care for our fellow men and women who have served this nation with honor. The American Legion has long had a "Buddy Check Week," asking our Legionnaires to conduct veteran outreach as part of their daily routine. The American Legion's "Buddy Check" program has been an excellent tool for membership, and we strongly support legislation that expands this program to VA.

"S.544 - the Buddy Check bill is now included as a provision in H.R. 6411 - the STRONG Veterans Act of 2022. This legislation is a comprehensive veterans' mental healthcare package that passed the House in July 2022. Amongst other provisions, it would:

- Expand eligibility for Vet Center services
- Require additional studies into veteran mental health research
- Mandate a review of the training for the Veterans Crisis Line responders
- Expand VA's Peer Specialist Support Program

It is now awaiting action in the Senate. The American Legion proudly supports this legislation and asks that you contact your Senators and tell them to support H.R. 6411 - the STRONG Veterans Act today!

TAKE ACTION NOW!

CONGRESS

With the 2023 fiscal year starting Saturday, Congress was tightly focused on passing a continuing resolution (CR) to keep the Federal government open, since appropriations bills are still under negotiation.

The week started dismally, with opposition on both sides of the aisle against energy permitting language by Sen. Manchin (D-WV), which Senate Majority Leader Schumer (D-NY) had promised to include. Tuesday afternoon, Manchin agreed to pull his language in order to clear the way for the CR's passage.

The Senate worked its magic, however, and passed the new version of the CR Thursday afternoon on a 72 to 25 vote. This version keeps the government operating until December 16, despite some Republicans' desire to have it go until January, when they hope to be in the majority.

The House is on schedule to vote on the CR on Friday, giving President Biden several hours to sign it before the fiscal year ends at midnight.

Senate Appropriations Committee chair Sen. Leahy (D-VT) released a statement making clear his commitment to pass full appropriations bills in December, stressing that the CR is "only a temporary

National Legislative Division Weekly

measure.” Leahy added “Running on autopilot after December with rising inflation would be irresponsible,” and leave both Parties’ priorities “underfunded and under resourced.”

Senate Appropriations Committee Vice Chairman Sen. Shelby (R-AL) joined Leahy in calling for full appropriations bills in December. His statement read, “My colleagues must quickly accept a bipartisan framework that rejects poison pills, maintains important legacy riders, and demonstrates a serious commitment to our national defense. We need to finish the job.”

Revised permitting language is expected to be included in the FY23 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). Senate Armed Services Committee chair Sen. Reed (D-RI) has previously said he hopes the Senate will return in October to take up the NDAA. However, Thursday afternoon, Schumer dismissed the Senate with the announcement that the next roll call vote will occur November 14, at 5:30pm. There is an agreement in place to start debating the NDAA on October 11, which would set the Senate up potentially to vote soon after the midterm elections. The Senate will, as usual, hold pro forma sessions every few days to prevent the President from making recess appointments.

Wednesday evening, the House passed legislation sponsored by Rep. Takano (D-CA) that would eliminate copayments for eligible veterans.

THE AMERICAN LEGION SUBMITS A STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD FOR A SUICIDE PREVENTION HEARING

The American Legion submitted a statement for the record (SFR) for a House Veterans Affairs Committee on Thursday. The hearing focused on suicide prevention among the veteran population. They were focused on what works, and how to expand innovative approaches.

For the second consecutive year, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), last week, reported a drop in the number of veterans who died by suicide in 2020, the last year for which data is available, compared to the previous year. The report revealed that 6,146 veterans died by suicide in 2020, a 9.7% decrease since 2018. This is almost double the 5.5% decrease seen in the general population. This means that, on average, 16.8 veterans died by suicide each day. This is the first time since 2006 that statistic has dropped below 17 per day.

The VA attributes much of its success to its public health approach to the issue, and the Department’s multiple approaches to identifying those at risk and providing help on demand. Other organizations charge the Federal government undercounts the real number of suicides because overdoses and similar deaths are not included.

During the hearing, Rep. Miller-Meeks (R-IA), mentioned The American in the following statement:

“I’ve been really impressed with what The American Legion has done in introducing systems like the Buddy Check Program. And this is a system that connects veterans that may not know who to ask, or where to go

National Legislative Division Weekly

when talking about their mental health. And this is extraordinarily important as you mentioned the VA hospital understands the military culture veterans understand other veterans. And the Buddy Check system has seemed to be effective as The American Legion has seen you know nationwide 234,000 veterans reached through this system. In our own area we have seen suicide rates decline and what is VA doing to implement a similar system or ensuring that veterans are getting the direct and immediate care and peer support from fellow veterans.”

HOUSE PASSES EIGHT BILLS TO SUPPORT VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES

This week, the House of Representatives passed eight bipartisan, bicameral bills to support veterans. These include bills from new members Rep. Peltola (D-Alaska) and Rep. Ryan (D-N.Y.) that will help end veteran hunger and expand home loans for Members of the National Guard and Reserve. The House also passed two bills to help veterans in crisis, including House Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano’s (D-Calif.) REMOVE Copays Act and Senator Hassan’s Solid Start Act.

The Solid Start Act will permanently authorize and expand the highly successful Solid Start program, which is an outreach program for veterans in their first year of separation from the military.

A complete list of bills passed can be found below. The ones in bold will be signed by the President into law:

1. H.R. 5918, as amended – To amend title 38, United States Code, to ensure that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs repays members of the Armed Forces for certain contributions made by such members towards Post-9/11 Educational Assistance, as amended (Rep. Banks)
2. H.R. 7589, as amended – REMOVE Copays Act, (Rep. Takano)
3. H.R. 3304, as amended – AUTO for Veterans Act (Rep. Fletcher)
4. H.R. 8888, as amended – Food Security for All Veterans Act (Rep. Peltola)
5. **S. 2794 – Supporting Families of the Fallen Act (Sen. Tuberville)**
6. H.R. 8875, as amended – Expanding Home Loans for Guard and Reservists Act (Rep. Ryan (NY))
7. **S. 1198 – Solid Start Act of 2022 (Sen. Hassan)**
8. H.R. 8510, as amended – Strengthening Whistleblower Protections at the Department of Veterans’ Affairs Act (Rep. Pappas)

PACT ACT IMPLEMENTATION

On Saturday, thousands of veterans could become eligible for VA care and benefits under the Honoring Our PACT Act. This legislation expanded care and services for veterans exposed to an array of toxins while serving in the military.

National Legislative Division Weekly

As of October 1, post-9/11 veterans who are not already enrolled in VA health care will have a one-year window to enroll if they:

- Served on active duty in a theater of combat operations after the Persian Gulf War, or
- Served in combat after November 11, 1998, and
- Left military service between September 11, 2001 and October 1, 2013.

More Vietnam-era veterans potentially exposed to Agent Orange also become eligible for VA care this weekend under the PACT Act. The legislation expanded the time periods and geographic areas covered:

- The Republic of Vietnam between January 9, 1962 and May 7, 1975;
- Thailand (any US or Royal Thai base) between January 9, 1962 and June 30, 1976;
- Laos between December 1, 1965 and September 30, 1969;
- Certain provinces in Cambodia between April 16, 1968 and April 30, 1969;
- Guam or America Samoa, or their territorial waters, between January 9, 1962 and July 31, 1980; and
- Johnston Atoll, or on a ship that called there, between January 1, 1972 and September 30, 1977.

VA officials told reporters, on Wednesday, the Department is prepared to adjudicate the expected influx of claims. As of September 27, the VA had 150,541 claims in the disability claims backlog. Acting Under Secretary of Benefits Josh Jacobs said the backlog will most certainly rise, but the VA has instituted more automatic tools to aid claims processors, in addition to hiring more staff.

The VA received an all-time high number of new claims on August 11, the day after the PACT Act was signed into law. Since then, the VA has received 200,000 claims, a 21% increase over this period last year, and 70% of those new claims are related to the PACT Act.

UPCOMING HEARINGS

Congress is out of session next week; there will be no hearings.

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.

National Legislative Division Weekly

Gary White, Montana

This week, we are excited to recognize Gary White from the Department of Montana for meeting with the staff at Sen. Daines' (R-MT) office in Helena. Mr. White discussed the American Legion's Legislative Agenda and specifically mentioned H.R. 6411 – the STRONG Veterans Act.

Thank you, Mr. White!

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.