

National Legislative Division Weekly

GRASSROOTS ACTION UPDATES

This week, The American Legion is urging Congress to pass the *Love Lives On Act* (S. 1266 / H.R. 3651). Currently, Gold Star Spouses under the age of 55 are forced to choose between remarriage and their survivor benefits. To ensure that surviving spouses can be married without repercussions, you contact your representatives in support of S. 1266 or H.R. 3651 by [clicking here](#).

Last session, three critical bills passed the House of Representatives: The [Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act of 2023 \(H.R. 542\)](#), the [HOME Act of 2023 \(H.R. 3848\)](#), and the [COPE Act \(H.R. 3581\)](#) bill. If the Senate agrees to pass this Legion-backed legislation, Congress has an opportunity to provide indispensable support for our Nation's veterans and their family caregivers.

The American Legion is also proud to support S. 3546, the [Veterans Mental Health and Addiction Therapy Quality of Care Act](#). S. 3546 aims to evaluate the quality of mental health services at the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) and non-Department providers. If you would like to contact your representatives in support of this bill, H.R. 542, H.R. 3848, or H.R. 3581, you can visit our [Grassroots Action Center](#) to identify and email your elected official.

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



Legion Family Members Cindy and Roger Boehnlein (Ohio Post 703) lobbying the *Love Lives On Act*

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SENATE PASSES CRUCIAL DEFENSE PACKAGE

Early on Tuesday, February 13th, the United States Senate passed a long-awaited emergency national defense funding package, aiming to support our allies and improving our national security abroad.

The \$95.3 billion package has been under Senate scrutiny since November of 2023 and is likely to face [similar difficulty in the House](#). [The current package](#) provides financial assistance to Ukraine and Israel, and funds humanitarian aid in Gaza, and boosts U.S. defenses in the Indo-Pacific.

The [vehicle](#) for the mammoth funding bill is HR 815, [or the RELIEVE Act](#). HR 815, introduced by Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA-5), is designed to ensure that veterans will be reimbursed for emergency treatment at non-VA facilities.



Sen. Moran (R-KS) speaking at a press conference with Sen. Klobuchar (D-MN) and National Security Chairman Matthew Shuman

Currently, veterans must have received care at a VA facility within the 2-year period before the related emergency. According to [Rep. Rodgers](#), this requirement is unjust given increasing wait times at VA facilities. HR 815 passed the House in March 2023 and will be sent back for consideration with the national security funding amendments.

Many lawmakers, including Speaker of the House Mike Johnson (R-LA-4), [criticize](#) the lack “real border security provisions” in these provisions. These criticisms from the House of Representatives could threaten the viability of the bill, as it is Speaker Johnson’s prerogative to decide which bills will receive the House’s attention.

As the bill sits in limbo between chambers, here are the figures that are included:

- Ukraine would receive [\\$60.06 billion](#) in the form of weapons and equipment.
- Israel would receive [\\$14.1 billion](#) for air defenses and the Iron Beam.
- [\\$9.2 billion](#) in humanitarian assistance is provided to civilians in Gaza and the West Bank and other global war zones.
- The United States would [allocate \\$2.44 billion](#) for operations against Houthi militants.
- Over [\\$8 billion](#) would be used to support Taiwan and other allies against aggression from China.

Unfortunately, the Legion’s long-standing priority of Afghan Adjustment was not included as an amendment to H.R. 815 with the national security measures listed above. Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN)

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and Senator Jerry Moran (R-KS) introduced the amendment with 13 other Senators hoping to honor the creed of [“no one left behind.”](#)

However, growing concerns about immigration and border security overshadowed the Senators’ critical efforts. The American Legion and other allies will continue to support lawmakers and urge the government to keep its promise to our Afghan allies.

INNOVATIVE BILLS FOR VETERANS’ EMPLOYMENT

Eight years ago, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce released a shocking report that found [53% of veterans](#) were unemployed for at least 4 months after separating from the military. Although strides were made to ensure veterans can find meaningful work, a 2019 report from the [Pew Research Center](#) found that while veterans aged 35-54 were still 1.5 times more likely to experience unemployment than their civilian counterparts.

Today, the veteran unemployment rate is lower than the civilian unemployment rate. But [it has risen since 2023](#). To ensure that veteran unemployment remains low, and veterans can pursue careers that are both well-paying and meaningful, lawmakers have devised many creative solutions. The American Legion has been a constant proponent of these bills and is supporting the following bills among others in the 118th Congress.



Senator Mike Braun (R-IN)

As January came to a close, Senator Mike Braun (R-IN), with the co-sponsorship of Senator Kyrsten Simena (I-AZ), introduced S. 3636, [the Hire Veterans Act](#). The logic behind the bill is two-fold. First, federal land management agencies are experiencing work shortages across the board. Second, the Senators want veterans in their states to have access to strong careers that ease the transition process.

The bill creates a five-year pilot program to help veterans find skilled labor opportunities within these agencies. In the words of Chairman Jay Bown, Sr. of The American

Legion’s Veterans’ Employment and Education Commission, “By encouraging hiring practices that provide employment opportunities for veterans in critical land management roles, Hire Veterans Act will ensure more of our nation’s veterans are able to build fulfilling careers following their service to our nation.”

The bill has picked up an additional co-sponsor in the new year, Senator Marsha Blackburn (R-TN). As the 2nd session of this Congress moves forward, S. 3636 will be at the front of mind for Legionnaires and veteran advocates.

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In April of 2023, Senator Deb Fischer took a similar two-pronged approach to helping veterans secure employment with S. 656, [the Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act](#). Senator Fischer's bill aims to ensure that veterans' GI bill benefits can be used to receive commercial driving licensing if the primary institution of the program has received regulatory approval.

Not only would this "expand GI benefits, career training, and educational opportunities" for veterans, [as Senator Alex Padilla \(D-CA\) noted](#), the bill addresses a "critical workforce shortage" in the trucking industry.

In the House of Representatives, Representative Mike Levin (D-CA-49) is also taking a creative approach to veterans' employment. Almost a year ago the Congressman released H.R. 1786, [the GROW Act](#). The bill requires increased reporting and data collection for SkillBridge and Transition Assistance Programs and requires the Department of the Interior (DOI) to implement a two-year pilot program to help veterans find employment in conservation and resource management.

[Rep. Levin's](#) office noticed that maintenance and conservation backlogs in national parks were growing. Moreover, he noted that almost 1 in 5 DOI employees was a veteran as of 2020. Given, veterans' propensities to work in government roles across all executive agencies, Rep. Levin and other congressmen saw an opportunity give tools the veterans for successful careers in an understaffed agency. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the pilot would not have a significant impact on the government's spending.

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.

David Hodgeboom, Washington

Congratulations, Mr. David Hodgeboom! You have been selected as Legionnaire of the Week.

Mr. Hodgeboom spoke with Rep. Derek Kilmer (D-WA-6) and his staff at a roundtable meeting. Not only did he bring up the Legion's top priority of Be The One and suicide prevention, but he and the Congressman also discussed food security and childcare for military families, military spouse employment, and long-term care for senior veterans. Mr. Hodgeboom's advocacy at this meeting spanned from national to state and local issues.

On behalf of American Legion members and staff, we thank Mr. Hodgeboom for his steadfast support for servicemembers, veterans, and The American Legion family.

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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 kryan@legion.org.

LEGISLATIVE DIVISION UPDATES

Legislative Division (LegDiv) Staff continued editing testimony for the 2nd Session of the 118th Congress and reviewing the National Commander's oral remarks for the joint hearing in March. LegDiv staff also read through the Commander's Call script, making edits to remarks and the run of show. Legislative Associates and the Legislative Coordinator continued to travel to the Hill to lobby Congress on key issues and consult on draft legislation. This included attending a hearing on the use of AI at VA facilities.

The Legislative Agenda for 118th Congress 2nd session was approved and is published on the website, along with other updates for Washinton Conference.

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.

UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

Neither the House nor the Senate are in Session from February 19th through February 23rd.

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

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