

National Legislative Division Weekly

CONGRESSIONAL UPDATE

The House on Thursday sent voting rights legislation to the Senate, where it is sure to stall until something is done about the filibuster. Sen. Manchin (D-WV) and Sen. Sinema (D-AZ) remain opposed to making any change to that Senate procedure without bipartisan support.

On Wednesday, the House Appropriations Committee's Defense Subcommittee held a hearing to highlight the negative impacts upon the military of operating under continuing resolutions (CRs), especially if it were to stretch to cover the entire year. No one doubts this is a bad thing. As subcommittee ranking member Rep. Calvert (R-CA) said, "no responsible person" wants to see a year-long CR. Rep. Rogers (R-KY) also noted that "everyone knows" this would be bad for the military and for national security. By the end of the day, an announcement was made that Sen. Leahy (D-VT), Sen. Shelby (R-AL), Rep. DeLauro (D-CT), and Rep. Granger (D-TX), the chairs and ranking members of both Appropriations Committees, would meet on Thursday to start negotiating. After the meeting, DeLauro and Leahy released a statement calling the meeting "constructive," and expressing interest in "further conversations in the coming days."

Hill Staff have told reporters they do not expect the Biden Administration to submit its FY23 proposed budget until March, about a month later than usual. It would come after President Biden delivers the State of the Union Address on March 1, which is also later than usual. The delays are due, in part, to Congress' inability so far to pass FY22 appropriations bills. There are glimmers of hope for an omnibus spending bill when the continuing resolution (CR) expires on February 18, rather than another CR, but it is too soon to be sure.

G.I. BILL PARITY ACT

This week, the House overwhelmingly passed the Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act, with a 287 to 133 vote. This legislation broadens the kinds of service for which members of the reserve components can earn GI Bill educational benefits. The increased use of these service members in the pandemic response over the past two years has highlighted the disparities and complexities in current law. Although many GOP Members expressed concern over the long-term costs of the measure (some of which will be offset by increases in some VA home loan fees), 68 of them joined all of the Democrats to pass the bill. The Senate has not given any indication when this will come to the floor, and the White House has expressed support for it.

National Guard and reserve troops would see all federal missions and some training days count towards their eligibility for GI Bill benefits under legislation advanced by the House on Wednesday. The move will still need to be approved by the Senate before it can become law. But the 287-133 vote represents a significant step forward for advocates who have lamented the complex and confusing rules surrounding missions for Guardsmen and reservists, especially in light of their increased deployments in recent years. "It's time the Guard and reserve benefits reflect the key work they are doing and the need for equity across the total force," said House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano, D-Calif., in a floor speech shortly before the vote.

National Legislative Division Weekly

“It’s time for every day in uniform to count ... Guard and reserve need this more than ever as they are constantly transitioning between military, civilian employment, and family life, facing continuous disruptions.” The legislation — introduced by Rep. Mike Levin, D-Calif. — could affect more than 40,000 Guard and reserve troops annually and has been under consideration for almost two years, dating back to when thousands of part-time troops were mobilized for federal pandemic response efforts. At the time, advocates questioned whether all of the missions would count towards troops’ eligibility for Veterans Affairs education benefits, given a lack of clarity over how the work was classified.

Under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, troops and certain family members can receive 36 months of in-state college tuition, a monthly living stipend and other payouts if they serve at least three full years on active duty. Only a handful of Guard troops and reservists qualify for that, given their usual lack of time mobilized to active duty. But any service member who serves at least 90 days on qualified military duty is eligible for 50 percent of the full benefit, which still totals thousands of dollars in tuition payments. But qualified federal orders require a federal emergency declaration by the president, something that doesn’t always happen before troops start their mobilization. As a result, some individuals could work weeks or months without accruing GI Bill eligibility, even while they assume they are.

The new legislation would standardize those rules, making all federal deployments count towards GI Bill eligibility. State missions — such as local disaster response — would still not count towards the federal benefits. Last summer, the National Guard reached record-high levels of personnel activation, with more than 120,000 service members performing federal missions worldwide. Lawmakers supporting the new legislation argued that those individuals already received a host of other veterans benefits, but could be denied education aid due to quirks in the federal statute.

Earlier this week, White House officials announced their support for the measure. But House Republicans largely opposed it, citing concerns over how to pay for the extra benefits. The move is expected to cost about \$2 billion a year, offset by increases in certain VA home loan fees. Rep. Mike Bost, R-Ill. and ranking member of the veterans committee, said that won’t be enough to cover other long-term costs associated with the change, and that the money should be set aside for other more pressing needs, like covering veterans toxic exposure injuries.

He also noted that the measure massively expands the type of service eligible for GI Bill credit, to include some Guard and reserve training time. “We can provide for the needs and benefits [of these troops] without burdening future generations,” he said. “But that requires Congress to make tough decisions and put first things first.” In the end, 68 Republicans sided with all of the House Democrats in advancing the measure. Senate leaders have not announced any timeline for when the measure might be considered in their chamber.

National Legislative Division Weekly

UPCOMING HEARINGS

- On Wednesday, January 19 at 2pm, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee will hold a roundtable discussion titled, "Care for Toxic-Exposed Veterans." [Click here for live hearing details.](#)
- On Wednesday, January 19 at 2pm, the House Armed Services Committee will hold a hearing titled, "Sexual Assault/Harassment in National Guard." [Click here for live hearing details.](#)

MEETINGS

- On Monday, January 10, NLD Staff met with Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) professional staff to discuss TAL's legislative priorities for this upcoming year.
- On Monday, January 10, NLD Staff attended a VSO meeting discussing toxic exposure and potential legislative issues with its score from the Congressional Budget Office.
- On Tuesday, January 11, NLD Staff attended a Senate Judiciary Hearing titled, "The Domestic Terrorism Threat One Year After January 6."
- On Tuesday, January 11, NLD staff sent messages to 210 Republican congressional offices urging them to in favor of H.R. 1836, the Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act.
- On Wednesday, January 12, NLD Staff met with the VA&R division to discuss 2022 legislative policy solutions.
- On Thursday, January 13, NLD Staff participated in HVAC meeting to discuss environmental exposures.
- On Thursday, January 13, NLD Staff met with Veterans Education Success to discuss upcoming educational priorities for veterans, including subjects for a February HVAC oversight hearing.
- On Thursday, January 13, NLD Staff met with DAV staff to discuss upcoming congressional testimony and veteran healthcare priorities.
- On Friday, January 14, NLD Staff met with VA to discuss the Accessing Telehealth through Local Areas Stations (ATLAS) program.
- On Friday, January 14, NLD Staff met with VA to discuss congressional authorization to reauthorize the Veterans Technology Education Courses (VETTEC), as well as the operational status of the Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP).
- On Friday, January 14, NLD Staff met with the Special Operations Association of American (SOAA) to discuss legislative priorities in regards to Afghan interpreters.
- On Friday, January 14, NLD Staff finalized weeks of preparation for the American Legion's 2022 Washington Conference by submitting the 2022 Legislative Agenda, Commander's Testimony, and Know Before You Go script to leadership for review.

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