

## **Military Quality of Life**

The U.S. military's greatest resources are servicemembers and their families. Without highly qualified and committed men and women, even the most sophisticated weaponry will not provide the deterrence necessary to defend our nation. Factors contributing to quality of life include proper compensation, appropriate housing, quality healthcare, reasonably priced commissaries, and access to childcare services. The American Legion urges Congress to pass legislation to expand access to affordable childcare, increase appropriations for military construction projects (including barracks and family housing), and ensuring timely access to mental healthcare.

*Military Housing Readiness Council Act (S. 2047)*

## **Pay the Coast Guard**

U.S. Coast Guard personnel carry out vital national security missions. Still, because the Coast Guard is under the Department of Homeland Security instead of DOD, its members are more likely to experience pay interruptions during prolonged government shutdowns. The common threat of shutdowns brings severe and unnecessary hardship on these men, women, and their families. The American Legion urges Congress to pass legislation that would guarantee that Coast Guard personnel are paid in case of a shutdown.

*Pay Our Coast Guard Parity Act (H.R. 2693)*

## **Access to healthcare for overseas military and families**

Military personnel stationed overseas in support of U.S. interests and our alliances provide a key role in deterring adversaries from a myriad of actions. However, even after the realignment of medical services in overseas and remote locations under the Defense Health Agency (DHA), major issues involving access to various types of healthcare continue. Additionally, the lack of access to certain types of care limits overseas assignments and contributes to military families being separated for extended periods of time.

*Health Care Fairness for Military Families Act (H.R. 1045)*

## **Improving the military TAP**

The American Legion urges Congress to direct the modernization of Transition Assistance Program (TAP) delivery using technology and performance data to ensure the DOD delivers a successful program. The creation of a mobile application, providing servicemembers with an extensive toolkit of on-demand transition-related content would improve participation and increase the benefit of transition resources available. Delivering effective transition assistance will ensure a veteran's proper reintegration from active duty to civilian life and reduce negative experiences. Improved TAP instruction will support our servicemembers in finding education, employment, and entrepreneurship opportunities and send successful citizens back to our communities.

*VET-TEC Authorization Act of 2023 (H.R. 1669)*

## **Protect the American Flag**

The American Legion urges Congress to approve an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would allow Congress to prohibit the physical desecration of the U.S. flag. Additionally, The American Legion urges Congress to pass the Flag Code Modernization Act of 2021 to amend the U.S. Flag Code to codify common patriotic customs and practices as described in The American Legion Resolution No. 19: Flag Code Amendment.

*Senate Joint Resolution 34*

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# The American Legion Legislative Agenda

For the 118th Congress, 2nd Session

The American Legion is the voice of U.S. military veterans and servicemembers. A resolution-based organization, The American Legion's positions represent the views of its nearly 1.6 million members and shape the organization's legislative priorities for the 118th Congress:

## Suicide Prevention & Mental Health

Suicide remains a top issue in the veteran community. The suicide rate among veterans is nearly double that of civilian counterparts. It is imperative that we simultaneously destigmatize mental health assistance, while increasing access. The American Legion encourages Congress to robustly fund VA's suicide prevention outreach budget and peer support programs. We encourage all Americans to "Be the One" who is willing, ready, and able to have a difficult conversations about suicide and other mental health issues.

*PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program (H.R. 2768)*

*VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Act (H.R. 1639)*

## Alternative Treatments

Data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) shows that in 2021, approximately 2.8 million veterans experienced an illicit drug or alcohol use disorder, with 92.4 percent not receiving treatment. More must be done to ensure veterans have access to the effective treatments they desire. This includes expanding research and access into alternative treatments and emerging therapies.

*TBI and PTSD Treatment Act (H.R. 105)*

## VA Healthcare Modernization

The biggest issue in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Healthcare Modernization is the implementation of the new electronic health record modernization program (EHRM). VA has experienced difficulties as the EHRM rollout has progressed. Some

issues identified were the differences in the training software compared to end-user software, along with inexperienced instructors providing the training to VA staff. VA made improvements on these identified issues. As the EHRM rollout is set to resume in 2024, The American Legion continues to call on Congress to provide oversight and to hold VA and other relevant parties accountable for the implementation and functioning of the EHR system.

*The Department of Veterans Affairs Electronic Health Record Modernization Improvement Act (H.R. 592)*

## PACT Act: Implementation & Oversight

Since the implementation of Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act, VA has screened more than 5 million veterans for toxic exposure. The average time to complete a PACT Act-related claim is 157 days. It is imperative that VA fully leverage the resources made available in the PACT Act to assist in the continued modernization of Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) information technology systems as well as the hiring of additional employees to ensure claims are adjudicated in a timely manner. The American Legion urges Congress to provide the necessary oversight and funding to ensure VA has the resources to properly implement this legislation.

## Safeguard Veteran Benefits

Veterans are facing a growing threat from exploitative entities aiming to capitalize on the benefits rightfully earned through military service. These predatory actors range from claims companies charging exorbitant fees to lawyers seeking sizable portions of VA disability benefit payments. The American Legion urges Congress to pass legislation to: restore criminal penalties for persons or companies that represent or charge veterans fees to file, prepare or prosecute initial VA claims without VA accreditation; and to oppose any legislation that would allow unaccredited parties to become legal representatives without completing the accreditation process. The American Legion's advocacy role remains focused on safeguarding the well-deserved benefits of those who have served.

*Veterans Benefits Improvement Act (H.R. 1530)*

## Concurrent Receipt

There are currently 42,000 military retirees with combat-related injuries who are eligible for retirement pay from the Department of Defense (DOD) and compensation for service-connected disabilities from the VA. However, retired veterans with a disability rating below 50-percent have their VA compensation deducted from their DOD retirement pay. The American Legion strongly supports ending this inequitable policy, where many military retirees must forfeit their retired pay to receive equal amounts of disability compensation.

*The Richard Star Act (H.R. 1282)*

## Guard & Reserve GI Bill Parity

National Guard and Reserve servicemembers are being deprived of education benefits that active-duty servicemembers enjoy, despite completing the same duties. According to current law, National Guard and Reserve servicemembers only accrue GI Bill entitlement when called to active duty under federal orders. When Guard and Reserve servicemembers are activated under state orders, they do not accrue eligibility for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits like their active-duty counterparts do. The American Legion believes that every day in uniform counts and urges Congress to recognize the service of Guard and Reserve servicemembers as eligible for the GI Bill.

## GI Bill for Honorable Service

To receive most VA benefits, a veteran's character of discharge or service must be "under honorable conditions." However, GI Bill education assistance benefits have a requirement that servicemembers receive an "honorable discharge." If the character of service is "general under honorable conditions," this benefit remains out of reach for these veterans. The American Legion urges Congress to correct this statutory incongruity by amending U.S. Code to allow access to VA educational assistance to veterans with general under honorable conditions discharges.