

Legislative Division Weekly

GRASSROOTS ACTION UPDATES

This week, we are asking Legionnaires to contact Congress to request support for a Congressional Gold Medal for the Hello Girls of World War I! The American Legion supports this recognition, and we appreciate all the emails you have sent so far. *Go to the [Action Center](#) to quickly email a letter of support.*

Have you had a recent meeting or phone call with your member of Congress? Report your contact today! Click [here](#) to register your Congressional contact and demonstrate the power of The American Legion advocacy in action.

The American Legion's legislative agenda for the 2nd Session of the 118th Congress. To review our priorities, you can check out our [Advocacy Toolkit](#).

MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

June 26th, 7pm Eastern – Legislative Commission Meeting

July 17th, 3pm Eastern – Legislative Division Training Session

Both meetings will be held online and link information will be distributed closer to time.

WHITE HOUSE OPPOSES PAY HIKE FOR TROOPS

This article's original publication can be found [here](#).

The White House is opposing a congressional proposal to give junior enlisted service members their biggest pay raise in a generation.

In a statement Tuesday about its position on the House's version of the annual must-pass defense policy bill, the White House budget office suggested a plan to give low-ranking troops a 19.5% boost in basic pay next year is too costly and premature amid the Biden administration's ongoing review of military compensation.

"The administration is strongly committed to taking care of our service members and their families, and appreciates the [House Armed Services Committee's] concern for the needs of the most junior enlisted members, but strongly opposes making a significant, permanent change to the basic pay schedule before the completion of the Fourteenth Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation," the White House said in its statement.

While the White House also raised several other issues with the House bill, the Biden administration in general "strongly supports enactment of a National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for a 64th consecutive year," the statement said.

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The House's version of this year's NDAA, which the full chamber is expected to approve later this week, would give all service members a 4.5% pay raise next year, as requested by the administration.

But it would also give E-1s through E-4s a 15% raise on top of that, for a total 19.5% pay hike next year for those junior troops.

The House Armed Services Committee decided to give junior enlisted members a major pay increase after months of study of military quality-of-life issues by a bipartisan panel of lawmakers found that military pay has not kept pace with inflation or the private sector.

Meanwhile, the administration has been conducting its own study, called the Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation, which is expected to be completed by the end of this year or early next year. While Tuesday's statement from the White House suggested Congress should wait until the administration's review is done to make any significant changes to military pay, the senior enlisted leaders for all the military services earlier this year urged lawmakers to act immediately to boost service members' pay.

Additionally, a House Armed Services Committee staffer told reporters last month that a 15% raise for junior enlisted service members is among the options the administration's review is considering. The White House's statement Tuesday cited cost as a concern with the House's plan. A Congressional Budget Office analysis released Monday estimated the increase in pay for junior enlisted troops would cost \$24.4 billion from 2025 to 2029.

The administration also argued that service members have already received significant raises in recent years, citing the 5.2% troops got this year and the 4.6% increase last year.

"If the president's FY 2025 request is enacted, service members will have received a 15% basic pay increase in just three years," the statement said, though it would actually add up to 14.3%.

Despite the White House opposition, Armed Services Committee leaders in both parties still strongly backed the pay boost Tuesday.

"One of the big aspects of this is a 19.5% pay increase for junior enlisted," Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., the ranking member of the committee, said at a House Rules Committee meeting about the NDAA.

"That's where we really have the problem. Many of our junior enlisteds are struggling to afford housing as housing costs have gone up. Their pay has not kept pace. This is a bold step to try to make sure that we support them, which incidentally will also help with recruitment and retention."

The Senate has not yet revealed its plans for next year's military raise. The House and Senate must negotiate their respective bills before the final legislation can reach President Joe Biden's desk.

Outside the junior enlisted pay raise, other issues the White House said it has with the House bill include a provision that would end marijuana testing as a condition for enlisting or commissioning into the military.

"The administration appreciates Congress' desire to increase the available military accessions pool," the statement said. But "the use of marijuana by service members is a military readiness and safety concern."

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The administration also took issue with the anti-diversity measures in the bill, including one that would ban affirmative action at military academies and make admissions dependent on a numerical score of "merit" based largely on standardized test scores.

"The academies currently use a range of factors to measure character, work ethic and leadership," the White House said. "Excluding these time-tested measures of performance would harm the academies' consideration of enlisted applicants, children of deceased and disabled veterans, recruited athletes, and non-traditional students such as those who are virtually educated or home-schooled, or who have studied abroad."

While a few anti-diversity measures made it into the bill during the House Armed Services Committee's consideration of it last month, the NDAA so far has not become the culture war battleground that it turned into last year.

But dozens more anti-diversity amendments have been proposed for this week's floor debate on the bill, as well as ones to restrict transgender health care and abortion access. The House Rules Committee was meeting Tuesday afternoon to decide which amendments would get floor votes this week.

NO MORE RADIATION FALLOUT COMPENSATION

This article's original publication can be found [here](#).

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., scuttled a bipartisan bill Friday that would have extended and expanded a unique federal program to compensate the "downwinder" radiation fallout victims of U.S. atom bomb tests.

Citing concerns that the bill would be too costly, Johnson adjourned the House without allowing a vote on the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, effectively killing the bill, which will sunset Monday. The House is not due to go back into session until Tuesday.

The bill, which passed in the Senate by a vote of 69-30 and was supported by President Joe Biden, would have extended RECA coverage for the first time to the "downwinders," uranium workers and others in New Mexico who were exposed to fallout from the July 16, 1945, first-ever explosion of an atom bomb in the Trinity test depicted in the blockbuster movie "Oppenheimer."

RECA coverage would also have been expanded to those in Montana, Idaho, Colorado, Missouri, New Mexico, Guam and parts of Arizona, Utah and Nevada who were not previously covered under the program. It would have covered people who were exposed to nuclear waste or were "downwind" of the Nevada test site where more than 100 atom bomb tests were conducted during the Cold War.

"I am disappointed that Speaker Johnson sent the House home without taking action on RECA before the sunset date," Sen. Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M., who has advocated since 2006 for expanding RECA coverage to New Mexicans, said in a statement. Luján said he would press for new legislation, but chances were slim that Congress would act before the current session ends in January.

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A spokesman for Luján said in an email statement that RECA claims filed before the official expiration date of June 10 will still be processed, but no new claims will be honored after Monday.

In a statement on the social media platform X, Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., said that "RECA expires today because the House has done nothing," and he ripped Johnson for failing to "make time to meet with radiation survivors, like he promised."

Hawley was a latecomer to supporting the extension and expansion of RECA, and coming on board after a series of collaborative reports by The Associated Press, The Missouri Independent and the nonprofit newsroom MuckRock on the dumping in the St. Louis area in the 1940s of nuclear waste from the Manhattan Project -- the crash program to build the first atom bomb.

Last fall, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimated that the extension and expansion of the RECA program would cost \$147 billion over 10 years, but advocates for the bill put the overall cost in the range of \$50 billion.

The failure to pass the RECA bill marked another setback for Tina Cordova, a cancer survivor and founder of the Tularosa Basin Downwinders Consortium, who has long advocated for inclusion in RECA coverage of families who lived near the Trinity test site.

In a statement, Cordova said that "improving RECA should not be about politics, parties or cost. It should be about taking care of the American citizens -- including children -- that our government put at tremendous risk in service of our national security."

LEGION TESTIFIES BEFORE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE

This article's original publication can be found [here](#).



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The American Legion expressed its support for legislation that would improve educational and economic opportunities for veterans and servicemembers during a House subcommittee hearing on June 12.

Kevin O’Neil, senior policy associate for the Legion’s Veterans Employment and Education Division, testified before the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity.

“Keeping in line with the theme of education, The American Legion would like to express its support for two bills that will greatly improve education and training outcomes for veterans,” O’Neil said in his opening statement to the subcommittee.

H.R. 8529, the Warriors to Workforce Act, would increase the monthly basic housing allowance paid by the VA to eligible individuals during the first year of a full-time apprenticeship or other on-the-job training program. “If passed, this bill will be a significant step towards ensuring that veterans have the necessary support to transition into the civilian workforce,” O’Neil said. American Legion Resolution 296 supports the aim of the legislation. “We firmly believe that no veteran should be forced to discontinue their education due to housing costs.”

H.R. 7543, the Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act of 2024, would expand eligibility for Post-9/11 educational assistance to National Guard and Reserve servicemembers. “From safeguarding our borders and capitol to providing pandemic aid and supporting local law enforcement, National Guard and Reserve servicemembers have been increasingly called upon to face unique challenges,” O’Neil said. “They often make significant sacrifices, leaving their families and civilian employers for extended periods of time — sometimes even accepting substantial pay cuts. Yet, despite all we ask of them, they often are denied fundamental benefits of their service, particularly the GI Bill. The American Legion believes that every day in uniform counts.” American Legion Resolution No. 24: GI Bill Fairness for Activated National Guard and Reserve Servicemembers supports counting every day in uniform toward GI Bill eligibility.

O’Neil also noted the Legion’s support of the VA Housing Loan Forever Act. “The American Legion supports transferring housing loan benefits to spouses and biological or legally adopted children. There’s no option for servicemembers and veterans to transfer VA home loan benefits to their spouse or child. By enabling and supporting the families of our veterans and servicemembers, we are supporting the military community as a whole,” O’Neil said.

The American Legion supports those benefits through Resolution No. 8: Home Loan Guaranty Program Eligibility.

In written testimony provided before the hearing, the Legion expressed support for other pending legislation:

H.R. 8560, the End Veteran Homelessness Act of 2024, would improve the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program. Among the improvements:

*Streamlining case management by prioritizing vulnerable veterans;

*Advocating for an annual HUD-VASH report to detail veterans served, qualifications of case managers and more;

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*Clarifying rental assistance for homeless or at-risk veterans.

Resolutions [357](#) and [332](#) reiterate the Legion's call for Congress to immediately improve the HUD-VASH program.

H.R. 7920, the AG VETS Act, "recognizes veterans' potential in agriculture and directs the Secretary of Agriculture to establish a grant program to establish and enhance farming and ranching opportunities for veterans," the Legion wrote. "... Awarding grants to entities that provide veterans with targeted training and classroom education will lead to more opportunities."

The Legion's support for the AG VETS Act is demonstrated through Resolutions [318](#), [296](#) and [25](#).

In written support of **H.R. 7896, the VETS Opportunity Act of 2024**, the Legion wrote, "The Post-9/11 GI Bill fails to adequately benefit veterans in hybrid versions of skilled trade training programs. This bill would extend educational benefits in the Post-9/11 GI Bill for veterans enrolled in hybrid certificate programs offered by higher education institutions; these hybrid programs teach in-demand skilled trades.

"Endorsed by the American Legion through [Resolution No. 14: Preserve Housing Benefits for Online Education](#), we urge Congress to expand the Post-9/11 GI Bill to better support veterans in hybrid versions of skilled trade training programs."

H.R. 8661, the Reforming Education for Veterans Act, would allow "servicemembers seeking an education to withdraw, take a leave of absence, or otherwise come to an agreement with the institution if they receive orders to enter a period of covered service. Second, it requires the VA to allow educational institutions with multiple campuses to file only one compliance survey. Last, if the VA updates its official handbook, it must notify all school certifying officials (SCOs). These reforms will improve the protection of education benefits and simplify the reporting process for SCOs and institutions, which ensures better outcomes," the Legion wrote. The Legion supports the legislation through Resolution 318.

"Historically, on-campus educational and vocational counseling has suffered from a lack of qualified personnel. Additionally, those who may be qualified are administratively burdened by the number of students being served at any given time, leading to a disparity in the services provided to veterans on campus," the Legion wrote. "**(H.R. 8646, the Modernizing the Veterans On-Campus Experience Act of 2024)** seeks to improve the provision of on-campus educational and vocational counseling by the Department of Veterans Affairs." Provisions of the bill are supported by Legion resolutions 318 and [343](#).

Through resolutions [228](#) and [59](#), the Legion supports **H.R. 8627, the Student Veteran Debt Relief Act of 2024**, which "aims to alleviate the financial burden and stress associated with overpayment recovery for veterans pursuing education," the Legion wrote. The bill would stipulate that overpayments would not be made a liability for veterans if due to a VA error or incorrect information from DoD; would include a hardship waiver if the overpayment liability would prevent a veteran from continuing their education; and would establish a payment plan if an overpayment cannot be recovered.

H.R. 8647, the VA Home Loan Program Reform Act, would authorize the VA Secretary to take actions to prevent or resolve a default on a housing loan guaranteed by the VA.

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“Many veterans still face foreclosure because of the pandemic’s impacts. Additional resources provided through this bill will alleviate problems of delinquency and allow veterans to remain in their homes without fear of foreclosure,” the Legion wrote. “... Based upon Resolution No. 8: Home Loan Guaranty Program Eligibility, The American Legion supports legislation that helps veterans seeking a home and, therefore, any administrative or legislative effort to make this process easier for veterans.”

LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

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.

Todd McKinley, Tennessee

Todd, for your steadfast advocacy of Legion priorities, we are honored to name you Legionnaire of the Week!

Todd recently met with Congresswoman Diana Harshbarger in Kingsport, TN recently. Todd gathered several veterans in the community to have lunch with Rep. Harshbarger and discuss suicide prevention among veterans and the Be The One mission. They also discussed the need to protect veterans benefits with all of the current budget issues the federal government faces.

Thank you, Todd, for your report and the time you have dedicated to the Legion’s legislative priorities.

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 us at grassroots@legion.org with the details.

LEGISLATIVE DIVISION UPDATES

This week was a busy one here in DC!

On Monday, June 10, 2024, Leg Div Staff:

- Welcomed onboard our summer interns.
- Met with the government affairs team from With Honor to discuss the NDAA
- Co-hosted a “lunch and learn” with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation in the HVAC hearing room to educate staffers on the Elizabeth Dole Act.
- Joined in the VSO Meeting on VBA claims, appeals, and legislative issues.
- Continued testimony preparations for Wednesday hearing.

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On Tuesday, June 11, 2024, Leg Div Staff:

- Followed up with Rep. Mills' office regarding S.3619 - Guard Act.
- Met with the House Veteran Affairs Committee (HVAC) minority to discuss legislation concerning veteran housing and homelessness.
- Met with Blue Star Families to review The White Oak Collaborative initiatives on upcoming legislation.
- Continued testimony preparations for Wednesday hearing.

On Wednesday, June 12, 2024, Leg Div Staff:

- Attended the Senate Armed Service Committee (SASC) - Subcommittee on Sea power Markup on the National Defense Authorization (NDAA) Act for FY 2025.
- Met with staff from the Military Officers Association of America to discuss the NDAA
- Attended the HVAC Economic Opportunity Subcommittee Hearing on Pending Legislation where Kevin O'Neil of VE&E provided testimony.
- Attended the Paralyzed Veterans of America Open House and Congressional Baseball game for networking purposes.

On Thursday, June 13, 2024, Leg Div Staff:

- Attended the SASC hearing on the NDAA for FY2025.
- Attended the HVAC hearing on Veteran Spinal Cord Injury and Disorder Needs.
- Had a luncheon meeting with Disabled American Veterans to follow up on the EO Subcommittee hearing and to discuss working together on future veteran legislation.

On Friday, June 14, 2024, Leg Div Staff:

- Met with Student Veterans of America to discuss legislation and policy concerning student veterans and servicemembers.
- Attended Rep. Levin's Quarterly National VSO Meeting to discuss bill that were in the EO subcommittee hearing, their TIER Act NDAA amendment, and veteran homelessness-related issues.
- Joined in on the SASC Committee markup on the NDAA Act of FY2025.
- Met with HVAC to talk about several bills regarding Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs in preparation for the July 10th Legislative Hearing.
- Met with a large group of VSOs to discuss the Dole Act and prepare for a press conference

GRASSROOTS INFORMATION

Interested in what the Legion is advocating for in Congress on *The Veteran's Role in Supporting the Military*? Check out our [information paper](#) in the [Legislative Toolkit](#). This is a great starting point for a conversation with your elected officials!

As part of our ongoing Grassroots efforts, LegDiv staff is available to provide **Grassroots Training** tailored to the hosting Department's needs. If you are interested in hosting a Grassroots training event, please contact grassroots@legion.org or ejohnson@legion.org.

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Register for Action Alerts today at <https://www.votervoice.net/AmericanLegion/Register>



UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

As of Friday, June 14th, at 10:00am, no hearings are scheduled for next week.

HVAC hearings can be viewed at: [Calendar Home | House Committee on Veterans Affairs](#)

SVAC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings - U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs](#)

HASC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings – House Armed Services Committee](#)

SASC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings – U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services](#)

[View The American Legion Legislative Handbook Here](#)