

National Legislative Division Weekly

CONGRESS

The House was out this week, and many in the Senate were focused on the hearings for the next Supreme Court Justice.

The Hill is gearing up for the Administration's expected FY23 budget submission on March 28. Some committees have already started their annual budget hearing process, especially the House and Senate Armed Services Committees (HASC & SASC). Between partisanship and the late start, it is almost a certainty that the Federal government will start the next fiscal year under a continuing resolution.

All but one GOP member of the HASC and SASC sent a letter to the White House this week asking for a 5% increase above inflation in the defense budget. While the letter does not give a preferred topline, this would put the defense appropriations bill above \$800 billion for the next fiscal year. For FY22, President Biden requested \$715 billion and Congress approved \$743 billion. Given that the letter was sent only days before the budget is going to the Hill, this letter primarily lays the groundwork for the coming Congressional fight. The rumor mill suggests that President Biden will request \$773 billion for the FY23 defense budget.

SASC chair Sen. Reed (D-RI) rejects the approach of setting a spending amount based on inflation. Rather, he said, the country needs to re-imagine how it prepares to fight. The new national defense strategy (which has yet to be released) must be considered. He also favors eliminating legacy systems that no longer function or play a role in modern warfighting. Speaking at the Defense Writers Group Wednesday morning, Reed said, "one of our greatest advantages is that we have the most superb men and women with intelligence, initiative, dedication, and selfless sacrifice." The budget, he added, must ensure they and their families have the tools, education, and support they need.

On Wednesday, the Senate unanimously passed the Making Advances in Mammography and Medical Options (MAMMO) for Veterans Act. This legislation requires the VA to develop a strategic plan to improve breast imaging services, create a tele mammography pilot program, and expand veterans' access to clinical trials with the National Cancer Institute. The legislation in the Senate was sponsored by Sen. Tester (D-MT), Sen. Boozman (R-AR), Sen. Hirono (D-HI), and Sen. Collins (R-ME). The same legislation, under bill number HR 4794, has been introduced in the House by Rep. Brownley (D-CA) and Rep. Miller-Meeks (R-IA). Brownley chairs the House Veterans Affairs Committee's Health Subcommittee, on which Miller-Meeks also serves.

VA CAREGIVER PROGRAM

On Tuesday, VA Secretary McDonough announced yet another pause to re-evaluate the caregiver support program. The Department put new criteria in place as the MISSION Act expanded the program from post-9/11 veterans to all veterans. The VA apparently expected that 30% of current program enrollees would lose eligibility under the new criteria. However, Department officials say the reality is that far more than that are being declared ineligible, although no one seems to have a figure as to just how many are being

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kicked out. Only 20% of new applicants are approved for participation, and only 13% of appeals are overturned.

The announcement of the pause came a day before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee held a hearing critical of the caregiver support program. VA witnesses said they are working to “get it right.” However, several caregivers testified that the program has aspects that actually hurt their veterans. Currently, participants have to undergo quarterly assessments with up to two hours of questioning. The caregivers reported that this over-taxes the veterans, and leaves them feeling hopeless and useless after having to list in detail all of the things they can no longer do for themselves. Apparently, these assessments are designed to determine whether the veteran’s care needs have changed. However, for many, there will never be real improvement, and the families feel persecuted for having to repeatedly justify their participation in the support program.

VA officials have not set a timeline for when the reassessment will be completed. On Tuesday, they indicated it could be a year or longer. In the meantime, no one will be removed from the program or see a decrease in benefits, even though the Department intends to continue processing assessments on current program participants. Anyone eligible for an increase in benefits will receive that. VA officials expect the caregiver support program to expand to include veterans from all eras by the October 1 deadline.

VA ELECTRONIC HEALTH RECORD MODERNIZATION (EHRM)

Despite a trio of highly critical Inspector General (IG) reports last week, the VA plans to go live with the new electronic health record (EHR) system at the Walla Walla medical center on Saturday. The reports highlighted a number of problems experienced by staff at Spokane’s Mann-Grandstaff medical center, which was the first VA facility to use the Cerner system.

Deputy Secretary Remy told reporters, on Tuesday, that the Department already has plans in place to remediate the issues identified by the IG during the remaining EHR rollout. He noted that the reports dealt with issues identified from January to June 2021, and many of those problems have already been solved, and processes put in place to ensure they are not repeated at future installations.

Remy said he has personally spoken with staff at Walla Walla to prepare them for drops in productivity and transition issues as the new system is implemented. He also plans to go to Spokane in person to assure staff at Mann-Grandstaff that their concerns are being heeded by top leadership.

The Columbus VA Medical Center is scheduled to go live with the new system at the end of April.

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UPCOMING HEARINGS

- On Tuesday, March 29, the HVAC Subcommittee on Disability and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) will hold a legislative hearing. TAL's Director of National Security, Mario Marquez (Ret. USMC), will testify before Congress on the American Legion's support for Citizenship through Honorable Service and the preventing the deportation of veterans.
- On Tuesday, March 29, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) will hold a hearing titled, "Hearings to examine the Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2021." TAL will submit a Statement for the Record (SFR).
- On Wednesday, March 30, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations will hold a legislative hearing. TAL will testify and provide input on the pending legislation.
- On Thursday, March 31, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) will hold a hearing titled, "Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism."

MEETINGS

- Legislative Division Staff continue preparing testimony for two upcoming HVAC hearings.
- On Monday, March 21, NLD Staff attended an event hosted by the Vandenberg Coalition. The event featured the release of an Afghanistan report which contains recommendations for Congress and the Biden administration to secure U.S. interests in the wake of the 2021 withdrawal. Panelists discussed key findings from the report, the future of American policy in Afghanistan, lessons learned from the 2021 crisis, and the implications for U.S. interests around the world including in Ukraine and in competition with China. More information and the report are available [here](#).
- On Monday, March 21, NLD Staff presented the legislative agenda to The American Legion's Auxiliary Conference.
- On Monday, March 21, NLD Staff participated in a weekly VSO meeting to discuss the passage of the Honoring Our Pact Act and the upcoming negotiations in the Senate for toxic exposure legislation.
- On Tuesday, March 22, NLD Staff attended an event hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) titled, "Ukraine and Taiwan: Parallels and Early Lessons Learned." During the event, panelists discussed the implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Taiwan. Although China has long voiced a desire for "peaceful" unification with Taiwan, China continues to increase pressure against the island and has not ruled out the option of unification by force. More information and video are [here](#).
- On Tuesday, March 22, NLD Staff attended an information session titled "Comcast Lift Zone serving Military Communities." Carol Eggert (Ret. US Army) discussed Comcast's work to provide internet access zones, or "Lift Zones," to communities across the nation, focusing on organizations that serve veteran and military communities.
- On Tuesday, March 22, NLD Staff met with HVAC Committee Staff to discuss the upcoming HVAC Subcommittee Oversight and Investigations hearing, which TAL will be testifying at.

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- On Wednesday, March 23, NLD Staff attended an Atlantic Council event titled, “Previewing the NATO Summit with Ambassador Julianne Smith.” Julianne Smith is the US Permanent Representative to NATO and she discussed the emergency summit in Brussels on Wednesday where G7 and NATO leaders strategized about the war in Ukraine. More information and video are [here](#).
- On Wednesday, March 23, NLD Staff monitored an SVAC hearing on VA’s caregiver program.
- On Wednesday, March 23, NLD Staff met with HVAC Minority Staff to discuss automation and the claims process at the VA.
- On Wednesday, March 23, NLD Staff attended an open forum with VA staff to discuss updates on the National Standards of Practice in VHA.
- On Thursday, March 24, NLD Staff met with the office of Rep. Cardenas (D-CA) to discuss legislation that would codify the veterans 9-8-8 hotline.
- On Friday, March 25, NLD Staff met with the office of Sen. Klobuchar (D-MN) to discuss her Afghan Adjustment Act. This bill would allow certain Afghan evacuees to apply for permanent status after one year of being paroled into the US. A factsheet on the bill is [here](#).
- On Friday, March 25, NLD Staff met with Sen. Manchin’s (D-WV and SVAC member) staff to discuss toxic exposure legislation.
- On Friday, March 25, NLD Staff met with Sen. Blumenthal (D-CT and SVAC member) staff to discuss the Honoring Our Pact Act and the Health Care for Burn Pit Veterans Act.
- On Friday, March 25, NLD Staff participated in a Toxic Exposure meeting with other VSOs to discuss the upcoming negotiations for comprehensive action in the Senate.
- On Friday, March 25, NLD Staff met with the office of Rep. Ruiz (D-CA) to discuss TAL’s Citizenship for Service campaign.

Lawrence Montreuil, Legislative Director

The American Legion

(202) 263-2981