

## 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 2<sup>nd</sup> Session of the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress. To review our priorities, you can check out our [Advocacy Toolkit](#).

### WHITE HOUSE THREATENS TO VETO VA SPENDING BILL

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

The White House is threatening to veto the annual Department of Veterans Affairs and military construction funding bill over GOP-backed riders that would undo VA policies on LGBTQ+ veterans and abortion.

The bill as written by House Republicans "includes numerous, partisan policy provisions with devastating consequences including harming access to reproductive health care, threatening the health and safety of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQI+) Americans, endangering marriage equality, hindering critical climate change initiatives, and preventing the administration from promoting diversity, equity and inclusion," the White House budget office said in a statement Monday. "If the president were presented with H.R. 8580, he would veto it," the statement added, referring to the bill by its number.

The statement signals that efforts to come to an agreement on funding the government in the next fiscal year could be as much of a slog as they were this year, when dispute over funding levels and partisan politics brought the government to the brink of shutting down several times and kept an agreement out of reach for half the fiscal year.

At issue now is the fiscal 2025 VA and military construction appropriations bill that was advanced by the House Appropriations Committee last month and that the full House is scheduled to vote on later this week. Both chambers of Congress must pass the bill before it would get to the president's desk to veto, and the Democratic-controlled Senate is not likely to accept the controversial riders. But Monday's statement serves as a warning ahead of negotiations that could be particularly difficult this year with election year politics looming large.

The bill would provide the VA with \$129 billion in discretionary funding for fiscal 2025, including \$113 billion for medical care, which matches the administration's budget request. It would also allocate \$18 billion for Pentagon construction projects, including \$1.1 billion to design and build new barracks.

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The White House is not taking issue with the funding levels, with the statement noting that the administration "appreciates" that the bill would provide the VA with enough funding to "continue supporting key priorities including veterans' health care and critical investments in caregiver support programs, construction of needed facilities, claims processing and national cemeteries."

But on the whole, the White House said it "strongly opposes" the bill because of the partisan policy provisions. Among the provisions the White House is taking issue with is one that would reverse the VA's policy of providing abortions in cases of rape, incest or where the life or health of the mother is at risk. The bill would instead make the VA follow what's known as the Hyde Amendment, which bars most federal funding from going toward abortion, with limited exceptions. The main difference is that the VA would not be able to provide abortions in cases where a mother has health risks but is not in danger of dying.

The White House also called out provisions that would ban gender-affirmation care for transgender veterans; effectively ban the VA from flying the LGBTQ+ pride flag at its facilities; and prohibit "any discriminatory action" from being taken against someone whose religious or moral beliefs are "that marriage is, or should be recognized as, a union of one man and one woman."

Further, the White House said language intended to nullify a 22-year-old payment processing agreement between the VA and Immigration and Customs Enforcement that has recently come under fire from Republicans would interfere with the VA's legal responsibility to provide emergency health services and fulfill its "fourth mission" to serve as the backup health system for the United States during a disaster or emergency. The provision at issue would ban the VA funding from being "used to provide any services to any individual unlawfully present in the United States who is not eligible for health care" from the VA. Medical care for detainees is considered a right under international law, and under U.S. policy, ICE provides and pays for health care for detained migrants.

Republicans have argued the bill "supports American values and principles" and "focuses the executive branch on its core responsibilities" by including the riders the White House opposes. "This FY25 legislation is a testament to our dedication to caring for those who selflessly served our nation, supporting our military families, and strengthening America's defense," House Appropriations Committee Chairman Tom Cole, R-Okla., said in a statement after the bill advanced out of committee. The White House similarly issued a veto threat against the House's initial version of the fiscal 2024 VA and military construction spending bill over many of the same policy riders.

### LAWMAKERS BLAST VA OVER BONUS SCANDAL

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

The chief of the Veterans Affairs Department faced heated criticism on Tuesday as House lawmakers berated him over the recent bonuses paid out to senior executives at the agency, and the secretary said the blame for the matter fell on his shoulders.

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Republicans on the House Veterans Affairs credited Denis McDonough for taking accountability for the issue and for leading the charge to recoup the improperly paid bonuses, but said he was covering for his undersecretaries' failures. Most of those lawmakers expressed frustration that Shareef Elnahal and Joshua Jacobs, the heads of the Veterans Health Administration and Veterans Benefits Administration, respectively, did not personally testify or offer their resignations.

McDonough repeatedly acknowledged VA made mistakes in approving the \$11 million in bonuses to executives, but said he still had confidence in his leadership team and would not seek any resignations. He praised Elnahal and Jacobs for their overall leadership and noted VA has been forthcoming in flagging the improper awards, asking for an inspector general investigation and so far clawing back 92% of the money it doled out.

The issue came about after President Biden signed the PACT Act into law in 2022, which newly offered VA health care and benefits to millions of veterans exposed to toxic burn pits during their service. To meet the new demand, the law contained provisions to ease the recruiting and retention of employees.

That included the "critical skill incentives," or CSIs, for employees or applicants with "high-demand" or understaffed skills. VA unveiled last fall that VHA and VBA had provided the CSIs worth up to 25% of an employee's base pay, to nearly all of their senior executives. In culling back the 182 bonuses, VA said it had made a "policy error" and was "overly broad" in using its new authority.

All told, VA has paid out 41,000 CSIs, worth \$340 million or an average of \$8,300 per employee. Michael Missal, the VA IG, told the committee he would not have confidence in how Elnahal and Jacobs handled the bonus payments, saying they failed to ensure proper compliance with the law and VA policy by approving the awards in bulk. His office's report included a recommendation that McDonough take accountability actions as he deemed appropriate. "This is not a recommendation that we do lightly," Missal said.

McDonough said because the issues took place on his watch, he showed up to testify so he could be "held to account for them." Rep. Derrick Van Orden, R-Wis., called on McDonough to resign. The secretary said after the hearing he was awaiting a review from VA's Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection for what disciplinary action he would take, if any, noting he must either accept those recommendations or explain to Congress why he was rejecting them.

The secretary noted VA has added new layers of review to the CSI process, including that he must personally approve any such awards to SES staff. He said the incentives are still an important tool for the department as it looks to maintain its recently expanded workforce.

Democrats on the panel faulted VA for allowing the payments but praised the department for flagging its errors in a transparent manner. They called for increased governance policies to ensure the mistakes are not repeated but did not demand that any heads roll. "While the missteps VA made here are disappointing, I have faith the VA can and will use the critical skills incentives authorized in the PACT Act as Congress intends, as they have done for years, with many other authorities that have been granted," said Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif., the top Democrat on the committee.

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Rep. Mike Bost, R-Ill., who chairs the panel, did not directly call for McDonough to resign, but suggested some change may be necessary. "As far as I can see the same leaders who allowed and made these poor decisions remain in power," Boat said. "With the VA's current leadership in place, I am sure many of us are wondering whether your leadership team is focused on selfless service or self service." He added that if McDonough did not hold his team accountable, "you must be held accountable."

### CONGRESSMEN JUMP OUT OF PLANE FOR D-DAY

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

Wearing a World War II uniform and carrying mementos from two members of the Greatest Generation, U.S. Rep. Keith Self of Texas will solo skydive Friday, and a bipartisan congressional delegation will parachute out of a World War II plane over Mont Saint-Michel to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the D-Day invasion.

"I'm just looking forward to enjoying, celebrating and experiencing where they jumped," said Self, a Republican from McKinney. "Just jumping where they jumped is going to be fabulous."

Self, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who was an Army Ranger, said he's one of nine House military veterans who will take part in the volunteer jump.

Two other Texas Republicans -- U.S. Reps. Dan Crenshaw, a decorated former Navy SEAL from Houston, and Ronny Jackson, a former Navy physician from Amarillo -- also plan to jump with their fellow congressmen.

"From a military standpoint, the longer you're sitting up there floating under a parachute, the more vulnerable you are to get shot. So you want to be as low to the ground as possible so that you float to the ground as fast as possible," said Rep. Michael Waltz, R-Fla., a retired Green Beret set for the Friday jump.

"You don't land softly, like when you see a skydiver just kind of tiptoe right onto the ground. You hit pretty hard," Waltz said. In the days surrounding the June 6 anniversary, reenactors, veterans and active-duty military members will re-stage the historic aerial invasion of Normandy, which launched the offensive that would wrest back control from the Nazis and change the course of the war.

Self made a similar jump in Normandy in 1993, when there were more World War II veterans alive. This week's celebration may be the last major event involving veterans who participated in the June 6, 1944, landing, one of the most pivotal moments in World War II. Dozens of D-Day participants -- ranging in age from 96 to 107, according to news accounts -- are expected to attend the commemoration in France. About 100,000 of the 16.4 million Americans who served in World War II are alive today.

"It's important that we recognize that this will probably be the last big celebration with these veterans," Self said. The D-Day landings in Normandy were an Allied operation to liberate France and Western Europe from Germany and the Axis powers. More than 4,400 Allied troops died on D-Day, including 2,500 Americans. The D-Day operation was the largest land, air and sea invasion in military history and is considered the turning point in World War II.

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As part of this year's commemoration, a congressional delegation will visit the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial, where many of the Americans who died during the assault are buried. More than a dozen senators will travel to France, and Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., canceled House votes on Thursday to allow members of his chamber to make the trip across the Atlantic as well.

But only a select few will make the leap over Mont Saint-Michel on Friday. According to Waltz's office, the group includes Democratic Rep. Jason Crow, a retired Army Ranger from Colorado, and Republican Reps. Mark Green of Tennessee; Rich McCormick of Georgia; Derrick Van Orden of Wisconsin; Darrell Issa of Ohio; and Cory Mills of Florida.

Self said he has a message for any D-Day veterans he encounters: "I'm going to say thank you. I cannot imagine what they went through." Self said he'll make his solo jump over Mont Saint-Michel carrying two medals belonging to Starlin Lee Click, a World War II Army veteran who received a Purple Heart and Bronze Star for his service.

Self will also carry a portrait of Glenn Hubbard Stevens of Anna, Texas. A member of the 507th parachute infantry regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division, Stevens died in action on D-Day. "We all need to honor and remember what happened," Self said. "It was one of the greatest battles in history."

Self's parachute jump is a reenactment, he said. He'll wear a World War II paratrooper uniform and jump from a C-47 military transport plane. He's had two practice jumps. The former Collin County judge was elected to Congress in 2022. He said he hopes the D-Day memorials will help bring Americans together. "We need to remember our shared history," he said. "It was truly the Greatest Generation. Every American contributed something."

Waltz is an experienced parachutist, with somewhere between 70 and 80 jumps under his belt. And Crow has made the jump over Normandy at least once before, in 2019, alongside Waltz for the 75th anniversary of D-Day. But others may be rustier. "Everyone has experience -- but for some people it's been quite a long time since they retired and since they were in an active airborne unit," Waltz said. He led most of the group on a practice jump on April 5 in Palatka, Fla., where they went over some safety precautions for the trip.

Landing correctly and controlling your body in the air, since members will be jumping about a second apart from each other, are key. And with the relatively low altitude, quickly activating the reserve parachute in the event of any midair mishaps can be a lifesaver. Given the Republicans' slim majority in the House, the group will want to adhere closely to all safety procedures, but Waltz said he isn't concerned.

"We joked with Speaker Johnson that the plane is 81 years old. It's a vintage World War II plane," Waltz said. "All of our uniforms will be vintage. We're going over the same drop zone as our forefathers in World War II. But the parachutes are new. And we have a backup chute. So don't worry, it'll be just fine."

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### 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.

#### Sharon Cherrette, Alaska

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

Sharon recently met with Senator Dan Sullivan during the Department of Alaska Convention. The Senator spoke about what was going on in DC and how he was working to serve the veterans of Alaska. He stayed for quite some time and answered questions for Legionnaires in attendance. In Sharon's report, she shared that the senator brought three staff members with him to better serve those in attendance. The Convention was held at Post 20 in Kenai, Alaska.

Thank you, Sharon, 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](mailto:grassroots@legion.org) with the details.

### LEGISLATIVE DIVISION UPDATES

Legislative Division staff wrapped up another busy week in DC by attending an open house for veterans at the White House. It is always a great way to connect with fellow veterans in the city and discuss our shared priorities.

This week we spoke with staff across the Hill on several issues, including the status of some of our most pressing priorities. We also took the chance to network with allied organizations and spoke with the Paralyzed Veterans of America on pending legislation, the Hello Girls Congressional Gold Medal Coalition and the Human Rights/Afghan coalition on our joint efforts and viewed hearings on issues such as the VA bonus scandal. We even started our planning for The American Legion Annual Convention in New Orleans!

And as always, we worked with other Government Affairs Divisions of The American Legion to coordinate efforts and expand the voice of Veterans in DC!

**Look for a National Legislative Council meeting to be announced this month!**

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### 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](mailto:grassroots@legion.org) or [ejohnson@legion.org](mailto:ejohnson@legion.org).

Register for Action Alerts today at <https://www.votervoicenet.com/AmericanLegion/Register>



### UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

As of Friday, June 7th, at 10:00am, the following hearings are scheduled:

June 11<sup>th</sup>, 4:30pm – House Veterans Affairs Committee (Technology Modernization Sub), VA Travel Self-Service System

June 12<sup>th</sup>, 10:15am – House Veterans Affairs Committee (Disability & Memorial Affairs Sub), TDIU

June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2:00pm – House Veterans Affairs Committee (Economic Opportunity Sub), Pending Legislation

June 12<sup>th</sup>, 10:15am – Senate Armed Services Committee, NDAA FY2025

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](#)