

American Legion Washington Conference 2023

The Detachment of New York was well represented at this year's Washington Conference, which began with a Wreath Laying Event on Sunday, February 26th. Organized by the National Legislative Commission of the Sons of The American Legion, this year's contingent of Legion Family members totaled 150 in 3 tour busses as the group travelled to various memorials to honor our Nation's veterans.



The day started at the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery where members witnessed a wreath laying by National SONS Commander Chris Carlton, who was accompanied by younger NY members Stenn and Geir Clancy, sons of PDC William Clancy.



The next stop was the Vietnam Memorial, followed by a wreath placement at the Korean War Memorial by our Department Commander David R. Riley, Sr., accompanied by Department Adjutant James Casey.



The final stop on Sunday's agenda took the members to the World War II

Memorial. Detachment Commander Timothy S. Van Patten, II placed a wreath at the New York pillar, in memory of not only both of his grandfathers, but all of New York's military who served in that war.



The Conference continued the following two days, with informative National American Legion Commission and Committee meetings, along with the National American Legion Commander's Call, where attendees heard from several



Congressmen and a Senator, along with other speakers.

Members then travelled to Capitol Hill to meet with their congressmen and urge their support for the various Legislative priorities of The American Legion this session. American Legion National Commander Vincent J. Troiola (NY) testified before a joint session of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs at the conclusion of the Conference.

This year's Legislative priorities are included in this summary. **SONS members are urged to contact their congressmen and our two Senators to support these measures.**

Support our Afghan Allies

In the U.S. military, there is a code: “no one left behind.” For two decades, members of the U.S. Armed Forces fought shoulder-to-shoulder with brave Afghan allies who served with and protected Americans, fighting for the freedom of Afghanistan and its people. The United States must honor its promises and provide genuine, lasting protection for the Afghans who have made it safely to the United States, and for those who were left behind. The American Legion urges Congress to reintroduce and pass legislation that would grant permanent legal status to Afghan refugees and improve the Special Immigrant Visa process for Afghans who served alongside U.S. service members.

Military Quality of Life

The U.S. military’s greatest resources are individual service members and their families. Without highly qualified and committed men and women, even the most sophisticated weaponry will not provide the deterrent necessary to defend our nation. Factors that contribute to quality of life include proper compensation, career development, appropriate housing, quality healthcare, reasonably priced commissaries and access to affordable daycare. The American Legion urges Congress to pass legislation that would increase access to child care for military families, increase appropriations to address matters involving service member food insecurity and increase funding to renovate military housing.

Pay the Coast Guard

U.S. Coast Guard personnel carry out vital national security missions, but they are the only U.S. military branch that works without pay during government shutdowns, due to their status under the Department of Homeland Security. The common threat of government shutdowns brings severe and unnecessary hardship on these men, women and their families. The American Legion urges Congress to reintroduce and pass the Unwavering Support for our Coast Guard Act, which would guarantee that Coast Guard personnel are paid without delay, even in the case of a government shutdown.



DoD Photo

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 multiple common patriotic customs and practices, as described in American Legion Resolution No. 19: Flag Code Amendment.



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The American Legion Legislative Agenda

For the 118th Congress, 1st Session

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

Mental Health & Suicide Prevention

The leading issue facing the veteran community is suicide. The suicide rate among veterans is nearly double that of their civilian counterparts, with more than 6,000 veterans taking their lives annually. It is imperative to destigmatize asking for mental health support. Simultaneously, access to such support must increase. The American Legion encourages Congress to enhance access to alternative therapies, robustly fund VA's suicide-prevention outreach budget and continue to invest in mental-health research.

VA Healthcare Modernization

The future of VA healthcare is as a hybrid system consisting of Veterans Health Administration-provided inpatient and outpatient care, telehealth and community care. Ensuring VA is equipped to meet the unique needs of an increasingly diverse veteran population requires that VA fully leverage all healthcare modalities and ensure a seamless transition between them. Modernizing electronic health records, veteran-centric access standards, and a transparent online scheduling system for VHA-provided care and community care alike are all essential to ensuring veterans receive the care they deserve. The means by which VA delivers care may change, but one thing will not: VA should continue to provide the best care anywhere to our nation's veterans.

PACT Act: Implementation & Oversight

Passage of the SFC Heath Robinson PACT Act in the 117th Congress ensured millions of toxic-exposed veterans will now have access to healthcare and compensation they rightfully deserve. VA estimates there will be up to 7 million new disability claims filed, due to eligibility expansion under the PACT Act and that the claims backlog will increase to 450,000 by October 2023. The efforts put forth by the VA workforce to reduce claims backlogs in recent years have been admirable, but substantial backlogs of hundreds of thousands of claims for sustained periods of time are not acceptable. It is imperative that VA fully leverage the resources made available in the PACT Act to assist in the continued modernization of information technology systems, as well as the hiring of additional employees to ensure veterans claims are adjudicated in a timely manner. The American Legion urges Congress to provide necessary oversight and funding to ensure VA has the resources needed to properly implement this legislation.

Protect Veterans from Predatory Actors

America's veterans are targeted by predatory actors that seek to profit from an array of benefits that have been rightfully earned by those who have served our nation. From claims companies that charge exorbitant fees (for services provided free by veterans service organizations) to lawyers vying for billions of dollars set aside for victims of diseases associated with contaminants, veterans and their families are met by promises of large payouts if they agree to surrender substantial portions of their benefits. Predatory actors often attempt to overwhelm veterans with aggressive marketing tactics and complicated contracts. The American Legion urges Congress to oppose legislation that elevates the standing of unaccredited claims companies or legitimizes predatory practices that target veterans and encourages Congress to impose a cap on legal services provided in association with the Camp Lejeune Justice Act.

Concurrent Receipt

Currently, 50,300 military retirees with combat-related injuries qualify for DoD retirement pay as well as VA disability compensation. However, for retired veterans with disability ratings less than 50%, the VA compensation is deducted from their DoD retirement pay. The American Legion strongly supports ending this unfair policy. The Major Richard Star Act would repeal this draconian offset, allowing disabled veterans to concurrently receive their retirement pay and disability compensation.

Guard & Reserve GI Bill Parity

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

GI Bill for Honorable Service

To receive most VA benefits, a veteran's characterization of discharge from service must be "under honorable conditions." However, education assistance benefits within the GI Bill, require that service members receive an "honorable discharge." If the characterization of service is "general under honorable conditions," the Post-9/11 GI Bill 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.