

NATIONAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION COMMISSION

TOPIC 1: ECONOMY

CONSUMER SPENDING IS PRIMED TO FUEL SUMMER GROWTH

Households shifted spending in May to travel and eating out; economists expect pent-up demand to support recovery



As pandemic-related restrictions are lifted, more Americans are going out.

Households increased spending in May on services that they shunned earlier in the pandemic, helping position the economic recovery for a strong summer as more businesses fully reopen and consumers unleash pent-up demand.

Spending was flat last month as consumers cut back on purchases of big-ticket items and rotated more of their money toward in-person services. Still, this spring shaped up to be a solid one for spending: April expenditures were upwardly revised to a 0.9% increase from a previously reported 0.5% rise. Overall spending in May was well above pre-pandemic levels, with spending on goods up nearly 20% from February 2020 and services down about 1%.

Higher prices and product shortages likely hurt sales for some goods such as autos last month. Consumer demand is also weakening for some items—such as household appliances and furniture—that people bought during the pandemic while many stores and restaurants were closed. Economists expect Americans to step up spending on travel, restaurants and other services this summer—while continuing to spend less on goods as states and cities lift restrictions.

“Overall consumers are still well positioned to attack the summer with a lot of enthusiasm,” said Gregory Daco, chief U.S. economist at Oxford Economics. “We have households that have a strong itch to spend, they have the means to do so, and they have fewer and fewer health reasons not to indulge.”

Stronger demand is helping drive up prices, with supply lagging for many products and employers struggling to find available workers to fill openings. The core personal-consumption expenditures price index, which excludes often volatile food and energy items, rose 0.5% in May from a month earlier and 3.4% from a year earlier, the fastest pace since 1992.

Spending has helped propel the broader U.S. economy, which grew at a 6.4% annual rate in the first quarter. Forecasting firm Oxford Economics estimates that consumer spending will grow around 9% this year, the strongest rate since 1946.

Rising vaccination rates are giving more people confidence to leave their homes as businesses increasingly reopen. Consumers have money to spend, in part due to government stimulus distributed when the pandemic restricted businesses and activities. While fiscal stimulus is fading, incomes remain well above pre-pandemic levels.

The personal saving rate eased to 12.4% in May from 14.5% a month earlier. The saving rate remains higher than in February 2020, when it was 8.3%. The relatively elevated saving rate signals consumers have more room to spend.

Consumers spent 0.7% more on services in May than April, a steady pace, albeit a slowdown from earlier in the spring when stimulus checks first hit bank accounts and business reopenings began. They curtailed spending on long-lasting goods such as cars and furniture by 2.8% last month.

Now that the economy is reopening more, Jennifer McRae’s life is starting to get back to normal. Ms. McRae, 67 years old, of Albuquerque, N.M., typically takes an annual trip to a spa, but she didn’t go last year after the pandemic hit.

Ms. McRae said she planned to enjoy a spa day this week with her sister and daughter, soaking in hot springs, getting massages and practicing yoga. She also intended to dine out several times this week after relying on takeout food for much of the past year.

“I like being around people again,” Ms. McRae said. But, she added, “I’m seriously worried about the economy.”

Ms. McRae said she was particularly concerned about rising gas and home prices. She wants to buy a home in Arizona, but prices in the neighborhood she desires have shot up since April.

The Federal Reserve aims for 2% annual inflation to keep the economy growing at a healthy pace. Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said earlier this week that the increases in prices had been larger than central bankers had expected and may prove more persistent. He nevertheless repeated his view that shortages—including of used cars, computer chips and workers—would fade over time, bringing inflation closer to the Fed’s 2% long-run target.

The economy’s recovery continues to be uneven. A recent downward trend in worker filings for unemployment benefits stalled in mid-June. Hiring is picking up but lagging behind gross domestic

product growth as millions of workers remain sidelined because of factors such as expanded unemployment benefits and increased child-care responsibilities.

Higher-income Americans are driving much of the spending growth, said Jonathan Silver, chief executive of Affinity Solutions, a consumer-data firm. They have more money to pay for services that they weren't able to throughout much of the pandemic, he added.

Households with incomes of more than \$200,000 spent 16% more on restaurants in May than in April. Those with incomes between \$31,000 and \$60,000 increased their spending by 5%, according to an analysis of credit- and debit-card transactions from Affinity Solutions.

Personal income fell 2% in May from April, as the impact faded from government stimulus checks sent out earlier in the year. Incomes fell in April after rising sharply in March due to the government's disbursement of \$1,400 stimulus checks to many households. Growth in wages and salaries will be an important driver of spending as the effect of the fiscal stimulus wanes, economists say.

Pay, particularly for lower-wage workers, has been rising rapidly as employers seek to fill jobs in a tight labor market. Average weekly wages in leisure and hospitality, the sector that suffered the steepest job losses in 2020, were up 10.4% in May from February 2020, Labor Department data show, outpacing the private sector overall.

HOUSEHOLD DATA						
Table A-5. Employment status of the civilian population 18 years and over by veteran status, period of service, and sex, not seasonally adjusted						
[Numbers in thousands]						
Employment status, veteran status, and period of service	Total		Men		Women	
	May 2020	May 2021	May 2020	May 2021	May 2020	May 2021
Unemployed	800	379	716	314	84	65
Unemployment rate	9.0	4.1	9.1	3.9	7.8	5.5

The national unemployment rate is 6.1 percent (May 2021). Gulf War II veterans' unemployment rate is 4.0 percent. Currently, Gulf War II women veterans' unemployment rate is 6.9 percent.

In April 2021, the veteran unemployment rate was 5.3%. The comparable non-veteran unemployment rate was 6.0% in April.

TOPIC 2: VIRTUAL MEETINGS & CONFERENCE CALLS

On Monday, June 21, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division attended a weekly economic opportunity meeting with Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), Student Veterans of America, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America to

discuss veterans employment and education issues on the horizon. PVA referenced a growing interest from Congress to study application of the Veterans Home Loan Guaranty benefit for any indications of potential discrimination. VE&E staff shared that there was no evidence of discriminatory practices in VA Home Loans, but offered to do background research on the topic.

On Monday, June 21, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division met with Pilot State Approving Agencies (SAAs) on the forthcoming evaluation of information they are presently imputing into E-Force (the VA reporting system on audit finding), the need for new and better forms, and how they are uploading forms to our website (the Google site used to receive and house Risk based survey reports.)

On Monday, June 21, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division had a conversation with Garrett Fitzgerald of College Recon to discuss higher education policy and how they are serving Veterans through their technology and information systems.

On Monday, June 21, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division had a conversation with some North Carolina Higher Education leaders to discuss veterans' needs on campus so they can have the opportunity to excel. Also, worked on oversight issues and research on distance learning.

On Tuesday, June 22, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division attended Centurion Military Alliance's webinar on "Empowering Veterans in Transition: Providing the Tools to Succeed"; conversation on problems with TAP in some service branches and discussion of how to assure quality in program delivery. Most callers agreed the best answer is to give Veterans correct, timely and sufficient information and allow them choose the best education pathways for their future success.

On Wednesday, June 23, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division gave a testimony before the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs on S.887 – VA Supply Chain Resiliency Act to make certain improvements relating to the supply chain of the VA, and for other purposes. The VA Supply Chain Resiliency Act requires VA to identify critical supply items and anticipate the needs of VA medical system in the event of future public health or national emergencies. Additionally, it requires VA to participate in the Department of Defense (DoD) Warstopper Program and thereby "ensure the maintenance and stability of items are identified as critical." Furthermore, this legislation mandates VA partner with manufacturers and distributors to secure a supply of critical items rather than holding physical inventories.

On Wednesday, June 23, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division spoke with Elizabeth Belcaster and SOLID, LLC about planning for the upcoming DOD SkillBridge roundtable on June 28. The American Legion will be hosting the roundtable to bring together stakeholders participating in the DOD Skillbridge employment program to determine best practices and improvements.

On Wednesday, June 23, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division had a conversation with HVAC staffer on medical residencies and the future of pending legislation on enhancing approval requirements for GI Bill education and training programs.

On Wednesday, June 23, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division spoke with Veterans Education Success and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities to potential Department of Education regulatory action related to the closure of the 90-10 loophole.

VE&E staff agreed that organizing a 90-10 working group to help guide the promulgation of these regulations would be useful to prevent any for-profit exploitation during the rulemaking process.

On Thursday, June 24, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division spoke with the House Veterans Affairs Committee on their schedule for upcoming hearings and roundtables. VE&E staff expressed concern over the lack of Legion representation at previous CY 2021 hearings, and was assured that The American Legion would be invited to provide testimony at hearings after the August congressional recess. Additionally, Congressional staff expressed interest in organizing a congressional roundtable on DOD's SkillBridge program, and asked for Legion's input and advise on how to organize it.

On Thursday, June 24, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division met with JPMorgan Chase with the opportunity to network with other veteran service organizations and to learn more about their agenda for the upcoming year as JPMorgan prepares to relocate their Office of Military and Veteran Affairs to Washington, D.C. JPMorgan Chase is committed to uplifting communities by actively providing veterans and their families with career and small business support, along with banking tools that help them build strong financial futures.

On Thursday, June 24, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division worked on a timeline to produce Op Eds, research paper, monthly meetings on Education.

On Thursday, June 24, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division met with National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASAA) legislative committee to discuss shared priorities; long discussion about Roe Isakson bill and its impact, not just on Veterans but on schools as well as concerns about the negative impact on SAAs, schools, and veterans in the increased reporting and oversight requirements.

GLOSSARY OF FREQUENTLY USED ABBREVIATIONS

ACE: American Council on Education

ACP: American Corporate Partners, a veteran's support organization

ATLAS: Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations, a V.A. telehealth initiative

BLS: Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics

C&P: V.A.'s Compensation and Pension exam

CAVC: Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims

CCME: Council of College and Military Educators

COLA: Cost-of-living adjustment

CSAAVE: California State Approving Agency for Veterans Education

DIMO: Defense Security Cooperation Agency/Defense Institute for Medical Operations

DOD: Department of Defense

DOL-VETS: Department of Labor, Veterans Employment and Training Services

EdCounsel: Higher education consulting firm

EIDL program. SBA's Economic Injury Disaster Loans

EIDL: Economic Injury Disaster Loan

GAO: Government Accountability Office

GPD: V.A.'s Grant and Per Diem Program for homeless veterans

GWB: George W. Bush Higher Education Policy Work Group

HEROES ACT of 2003: Higher Education Relief Opportunities for Students Act of 2003. Grants the Secretary of Education the authority to waive requirements that impede military borrowers' access to critical repayment protection during the war, military operation, or national emergency.

HVAC: House Veterans Affairs Committee

MCAI: American Legion's Military Credentialing Advancement Initiative
MSLP: The Federal Reserve's Main Street Lending Program
MSO: Military Support Organization
NAICU: National Association of Independent Colleges & Universities
NASAA: National Association of State Approving Agencies. Responsible for approving school funding for GI Bill
NAVPA: National Association of Veterans Program Administrators
NCA: V.A.'s National Cemetery Administration
NDAA: National Defense Authorization Act
NLD: American Legion's National Legislative Division
OPM: Office of Personnel Management
PPP: Paycheck Protection Program
RBS: Risk-Based Survey Model
RPIC: Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge
S2S: Service to School, a veteran's organization
SAA: State Approving Agency, responsible for approving school funding for GI Bill
SBA: Small Business Administration
STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering, Medical
SVA: Student Veterans of America, a veteran's organization
SVAC Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
TAPS: Transition Assistance Program for Survivors, a nonprofit for Gold Star Families
TEAM Act: Senate Bill 4393, to improve the provision of health care for veterans who were exposed to toxic substances from burn pits
TFA: American Legion's Temporary Financial Assistance program
USAID: United States Agency for International Development
USDA: United States Department of Agriculture
USERRA: Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act
VA&R: American Legion's Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Division
VACO: Veterans Affairs Central Office
VBA: V.A.'s Veterans Benefits Administration
VE&E: Veterans Employment and Education Division
VES: Veterans Education Success, a veteran's organization
VSO: Veterans Service Organization

TOPIC 3a: TRACKING LEGISLATION

Recognizing Military Service in Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Act: Would allow service members who pause their student loan payments while deployed or on extended active duty orders to count that period of time toward their PSLF progress – which is currently not allowed.

Status: Expected to be introduced within a month

H.R.1836 - Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act of 2021: Would expand eligibility for the Post-9/11 GI Bill to count every day that a servicemember is paid and in uniform toward benefit eligibility in order to achieve GI Bill parity for National Guard and Reserve members.

Student Veterans Transparency and Protection Act: Would improve veterans' access to information about higher education and allow the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to restore benefits that veterans use at schools subject to civil enforcement.

GI Bill Repair Act of 2020: To extend to black veterans of World War II, their surviving spouses, and direct descendants' eligibility for specific housing and educational assistance programs administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs

[Resolution No.: None on file](#)

Status: Currently on hold, has not been introduced

Homeless Veteran Coronavirus Response Act: The bill allows V.A. to use existing funds for a broader range of services; authorizes the Department to collaborate with outside organizations to facilitate shelters on its properties; loosens restrictions on Grant and Per Diem (GPD) payments and requires V.A. to ensure veterans participating in V.A. homeless programs have access to V.A. telehealth services.

[Resolution No. 326: Support Funding for Additional Housing for Homeless Veterans with Families](#)

H.R.492: To amend title 38, United States Code, make permanent the Secretary of Veterans Affairs's authority to provide financial assistance for supportive services for very low-income veteran families in permanent housing.

[Resolution No. 340: Support Permanent Authorization for the Supportive Services for Veteran Families \(SSVF\) Program](#)

HR 1615: The American Legion supports legislation that would streamline and improve the verification process for veteran-owned small businesses and veteran-owned small businesses.

Status: Passed House Vote, received in the Senate, and referred to the Committee on Veterans Affairs. It did not pass by the end of the 116th Session, will need to be reintroduced.

HR 2224: To direct the Secretary of Labor to prioritize services to homeless veterans with dependent children in carrying out homeless veterans' reintegration programs and for other purposes.

Status: Did not pass by the end of the 116th Session.

HR 1196, Jobs for Veterans Act of 2019: This bill allows an increased work opportunity tax credit for employers who hire veterans who have been certified as discharged or released from active duty in the Armed Forces after September 11, 2001, and who begin working for the employer after December 31, 2019, and before January 1, 2024. This increased credit is in addition to any work opportunity tax credit allowed to a veteran with a service-connected disability.

[Resolution No. 354: Work Opportunity Tax Credit Program](#)

HR 7010, Paycheck Protection Program Flexibility Act of 2020: This bill significantly changes the PPP loans' terms to be more advantageous to small businesses. Including more flexibility in applying the loan to other expenses besides payroll and benefits and extending the time frame for expending the loan.

Status: Became Public Law No: 116-142.

HR 4625: To require education programs to be approved by the V.A. to abide by the Principles of Excellence to include a ban on deceptive or misleading recruiting, clear information about total costs and program requirements, accommodation for deployments, ensuring a point of contact for veterans, and not being under a punitive action by an accreditor.

[Resolution No. 318: Ensuring the Quality of Servicemember and Veteran Student's Education at Institutions of Higher Education](#)

Status: Became Public Law No: 116-315

HR 6957: To direct the Secretaries of Defense and Veterans Affairs to treat a period of full-time National Guard duty, performed in response to the national emergency declared on March 13, 2020, by the President concerning COVID-19, as not shorter than 90 days.

Resolution No.: [Currently studying for appropriate resolution.](#)

HR 4920, Department of Veterans Affairs Contracting Preference Consistency Act of 2020: This is a bill that would allow AbilityOne companies to keep their preferential treatment at the Department of Veteran Affairs after 2016 with some compromises. The Senate initially sent it back to the House after it was passed for changes. Those changes have been reconciled, and the bill cleared its last hurdle before it is sent to the White House.

S. 2594: To amend title 5, United States Code, to modify specific requirements concerning service and retirement for veterans' Preference for federal hiring.

TOPIC 3b: ACTION TAKEN ON LEGISLATION

Building Credit Access for Veterans Act: A bill to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program to establish an automated process for obtaining alternative credit rating information and other purposes.

Status: Draft Bill / Letter of Support submitted on October 13

HR 8426: Protecting Apprenticeship Training for Veterans Act: Currently, veterans must meet a minimum number of apprenticeship hours to receive their Housing Allowance. Due to pandemic work shortages, veterans in those programs now face a reduction or suspension in their stipend. This would allow veteran apprentices who were laid off to roll over excess hours from a previous month to meet the hourly requirement.

Resolution: [Resolution No. 25: Support and Expand Apprenticeship Opportunities for Servicemembers](#)

Status: Letter of Support drafted

HR 4941, Veteran Employment Transition Act” or the “VET Act”: Was sponsored by Representative Andy Kim. The bill's last action was in the House on 12/02/2019; it was referred to the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. The bill's goal is to improve the Transition Assistance Program. The bill would allow certain veterans' service organizations to contact veterans regarding benefits and better inform veterans of employment opportunities. The Service groups would inform veterans of the benefits and employment opportunities with the Federal, State, and local governments. The groups inform veterans of events in the area.

Resolution No. 70: Improve Transition Assistance Program

Status: Letter of Support submitted

HR 7003: Is a bill sponsored by Rep. Takano, Mark D-CA-41, and was introduced 05/22/2020. The bill would authorize a pilot program in the Department of Defense to enhance efforts to provide job placement assistance and related employment services directly to the National Guard, Reserves, and veterans of the Armed Forces. The last action on the bill was 05/22/2020 and referred to the Committee on Armed Services.

Resolution No. 81: Transition Assistance Program Employment Workshops for National Guard and Reserve Members

Status: Pending Letter of Support

Draft Bill: Veterans Educational Assistance Transparency and Accountability Improvement Act, improve the G.I. Bill Comparison Tool ensures veterans, servicemembers, and their families are better informed when choosing what educational institution is best for them.

Status: Letter of Support submitted

H.R. 711, West Los Angeles VA Campus Improvement Act of 2021: This legislation would direct the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) West Los Angeles Medical Center campus to use revenues from leases and easements as a dedicated funding source to build additional housing for homeless veterans, offset the high costs of housing construction, and help fund the provision of supportive services for veterans in the community.

[Resolution No. 141: Department of Veterans Affairs Enhanced-Use Leasing](#)

Status: This bill was submitted for the April 21, 2021 testimony.

H.R. 2082, VA Supply Chain Resiliency Act: To make certain improvements relating to the supply chain of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

[Resolution No. 13: Support “Buy American” Policy within the Federal Government to Create Opportunities for Veterans](#)

Status: This bill was submitted for the April 21, 2021 testimony.

TOPIC 4a: EMPLOYMENT

BIDEN TO NOMINATE UNION LAWYER TO KEY SEAT ON U.S. LABOR BOARD

President Joe Biden announced on Tuesday that he intends to nominate a senior union lawyer to the U.S. National Labor Relations Board as Democrats move to retake control.

Biden plans to tap David Prouty, general counsel of Service Employee International Union (SEIU) Local 32BJ, the largest labor union for property service workers in the country with over 175,000 members, to fill the seat currently held by Republican William Emanuel, the White House said. Emanuel's term is set to expire Aug. 27.

Biden last month nominated veteran union lawyer Gwynne Wilcox for a vacant seat on the NLRB. If both are confirmed, Democrats would take control of the five-member labor board.

Prouty declined to comment. Reuters first reported Prouty's nomination.

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka on Tuesday praised Biden in a tweet for "for acting quickly to return a pro-worker majority to the @NLRB."

Once Democrats have a majority on the board, they are expected to move quickly to undo a slew of Trump-era precedents seen as favoring businesses over unions.



The seal of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) is seen at their headquarters in Washington, D.C., U.S.

(Photo: REUTERS/Andrew Kelly)

Biden backs legal changes to make it easier for workers to organize and join unions. On Monday, Vice President Kamala Harris said the Biden administration "will probably be the most pro-union of any we've seen before."

Those include major Trump-era rulings that made it easier for employers to defend workplace rules; barring union organizers and off-duty employees from engaging in organizing activities on employers' property; giving businesses more power to make unilateral changes to working conditions and prohibiting workers from using company email for union organizing.

The board is also expected to scrap and replace Trump-era rules involving "joint employment," where businesses are considered the employers of contract or franchise workers, and the procedures for holding union elections and litigating post-election challenges.

Under then-President Barack Obama, the board adopted rules that sped up the election process, which is typically seen as favoring unions; in 2019, the board reversed course and slowed the process down again. A federal judge threw out some of the 2019 rules.

Prouty served as a senior lawyer for the Major League Baseball Players Association from 2008 through 2017 and previously was general counsel of UNITE HERE, the union formed by the 2004 merger of two major unions.

In January, Biden fired the NLRB's general counsel and removed the deputy general counsel from her position.

TOPIC 4b: EMPLOYMENT

CONGRESSMAN BLAKE MOORE WORKS TO ASSIST VETERAN CIVILIAN EMPLOYMENT

It's a very simple bill that makes a simple change that has potentially, huge ramifications for veterans. It's the Retained Skilled Veterans Act. On KVNU's For the People program on Thursday, Representative Blake Moore, who represents Utah's 1st congressional district explained what it does.



Congressman Blake Moore

"And what it simply does, it removes an arbitrary 180 day rule that is in place for when somebody is active duty and they want to go into the civilian workforce to the Department of Defense in some capacity. It was in place a long time ago, just to kind of dissuade a lot of revolving door type of stuff," he explained.

Moore said when military men or women are lost to the private sector it's a good thing to celebrate because it recognizes the amazing training that goes through our defense-related world.

"But you're losing that worker when they leave to go to the private sector, it's good for the private sector, I like to celebrate it. But we don't want to make it so they can't still maintain a good solid job supporting our men and women in a civilian role."

He said the bill aims to remove the red tape in the process. Moore said the Utah Defense Alliance and Hill Air Force Base have been working with him on this.

He said they have it in two different processes, a stand-alone bill and the defense authorization act. So he said there are different avenues to take care of it.

The American Legion urges Congress to support and fund quality of life features including preserving an attractive retirement system for the active and reserve components as found in our **Resolution No. 85: Support for Military Quality of Life Standards**

TOPIC 5: EDUCATION

Army veteran James Kumm started college as a sergeant in the National Guard. It didn't take long to feel like he didn't fit in.

“One of the big disconnects that I had was I was a little bit older,” he said. “I had responsibilities being in the National Guard that the average student didn't have. I was very used to, ‘If you're not 15 minutes early, then you're late.’”



Then Kumm got a job on campus helping student veterans with their benefits working alongside a Marine.

“It was that sense of community that really helped me overcome a lot of the obstacles I was facing.”

Now, as the director of military and veterans services at the University of Texas at Arlington, Kumm aims to help the school's military-connected

students find that same sense of community so they, too, can succeed in college.

And it's in part because of his efforts and other resources the school offers to its military-connected population that UT Arlington ranked No. 1 among 4-year colleges and universities in this year's Military Times Best for Vets: Colleges rankings.

More than 300 schools participated in the latest Best for Vets: Colleges survey, which included more than 70 questions seeking details about the school's costs, programs, policies and services that impact military-connected students. Federal data from the U.S. Departments of Education, Veterans Affairs and Defense, were also considered.

The rankings come at a time when most schools have had to change their approach to serving students in the midst of a pandemic that has moved most learning online.

At No. 2-ranked Weber State University in Utah — which has a schoolwide Military Outreach Veterans Education Committee that meets quarterly to discuss military student-specific concerns — staff in the veterans services offices snapped into action, interceding with professors and administrators to get students the help they needed.

“There were some difficult times for students, but if students feel like you’re being a mentor for them, an advocate for them, it makes all the difference in the world,” said Charles Chandler, director of veterans services at Weber.

Luke McClees, director of the office of military affairs and services at Florida-based Saint Leo University, another top-ranked school, has also been keeping tabs on student veterans individually to check on their wellbeing throughout the last year.

“That really gained this very informal qualitative picture for me of exactly what was going on day by day, month by month for our students” — from concerns about online learning to lost jobs or food insecurity for their kids out of school, he said. He then reported their needs back to campus in order to get students the extra help they needed.

At Pierce College at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, part of a top-ranked community college system in Washington, Executive Director Mark Haskins said the school issued hundreds of digital devices to support traditional in-person students who were making the transition to online learning. The school has also seen an increase in enrollment in certain classes that previously had attendance caps, as well as in the number of people taking advantage of school resources.

“We’ve just continued to serve students virtually,” he said. “It’s never quite the same as in person, but in many ways, we’ve seen an increase in the utilization of services because ... people don’t have to fit into a rigid schedule of office hours, or they don’t have to travel to meetings.”

Meanwhile, veterans’ education benefits have garnered national attention, as lawmakers passed legislation early on in the pandemic to allow students using the Post-9/11 GI Bill for in-person classes to maintain their monthly housing allowance at the in-person rate, rather than the housing stipend equal to half of the national average for online-only students.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill is the most popular education benefit among the youngest generation of veterans. It includes payment of tuition and fees, a monthly housing allowance and a stipend for textbooks and supplies for up to 36 months. In fiscal 2019, the latest year for which VA data is available, 714,346 beneficiaries used the Post-9/11 GI Bill to pay for school — up from 708,069 the previous year.

Service members are also able to transfer the GI Bill to their dependents while still in uniform and also have access to another education benefit: DoD Tuition Assistance, a benefit that covers the cost of college classes up to \$250 per semester hour, within certain parameters.

Currently, those benefits don’t count as federal student loans and grants, creating a loophole in a law that bars for-profit colleges — institutions that operate as businesses — from receiving more than 90 percent of their funding from federal sources. Advocates say this so-called “90-10 loophole” has made veterans a target of bad-actor schools for years.

Yet as part of the American Rescue Plan passed earlier this year, lawmakers voted to close this loophole.

Carrie Wofford, president of Veterans Education Success, said there had been “loud consensus” from veterans organizations that Congress “had to remove the recruiting target from the backs of veterans.”

The new regulations won’t go into effect for another two years, so veterans should still be cautious when selecting a school, Wofford said — especially as scams remain rampant.

In April, the head of a for-profit, majority-veteran trade school in Texas, was found guilty for defrauding its students and the VA, and there have been other similar cases as well. Wofford said helpful resources for picking schools include government data on graduation rates and student outcomes.

“Trust the government data, and look at it carefully,” she said, also suggesting that prospective students talk with teachers and students at schools they’re interested in, as well as employers to see which schools they respect — and which ones they don’t.

“Be cautious. This is your one shot at the GI Bill and it’s one of the most important decisions that you’ll make,” Wofford said.

Rankings like Military Times’ are also helpful when considering a school, said Kumm, who grew up seeing the newspapers on military installations as an Air Force kid, and later as a soldier.

“It’s wonderful to have [the school] recognized,” he said. “I know that veterans and community members and veteran-affiliated are seeing that. So, when our university is listed as a top institution for veterans in the nation by an organization ... it says a lot.”

To check out the full list of 2021 Military Times Best for Vets: Colleges rankings, go [here](#).

TOPIC 6a: VETERAN HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

NEW BILL WOULD MAKE EXTRA PANDEMIC ASSISTANCE PERMANENT FOR HOMELESS VETERANS

A new bill in the Senate would make permanent the increased assistance given during the coronavirus pandemic to help combat the issue of veteran homelessness.



Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., chairman of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee, introduced the Building Solutions for Veterans Experiencing Homelessness Act of 2021 this week. The committee discussed the measure during a hearing Wednesday.

The bill would extend indefinitely the extra resources and flexibility given during the pandemic to the federal, state and local agencies that provide services to homeless veterans. Advocates have been warning in recent weeks that the expiration of these resources could create an “unprecedented wave” of veteran homelessness.

“This bill makes permanent the COVID-related safety nets that have become essential to providing the most effective care and support to unhoused veterans and their families,” Tester said. “These requests are not wish list items but concrete changes advocates have said are absolutely necessary in the fight to effectively end veteran homelessness.”

Tester criticized the Department of Veterans Affairs on Wednesday for not offering its opinion on the bill during the hearing. The department has had a copy of the measure since May 24 but hasn’t provided any feedback, he said.

“We want to help you,” Tester said. “We can’t help you if we don’t know what the hell you’re thinking.”

When asked about the lack of input, Mark Upton, VA’s acting assistant undersecretary for health, committed to delivering that feedback sometime soon.

“I know we are actively working on that,” Upton said.

Kathryn Monet, president of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, applauded the bill during Wednesday’s hearing. Her organization coordinates efforts to end veteran homelessness with Congress, the White House and the agencies that provide support to veterans.

Monet has warned in recent weeks that, as emergency declarations for the coronavirus pandemic are lifted, the extra support for homeless veterans will also go away.

“The impacts will be dire on veterans,” Monet said.

One of the actions Congress took at the start of the pandemic was to increase the maximum rates for the VA’s grant and per diem program. The money went to shelters, which get paid for filling beds but were unable to house as many veterans in order to abide by social distancing guidelines.

Monet said that the higher rates allowed shelters to improve their facilities, space out veterans and provide better care. She asked that Congress make the rate increase permanent. Under Tester’s bill, the rate would increase from a maximum of 115% to 200%.

“The rate has not been enough in the past to provide the level of services veterans need,” Monet said. “We’ve been pushing facilities to space people out better, give veterans the dignity they need. They can’t do that at 115%.”

In addition, the bill aims to provide all veterans with case-management services, increase funding for veteran employment initiatives, expand public transportation benefits to homeless veterans and house aging veterans as they wait for placement in long-term care facilities. It also establishes a five-year grant for programs that help veterans with recovery from substance abuse.

The American Legion supports legislation and policy that increases assistance and services to aid veterans. The Legion recommend Congress to permanently authorize and adequately fund the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program, which is the only national, veteran specific program to help at-risk veterans avoid becoming homeless, and rapidly re-house those veteran families who lose their housing as found in our **Resolution No. 164: Support For The Armed Forces And Their Families.**

TOPIC 6b: VETERAN HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Congressman Ted W. Lieu (D-Los Angeles County) and Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) applauded President Joe Biden for signing the *West Los Angeles VA Campus Improvement Act* into law. This legislation will help the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) address veteran homelessness in the Los Angeles area. In addition, it helps VA use already available funding streams for certain homeless veteran programs, thus reducing the need for taxpayer funds.

In 2016, Congress passed the Rep. Lieu's West Los Angeles Leasing Act of 2016, a law intended to clean up the campus and end most non-veteran related leases. The law also helped spur the redevelopment of the VA. The VA is now implementing a plan to build at least 1,200 new subsidized apartments, which is composed of 23 projects that range from renovating existing structures to developing and building new units. The West Los Angeles VA Campus Improvement Act of 2021 ensures that funds recouped following execution of 2016 bill goes directly back to the West LA VA.



VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System

“No one who served our country should ever go without housing,” Congressman Lieu said. “I’m proud that our bill to expand the West LA VA campus’s ability to provide housing for homeless veterans has been signed by the president. Our legislation contains a number of improvements, including a commonsense solution to ensure that VA lease revenue goes toward housing and other services for our veterans. I want to thank Senator Feinstein for her tireless efforts to help get this bill across the finish line. We will continue working with our Senate partners and others to ensure the West LA VA can best serve our nation’s heroes.”

“With around 4,000 homeless veterans in LA, the city faces a huge challenge to find homes and resources for this at-risk population,” Senator Feinstein said. “Allowing funds that are generated on campus to build housing is a no-brainer. I’m proud to continue working with Congressman Lieu and others to turn the West LA VA campus into a model for the nation on how we can house and provide comprehensive services to as many homeless veterans as possible.”

Background on the bill:

- Authorizes the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to use funds collected from leases and other use-agreements on the West LA VA campus for the development of supportive housing and services on campus.
- Increases the time period for enhanced use leases on the campus from 75 to 99 years. Increasing the length of leases will help streamline the construction of 1,200 units of supportive housing on campus while reducing long-term costs.

The West LA Campus Improvement Act is Supported by:

LA County Supervisor Sheila Kuehl: “Signing this bill into law is a giant step forward in meeting our obligation to veterans who have served and sacrificed so much for this country. The West LA VA Campus Improvement Act will help us to meet this important obligation by ensuring that VA lease revenue is directed to housing and services for our LA vets. Over the last 10 years, we have made great progress in housing veterans who are experiencing homelessness, but much more remains to be done, and the passage of this legislation will help us with the crucial work of continuing to reduce the number of vets who are homeless.”

Steve Peck, CEO of U.S.VETS, and a member of the team that will be constructing more than 1,450 housing units for homeless veterans on the West LA VA campus: “I want to thank Senator Feinstein and Representative Lieu for their commitment to Los Angeles veterans and determination to get this legislation enacted into law so quickly. The bill that President Biden signed into law today will help put a roof over the heads of veterans in need and promote their housing stability, long term health and recovery.”

Anthony Allman, Army veteran and executive director at Vets Advocacy, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit created to fulfill the promise of a veterans community at VA West Los Angeles: “This is a win for homeless veterans. The *Improvement Act* reinforces the clear intent of the *West LA Leasing Act of 2016* and permits investing campus revenues in long overdue infrastructure projects, housing construction and services on campus. The ongoing commitment of Senator Feinstein and Representative Lieu to making sure VA is resourced to accomplish this mission deserves our highest praise.”

This bill is endorsed by: American Legion, CA Chapter; National Coalition for Homeless Veterans; Vets Advocacy; Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority; California Association of Veteran Service Agencies; Disabled American Veterans, CA Chapter; Los Angeles County; City of Los Angeles; and Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America.

TOPIC 7: SMALL BUSINESS

VA MUST MODERNIZE SUPPLY CHAIN AMID COVID-19, GAO SAYS



*Oklahoma Air National Guard/Tech. Sgt. Kasey
(Photo: Phipps/Flickr cc)*

In the Government Accountability Office's (GAO's) latest report yesterday, the agency recommends that the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) develop a supply chain management strategy, including an explanation of how all its supply chain initiatives relate to each other.

Currently, the VA's main supply chain initiatives are around implementing the Department of Defense's (DOD's) Defense Medical Logistics Standard Support (DMLSS) inventory system, creating four regional readiness centers for critical

medical supplies, and participating in the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) Warstopper Program,

which would increase its access to critical medical supplies during emergencies. However, as GAO notes throughout the report, these efforts are either in their early stages or have already been delayed.

GAO has labeled the VA's acquisition management as an area of high risk since March 2019. Of the 49 recommendations GAO has made to improve VA acquisition management since 2015, the VA has agreed with all and implemented 22.

Unfulfilled, modified contracts during COVID

Like other organizations during COVID-19, the VA has had difficulties acquiring medical supplies, including personal protective equipment (PPE), especially during the early stages of the pandemic.

The VA has obligated roughly \$4.2 billion for COVID-related products and services as of May 2021, but the report says roughly 66% and 31% of product and service contracts, respectively, were modified or terminated. The authors found that 11 contracts were terminated for cause, 5 were terminated for convenience, and 806 experienced reductions in price or quantity. They add, "In comparison, for the 5 years spanning fiscal years 2015 to 2019, VA reported terminating 105 contracts for cause, for a total of \$11.4 million versus \$39 million in the 15 months spanning March 2020 through May 2021."

Two instances of contract modification were highlighted in the report, one of PPE not meeting standards upon arrival, and another where PPE set to depart from China to the United States was seized by the China government for local use.

To help secure the medical supply chain, the VA began to screen vendors for capability and capacity. The department also integrated Federal Acquisition Regulation–based emergency flexibility and began partnering with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and with Defense Production Act–related efforts. The VA even created an automated business intelligence tool to better track VA medical center inventory and assist with purchasing decisions, GAO reported.

Even with these efforts, though, the VA was still working off an outdated inventory system that could not automatically track critical supplies at VA medical centers.

Three initiatives made more urgent in face of pandemic

The VA has been working on updating its inventory management system since October 2019 with full implementation of the DMLSS in 2027. Before COVID-19, the authors write that the timeline was in jeopardy. However, because of the pandemic's urgency and related supplemental funds, officials are hoping to accelerate the timeline and achieve full implementation by 2025.

"Until the [DMLSS] system is rolled out in all 170 medical centers VA will continue to use an outdated system that does not provide needed functionality to track medical and surgical supplies, including critical COVID-19 supplies," they write.

The other two initiatives deal with critical medical supply access across different parts of the supply chain system.

The Veterans Health Administration also wants to eventually reduce its nine interim sites to four geographically dispersed, fully operational regional readiness centers that manage 120 days' worth of PPE and other critical supplies. The idea is to have two of the sites owned and operated by the

DLA and the other two owned and operated by DLA contractors. Two of the sites will be in California and Pennsylvania, but the sites for the Midwest and the South region have not been decided yet, according to the report.

While the authors write that the VA was working on closing three of its interim sites as of March 2021, it also notes that the overall target date has been extended from 2022 to 2023 as the VHA deals with pandemic disruptions, supply chain constraints, budgetary issues, and a lack of a supply chain management system. In addition, the VHA has to figure out operations, total cost and funding means, and more detailed implementation.

More upstream on the supply chain, the VA wants to participate in the Defense Logistics Agency's Warstopper Program, which uses targeted investments to guarantee surge production and inventory. According to GAO, the VA has wanted to be a part of the program since June 2020, but still unknown is the timeline of any implementation, the funding needed, the range of products the VA would be working with, and how it would work in conjunction with the regional readiness.

The American Legion supports legislation that mandates all federal agencies to adopt and enforce a “Buy American” policy in the procurement of goods and services to the highest extent possible and support efforts to provide more stable and sustainable American-made and sourced raw materials, medications, and vaccines to ensure no shortages impact combat readiness and force protection while diversifying our supply chain to safeguard against potential threats from peer threats, state actors, and non-state actors as found in our **Resolution No. 13: Support “Buy American” Policy within the Federal Government to Create Opportunities for Veterans and Resolution No. 23: Pharmaceutical Independence Long-Term Readiness Reform**

TOPIC 8: CAREER FAIRS

ALL IN-PERSON CAREER FAIRS SCHEDULED THROUGH DECEMBER HAVE BEEN CANCELLED, SUSPENDED, OR POSTPONED.

The American Legion is working on future virtual workshops and career fairs.

The American Legion's National Veterans Employment & Education Commission's Mission is to take actions that affect veterans' economic well-being, including issues relating to veterans' education, employment, home loans, vocational rehabilitation, homelessness, and small business.

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Week Ending: 6/25/2021