

# AMERICAN LEGION



## LEGISLATIVE WEEKLY



May 16, 2025

### WEEKLY GRASSROOTS NEWSLETTER

This week, we are asking Legionnaires to contact Congress to request support for the *GI Bill Parity Act!* Currently, National Guard and Reserve servicemembers only earn credit toward their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits when they mobilize and deploy for federal missions. National Guard and Reserve servicemembers activated under state orders do not accrue eligibility for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. This legislation aims to count every day spent on weekend drills, annual training, attending military school, participating in an exercise, or responding to a disaster toward GI Bill eligibility. *The American Legion supports this legislation, and we appreciate all the emails you have sent so far. **Go to the Action Center to quickly email a letter of support to your members of Congress.***

Have you had a recent meeting or phone call with your member of Congress? Report your contact today! Click [here](#) to register your Congressional contact and demonstrate the power of The American Legion advocacy in action.

### VETS DISABILITY CLAIMS BACKLOG DOWN TO 200K CASES, A POST-PANDEMIC LOW

*This article's original publication can be found [here](#).*



The backlog of veterans disability claims this week fell to about 200,000 cases, its lowest mark since the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic during President Donald Trump's first term in office.

In testimony before Congress, Veterans Affairs leaders praised the milestone as evidence that new leadership is producing results at the department, noting a drop of more than 50,000 overdue cases since Trump's second inauguration.

But the numbers have decreased by more than 200,000 cases over the last 18 months, with most of that improvement coming during the final year of President Joe Biden's term in office.

The disability claims backlog counts the total number of first-time benefits cases that have taken more than four months to complete. Over the years, the figure has become shorthand for how well or poorly department processors are keeping up with the department's benefits workload.

After years of work to reduce the backlog through digitized records and improved processing, the number hovered around 60,000 cases from early 2015 to spring 2020.

During that period, department leaders said the 60,000 mark was realistically the lowest range the metric could reach, given that a significant portion of the hundreds of thousands of veterans benefits cases processed annually require extra time to review and adjudicate.

When the COVID pandemic began in America at the end of Trump's first term in office, most benefits processing centers were temporarily shuttered, leading to a sharp increase in processing delays. By late 2020, the backlog had topped 200,000 cases.

The total ebbed and grew for the next two years until the passage of the PACT Act, which provided a host of new benefits to veterans exposed to burn pit smoke, chemical defoliants and other toxins during their military service.

VA leaders praised passage of that legislation but also warned that the increased workload would lead to increases in the backlogged case numbers. The backlog peaked at around 410,000 cases in late 2023.

Past administrators had estimated that the backlog would not return to the 60,000 mark until late 2025. The recent improvements in processing suggest that goal remains within reach.

However, continued progress could depend on potential cuts to the VA workforce in coming months.

VA Secretary Doug Collins has proposed dismissing up to 80,000 of the department's 480,000 staffers as part of efforts to reduce the size of the federal bureaucracy. In testimony before the House Appropriations Committee on Thursday, Collins said that the backlog improvement over the last four months came even though "we didn't have any more employees, and we didn't have any more money to do that. We just got it done."

He credited new department efficiencies and focus for the improvements.

But VA did add more than 9,000 benefits processors from fiscal 2022 to the end of fiscal 2024, a 34% increase in staffing. Officials from the previous administration had credited backlog improvements in recent years to the bigger benefits workforce.

Democratic lawmakers challenged Collins assertions that staffing had little to do with the improvements.

“It’s clear to me that the VA was successful in encouraging eligible veterans to apply for benefits, and they apparently were addressing those numbers very, very effectively,” Rep. Sanford Bishop Jr., D-Ga., told Collins during the hearing.

Last fall, VA officials announced the staffers processed more than 2.5 million claims in fiscal 2024, a new record for the department. Collins has said the pace of claims this fiscal year appears even higher.

The secretary has previously vowed to protect department jobs that provide direct benefits to veterans, including benefits processors. Details of force reductions are expected in coming months.

## **STRONG LEADS BIPARTISAN EFFORT TO SUPPORT VETERANS, LAW ENFORCEMENT**

*The article’s original publication can be found [here](#).*

Today, U.S. Representatives Dale W. Strong (R-AL), Lou Correa (D-CA), Maria Elvira Salazar (R-FL), and Glenn Ivey (D-MD) introduced the [Supporting Every at-Risk Veteran In Critical Emergencies \(SERVICE\) Act](#). Nine additional Members joined as original cosponsors of the bill.

The SERVICE Act would establish a pilot program to allow local law enforcement agencies to use the Department of Justice’s (DOJ) Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) grants to establish dedicated “Veterans Response Teams” within departments to respond to emergency calls involving veterans in crisis.

A Veterans Response Team is a team of law enforcement officers who also have a background in military service. Members of the team would be available 24/7 to respond to instances of a veteran in crisis, including mental health or substance abuse situations. Following the initial response, members of the team would assist in connecting the individual with community and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) resources.

“The SERVICE Act is a crucial step toward ensuring our veterans get the care and understanding they deserve in times of crisis,” said Rep. Dale Strong. “We owe our servicemembers a debt that cannot be repaid, and it is my honor to introduce this legislation and work toward providing our veterans with the compassionate and effective resources they need. This legislation honors their service by meeting them with support, not stigma.”

“When our nation’s veterans return home, we owe it to them to make sure they’re met with the support they deserve and have earned—and we must keep our moral

commitment to them,” said Rep. Lou Correa. “Many of our veterans return home with invisible wounds and respond better to their fellow veterans in times of need. This common-sense, bipartisan legislation is key to fulfilling our promise to those who’ve offered their lives for our freedom—and will save countless lives along the way.”

“Research shows that when a veteran is in crisis, they are most receptive to help and support provided by fellow veterans. Nearly 20% of our U.S. law enforcement has served in the military, and they are undoubtedly the most well-equipped to respond to other veterans in need,” said Rep. Maria Salazar. “Our veterans have sacrificed so much for our freedoms, and we owe them the best care possible when they return from their service. I am proud to co-lead the SERVICE Act to provide support to our brave men and women in uniform.”

“Veterans have served us in our nation’s time of need. Now we must keep this sacred covenant to serve our veterans in their darkest hour. The SERVICE Act will help them get mental health services and prevent suicides. Service men and women who now face PTSD, psycho-social trauma, and physical symptoms of being in war zones across our world must get treatment for what ails them. My father and father-in-law both served in the military, so I know what it means to be a part of a military family. They deserve the respect and dignity of getting the care they rightly earned. I co-lead this bill because this is about doing what’s best for veterans in crisis and helping our law enforcement personnel assist in this effort,” said Rep. Glenn Ivey.

This program was first implemented in Cincinnati, Ohio, and now serves as the blueprint for the state. Sergeant Dave Corlett (Ret.), a veteran himself, established the program and maintains that having a fellow veteran respond to these calls is more effective in de-escalating and ensuring that veterans are aware of the resources available to them.

“I couldn’t be more thrilled than to hear about the reintroduction of the SERVICE Act. As a military veteran and 30-year first responder, I have seen the effects of trauma on our warfighters. We all want to reduce the stigma of seeking help for mental health issues and reduce the number of military and first responder suicides. This program has proven itself in the real world to be a great step in that direction,” said Dave Corlett.

The SERVICE Act has been endorsed by American Legion, Hope for the Warriors, Vietnam Veterans of America, Military Order of the Purple Heart, National Policing Institute, Small and Rural Law Enforcement Executives Association, and the CJ3 Foundation.

Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) strongly supports this legislation, saying, in part: “The SERVICE Act will provide veterans in law enforcement with tools and training to help our fellow veterans and the law enforcement community to better deal with veterans in crisis,” said Jack McManus, National Vietnam Veterans of America President. “The SERVICE Act presents an opportunity to improve community relations while saving the lives of our nation’s veterans.”

“At HOPE for the Warriors, we stand firmly behind the SERVICE Act as a critical lifeline for veterans in crisis,” said Robin Kelleher, Hope for the Warriors CEO. “By empowering specialized Veteran Response Teams—who truly understand the unique challenges veterans face—communities can respond with compassion, defuse crisis situations more effectively, and create safer, healthier outcomes for everyone involved.”

“Having served in both the military and law enforcement, I believe we have a sacred duty to support those who have protected us. Our veterans, much like our law enforcement officers, have answered the call in our nation’s time of need,” said Sheriff Eli Rivera, Small and Rural Law Enforcement Executives Association President. “This bill presents an opportunity to uphold that covenant, ensuring our veterans receive the care and resources they deserve in their darkest hour. SRLEEA is committed to advocating for policies that honor and support our nation’s heroes, both on and off the battlefield.”

“The SERVICE Act is a vital and strategic support for the critical role of trained veterans in responding to their peers in times of need—because no one understands a veteran like another veteran,” said Jim Burch, President of the National Policing Institute.

“By establishing dedicated Veterans Response Teams, law enforcement can provide immediate, informed, and empathetic care, bridging the gap between crisis intervention and long-term support.”

“CJ3 Foundation is proud to endorse Congressman Dale Strong’s introduction of the Supporting Every at Risk Veteran In Critical Emergencies (SERVICE) Act of 2025, which proposes that the Attorney General support the creation and operation of ‘Veterans Response Teams’ in the law enforcement agencies of states, local government, and similar entities to assist veterans in need and strengthen local law enforcement relationships with the veteran communities they serve,” said Eric Thomas, CJ3 Foundation Founder and Director.

Original cosponsors of the SERVICE Act include Representatives Lou Correa (D-CA), Maria Elvira Salazar (R-FL), Glenn Ivey (D-MD), Clay Higgins (R-LA), Derek Tran (D-CA), David Valadao (R-CA), Don Davis (D-NC), Barry Moore (R-AL), Dan Goldman (D-NY), Scott Franklin (R-FL), Maggie Goodlander (D-NH), and Mike Rogers (R-AL).

#### BACKGROUND:

There were 6,407 veteran suicides in 2022, according to the most recent VA data. Most veterans who committed suicide were not receiving any form of care at the VA.

VA studies suggest that strides can be made toward prevention with greater community-based intervention and coalition-building and by increasing awareness of and access to mental health services, among other things.

It is estimated that 20-25% of law enforcement officers have a background in military service. Establishing Veterans Response Teams affords an opportunity for positive engagement for veterans both within their departments and within their broader communities – which could assist in the transition between military and civilian life and improve recruitment and retention efforts within law enforcement.

To that end, the SERVICE Act aims to take steps toward assisting veterans in crisis by allowing DOJ COPS grants to be used to:

- Train and educate law enforcement officers on mental health issues related to military service.
- Outfit law enforcement officers with insignia that indicate their branch of service.
- Provide overtime pay for law enforcement officers who participate in a Veterans Response Team.
- Grow awareness of the program within their communities and promote VA resources.

## **LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK**

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.

### **Patricia Jackson Kelley, California**

Patricia, for your steadfast advocacy of Legion priorities, we are honored to name you Legionnaire of the Week!

Patricia attended a town hall meeting at WLCAC Los Angeles where Congresswoman Maxine Waters was speaking. The Congresswoman was joined by industry and policy experts to provide insight into new policies and developments regarding topics like Housing, Social Security, Education, Labor, and Veteran Advocacy. Patricia provided

support by identifying a veteran to lead the pledge at all 4 town halls that the Congresswoman hosted in the area.

*Thank you, Patricia, for your report and the time you have dedicated to the Legion's legislative priorities.*

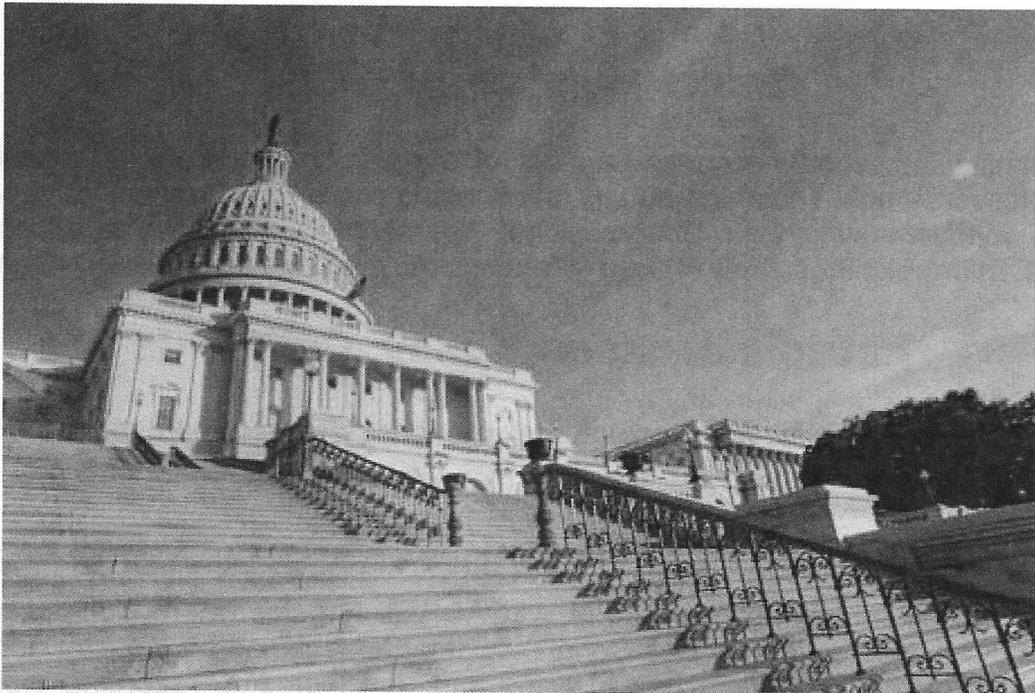
## **GRASSROOTS INFORMATION**

Interested in what the Legion is advocating for in Congress on ***The Veteran's Role in Supporting the Military?*** Check out our information papers in the Legislative Toolkit. This is a great starting point for a conversation with your elected officials!

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](mailto:grassroots@legion.org) or [ejohnson@legion.org](mailto:ejohnson@legion.org).

You can find relevant legislation and the Legion's stance on them in the key legislation section of VoterVoice.

***Register for Action Alerts today at***  
***<https://www.votervoice.net/AmericanLegion/Register>***



## UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

As of 5/15, the following hearings are scheduled:

- Monday, May 19, 3:00 PM: House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Technology Modernization Oversight Hearing -- *"Improving Software Licensing Management"*
- Tuesday, May 20, 4:45 PM: Senate Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces -- *"To receive testimony on the Department of Energy's atomic energy defense activities and Department of Defense nuclear weapons programs in review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2026 and the Future Years Defense Program"*
- Wednesday, May 21, 10:30 AM: House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Oversight Hearing -- *"Pushing VA Forward: Review of VA's Adaptive Programs for Disabled Veterans"*
- Wednesday, May 21, 2:30 PM: Senate Committee on Armed Services, Full Committee Hearing -- *"To Receive Testimony on Navy Unmanned Systems"*
- Wednesday, May 21, 4:00 PM: Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Full Committee Hearing -- *"To Consider Pending Legislation"*

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

HASC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings - House Armed Services Committee](#)

SASC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings - U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services](#)

[View The American Legion Legislative Handbook Here](#)