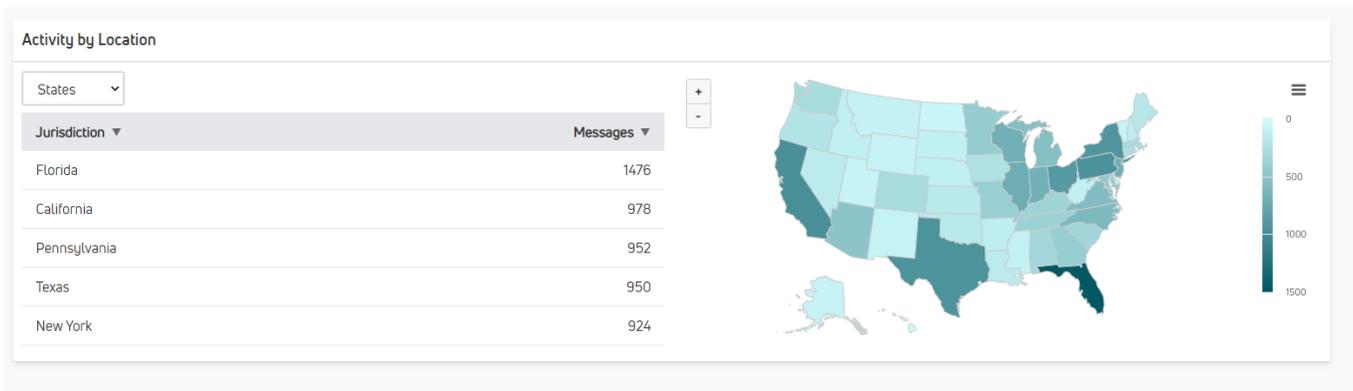


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GRASSROOTS ALERT: TAKE ACTION TO SUPPORT VETERANS EXPOSED TO TOXIC HAZARDS

This week, The American Legion National Headquarters sent out an alert to National Legislative Council (NLC) members and Legislative Action Center subscribers to [call on their Senators](#) to pass H.R. 3967, the Honoring our PACT Act. In seven weeks, **18,594** messages were sent to Senators. Florida, California, and Pennsylvania had the largest share of total messages sent to their respective Senators. This can be seen in the graphic below:



This campaign will be the top legislative priority of The American Legion until the Senate votes on it around June 6 or 7. National Commander Paul Dillard has visited Minnesota, Georgia, Alaska, South Dakota, and Indiana on a [multi-state tour](#) to spread awareness of the PACT Act. Last month, he held a [press conference](#) where he urged Legionnaires to take action and press their senators to vote yes on this critical piece of legislation.

Status updates will be shared weekly, and Legionnaires are encouraged to disseminate this campaign far and wide.

[TAKE ACTION NOW](#)

CONGRESS

Congress was out of session this week for Memorial Day recess but will return next week.

TOXIC EXPOSURE BILL WOULD REWRITE AMERICA'S COMPACT WITH VETERANS

In a year in which Congress has strained for legislative achievements, a big one is in sight. When senators return from a Memorial Day recess spent honoring those who gave their lives for the United States, they

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will take up a bipartisan bill that will dramatically broaden America's commitment to take care of sick veterans.



Marines dispose of trash in a burn pit in Afghanistan.

The bill would offer new health care and tax-free disability benefits as high as \$3,332 a month to as many as 3.5 million veterans at a cost the Congressional Budget Office has pegged at more than \$300 billion over 10 years.

Under the legislation — crafted by Senate Veterans' Affairs Chairman Jon Tester (D-MT) and ranking member Jerry Moran (R-KS) — the Veterans Affairs Department would consider a veteran with any of 23 conditions, as varied as brain cancer and hypertension, who was deployed to a combat zone during the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan automatically eligible for care at government cost.

By contrast, under current law, the veteran must demonstrate that his or her illness was the result of military service in order to qualify for benefits.

There's little doubt that many veterans were sickened by exposure to chemicals while they served, including smoke from burn pits in which troops disposed of garbage, such as medical materials and vehicle parts, by dousing it in jet fuel and setting it ablaze.

The practice was widespread during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and medical experts say exposure is linked to a host of illnesses that can present themselves years later, including cancers, chronic respiratory conditions and lung damage.

But for the better part of the post-9/11 era, the military did not keep thorough records of where burn pits were used. The smoke from the pits can also travel for miles, potentially affecting troops far afield. For veterans trying to prove that they qualified for toxic exposure treatment through the VA, it could be their word against the Pentagon's.

The bill would also extend, from five years to 10 years, the period after veterans' separation from the military during which they can seek out health care from the VA. If within that time period the veteran qualifies for care, he or she will continue to receive it indefinitely.

Also in the legislation is an expansion of benefits for veterans exposed to radiation during the Cold War, an expansion of the list of illnesses linked to the use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War and an extension of benefits to Vietnam War-era veterans who served in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Guam and may have been exposed to Agent Orange there.

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It would also greatly expand the VA's physical footprint by setting up 31 new, major medical clinics across 19 states while hiring thousands more claims processors and staff.

The legislation largely mirrors, and slightly expands on, a House bill by Veterans' Affairs Chairman Mark Takano (D-CA) that passed 256-174 in March. President Joe Biden issued a statement at the time saying he supported the measure.

Republicans who opposed the House bill argued that its likely price tag of more than \$300 billion over 10 years was too expensive.

The Congressional Budget Office projected that direct benefit payments for disability compensation would increase by \$208 billion over a decade

under the House bill, while health care costs, paid for through the annual appropriations process, plus VA administrative costs, could require an additional \$114 billion. VA disability benefits range from \$153 to \$3,332 a month in tax-free payments, depending on the severity of the ailment.

In February, the Senate passed by voice vote a narrower version of the bill that the Congressional Budget Office said would cost \$1 billion over a decade. It would expand health care to more veterans who served in areas with known toxic exposure but wouldn't provide disability compensation.

House Democrats said that Senate bill wouldn't help enough veterans — just 16,000 out of the 3.5 million potentially eligible Iraq and Afghanistan veterans — and declined to take it up.

In the interim, Democrats argued it was not necessary to offset the cost with new taxes or fees, or budget cuts elsewhere, because of ill veterans' pressing needs, and they derided the Senate's original bill as stingy. "It's the cost of war," Speaker Nancy Pelosi said after the House's March vote. "For the Republicans to go to the floor and say their veterans really don't want this help with their health because it's going to cost money and they're more concerned about the budget ... than they are about their health — oh, really? You just gave tax cuts in 2017 to the richest people in America. Tax cuts for the rich, cancer for our veterans." A coalition of more than 40 veterans groups also backed the Democrats' argument, while comedian Jon Stewart, who successfully lobbied Congress to provide compensation to people exposed to toxic air in New York City from the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, joined the cause and raised the pressure.

During a Sunday speech at a Memorial Day weekend event in Washington, Stewart said it was difficult not to be frustrated with Congress and the American people for taking so long to address the burn pits issue.



Agent Orange used in Vietnam-era

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“This may be one of the lowest-hanging fruit of the American legislative agenda,” he said. “Those that took up arms in defense of this country suffered grievous harm in that defense.”

The new Senate bill would establish a “Cost of War Toxic Exposures Fund” to cover the costs of the benefits it would create. The Congressional Budget Office has not yet released its estimate of the bill’s cost, although it will likely be similar to that of the House version.

UPCOMING HEARINGS

- On Tuesday, June 7, the House Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Technology Modernization will hold a hearing titled “Cybersecurity and Risk Management at VA: Addressing Ongoing Challenges and Moving Forward.”
- On Wednesday, June 8, the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Cyber, Innovative Technologies, and Information Systems will hold a National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) markup hearing.
- On Wednesday, June 8, the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Strategic Forces will hold an NDAA markup hearing.
- On Wednesday, June 8, the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces will hold an NDAA markup hearing.
- On Wednesday, June 8, the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel will hold an NDAA markup hearing.
- On Wednesday, June 8, the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation will hold a hearing titled “Resourcing US Priorities in the Indo-Pacific FY23 Budget.”
- On Thursday, June 9, the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces will hold an NDAA markup hearing.
- On Thursday, June 9, the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness will hold an NDAA markup hearing.
- On Thursday, June 9, the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations will hold an NDAA markup hearing.

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.

NLC Vice Chairman Paul Martel, Florida

This week, we are excited to recognize NLC Vice Chairman and past Department Commander Paul Martel for representing The American Legion at a Republican National Committee (RNC) veterans forum in The

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Villages, Florida on May 27th to an audience of veterans, servicemembers, and military family members. Mr. Martel spoke about the Legion's legislative priorities, as well as the benefits of membership alongside Congressman Daniel Webster and state Senator Tom Wright.



NLC Vice Chairman, Paul Martel, representing The American Legion at an RNC veterans forum in The Villages, Florida.

Thank you PDC Martel!

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.

MEETINGS

- On Wednesday, June 1, NLD Staff participated in a VSO weekly meeting to discuss the Major Richard Star Act to discuss the disparate impact on veterans specifically with the issue of a concurrent receipt.
- On Wednesday, June 1, NLD Staff participated in a call with Senator Scott's (R-FL) Veterans Policy Advisor to discuss the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our PACT Act and its impact on Florida veterans.
- On Wednesday, June 1, NLD Staff participated in a call with Senator Portman's (R-OH) Veterans Policy Advisor to discuss the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our PACT Act and its impact on Ohio veterans.
- On Wednesday, June 1, NLD Staff participated in a call with Senator Cruz's (R-TX) veterans policy team to discuss the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our PACT Act and its impact on Texas veterans.

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- On Wednesday, June 1, NLD Staff met with Senator Murkowski's (R-AK) Veterans Policy Advisor to discuss the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our PACT Act and its impact on Alaska veterans.
- On Wednesday, June 1, NLD Staff attended an American Institute of Research briefing on an upcoming report they will be releasing regarding Post-9/11 GI Bill outcomes.
- On Wednesday, June 1, NLD Staff with the Veteran Legislative Assistant in Senator Thune's (R-SD) office to discuss VA's Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission.
- On Thursday, June 2, NLD Staff participated in a meeting with House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) staff to determine criminal penalties and legislative deterrents to preventing unaccredited claims consulting entities from harming veterans.
- On Thursday, June 2, NLD Staff met with Senator Young's (R-IN) Veterans Policy Advisor to discuss the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our PACT Act and its impact on Indiana veterans.
- On Thursday, June 2, NLD Staff met with Senator Crapo's (R-ID) Veterans Policy Advisor to discuss the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our PACT Act and its impact on Idaho veterans.
- On Thursday, June 2, NLD Staff participated in a call with Senator Cornyn's (R-TX) Veterans Policy Team to discuss the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our PACT Act and its impact on Texas veterans.
- On Thursday, June 2, NLD Staff attended a Department of Education briefing announcing the cancellation of \$5.8 billion in student loans for former Corinthian College students.
- On Thursday, June 2, NLD Staff met with a Veterans Consortium Prop Bono Project member to discuss funding through *the Deborah Sampson Act*.

Lawrence Montreuil, Legislative Director
The American Legion
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