

National Legislative Division Weekly

THE AMERICAN LEGION TESTIFIES AT HOUSE HEARING “SECURING HIGH-DEMAND JOBS FOR VETERANS.”



American Legion Director of Veterans Employment and Education Joseph Sharpe testified on Feb. 2 before the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity on efforts to secure high-demand jobs for veterans.

A shortage of high-skilled labor — further impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic — has left employers struggling to fill certain positions. While many veterans use their GI Bill benefits to earn conventional four-year degrees, intensive, short-term

Director of Veterans Employment and Education Division, Joseph Sharpe, testifies at HVAC hearing regarding job training programs.

programs can develop the skills that today’s employers require, Sharpe told lawmakers. This enables veterans to accelerate themselves to new positions in the job market and address the economic challenges of today.

“To be viable candidates in the 21st century workforce, veterans need training opportunities that are affordable, flexible and applicable to their desired industries,” said Sharpe.

Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) is a five-year pilot program designed to help eligible veterans secure meaningful employment in the high-demand technology sector. The program was initially authorized in the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 and launched in the spring of 2019.

VET TEC pairs eligible veterans with Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) training providers offering high-tech training and skills development. This includes information science, data processing and computer software programs. VET TEC also uses an employer consortium to help veterans find employment following the completion of their program. Rather than a traditional four-year degree path, VET TEC courses range between 40 and 700 training hours.

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The VET TEC program provides non-active duty students a housing stipend and subsidized tuition by VA, while preserving GI Bill eligibility. Nearly 5,000 veterans have utilized the program to date, with an 88% graduation rate and a 72% employment rate. On average, it is taking graduates around two months to find employment and starting salaries have averaged more than \$59,000. Currently, only 16 states have approved training providers available, said Sharpe.

“The American Legion calls on Congress to increase VA training program offerings and access for VET TEC throughout the nation and its territories,” he testified.

“Additionally, Congress should require a report detailing demographic, geographic, and Diversity Equity and Inclusion metrics of applicants rather than just age to ensure the program is best positioned to serve an increasingly diverse veteran population.”

In addition to the VET TEC program, certain eligible veterans have access to the Veteran Rapid Retraining and Assistance Program (VRRAP). That program offers education and training for high-demand jobs — including health care, education and engineering — to veterans who are unemployed due to the pandemic.

Veterans participating in VRRAP will receive up to 12 months of tuition and fees and a monthly housing allowance based on Post-9/11 GI Bill rates. To be eligible, veterans must be unemployed because of the pandemic and not eligible for GI Bill or VR&E benefits.

VRRAP was developed as part of the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus economic relief package signed into law by President Biden in March 2021. About \$17 billion was allocated to support VA in its response to the pandemic. Of this, \$386 million went to VRRAP. To date, only one quarter of the funding has been used.

“To boost veteran engagement in VRRAP, Congress should work with VA, Department of Labor and American Job Centers to increase program outreach to meet the funding or participant limits,” Sharpe told the subcommittee. “Additionally, Congress should eliminate the VRRAP program eligibility cutoff age of 66 to provide older veterans access to this vital benefit.”

According to Sharpe, part of the reason many veterans could be shying away from the program is the ambiguity. Asking Congress to clarify what constitutes unemployment specifically attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic as criteria for VRRAP would mitigate this issue.

“Finally,” said Sharpe, “The American Legion calls on Congress to expand VRRAP eligibility to any veteran who is either unemployed or underemployed.”

The American Legion supports the program through *Resolution No. 305: Support the Development of Veterans On-The-Job Training Opportunities.*

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CONGRESSIONAL UPDATE

News broke this week that Sen. Luján (D-NM) is in the hospital after suffering a stroke. While he is expected to make a full recovery, Senate Democrats are down one much-needed vote for the duration of his absence. Basically, this means they cannot advance anything without the help of at least one Republican, and are even further behind when a 60-vote threshold is needed. This comes as much of President Biden's legislative agenda remains in limbo, there is a new Supreme Court vacancy, and an FY23 budget still needs to be crafted and passed.

The February 18 expiration of the current continuing resolution (CR) is distressingly near, and appropriators have yet to announce a topline funding agreement. Pentagon leaders took advantage of a classified briefing to House Members Thursday afternoon to emphasize the importance of full-year funding, according to Members' comments after the meeting.

Leaders of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees have met, and Republicans have reportedly made a topline offer that Democrats are still considering at this writing. Rumors abound, with reports that Rep. Granger (R-TX) wants to walk away from negotiations and Sen. Shelby (R-AL) thinks a deal can still be made. At this point, the only sure thing is that another CR will likely be required, and no one has any idea how long that will last. There are lawmakers on both sides of the aisle who strenuously oppose a fully-year CR, but others support the idea (these are not appropriators).

Tuesday evening, the Senate, by voice vote, adopted a resolution acknowledging and commemorating those who served in the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) during World War Two. This bill is part of efforts to achieve recognition for the women who served in various elements of the military during that time, but who have failed to receive official recognition from the Federal government. This particular resolution was introduced by Sen. Warren (D-MA). Provisions included in the most recent National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) to recognize them and provide grave markers did not make it through the conference process, although there was, in the final statement, a general statement of appreciation for the women who served.

UPCOMING HEARINGS

- On Tuesday, February 8th, the House Intelligence Subcommittee on Defense Intelligence and Warfighter Support will hold a hearing titled, "Intelligence Support to the DoD's August 29, 2021 Stike in Kabul (Closed)."
- On Tuesday, February 8th, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) will hold a hearing titled, "Honoring Our Promise: Reviewing the Effectiveness of Services for Survivors and Dependents."
- On Wednesday, February 9th, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Technology Modernization will hold a hearing titled, "IT Infrastructure Modernization: Addressing Ongoing Challenges and the Path Forward."

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MEETINGS

- On Monday, January 31, NLD Staff participated in VSO weekly meeting to discuss economic opportunity legislation.
- On Monday, January 31, NLD Staff participated in a VSO Other Than Honorable (OTH) Summit to discuss VA benefits and services to Veterans with an OTH character of discharge.
- On Tuesday, February 1, NLC Staff met with Senate Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity staff to discuss progress on GI Bill for national guard service, as well as raise concerns over GI Bill ineligibility for servicemembers with general discharges under honorable conditions.
- On Tuesday, February 1, NLC Staff participated in a Four Corners Congressional call on veterans education to discuss concerns over VA's new 18-15 rule.
- On Tuesday, February 1, NLD Staff attended a press conference held by the Chairman and Ranking Member of SVAC as they unveiled the new "Health Care for Burn Pit Veterans Act." This legislation is an effort to pass into law the most important aspect of the COST of War Act: enrolling GWOT veterans into the VA system who were exposed to burn pits or other toxic substances under Priority Group 6. NLD Staff expects this bill would be phase one of a more measured and phased approach to address issues with VA processes involving toxic exposed veterans. The American Legion's National Commander Paul E. Dillard announced, "The American Legion is proud to support the Health Care for Burn Pit Veterans Act which eases the burden on veterans navigating the claims filing process by giving all post-9/11 veterans, in any theater of combat operations after November 1998, access to VA healthcare by granting Priority Group 6 eligibility. Although VA is working to improve the presumptive process, unfortunately, time is running out for some. On behalf of the 1.8 million dues-paying members of The American Legion, we thank Chairman Tester (D-MT) and Ranking Member Moran (R-KS) for their continued leadership on this issue."
- On Wednesday, February 2, NLC Staff held a call with TALs National Legislative Council Chairman to discuss its Q1 2022 priorities.
- On Wednesday, February 2, NLD Staff met with staff in the office of Representative Kelly (D-IL) to discuss improvements to the Transition Assistance Program. Rep. Kelly's office expressed interest in creating a pilot program exclusively for military spouses.
- On Wednesday, February 2, NLD Staff attended the HVAC subcommittee on Economic Opportunities hearing on "Securing High-Demand Jobs for Veterans." The American Legion's Director of Veterans Employment and Education, Joseph Sharpe, testified "The American Legion calls on Congress to increase VA training program offerings and access for VET TEC throughout the nation and its territories...and to expand VRRAP eligibility to any veteran who is either unemployed or underemployed."
- On Wednesday, February 2, NLD Staff attended the House Veterans' Affairs Full Committee markup hearing where Members voted on H.R. 5575 – Department of Veterans Affairs Nurse and Physician Assistant Retention and Income Security Enhancement (RAISE) Act and H.R. 6411 – Support The Resiliency of Our Nation's Great Veterans (STRONG Veterans) Act. Both bills passed out of committee.
- On Wednesday, February 2, NLD Staff attended the SVAC markup hearing on the bipartisan "Health Care for Burn Pit Veterans Act." This landmark legislation would Post-9/11 combat

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veterans, including those suffering from conditions caused by toxic exposures, access to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care. This bill passed out of committee.

- On Wednesday, February 2, NLD Staff attended a House Committee on Homeland Security virtual hearing on: "The Dynamic Terrorism Landscape and What it Means for America."
- On Thursday, February 3, NLD Staff attended the HVAC Subcommittee on Health hearing on "Close to Home: Supporting Vet Centers in Meeting the Needs of Veterans and Military Personnel."

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