

National Legislative Division Weekly

PACT ACT UPDATE



The PACT Act passed the Senate last week on an 84 to 14 vote. The PACT Act will greatly expand access to care and benefits provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for veterans exposed to toxins during the military service dating back decades, including additional service presumptions for Agent Orange exposures.

The House was expected to vote on the Senate version of the SFC Heath Robinson Honoring Our PACT this week, sending the legislation on to the President for his signature. However, it turns out that the Senate may have inadvertently violated the Constitutional requirement that all tax provisions originate in the House.

Lawmakers and advocates are finding ways to reconcile the legislation with parliamentary requirements. This is not expected to interfere with the final passage of the legislation.

CONGRESS

On Thursday, the House passed the Support the Resilience of Our Nation's Great (STRONG) Veterans Act on a voice vote. The legislation addresses the VA's mental health workforce and use of peer support services; requires suicide prevention outreach to underserved veteran populations; makes Vet Center services available to student veterans and families who have lost veterans to suicide; strengthens the Veterans Crisis Line, and promotes research into veterans' mental health challenges.

It also would designate one week each year as "Buddy Check Week" for the purpose of outreach and education concerning peer wellness checks for veterans.

The bill now moves to the Senate, where it is expected to pass. Next week, in anticipation of the 4th of July, the Senate will not be in session, and the House will not hold any votes, although committees may meet.

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FY23 NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT (NDAA)

On Wednesday, the House Armed Services Committee started marking up its NDAA at 10am, and gaveled out at 2:13 Thursday morning. In a stunning show of bipartisanship, 57 Members voted to report the bill to the full House. Only Rep. Khanna (D-CA) voted against the measure. During the course of the day and night, 14 Democrats joined all Republican members to raise the topline spending amount for the bill by \$37 billion. The amendment was proposed by Rep. Golden (D-ME).

Members on both sides of the aisle expressed empathy with service members who use cannabis to treat pain, PTSD, and other medical issues. Some form of medical use of marijuana is legal in 48 states, although federal law and the UCMJ still prohibit use of the product. An amendment by Rep. Brown (D-MD) would have the Military Justice Review Panel examine sentencing guidelines for offenses involving cannabis in comparison to penalties incurred for comparable offenses, such as the misuse of alcohol. It was adopted by voice vote.

Another amendment would create a research program to examine the use of medicinal cannabis among service members. It would be limited to individuals already on terminal leave, to lessen the impact upon medical readiness. This amendment was also adopted by voice vote.

All kinds of issues show up in the annual authorization bill, which has passed Congress for 61 consecutive years (a record on the Hill). Congress wants DoD to buy at least two million pounds of bison meat from Native American and Tribal organizations per year. The meat would go to feed the troops. Appropriators also included this provision in the spending bill.

Another amendment would allow DoD to keep the location of sunken ships and aircraft secret. Scrapers have been using Freedom of Information Act requests to learn those locations, and have been looting the wrecks to sell the metal for scrap. This apparently is a major problem around the world, especially in the Pacific where many wrecks remain from World War Two.

One amendment adopted during the markup would prohibit military commissaries and exchanges from selling any products made in China. This provision is unlikely to make it into the final bill, if only because it would severely limit service members' options when shopping.

FY23 DEFENSE APPROPRIATIONS

House appropriators marked up the FY23 Defense spending bill on Wednesday. The final bill was reported to the full House on a 32 to 26 vote. The bill retains the Administration's requested topline spending amount, which is unacceptably low to Republican Members (and some Democrats).

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At one point during the markup, an attempt was made to increase the base pay for the most junior service members. Full committee chair Rep. DeLauro (D-CT) expressed frustration that the money simply is not available to do this, without taking funding from somewhere else. She does not want to increase the topline because that would mean taking funding away from social net services provided elsewhere in the government.

Amendments proposed by Rep. Lee (D-CA) to sunset the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) and eliminate the 2002 AUMF were once again adopted, this time by voice vote. She introduces these amendments every year, and frequently gets them adopted into the House bill. However, those provisions always get dropped during the conference process with the Senate.

House Appropriations Committee chair Rep. DeLauro (D-CT) hopes to complete all of the FY23 spending bills this month, and to bring them to the floor in July.

FY23 MILITARY CONSTRUCTION AND VA APPROPRIATIONS

Rounding out a busy week, the House Appropriations Committee also marked up and reported to the full chamber the FY23 spending bill for military construction (milcon) and the VA. While the bill was reported out of committee (32-26 vote), it failed to achieve Republican support due to the lack of language prohibiting the use of any funds to build a facility in the United States to house prisoners currently held at Guantanamo Bay.

During the markup, provisions were added to the underlying report addressing the patient harm findings related to the VA's electronic health record (EHR) system. News broke last weekend that the Inspector General has found over a hundred instances of patient harm caused by the system's tendency to allow specialty care and imaging referrals to go awry. The committee is now requiring the VA to report on all known cases of patient harm, as well as a timeline of when senior leadership was informed of the problems. The Department must also report monthly to Congress on its progress in fixing the problems with Oracle and Cerner. The amendment was part of the Manager's Package, and was not discussed in open session.

The Army was also chided for not communicating effectively with the committee.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR LAWMAKER

The National Legislative Council Chairwoman, Elizabeth Hartman, is pleased to host a training webinar titled "Building a Relationship with your Lawmaker." Chairwoman Hartman is a Marine Corps veteran and is the Commander of Post 539 in North Carolina. She is a passionate veteran advocate and is looking forward to sharing her expertise on how to effectively support the veteran community. The training will take place on **Thursday, July 7, at 7 PM ET.**

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The training will cover a variety of topics, including how to:

- Identify levels of influence
- Distinguish yourself from other constituents
- Establish effective grassroots activities
- Brief your state or district on legislative activities
- Communicate with American Legion Headquarters staff

If you want to get more involved in American Legion grassroots advocacy, please register [here](#).

UPCOMING HEARINGS

- On Wednesday, June 29, the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship will hold a hearing titled “Oversight of Immigrant Military Members and Veterans.” The Legion will submit a Statement for the Record (SFR).

MEETINGS

- This week, NLD Staff prepared an SFR for a House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship hearing titled “Oversight of Immigrant Military Members and Veterans.” The hearing will take place on Wednesday, June 29.
- On Monday, June 20, NLD Staff participated in a VSO meeting to discuss Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) claims and appeals and other legislative concerns.
- On Tuesday, June 21, NLD Staff participated in the monthly Toxic Exposure in the American Military (TEAM) coalition to discuss the next steps for the PACT Act.
- On Tuesday, June 21, NLD Staff met with Ranking Member Bost (R-IL) to discuss passing the PACT Act in the House.
- On Tuesday, June 21, NLD Staff met with the staff of Rep. Pfluger (R-TX) to discuss their veteran policy priorities as well as TAL’s legislative agenda for the 117th Congress.
- On Tuesday, June 21, NLD Staff met with the office of Chairman Takano (D-CA) to discuss the next steps for the PACT Act.
- On Tuesday, June 21, NLD Staff met with Speaker Pelosi’s (D-CA) Veterans Policy Team to discuss the PACT Act.
- On Tuesday, June 21, NLD Staff met with the office of Rep. Cline (R-VA) to discuss the PACT Act.
- On Tuesday, June 21, NLD Staff attended a virtual event hosted by the Hudson Institute titled “Thinking the Unthinkable Part II: What if Putin Wins in Ukraine?” More information and a video of the event is [here](#).
- On Tuesday, June 21, NLD Staff met with members of No One Left Behind, a non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring that US interpreters and employees in Iraq and Afghanistan through Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) programs.

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- On Wednesday, June 22, NLD Staff participated in a VSO call to discuss the next steps for the PACT Act.
- On Wednesday, June 22, NLD Staff met with the office of Majority Leader Schumer (D-NY) to discuss updates on the PACT Act.
- On Wednesday, June 22, NLD Staff met with the office of Rep. Ruiz (D-CA) to discuss the PACT Act.
- On Wednesday, June 22, NLD Staff accompanied members of the World War One Centennial Commission on a visit to the World War One Memorial on the National Mall.
- On Wednesday, June 22, NLD Staff monitored the House Armed Services Committee's (HASC) annual markup of their version of the FY2023 National Defense Authorization Act.
- On Wednesday, June 22, NLD Staff participated in a legislative working group on the Afghan Adjustment Act, which would allow Afghans who were evacuated last year to adjust their status in the U.S. and be able to quickly integrate.
- On Wednesday, June 22, NLD Staff attended a virtual event hosted by the Quincy Institute and The American Conservative titled "The New Right: Ukraine Marks Major Foreign Policy Shift Among Conservatives." More information and a video of the event is [here](#).
- On Wednesday, June 22, NLD Staff attended the Secretary of Veterans Affairs press conference on updates to the VA's veterans homelessness initiative.
- On Wednesday, June 22, NLD Staff met with the Chairwoman of the National Legislative Council, Elizabeth Hartman, to discuss the syllabus for the upcoming "Building Relationships with Your Lawmaker" online training on July 7. If you would like to attend, you can register [here](#).
- On Wednesday, June 22, NLD Staff attended a virtual event to discuss the 50th anniversary of America's All-Volunteer Force (AVF).
- On Thursday, June 23, NLD Staff attended a virtual foreign policy event hosted by the Hudson Institute featuring Rep. Jake Ellzey (R-TX). More information and a video of the conversation is [here](#).
- On Thursday, June 23, NLD Staff monitored the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Personnel, VA, and other Related Agencies markup.
- On Friday, June 25, NLD Staff hosted a National Legislative Council Training Class at the Department of California's Convention in Visalia.
- On Friday, June 24, NLD Staff met with House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity minority staff to discuss their perspective on the upcoming GI Bill oversight hearing on July 20.
- On Friday, June 24, NLD Staff spoke with National Executive Committeeman, Bob Hensley, to discuss the upcoming "Building Relationships with Your Lawmaker" online training on July 7. Mr. Hensley will be a guest speaker. If you would like to attend, you can register [here](#).

Lawrence Montreuil, Legislative Director
The American Legion
(202) 263-2981