



# THE AMERICAN LEGION



## THE AMERICAN LEGION LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Submitted to accompany testimony before Congress by  
**American Legion National Commander James W. "Bill" Oxford**  
March 11, 2020

# A historic opportunity to build for the future

Seventy-five years ago, America prevailed over some of the most powerful military forces of the 20th century. A generation later, the United States would send men to the moon. A nation capable of such magnificent achievements is surely capable of caring for those who helped make such accomplishments possible.

Just as scripture teaches that to whom much is given, much should be required, The American Legion believes veterans have given this country far more than what is asked in return. It is in this spirit that we present our legislative agenda to the second session of the 116th Congress.

For starters, no veteran should ever die by his or her own hand. We would like to see Congress pass the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019. The American Legion works diligently to remove stigmas that are too often associated with those seeking mental health treatment. Whether caused by post-traumatic stress disorder or military sexual trauma, every veteran suicide is a tragic loss compounded by the fact that these deaths are preventable. We must equip VA with the resources it needs to convince veterans that their lives are worth living.

One of the great legacies of World War II was the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. Just as the GI Bill dramatically improved the lives of millions of American families, the Harry W. Colmery "Forever" GI Bill enables the current generation of veterans to achieve their educational aspirations. The American Legion will adamantly oppose any diminishment of GI Bill benefits and welcomes better oversight of institutions that do not provide appropriate value for student veterans. We believe that the Protect the GI Bill Act helps accomplish this goal.

Congress has responded well to the needs of veterans in recent years. The VA MISSION Act, the expansion of Agent Orange benefits and robust defense budgets demonstrate the gratitude of a nation that values its men and women in uniform.

The American Legion recently observed the centennial of its founding. Through telehealth opportunities and strategic alliances, we believe that the United States enters this century's roaring twenties with the ability to serve veterans like never before. I look forward to working with the Congress as we build a foundation for the future.



**James W. "Bill" Oxford**  
National Commander  
The American Legion

## ABOUT THE COMMANDER

- » Vietnam War veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps; aviation electronic technician for the A-6 Intruder
- » Army National Guard and Army Reserve officer, retiring as a colonel after more than 34 years of military service
- » Former mayor and city council member in Cahah's Mountain, N.C.
- » Past American Legion Department of North Carolina and Post 29 Commander

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James W. 'Bill' Oxford".

James W. "Bill" Oxford  
National Commander

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President Trump signs the 2019 LEGION Act in the Oval Office on July 30. *White House*

## 2019 victories and looking ahead to 2020

The American Legion celebrated its 101st anniversary by closing out 2019 with several key accomplishments. From last year's Legislative Agenda for the first session of the 116th Congress, below is a sampling of legislative victories, some of which have been decades in the making:

- **Redefine "wartime service" period.** In a significant legislative victory for The American Legion, President Trump signed into law The LEGION Act (Let Everyone Get Involved In Opportunities for National Service Act) on July 30, 2019. The law declares the United States has been in a state of war since Dec. 7, 1941. The American Legion sought the declaration as a way to honor approximately 1,600 U.S. service members who were killed or wounded during previously undeclared periods of war. The bill also opened the door for approximately 6 million veterans to access American Legion programs and benefits for which they previously had not been eligible.
- **Fully fund a superior national defense.** Congress passed a defense funding bill that reversed sequestration, rebuilds U.S. military end strength and weaponry and fairly compensates military personnel. As a result, service members received a 3.1 percent pay raise in 2020, the largest increase since 2010.
- **Expand Agent Orange benefits.** Late in the evening on June 25, President Trump signed the Blue Water Navy Act into law. This bill represents the bipartisan efforts of veterans, advocacy groups, Congress and the administration to give Vietnam-era veterans the VA benefits they need.
- **Repeal unfair VA offsets.** Congress finally passed a repeal of what is referred to as the military "Widow's Tax." For decades, VA survivor benefits and Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) have been offset from military Survivor Benefit Plan annuities (SBP). The Fiscal Year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) completely eliminated the Widow's Tax.

Top issues The American Legion and lawmakers in both chambers of Congress expect to tackle in a bipartisan way in the second session of the 116th Congress include:

- **Supporting VA’s suicide-prevention efforts.** The bill The American Legion is focusing on is S. 785 – Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 (passed out of committee on Jan. 29, 2020). We also remain active participants in the “President’s Roadmap to Empower Veterans to End the National Tragedy of Suicide” (the PREVENTS Initiative and Task Force), which aims to empower veterans to pursue an improved quality of life, coordinate existing suicide-prevention efforts, prioritize related research activities and engender collaboration across the public and private sectors.
- **Supporting those suffering from illnesses related to toxic exposures such as burn pits.** Last year, the Burn Pits Accountability Act was passed into law in the NDAA, which increased the requirements on the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs to track and evaluate service members’ health when they have been exposed to burn pits. This year, S. 2950, The Veterans Burn Pit Exposure Recognition Act of 2019, is the most immediate priority, as burn pits and airborne toxins have become a major concern for the Post 9/11 generation of veterans. The act would recognize and concede exposure during deployed service. However, the bill would not automatically grant benefits or health care to veterans who served near burn pits, nor would it create a presumption of service connection, like Agent Orange. There are several proposed bills The American Legion is assisting lawmakers and fellow veterans’ organizations in crafting and refining that aim to address presumptions of service connection.
- **Enhance women’s health care at VA.** S. 514 – the Deborah Sampson Act – is the bill The American Legion is working with the majority and minority to refine. A version of the bill passed out of the House in December 2019.
- **Ensuring the Coast Guard gets paid during a government shutdown.** The American Legion championed this issue in 2019. There is a stand-alone bill that would solve the problem (S. 21 - Pay Our Coast Guard Act), but it is also included in the Coast Guard Reauthorization Act.
- **Lastly, protecting the GI Bill remains an evergreen issue.** H.R. 4625 - Protect the GI Bill Act, which has already passed the House and is awaiting action in the Senate, would create common-sense oversight of schools and give military-connected students the same rights as non-veterans if their school closes, when they face overpayment, and when a school loses eligibility to operate.

The American Legion looks forward to working with congressional leadership in the House and Senate Veterans’ Affairs and Armed Services Committees in order to achieve more victories during another productive, albeit extremely busy (due to presidential election season), legislative calendar year.



*The American Legion has been a cornerstone of life in the United States from the local to the federal level for 100 years and serves as a constant reminder of the inestimable contributions the members of the Armed Forces have made to enrich life in the United States during and after their service.*

**Sen. Res. 263,**  
July 31, 2019, recognizing  
the legacy of The American  
Legion in honor of its  
100th anniversary

# CARE

## KEY POINTS

» Modernizing the VA health-care system is an investment in VA's future and the best path forward.



*It is critical that we deliver a transformed VA health-care system that puts veterans at the center of everything we do. We are on the cusp of the greatest transformative period in the history of VA.*

**VA Secretary Robert Wilkie,**  
testifying at a joint congressional hearing  
Dec. 19, 2019.



The Project ATLAS display at the 2019 American Legion National Convention. Phillips photo

## The future of VA health care

In 2018, Congress approved and the president signed into law the most significant legislation to transform the VA health-care system since 1996 – the VA Maintaining Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act, or the VA MISSION Act.

On June 6, 2019, VA launched its improved Veterans Community Care Program, implementing portions of the MISSION Act, which ended the Veterans Choice Program and established the new Veterans Community Care Program. According to VA, enactment of the MISSION Act will strengthen its ability to recruit and retain clinicians, authorize telehealth across state lines, empower veterans with increased access to community care and establish a new urgent-care benefit which eligible veterans can access through VA's network of community urgent-care providers.

Many veterans in rural areas struggle to make their appointments because the distance needed to travel to the nearest VA facility makes it inconvenient and unrealistic. In an effort to ease this burden, VA has devoted many resources to improving telehealth services. In a mid-October report, the department found more than 900,000 veterans used VA telehealth services in 2019. This was a 17 percent increase over the prior fiscal year and contributed to VA's delivery of more than 2.6 million individual telehealth sessions in 2019.

Anywhere to Anywhere is a VA telehealth initiative designed to reduce the confusion around state-specific telehealth laws and licensing restrictions. In an effort to eliminate this confusion, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced a new federal rule that will allow its doctors, nurses and other health-care providers to administer care to veterans using telehealth or virtual technology, regardless where veterans or providers are located.

In an effort to support this initiative, VA teamed up with The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars and Philips to bring care to veterans in a familiar setting – their local posts. Through Project ATLAS (Accessing Telehealth through



**American Legion National Commander Bill Oxford visits patients at the Denver VA Medical Center.** *Larry Cline*

Local Area Stations), Philips will install video communication technologies and medical devices in selected American Legion and VFW posts to enable remote examinations through a secure, high-speed internet line. Veterans will be examined and advised in real time through face-to-face video sessions with VA medical professionals, who may be located hundreds or thousands of miles away.

VA's budget for Fiscal 2020 is \$220.2 billion, 9.6 percent over that of Fiscal 2019. This budgetary increase will help VA toward obtaining the four priorities outlined in its strategic plan by VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. These priorities include improving customer service, MISSION Act implementation, replacing an outdated Electronic Health Record system and updating other business and information technology systems to a 21st century operating capability.

In December 2019, VA announced it will no longer issue star ratings for its 146 medical centers. Individual VA hospitals will instead post measures including patient satisfaction, medical services, wait times and quality assessments on their individual websites. Wilkie said in a statement: "These ratings do not provide insight as to how our hospitals stack up against nearby non-VA facilities and are therefore of little value in helping veterans make informed health-care decisions." Updating this often-misinterpreted rating system will allow veterans to more accurately compare VA facilities with other local medical centers.

## **WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?**

- » Urge Congress to maintain oversight on the MISSION Act implementation, ensuring that VA honors all of its commitments to the veteran community.
- » Ensure VA is accountable to deadlines proposed for various IT system upgrades and installations.



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## KEY POINTS

- » The American Legion's System Worth Saving program assesses the quality of care and services at select VA medical facilities throughout the United States and its territories.
- » More than 9 million veterans use VA for health care.



*By many measures, VA is providing not only 'the best care anywhere' but also highly integrated treatment specific to the needs of veterans – care that is not available at any price to patients outside the VA system.*

**Phillip Longman,**  
author of "Best Care  
Anywhere: Why VA Health  
Care is Better"



Legionnaires conduct a System Worth Saving site visit in Washington, D.C. Tom Brenner

## Protect the best care anywhere

The American Legion continues to believe that VA performs as well as, or better than, other health-care providers on quality measures like patient safety, patient satisfaction, care coordination and innovative medical practices related to veteran-specific health-care issues.

In 2019, The American Legion System Worth Saving (SWS) program visited 12 medical facilities to identify best practices and challenges of VA hospitals and community-based outpatient clinics. Site visits consist of a town-hall meeting, a visit to the local VA facility and meetings with staff and executive leadership. At the end of each SWS visit, a report is issued that is shared with the medical center, the VA secretary and under secretary of health, congressional members and the President of the United States. Those visits revealed that VA facilities continue experiencing growth in veteran populations, need improved physical and information technology infrastructure and struggle with critical staffing shortages. Many of the facilities visited in the past year have dedicated new space for women veterans' health care to ensure privacy, safety, dignity and sensitivity to their gender-specific needs.

The American Legion supports legislation that capitalizes on VA's strengths and core competencies while ensuring that veterans continue to have access to the best possible care.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Attend The American Legion's town hall meetings that are kickoff events for each System Worth Saving site visit. These meetings offer elected leaders the opportunity to hear directly from veterans about their VA health-care experiences.
- » Do not sponsor nor support legislation that authorizes VA to centralize operations successfully managed by local VA medical facilities.
- » Enhance VA's ability to offer telehealth services and telemedicine to rural communities.





VA offers programs to attract and keep dedicated health-care professionals. VA

## VA recruitment and retention

A 2019 VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) report surveyed medical facility directors to determine the extent of severe occupational staffing shortages that exist at Veterans Health Administration (VHA) medical facilities.

The Sept. 30, 2019, report detailed the following findings:

- Medical center directors reported widespread severe shortages in many occupations throughout VHA.
- A lack of qualified applicants and non-competitive salaries were the two most commonly cited reasons for severe staffing shortages.
- Although the numbers of reported severe shortages across facilities declined from last year, the reasons for these shortages did not change.

The OIG report also found that 96 percent of VHA facilities show at least one severe occupational shortage as of end of 2018, and 39 percent of facilities noted at least 20 severe occupational staffing shortages.

The American Legion understands that recruiting highly skilled health-care professionals to fill vacancies at VA facilities is an ambitious undertaking, given resources and regulatory constraints. Recruitment and retention solutions can be achieved, many without additional legislative action, to provide full staffing of top health-care professionals.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Pass legislation addressing the recruitment and retention challenges VA has regarding pay disparities among physicians and medical specialists who are providing direct health care to veterans.
- » Monitor VHA's plan of action to address the underlying causes of severe occupational staffing shortages.

### KEY POINTS

- » The American Legion, through its System Worth Saving program, continues to document staffing shortages and recruitment performance challenges at many VA health-care facilities.
- » A 2019 VA Inspector General report lists medical officer and nursing occupations as the most commonly cited positions with severe staffing shortages in the system.
- » Psychiatry is the most commonly cited medical specialty, and Human Resources Management is the most commonly cited non-clinical occupation with severe staffing shortages.

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*Private hospitals use innovative and progressive solutions to address recruitment and retention challenges, and we in the VA must be creative in our approach to human capital.*

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**Daniel Sitterly,**  
VA's Assistant Secretary  
for Human Resources and  
Administration, before the  
Committee on Veterans'  
Affairs on Sept. 18, 2019

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## KEY POINTS

- » Over the next 10 years, VA will move to a new electronic health records system that links VA, DoD and community health-care providers to patient records and unifies all VA facilities on one system.
- » VA recently kicked off its initial operating capability for the new EHR at medical facilities in Nevada and Washington state.



*It's the fact that, for the very first time, we are going to have an opportunity to exist as a single shared entity, where we all truly collaborate in the same space, in order to make sure that our EHR is working as hard as it possibly can for the veteran.*

**Dr. Evan Paul**, Hospitalist,  
VA Puget Sound  
Health Care System



Clinics using MHS GENESIS have sped up consultations for DoD patients. *U.S. Navy*

## Connected electronic health records

The Electronic Health Record (EHR) Modernization initiative leverages existing commercial solutions to gain interoperability within the Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Defense and community providers. This solution will facilitate the secure transfer of active-duty service members' health data during the transition to veteran status and will provide clinicians with efficient access to a veteran's health information.

In May 2018, VA awarded Cerner a contract to replace its EHR systems with Cerner Millennium, currently deployed by the DoD. VA kicked off its initial operating capability of the new EHR at three sites, two in Washington state and one in Nevada, with the expectation to go live in March 2020. VA completed the migration of more than 23 million veteran health records and created training for key clinical front-line staff in preparation for smooth implementation.

After IOC implementation, VA will deploy the new EHR solution over a 10-year period across the entire VA enterprise. Maintenance and support of legacy EHR systems will continue until every VA medical facility has the new EHR solution. This ensures that all current patient records are accessible and no interruption of any veteran's care occurs.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Ensure VA's EHR initiative remains fully funded.
- » Require VA to regularly report EHR progress to Congress.



As more women serve in the military, the need for gender-specific VA care will grow. DoD

## KEY POINTS

- » Women have voluntarily served in every war since the American Revolution.
- » Women now routinely serve in combat and deserve equal benefits as their male counterparts.
- » Women are the fastest growing demographic in the veteran community.
- » Hypertension, PTSD and depression are the top three diagnostic categories for women veterans treated at VA.

## Improving care for women veterans

Never before have so many women service members been routinely assigned to combat zones. They sustain the same types of injuries as their male counterparts. The 2017 Department of Veterans Affairs Women Veterans Report noted that the total population of women veterans is expected to increase at an average rate of about 18,000 per year for the next 10 years.

According to the Veteran Population Projection Model between 2015-2045, the women veteran population increases annually at 0.6 percent while the male veteran population declines at 2.2 percent. VA must ensure women veterans receive gender-specific health care to meet their needs across the entire network. Finding ways to ensure that these veterans are welcome and receive the services they deserve is vital to The American Legion.

The American Legion strives to improve quality of care for all women veterans. The American Legion continues to focus on:

- Visiting VA health-care systems to explore any issues that could be preventing VA hospitals from providing gender-specific care.
- Educating women veterans about the importance of identifying as veterans.
- Ensuring full-time gynecologists are available at all VA medical centers.
- Advocating for an increase of women's health providers to assist women veterans who have been victims of military sexual trauma.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Enact legislation for VA facilities to implement current standards of care to women veterans, providing the latest diagnostic and treatment methods.
- » Provide child-care services at all VA medical centers.
- » Urge VA to meet the privacy needs of women veterans at its facilities.

*Women now make up the fastest-growing group of veterans enrolling in VA health care, and many of them face challenges with the invisible wounds of war, like PTS and military sexual trauma. VA needs to adapt to the complex and unique needs of our women veterans, and that means ensuring there are specific programs and resources to support them.*

**U.S. Rep. Julia Brownley**  
(D-Calif.)



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## KEY POINTS

- » Data from VA's National Screening Program reveal that about one in four women, and one in 100 men say they have experienced military sexual trauma (MST).
- » Men are less likely to report MST than their female counterparts, but MST is a military issue, not a women's issue.



*What do I want now? I want to be treated with the respect I deserve in the current VA system and not retraumatized.*

**Diane Chamberlain,**

Author of *Conduct Unbecoming: Rape, Torture, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from Military Commanders*



DoD has initiated sexual assault prevention and awareness programs. DoD

## Improve access to MST care

The American Legion continues to track and monitor all issues related to military sexual trauma (MST). MST includes any sexual activity against one's will, or during a time when one is unable to consent to sexual activities, while serving in the military.

According to a VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) review and the Department of Defense 2018 Report on Sexual Assault in the Military, more than 6,000 servicemembers reported a sexual assault in fiscal 2018. The reported sexual assaults occurred during their military service and was an increase of about 10 percent from the previous year.

The American Legion is deeply concerned with the plight of MST survivors and continues to work with Congress to find the right treatment for every patient, while urging VA to be flexible and to ensure that these veterans receive the care they need.

The American Legion will work to ensure that those who have become victims are treated, while urging the U.S. Armed Forces to take steps to eradicate MST entirely.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Ensure VA has all necessary resources to remain committed to providing veterans access to help they need to recover from MST.
- » Maintain oversight of VHA's MST counselors as per VHA Directive 1115 and to continue universal screening for all veterans for history of MST.
- » Maintain oversight of VBA's Women Veterans Claims and MST sensitivity training for processors.
- » Encourage better awareness training in the DoD for MST sensitivity and develop more comprehensive care options for survivors, including better availability of therapists and group therapy, along with other options to make MST care more accessible to veterans.



Improved maternity care helps support the unique needs of women veterans. DoD

## Improvements for newborn care

For women veterans who are eligible and become pregnant, the Department of Veterans Affairs provides Maternity Care Coordinators (MCC) at every VA Medical Center. The MCC assists women in the process of receiving services in the Veterans Health Administration and in the community throughout pregnancy, delivery and postpartum. VA offers additional maternity care services such as lactation services and products, nursing bras, postpartum screenings and support groups. VA continues to see a significant increase of women veterans using VA maternity benefits.

Disabilities, unique stressors and exposures during service are risk factors for high-risk pregnancy among women veterans. Women veterans are 40 percent more likely than their civilian counterparts to deliver newborns requiring specialized and intensive services. A high-risk pregnancy, plus the need for neonatal intensive care, may require newborns to be hospitalized longer than the average 48 to 96 hours in adequate facilities, which could be miles away from where the child was delivered. VA's current policy covers infant care for up to seven days. VA does not cover medically necessary transportation costs for the newborn.

The American Legion has testified numerous times supporting legislation to extend post-delivery care services for newborns by extending VA coverage from seven to 14 days and covering the cost of medically necessary transportation.

### WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO?

- » Hold VA accountable by promoting the maternity care program and ensuring MCCs are fulfilling their job descriptions.
- » Pass legislation to amend Title 38, U.S. Code, to improve care provided by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to newborn children.
- » Pass legislation to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to furnish medically necessary transportation for newborn children of certain women veterans.

### KEY POINTS

- » Each VA Medical Center has Maternity Care Coordinators (MCCs) to help veterans through the process, during and after pregnancy.
- » Women veterans are at a higher risk to deliver a newborn who may require additional care.

*Newborn care includes, but is not limited to, inpatient care, outpatient care, medications, immunizations, circumcision, well-baby office visits, neonatal intensive care, and other appropriate post-delivery services.*

**Dr. Patricia Hayes,**  
Chief Consultant for  
Women's Health Services

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## KEY POINTS

- » Veterans of various eras and theaters of operation are currently receiving different levels of VA caregiver benefits, based on their dates and locations of service.
- » All veterans deserve equality in terms of benefits, regardless of the era in which they served.



*These hidden heroes have served as an unpaid workforce, absorbing the overwhelming challenges that can come with caring for a veteran.*

**Elizabeth Dole,**

Elizabeth Dole Foundation  
founder and former  
U.S. senator



Caregivers of eligible veterans from all war eras deserve equal support. VA

## Support for veteran caregivers

The American Legion has long argued that the Department of Veterans Affairs Caregiver Program must be expanded to include all generations of veterans. The American Legion believes that all veterans deserve equality in terms of benefits, regardless of era.

Policymakers are slowly recognizing the nearly 6 million caregivers who provide support for veterans in need of intensive personal assistance due to medical conditions related to military service. On June 6, 2018, President Trump signed the VA Maintaining Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act, or MISSION Act. Section 161 expands veteran caregiver benefits to caregivers of veterans of all eras in a phased manner.

The first phase will be for caregivers of veterans severely injured in the line of duty on or before May 7, 1975. But VA has delayed the new technology and the systems to process these new applicants to June 2020, two years after the signing of the MISSION Act. The second phase for eligible caregivers of veterans who served from 1975-2001 is pushed back to fall 2022.

The American Legion urges VA to provide the same level of benefits to all eligible enrolled veterans. VA caregiver benefits should not be limited to specific eras but expanded to assist all eligible, VA-enrolled veterans, including those who require caregiver assistance in day-to-day health-care needs, regardless of when they served.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Allow all caregivers to begin the application process, therefore making them eligible for back pay when the system is up and running and they may receive acceptance into the program.
- » Maintain oversight on the expansion of VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) under Caregiver Support.





A 2019 American Legion survey revealed high interest in suicide-prevention training.

## KEY POINTS

» The American Legion established a suicide-prevention program in 2017 and aligned it with the TBI/PTSD Committee, which reviews methods, programs and strategies that can be used to reduce veteran suicide.

» The American Legion and VA are currently working together to adopt a public health approach to suicide prevention which looks beyond the individual to involve peers, family members and the community.

» In 2019, The American Legion conducted a Mental Health Survey to analyze treatments for TBI/PTSD, and gauge current suicide prevention readiness.

## Veteran suicide prevention

In 2019, VA reported that the suicide rate among male veterans was 1.3 times the rate of other adult men in 2017. For women veterans, the suicide rate was even higher at 2.2 times the rate of their civilian counterparts. Recent statistics on suicide are shockingly high but conservative because many suicides are misclassified as death by motor vehicles, poisonings, drownings, overdoses or other accidents.

Many factors increase the risk of veteran suicides: post-traumatic stress disorder; traumatic brain injury; loss of a sense of purpose; loss of a sense of belonging; stigma surrounding mental health; access to lethal means (firearms, bridges, opioids, etc.); and substance use and abuse disorders.

The American Legion launched an online mental health survey in May as part of the organization's continuing research into mental health issues impacting veterans. The survey was created by the American Legion's TBI/PTSD Committee and was designed to collect data that will help The American Legion bring local resources related to TBI, PTSD and suicide prevention to veterans and their families.

The data collected indicated 82.47 percent of participants never received any form of suicide prevention training and 67.39 percent of participants were somewhat likely, likely or very likely to take suicide-prevention training if offered.

The survey identified that 84.23 percent of respondents never sought mental health care from VA Vet Centers, and nearly 40 percent of respondents were unsure of eligibility for VA mental health services.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Urge the DoD and VA to implement an automatic flagging system to alert providers of potentially fatal prescription drug combinations.
- » Provide VA the necessary funding for complementary and alternative therapies for treating TBI, PTSD and other mental health conditions.
- » Improve VA's hiring process for mental health providers.
- » Increase funding for DoD and VA suicide-prevention programs.



*An estimated 20 veterans a day take their own lives. Every one of these instances is tragic. More veterans die from their own hands than are killed by our nation's enemies. We must do a better job of embracing and listening to these men and women.*

**James W. "Bill" Oxford,**  
American Legion  
National Commander

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## KEY POINTS

- » The American Legion remains deeply concerned about high numbers of veterans who develop opioid/substance use disorders as a means of mitigating their physical and emotional pain.
- » The American Legion will continue to urge VA and DoD to investigate the potential harms of antidepressant medications and their apparent link to veteran suicide.



Shutterstock

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*After combat, it's common for veterans to suffer chronic pain. But now that doctors have a clearer understanding of the risks of addictive painkillers, they are wary of relying on opioids to relieve it. Plus, veterans suffer from addiction at higher rates than the general population.*

**Robert Wilkie,**  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs

## Prescription drug abuse

Data collected by the Department of Health and Human Services suggest that at least 2 million Americans have opioid-use disorders involving prescribed medication. This is an issue that affects all Americans, but members of the military community may be at even greater risk. In 2017, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie stated that “more than 130 Americans died each day from a drug overdose involving an opioid, and veterans were twice as likely to die of the same. This connection may be attributed to the fact that 60 percent of veterans who have served in the Middle East, and more than 50 percent of older veterans live with ... chronic pain.”

The American Legion is deeply concerned about the prevalence of opioid use among the military community and understands the pain experience by our servicemembers is not only physical. Many members of the military and veterans are suffering from invisible wounds. The most common treatment method is pharmacological. According to a DoD study, antidepressants were prescribed to 70-80 percent of service members diagnosed with depression or PTSD.

The American Legion is extremely concerned with the effects antidepressants may have on veteran suicide, and the rate VA prescribes such medications. A study comparing suicide rates between seven different types of antidepressants, found six to have suicide rates 10 times that of even the most at-risk veteran population.

The American Legion passed Resolution No. 52: Antidepressant Harms Analysis in August 2019, urging VA and DoD to investigate the potential harms of these medications. This resolution calls for a report to be created detailing any and all findings to the President of the United States, Congress and The American Legion.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Urge VA and DoD to investigate the role antidepressants have in veterans, active and reserve component servicemembers and National Guard personnel suicides.
- » Ensure VA has all necessary resources to remain committed to providing veterans access to the help needed to recover from substance abuse and opioid use disorder.



Research on donated brains helps scientists better understand effects of TBI. *Ryan Young*

## KEY POINTS

- » The American Legion TBI/PTSD Committee understands, evaluates, expands awareness and advances research into effective therapies and treatments for TBI and PTSD.
- » The American Legion will continue to review methods and strategies to treat TBI and PTSD in order to reduce veteran suicide.



*PTSD affects the mind, body and relationships. There is no silver bullet approach.*

**Nicole French, Psy.D.**  
Military Veteran and  
Clinical Director at  
Veterans Bridge Home

## The Road Home from PTSD/TBI

Approximately 6,967 servicemembers have died during overseas operations since Sept. 11, 2001, and an additional 52,802 have been wounded, according to a Congressional Research Report published in April 2019. Traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have become known as the “signature wounds” of this war, and in recent years, thousands of studies, articles and reports have focused on their effects on veterans and active-duty personnel. With no end to the Global War on Terrorism in sight, the post-9/11 cohort will continue to grow, as will the number of veterans requiring mental health care.

At least 383,947 servicemembers were medically diagnosed with TBI between 2000 and 2018, according to the DoD. The National Center for PTSD reports that between 11 and 20 percent of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans have PTSD in a given year. These veterans are three to five times more likely to suffer from depression than those without PTSD diagnoses. While the number of veterans diagnosed with TBI and PTSD is increasing significantly, the types of treatments offered remain limited and inadequate.

The American Legion’s TBI/PTSD Committee has spent nearly a decade studying scientific research and meeting with clinicians, policy analysts and mental health experts to understand the problem and explore potential solutions.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Increase budgets for DoD and VA to improve the research, screening, diagnosis and treatment of TBI and PTSD.
- » Urge DoD and VA to closely monitor and study drugs prescribed in potentially toxic combinations, particularly involving addictive benzodiazepines and opioids, especially when prescribed by non-VA providers through the MISSION Act.
- » Improve training for DoD and VA personnel to identify and prevent suicide risks.



## KEY POINTS

- » As many as 60,000 veterans volunteered for medical research for the U.S. biological and chemical programs between 1942 and 1975.
- » Generations of veterans were exposed to various toxic and environmental hazards that continue to affect them and their children.
- » Veterans can access more information on military exposure and their health by visiting [publichealth.va.gov/exposures/index.asp](https://publichealth.va.gov/exposures/index.asp).
- » VA and DoD will conduct a long-term study that will follow veterans for decades looking at their exposures and health issues to determine the impact of deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.



*There are all sorts of toxic substances out there, many more than are imaginable to the layperson, whether it is depleted uranium, pollutants from burn pits, or nerve gas in unexploded ordnances.*

Sen. Richard Blumenthal  
(D-Conn.)



Studies into the effects of burn-pit exposure must be accelerated. DoD

## Toxic exposures during service

“Veterans may have been exposed to a range of chemical, physical, and environmental hazards during military service,” according to the VA Public Health Department. These exposures result in health concerns such as burn pit-related illnesses, Agent Orange-related diseases, Gulf War veterans’ illnesses, radiation-related diseases and conditions caused by vaccinations and medications. Exposure to toxic chemicals may have happened across a range of wars and operations to include Operations Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom, New Dawn; the Gulf War; and the Vietnam War.

Exposure to toxic chemicals is not limited to wartime operations. Some examples are the Camp Lejeune water-contamination issue, Blue Water Navy Agent Orange exposure, per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), nuclear and other radiation exposures, burn pit smoke, dust, asbestos, lead and chemical or biological weapons.

The DoD is beginning to track locations where burn pits are utilized, but its study is far from exhaustive and many years late. VA has not done sufficient studies to determine illnesses and diseases directly related to the various types of toxic chemicals, nor have they begun to develop a list of presumptive conditions. Veterans who suffer from conditions related to toxic exposure have neither the time, resources or evidence to make their cases, nor is there adequate legislation to support toxic-exposure claims.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Pass legislation requiring the proper study to understand what chemicals veterans were exposed to, where the exposure occurred, and develop a list of health conditions related to various toxic chemicals.

# TRANSITION, EDUCATION & ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY



Boots 2 Business workshops help veterans transition to civilian careers. Amy C. Elliott

## KEY POINTS

- » The National Defense Authorization Act changes the sequencing of transition service delivery, making the self-assessment and individualized initial counseling the first TAP events, instead of pre-separation counseling.
- » The mandatory components of TAP are applicable for all service members who have at least 180 continuous days or more on active duty, including members of the National Guard and Reserves.

## A new approach to transition

With an estimated 200,000 service members leaving the military each year, the Transition Assistance Program becomes an essential step in the journey back to civilian life. The American Legion continues to assist transitioning servicemembers in obtaining gainful employment through resume/interview workshops, career fairs and entrepreneurship workshops (such as Boots 2 Business), but as the economic landscape evolves, military and veteran interests must be represented in civilian workforce initiatives. In response to previous American Legion recommendations, new changes to the TAP were introduced in the National Defense Authorization Act, and responsible oversight is required.

To support this, The American Legion has established an Employment Advisory Task Force to identify, scale and guide innovative employment solutions for transitioning servicemembers and veterans. The Employment Innovative Advisory Task Force will report to The American Legion Veterans Employment & Education Commission and provide a compelling set of innovations that will, if adopted by the Department of Defense and other related agencies, improve the quality, timeliness of services, relevance and usefulness of information shared in the TAP.

## WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Hold federal agencies accountable for the implementation of the John McCain National Defense Authorization Act for the Fiscal Year 2019 (NDAA) adapted provisions of the BATTLE Act, which folds these optional two-day workshops on higher education, skills training and entrepreneurship into the five-day TAP workshop.
- » Hold unit commanders or their designees accountable for ensuring all servicemembers, in particular the reserve component, are allowed to attend TAP.
- » Introduce legislation to authorize military spouses to accompany service members participating in TAP.



*It is our hope that these changes will provide ample time for transitioning service members to begin thinking about their transition and begin planning accordingly.*

**Tamre H. Newton,**  
Director of DoD's  
Transition to Veterans  
Program Office

## KEY POINTS

- » Title 5, section 3310, originating from Public Law 89-554, dated Sept 6, 1966, still has guards, elevator operators, messengers and custodians as occupations reserved for veterans.
- » A Veterans Recruitment Appointment can be appointed to a position through GS-11 without having to compete with other applicants.
- » The Society of Human Resources Management Foundation has found that the most pressing need in the human-resources community is to educate employers on the cultural and occupational competency of veterans in transition.
- » Executive Order 13518, Veterans Employment Initiative, aims to boost employment of military veterans, especially from Iraq and Afghanistan, in the federal government.



*Advocates for veterans and researchers point to the first year of transition as a critical period for former service members' well-being and acclimating to civilian life.*

**Dawn Vogt,**

Research Health Scientist  
with the VA's National Center  
Boston Healthcare System



American Legion job fairs help put employers in touch with veteran job seekers. *Ryan Young*

## Veterans Preference hiring

Veterans Preference hiring benefits assist veterans from every socioeconomic class, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation and creed. Veterans Preference is triggered when a hiring manager is deciding between two equally qualified candidates, where one is a civilian, and the other is a service member or veteran. Veterans Preference requires a veteran to be fully qualified for the position sought. The preference was never intended to force agencies to hire a veteran merely because of veteran status.

The American Legion calls on Congress to take action to reaffirm the Veterans Preference Act of 1944. In light of recent policy changes, the reorganization of the Office of Personnel Management, and expanded use of new hiring authorities for federal agencies, The American Legion supports congressional reaffirmation action in support of the continued application of veterans' preference in this new federal workforce environment.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Reaffirm continued application of Veterans Preference for federal hiring and reduction-in-force actions as originally intended by the Veterans Preference Act.
- » Mandate that agencies using new hiring authorities report annually to Congress on the employment level and representation of veterans in their workforces, along with the number of veterans hired using these new hiring authorities.
- » Include in that required report a report of all veteran recruiting and applicant sourcing activities to ensure the veteran community is aware of job opportunities, regardless of hiring authority, and any other activities that demonstrate commitments to conducting affirmative outreach to veterans.
- » Require that agencies develop best practices in administrative measures and resources that educate and train human resources professionals and hiring managers on the value of hiring veterans, military spouses, as well as, facilitate the translation of military to civilian work experience.





Veteran-owned small businesses benefit from SBA loan products. *Lucas Carter*

## Waiver for veteran business loan fees

An obstacle facing veteran small businesses is the lack of start-up and growth capital. Recognizing that investments were needed to grow the veteran small business industrial base and develop innovative products and services, Congress made it easier for veterans to obtain loans by eliminating fees associated with SBA-guarantee loans. SBA's fees are often added to the loans. With interest, it can amount to thousands of dollars to the cost of loan repayment.

Access to capital has been marked as the leading issue affecting small businesses in previous years. Recent statistics from SBA's Office of Capital Access show veteran utilization of SBA's 7(a) loans trending downward. The 7(a) loan program's inconsistencies will continue to fuel confusion among counselors and users and dissuade its utilization. Programmatic consistency in SBA's guaranty loan program benefits veterans and also has support of all the financial institutions that make the loans.

The solution to address this issue is to reinstate the fee waiver for SBA's veteran loan products.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Congress should permanently reinstate the fee waiver for veteran small business owners and support S. 2138 Small Dollar Loan and Veterans Loan Enhancement Act.
- » Raising the guaranty level of 7(a) loans will also incentivize more financial institutions to provide loans to veteran small businesses.

### KEY POINTS

- » Veterans are 45 percent more likely to start their own businesses, compared to their civilian counterparts. About 9 percent of small businesses are owned by veterans, and collectively, these 2.4 million businesses employ 6 million Americans, and generate over \$1 trillion in receipts.
- » Resolution No. 313: Support Elimination Funding Fees for Government Guaranteed Loans

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*Historically, through their service, America's veterans endure an 'earnings penalty' compared to their non-veteran peers. Waiving SBA 7a loan fees for veteran entrepreneurs helps them secure necessary small business financing and helps the American economy as they grow.*

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**William (Bill) Elmore**, former associate administrator for the U.S. Small Business Administration's Office of Veterans Business Development

# TRANSITION, EDUCATION & ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

## KEY POINTS

- » Nine of 10 veterans experiencing homelessness are men (33,492).
- » Six in 10 homeless veterans (22,740) were staying in emergency shelters or transitional housing programs, while two in five (14,345) were found in places not suitable for human habitation.
- » Most veterans experiencing homelessness were without children (36,280). About 2 percent (805) had dependents.



Homeless veteran encampments can be seen near the West LA VA campus. Schelly Stone

“  
*The recipe is deceptively simple: federal funding efficiently invested in communities. When given enough resources, and enough focus by leadership, communities are absolutely able to house every single veteran who needs help.*

**Kathryn Monet,**  
Executive Director,  
National Coalition for  
Homeless Veterans

## Prevent veteran homelessness

Generally, the causes of homelessness can be grouped into three categories: economic hardships, health issues and lack of affordable housing. Although these issues affect all homeless individuals, veterans face additional challenges in overcoming these obstacles, including prolonged separation from traditional supports such as family and friends; stressful training and occupational demands, which can affect personality, self-esteem and the ability to communicate upon discharge; and non-transferability of military occupational specialties into the civilian workforce.

Through the U.S. Housing and Urban Development’s (HUDs) annual Point-in-Time (PIT) count estimate of America’s homeless population, communities across the country reported that 37,085 veterans were experiencing homelessness on a given night in January 2019. Since 2010, veteran homelessness has dropped, with 50 percent (75,756) fewer veterans experiencing homelessness in 2019.

The American Legion is focused on prevention of homelessness through the simple mantra: “get them before they get on the street.” The Legion offers support to at-risk and/or homeless veterans and their families, advice and counseling, assistance obtaining care and benefits, financial help, career fairs, business development workshops and other forums.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » **Modify the current HUD definition that would cover couch surfing.**
- » **Permanently authorize the Supportive Services for Veterans and Families.**
- » **Provide funding for dental care and legal services for homeless veterans.**
- » **Continue to fund the homeless veterans Grant and Per Diem Program (transitional housing) at the level of local need, incorporating per diem for family members.**
- » **Provide a higher allocation of project-based HUD-VASH vouchers for homeless veterans.**



Troops can get a jump-start in such licensed fields as physical therapy. *Chelsea Purgahn*

## Licensing and credentialing

Military occupational career fields are measured and evaluated by performance standards and are highly respected by the civilian workforce. Unfortunately, these unique occupations are often not properly licensed or certified in civilian fields, thus delaying immediate civilian employment and career advancement.

To lower these barriers, The American Legion has established the Credentialing Advisory Roundtable in order to promote the transferability of military skills and experience, identify strategies and promote initiatives that will expand upon progress and promote wider awareness in the fields of licensing, certifications and credentialing.

The American Legion Credentialing Advisory Roundtable will report to the Veterans Employment & Education Commission and in 2020 will study five components of military credentialing:

- Public/private partnership models to transition military servicemembers into civilian employment
- Stackable training models and accrediting entities
- Scalable transition tools
- State funding-based pilot models
- Research gaps on military to civilian employment

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Pass the Incentives for Our Nation's Veterans in Energy Sustainability Technologies Act (INVEST Act) to incentivize employers to hire returning veterans who have received a professional certification of military occupational specialty or skill in renewable energy, advanced manufacturing, machining or welding, or engineering.
- » Pass the Pre-Apprenticeships to Hardhats Act (PATH Act) to foster nonprofit partnerships between industry, labor, academia, community groups, veterans associations and government for the purpose of developing pre-apprenticeship programs designed to help individuals achieve self-sufficiency.

### KEY POINTS

- » The American Legion hosted its third National Credentialing Summit in 2019 and continues to organize bi-annual credentialing roundtables that include stakeholders, government, industry and credentialing authorities.
- » The DoD's United Services Military Apprenticeship Program (USMAP) reached a milestone of 100,000 active participants in 2017 and continues to grow.
- » The Navy is launching a Naval Community College as part of an effort to revamp how it credentials and arranges education for Navy and Marine Corps personnel.

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*The efforts in Congressman Norcross' bill not only open the pipelines of the skilled trades to underserved communities across America, they are essential to securing a strong foundation for America's middle-class and ensuring national and local economic growth.*

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**Sean McGarvey,**  
President of North America's  
Building Trades Unions.



# TRANSITION, EDUCATION & ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

## KEY POINTS

- » Twenty-four percent of for-profit schools are out of compliance with the 90-10 rule with GI Bill and DoD benefits factored.
- » In 2019, the Federal Trade Commission reached a \$191 million settlement with for-profit University of Phoenix to resolve charges that the school falsely promoted its education benefits and used deceptive marketing materials that targeted active-duty service members, veterans and military spouses.



Shutterstock



*Our veterans have served our nation selflessly, and we made a promise to assist them as they transition to civilian life after service... this bill puts reasonable protections in place that are fair to veterans, taxpayers, and schools.*

**Sen. James Lankford** (R-Okla.), on the Protect Veterans' Education and Taxpayer Spending Act, of which he is an original co-sponsor

## GI Bill abuse by for-profit schools

With the passage of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act – the “Forever GI Bill” – providing the largest improvement in veterans’ education in a decade, The American Legion is now focused on ensuring that student veterans and their families receive the highest quality education when using their GI Bill benefits. Unfortunately, unscrupulous schools and programs have successfully recruited veterans through misleading advertising and market saturation. While there are many reasons these schools are poor choices for veterans, one overriding reason why veterans have been aggressively recruited is the 90-10 loophole.

Under current law, for-profit colleges may receive no more than 90 percent of their revenues from federal aid. At least 10 percent of revenue must be acquired outside of federal aid so that the Department of Education has quality assurance. If a college offers a quality education at a competitive price, someone other than the federal government, such as employers, philanthropic scholarships or students, will be willing to pay for attendance at the school.

VA and DoD education programs are statutorily counted as private dollars on the 10 percent side, allowing schools to report GI Bill and DoD Tuition Assistance as private dollars, resulting in aggressive recruitment.

The American Legion believes that legislation and federal agency action should be taken to ensure better quality and student outcomes for servicemembers and veterans, by excluding Department of Defense and VA funds from the 90-10 calculation for federal student aid.

## WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Pass the Protect Veterans' Education and Taxpayer Spending Act, to close the 90/10 loophole that counts VA and DoD educational funds as private dollars.
- » Pass the Protect the GI Bill Act to reinstate GI Bill benefits to students whose schools have closed and require common-sense GI Bill oversight of schools.





A Coast Guard aviation survival technician trains in Michigan. *U.S. Coast Guard*

## Ensure the Coast Guard is paid

On a daily basis, U.S. Coast Guard personnel carry out missions that are vital to national security. The Coast Guard, however, is the only military branch forced to work without pay during a government shutdown. This is unacceptable.

The repeated and all too common threat of government shutdowns brings severe hardship on U.S. Coast Guard members and their families. No member of the U.S. military service should ever live in fear of not being paid. The American Legion supports bills and provisions that will ensure the Coast Guard is paid during government shutdowns.

This situation came to a head in January 2019 during the 35-day federal government shutdown. During that time, in an effort to help junior enlisted personnel with children at home make ends meet, The American Legion issued more than \$1 million in expedited Temporary Financial Assistance grants.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Pass S.21 Pay Our Coast Guard Act, and H.R. Pay Our Coast Guard Parity Act of 2019.

### KEY POINTS

- » The U.S. Coast Guard is the only branch of service forced to go without pay during the federal government shutdown of January 2019.
- » Dozens of American Legion posts raised funds and collected essential items to help Coast Guard families during the shutdown.
- » The American Legion adamantly opposes any delays or stoppages of pay for members of the U.S. Armed Forces, even during a time of shutdown for other government agencies, due to the necessity of maintaining our national security.



*Ultimately, I find it unacceptable that Coast Guard men and women have to rely on food pantries and donations to get through day-to-day life as service members.*

**Adm. Karl Schultz,**  
26th Commandant of the  
U.S. Coast Guard, during the  
2019 government shutdown  
that lasted 35 days

# NATIONAL SECURITY

## KEY POINTS

- » The Pentagon's National Defense Strategy promotes a world where great-power competition, rather than counter terrorism, will drive DoD decision-making and force structure.
- » For decades, the United States has generally been able to deploy forces when, how and where desired. Today, every domain is contested. The National Defense Authorization Act of 2020 budget requests \$750 billion for national security with just over \$718 billion of that amount for the DoD. This will reverse the effects of sequestration and exceeds the defense spending caps set by the Budget Control Act of 2011.
- » The 2020 defense budget goes a long way toward rebuilding the military infrastructure, size and scope that sequestration crippled. The American Legion supports strengthening the U.S. military in these uncertain times.



*This nation will remain the land of the free only so long as it is the home of the brave.*

**Elmer Davis,**

Director of the United States Office of War Information during World War II and a Peabody Award recipient



Marines disembark an MV-22 Osprey on a training mission in Hawaii. *U.S. Marine Corps*

## Strengthen the U.S. military

For decades, the United States has generally been able to deploy forces at a time and place of its own choosing. Today, every domain is contested.

The National Defense Authorization Act of 2020 requests \$750 billion for national security with just over \$718 billion of that amount appropriated for the Department of Defense. This will help offset the effects of seven years of sequestration, and exceeds the defense spending caps set by the Budget Control Act of 2011. In 2018, the Pentagon outlined a planned trajectory of the defense budget that will not be enough to rebuild the military and create separation between the United States and its strategic competitors; this budget goes a long way toward correcting that deficit.

The American Legion supports strengthening the U.S. military in these uncertain times with both highly trained personnel and state-of-the-art supportive equipment. Our military men and women deserve no less. The administration, leaders at the Pentagon and Congress must do everything possible to ensure our nation's citizens and allies are protected.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » **Continuing to focus on rebuilding the U.S. military to reconstitute and upgrade equipment that has supported over a decade of war and ensure our fighting force has the tools and weaponry to protect the United States and global interests against all forms of aggression.**
- » **Consistently pass the NDAA without the need for continuing resolutions, to ensure reliable, consistent funding, and ensure that all military members, including the U.S. Coast Guard, are paid without delay.**
- » **Increase the budget by 2.5 percent to 3.5 percent to ensure combat effectiveness for the next five years.**



Gold Star families need continued support from veteran and military communities. DoD

## Support for Gold Star Families

Members of the U.S. Armed Forces do not serve alone. Their spouses, children and other loved ones also sacrifice. While every service member raises his or her hand and swears an oath to lay down their lives for freedom if necessary and to defend the nation, a disconnect often exists between the military community and surviving family members.

The American Legion supports and demands surviving families receive the highest level of support as they face heart-wrenching decisions immediately upon being notified of a loved one's death.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Support a program within the Department of Defense that ensures Gold Star Families receive the benefits and support they have earned.
- » Bring awareness to the programs that support and honor the ultimate sacrifices service members have made, as well as their families.
- » Restore base privileges and readmit Gold Star wives back into the military communities with their children regardless of their future marital status.

### KEY POINTS

- » Gold Star parents, surviving spouses and children each have unique issues that need to be addressed. Veteran service organizations are capable and willing to provide support to Gold Star surviving families, and that support should be referenced upon notification of death.
- » Beyond the Service Members Group Life Insurance policy, which provides a one-time lump-sum payment for those who elect to sign up, there are two different types of survivor benefits available to military spouses and children. These include Department of Defense insurance annuity and Dependency and Indemnity Compensation.

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*I had no choice in those words that were given to me, but I did have a choice how I responded. My choice was to put on Marc's boots, pick up his weapon and stay in the fight for you, stay in the fight for every other man and woman who serves, stay in the fight for every family that has lost a loved one.*

**Debbie Lee**, Gold Star Mother



# NATIONAL SECURITY

## KEY POINTS

- » Build a more lethal force. The most effective way to prevent war is to be adequately prepared for one and displaying superior firepower. In doing so, we must continue to take a competitive approach against our enemies whether they be state actors non-state actors or cyber criminals.
- » Force size matters not only in its lethality but its maneuverability to achieve sustainable outcomes that protect the American people and vital U.S. interests.
- » America must aim for a joint force that possesses decisive advantages for any likely conflict, while remaining proficient across the entire spectrum of war.
- » U.S. assets in space must be protected.



*Combat is unforgiving, and more unforgiving in armies that are not manned, trained, equipped and well-led.*

**General Mark A. Milley**,  
then U.S. Army Chief of Staff,  
currently Chairman of the  
Joint Chiefs of Staff



Joint training prepares forces for military interoperability. DoD

## U.S. military readiness and speed

In a time of uncertainty, America stands ready to fight its battles and support U.S. allies, any time and place. The U.S. military needs to be ready to take the fight to our nation's enemies, on their shores or our own. To ensure this, the U.S. military must be ready at a moment's notice to combat adversaries and be effective in doing so.

The American Legion supports a military ready to immediately deploy, to defend the homeland, allies and way of life. This includes armed conflict, natural disaster relief and support operations.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Ensure that the U.S. military is fully funded on time, every time, through the NDAA and proposed budget.
- » Support reforming the Department of Defense focus on joint force business practices for greater performance and affordability. In doing so, the United States will out-think, out-manuever and challenge the status quo while out-partnering and out-innovating revisionist powers, rogue regimes, terrorists and other possible threats.
- » Ensure the United States maintains and supports strategic partners and allies in Europe and, specifically, the Pacific Rim. These island nations are critical to the successful defense of global trade access routes and the security of U.S. interests in the South China seas.
- » Reassure U.S. allies and strategic partners like Australia, Taiwan, New Zealand, The Federated States of Micronesia and others that the United States will not let them suffer from communist aggression.





Joint training allows coalition forces to operate as a unified multi-lateral team. U.S. Air Force

## KEY POINTS

» There is no arc of historical happenstance that ensures that America's free political and economic system will automatically prevail. Our success and failure depends upon actions.

» We must assist fragile states to prevent threats to the U.S. homeland. This can include non-state actors such as ISIS, Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda or include state actors like North Korea.

» The United States will prioritize collaborations with aspiring nations that share a common core set of values with the United States and our allies. This will include investing where the United States can have the most impact on local reformers that are committed to tackling their own economic and political challenges.

## Strength through alliances

Some of the greatest triumphs of American statecraft resulted from helping fragile and developing countries become successful societies. These successes created profitable markets for American businesses, allies to help achieve favorable regional balances of power and coalition partners to share burdens and address a variety of problems around the world. Over time, the United States has helped create a network of states that advance our common interests and values.

The American Legion supports strength in U.S. alliances through diplomatic measures. This is to ensure stability in regions where our allies and partners reside, as well as the homeland and its territories.

### WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- » Use diplomacy and assistance to encourage states to make choices that improve governance, rule of law and sustainable development.
- » Resolve our commitment to fragile states where weakness would magnify threats to America. For instance, engagement in Afghanistan seeks to prevent the re-emergence of a terrorist haven.
- » Safeguard territories and strategic island locations that will enable us to protect our interests and launch attacks from a variety of locations throughout the South Pacific region.
- » Place a priority on economic support that achieves local and macroeconomic stability, helps build capable security forces, and strengthens the rule of law.

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*Peace is a daily, a weekly, a monthly process, gradually changing opinions, slowly eroding old barriers, quietly building new structures.*

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**John F. Kennedy,**  
35th President of the  
United States

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# PREAMBLE TO THE AMERICAN LEGION CONSTITUTION

FOR GOD AND COUNTRY  
WE ASSOCIATE OURSELVES  
TOGETHER FOR THE FOLLOWING PURPOSES:

To uphold and defend the Constitution  
of the United States of America;

To maintain law and order;

To foster and perpetuate a  
one hundred percent Americanism;

To preserve the memories and incidents  
of our associations in all wars;

To inculcate a sense of individual obligation  
to the community, state and nation;

To combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses;

To make right the master of might;

To promote peace and goodwill on earth;

To safeguard and transmit to posterity the principles of  
justice, freedom and democracy;

To consecrate and sanctify our comradeship  
by our devotion to mutual helpfulness.




## THE AMERICAN LEGION

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