

National Legislative Division Weekly

CONGRESS



Rep. Massie (R-KY)

Lawmakers return to Washington next week under pressure to make progress on annual spending bills. Language in the debt ceiling law (PL 118-5) inspired by Rep. Thomas Massie (R-KY) seeks to light a fire under them to complete the fiscal 2024 appropriations process by Jan. 1.

At that point, if all Congress has been able to do is pass continuing resolutions at the current fiscal year's funding rate, then the spending caps for fiscal 2024 will reset to much different levels than the debt ceiling deal envisioned.

In other appropriations news, Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (R-FL) in his first year as chairman of the subcommittee with responsibility for foreign aid, is putting his thumbprint on Western Hemisphere programs. Among his proposals is a 50 percent funding boost for democracy promotion efforts in Cuba.

Diaz-Balart's panel, the State-Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee, advanced its bill before the Fourth of July recess. The draft bill would block funding for presidential envoys. Those cuts would hit John Kerry's position as President Joe Biden's special envoy for climate issues.

Over on the Senate side, appropriators are gearing up for the Financial Services Appropriations Subcommittee markup on July 11. It's set to be the first of the Senate's 12 annual spending bills to get a subcommittee markup. The full committee approved the Agriculture and Military Construction-VA bills last month; both bypassed subcommittee markups.

NDAA UPDATE

Lawmakers have filed more than 1,400 amendments to the House version of the fiscal 2024 defense authorization (HR 2670) ahead of floor consideration scheduled for next week.

Republican leaders will need to sift through the proposals and determine which will get votes in the full House. But the amendments suggest GOP lawmakers are eager to chew over political issues.

Republicans also filed several amendments to chip away at the Pentagon's diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives. And gender identity and treatment of transgender troops could also be a focus.

While those amendments hit on culture war topics, the debate could also shine a light on Republican divisions on larger issues, including the appetite for more Ukraine aid.

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AS VETERAN DISABILITY CLAIMS SOAR, UNACCREDITED COACHES PROFIT OFF FRUSTRATION WITH VA SYSTEM

Original Article: [Here](#) (Texas Tribune)

Jim Peckey was a young Navy petty officer stationed in Bahrain when the 9/11 attacks happened. As the nation went on a war footing, he suddenly shifted from administrative and IT duties to lugging water and equipment 12 hours a day, seven days a week — work that left him with chronic neck and back pain. He retired in 2002 but he put off applying for benefits because, like millions of veterans, he felt overwhelmed by the paperwork required.

That changed in 2020, when he watched a YouTube video in which a fellow veteran, Brian T. Reese, promised to help veterans navigate the benefits maze and lead “happier, healthier and wealthier” lives.

Peckey signed on as a customer with Reese’s company, Austin-based VA Claims Insider. The 44-year-old Abilene resident, who now does IT work for a defense contractor, said he was charged nearly \$10,000 for about six hours of coaching, some of which included watching pre-recorded online informational sessions with as many as 400 other attendees at a time.

Although Peckey did get a monthly disability check of around \$1,500, he felt he was charged for information he could have found on the internet. To help him qualify for benefits, the company’s coach pushed him to emphasize mental distress, Peckey said, even though what he considered that to be a “backseat concern” and wanted top-notch care for his chronic physical pain.

“Nothing short of a nightmare,” he wrote in a December 2021 complaint filed with the Texas attorney general’s office, in which he accused the company of “slimy car sales tactics” and “defrauding veterans out of their benefits.” Peckey said he wanted to sue but could not find a lawyer to take on the case. He refused to pay VA Claims Insider, which then hired a collection agency to pursue his debt; he says he felt so strongly about the matter that he accepted the hit to his credit score.

In another complaint, Shana Hill, the wife of a Marine Corps veteran in Houston, said their coach “showed late and was disorganized and did not provide any strategy as advertised and promised.” Another veteran, Simon Keller of Tucson, Arizona, estimated that he had paid nearly \$8,000 for two hours of assistance and claimed the company was “extorting” veterans.

The Texas Tribune spoke with five of a dozen or so people who complained to the Texas attorney general about VA Claims Insider. All said the state hadn’t meaningfully followed up on their concerns. Peckey, the Abilene veteran, said that the office suggested that he hire a private lawyer, or talk to the Better Business Bureau.

To read more, click [here](#).

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LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

In an effort to recognize the weekly accomplishments of our Legionnaires, we will spotlight an individual every week. These individuals demonstrate exceptional grassroots activism by meeting with/contacting their Congressional Representative/Senator to advocate for veterans. Efforts like these truly make a difference and give veterans a voice in Congress.

Joseph Burns, New York

This week, we are excited to recognize Joseph Burns from the Department of New York for meeting with the office of Rep. Garbarino (R-NY) to discuss H.R. 2693, the Pay our Coast Guard Parity Act of 2023. They also planned a Vietnam veterans pinning ceremony.

Thank you, Mr. Burns!

If you have made a grassroots effort and would like to be considered for next week's "Legionnaire of the Week," please fill out the Congressional Contact Report Form [here](#). You can also email me at kisaacson@legion.org.

UPCOMING HEARINGS

- On Wednesday, July 12, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations will be holding a legislative hearing. The American Legion will be testifying, you can watch [here](#).
- On Wednesday, July 12, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) will be holding a pending legislation hearing.
- On Thursday, July 13, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity will hold a hearing titled "Reviewing the Digital G.I. Bill Program."
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