

## Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation

April 2026

By 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice – Lynda Griffin



### 2026 American Legion Washington Conference

I attended the American Legion Washington Conference last month and it was extremely emotional and a learning experience for me. Some of the issues we talked to our State Representative and Senator's about where the following issues concerning our veterans today. I have attached the information of each issue to this month's bulletin, they are as follows: Balanced Community Care, Empowering and investing in Women Veterans, Guard & Reserve GI Bill Parity, and Improving Lethality of our armed Forces. Major Richard Star Act, Veteran Homelessness, Winning the War Within.

I have attached a brief newsletter sharing an important message from the American Legion National Commander. Please read and share this information with your unit.

On behalf of the Department of Arizona American Legion Auxiliary I would like to extend our warmest congratulation to all the National winners. Congratulation to Felix Fortuna for winning First Place at the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival (VCAF). This is a remarkable achievement and a testament to your incredible talent. Mr. Fortuna will be turning 102 year young on June 9, 2026, he is a veteran of the United State Navy. While we are sorry to hear that you will be unable to attend the National VCAF in person this year which falls on your special day, we want to celebrate this incredible milestone with you. Happy 102<sup>nd</sup> Birthday! We are all so proud of your accomplishments and grateful for your service.



**Carl T Hayden Phoenix VA Medical Center  
National Competition Winners**

*Destroyer of Valor, Feliciano Fortuna  
1<sup>st</sup> Place Combat Experience (top left)*

**Let us all remember the ALA Mission Statement in everything we do!**

In the spirit of Service, Not Self, the mission of the American Legion Auxiliary is to support The American Legion and to honor the sacrifice of those who serve by enhancing the lives of our veterans, military, and their families, both at home and abroad. For God and Country, we advocate for veterans, educate our citizens, mentor youth, and promote patriotism, good citizenship, peace and security.

# Balanced Community Care

## BACKGROUND

Access to community care is essential for veterans, particularly those living in rural areas and those with unique needs. An estimated 4.6 million veterans reside in rural communities, with 58% enrolled in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), compared to 38% for urban veterans, underscoring the need for accessible healthcare options.

While The American Legion believes VA should remain the cornerstone of veterans healthcare, integration of community care to supplement the VA direct-care system has been an important relief valve to ensure veterans get the care they need, when they need it.

Over \$150 billion has been spent on community care since 2015. Costs for community care have grown approximately 20% annually since 2019, while internal VA costs have remained stable. The increase is primarily due to expanded eligibility.

Rural veterans face unique challenges obtaining VA care. For instance, lack of internet connectivity makes it difficult for rural veterans to attend telehealth visits. Rural broadband access must be expanded and transportation programs improved.

## KEY POINTS

- Community care should receive the same coordination and oversight as VHA-provided care.
- Community care costs have ballooned due to expanded use and require additional oversight.
- VA providers should be able to fully treat veterans outside of the state in which they are licensed to operate.
- Transportation programs for veterans to and from appointments both at VA and in the community must be improved, including emergency flights.

## WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO

- **Pass S. 275/H.R. 740 – Veterans ACCESS Act**
- **Pass H.R. 1107 – Protecting Veteran Access to Telemedicine Services Act**
- Ensure veterans receive any bills for copays quickly and do not receive surprise bills months after treatment.
- Pass legislation codifying rules VA is currently using to allow doctors to treat and prescribe remotely for patients outside the state the provider is licensed in.



## THE AMERICAN LEGION'S LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Scan the QR code to read the full list of legislative priorities of The American Legion.



# Empowering and Investing in Women Veterans

## BACKGROUND

Women are the fastest-growing demographic within the military and veteran community. Women have played a vital role in every conflict since the Revolutionary War, and yet, the existing infrastructure to support their health-care needs continues to be insufficient.

Research shows that women veterans have a suicide rate that is 92.4% higher than their female civilian counterparts. Additionally, the suicide rate was 75% higher for women using VA services who reported experiencing Military Sexual Trauma (MST). The research is clear – more must be done to support the health needs of our female veterans.

Another emerging challenge for VA surrounds the impacts of menopause. Despite impacting half of the population, not much is known about menopause and its effects on women, let alone women who have served. Additionally, 20% of perimenopausal women report symptoms of depression, which becomes complex when considering the additional factor of their service.

The American Legion is proud to endorse, advocate for, and offer grassroots support for legislation that supports and invests in women who have served. The American Legion is fighting for health-care facilities that are inclusive, empowering survivors of MST and investing in research to support women as they age.

## KEY POINTS

- Women are the fastest-growing demographic within the military and veteran community.
- Research shows that women veterans have a suicide rate that is 92.4% higher than that of their female civilian counterparts.
- When compared to their civilian counterparts, the suicide rate was 75% higher for women using VA services who reported experiencing MST.
- Not much is known about menopause and its effects on women, let alone women who have served.

## WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO

- **Pass S. 1245 – Servicemembers and Veterans Empowerment and Support (SAVES) Act**
- **Pass S. 609 – Building Resources and Access for Veterans' Mental Health Engagement (BRAVE) Act**
- **Pass H.R. 219 – Improving Menopause Care for Veterans Act**



# 92.4% HIGHER

the suicide rate for women veterans  
compared to their civilian counterparts

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American Legion.*



## Guard & Reserve GI Bill Parity

### BACKGROUND

National Guard and Reserve servicemembers play a critical role in defending our borders, responding to public health crises and supporting local law enforcement. These servicemembers frequently face unique challenges on the home front, often leaving behind their families and civilian jobs for extended periods, sometimes at a considerable financial loss. Despite their significant contributions, they are often denied a fundamental benefit: the GI Bill.

Under current law, National Guard and Reserve servicemembers accrue GI Bill entitlement only when activated under federal orders. When activated under state orders, they do not qualify for GI Bill benefits, creating a significant disparity in access to these crucial resources. This issue became particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic when many National Guard units were activated in response to the public health emergency. Those called under federal orders to assist with pandemic relief were eligible for GI Bill benefits, but those activated under state orders, such as those supporting governors' declarations, were not. Similarly, National Guard members who helped construct the U.S.-Mexico border wall earned GI Bill benefits, but the thousands who responded to civil rights protests in 2020 did not.

The arbitrary distinction between federal and state orders in determining GI Bill eligibility is unjust and should be eliminated. The American Legion strongly believes that "every day in uniform counts" and that National Guard and Reserve servicemembers, who serve alongside their active-duty counterparts, should receive the same benefits. It is time for Congress to rectify this discrepancy and extend GI Bill eligibility to all National Guard and Reserve servicemembers, regardless of the nature of their activation.

### KEY POINTS

- Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, all 50 states and U.S. territories activated servicemembers under 502(f) status to directly assist in the crisis.
- When Army Reserve servicemembers are ordered to professional development academies, they are activated under GI Bill-eligible 12301(d) orders.
- When National Guard servicemembers are ordered to the same professional development academies, they are activated under GI Bill-ineligible 502(f) orders.

### WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO

- **Pass H.R. 1423 - Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act of 2025**
- **Pass H.R. 6975 – Duty Status Reform Act** to simplify Guard and Reserve pay and benefits accounting.
- Hold DoD and the National Guard Bureau accountable for transparency to National Guard and Reserve servicemembers on their GI Bill eligibility.



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# Improving Lethality of our Armed Forces

## BACKGROUND

The continued modernization of the U.S. Armed Forces is essential for maintaining military superiority and ensuring national security in an increasingly complex and dynamic global environment.

As adversaries adopt new technologies and strategies, the United States must stay ahead by embracing cutting-edge solutions and modernizing its defense capabilities.

This includes investing in next-generation weaponry, cybersecurity measures and artificial intelligence, all critical to maintaining strategic advantage.

America no longer has the world's largest navy and China's shipbuilding capacity is 232 times greater than that of the United States.

The modernization process also involves updating military infrastructure, improving logistics and enhancing the training and operational readiness of personnel to address evolving threats.

## KEY POINTS

- The U.S. Navy trails behind China's navy in number of battle force ships. As of 2025, China's navy has over 370 ships, whereas the U.S. Navy has 296 ships.
- The defense industrial base is not equipped to meet the rising shipbuilding demand to meet the U.S. Navy's projected force-level goals over the next 30 years. Increasing the domestic shipbuilding capacity requires expanding shipyard infrastructure and developing a skilled shipbuilding workforce.
- Unmanned systems are growing in demand for aerial, ground, and maritime warfighting applications. Specialized components are commonly sourced worldwide for the domestic production of unmanned systems, posing a supply chain risk for the defense industrial base's manufacturing capacity for unmanned systems.

## WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO

- **Pass H.R. 3151/S.1541 – Shipbuilding and Harbor Infrastructure for Prosperity and Security (SHIPS) for America Act**
- **Pass S. 5618 – Fostering Reform and Government Efficiency in Defense (FoRGED) Act**
- National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2027



## THE AMERICAN LEGION'S LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

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# Major Richard Star Act

## BACKGROUND

The Major Richard Star Act is bipartisan legislation intended to correct a long-standing inequity affecting medically retired, combat-injured veterans. The bill would authorize full concurrent receipt of Department of Defense (DoD) medical retirement pay and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability compensation for eligible veterans who were medically retired prior to completing 20 years of service due to combat-related disabilities.

Under current law, certain combat-injured veterans who are medically retired with fewer than 20 years of service are required to waive or offset their earned DoD medical retirement pay in order to receive VA disability compensation. This policy creates an inequitable, two-tiered system that arbitrarily distinguishes veterans based solely on length of service rather than the severity or cause of their injuries. As a result, veterans whose military careers were involuntarily cut short by combat-related wounds are financially penalized for circumstances beyond their control. The Major Richard Star Act would restore fairness by ensuring these veterans receive the full benefits they have earned through honorable service and sacrifice.

## KEY POINTS

- Combat-injured veterans who are medically retired before completing 20 years of service are currently denied full concurrent receipt of benefits they have earned.
- Military retired pay is earned compensation for honorable service, while VA disability compensation is restitution for service-connected injuries; these benefits serve separate and distinct purposes.
- Under current law, veterans are treated unequally based solely on length of service, not on the severity, cause or combat-related nature of their injuries.
- It eliminates the requirement that medically retired combat-injured veterans waive earned retirement pay in order to receive VA disability compensation.
- Combat-injured veterans are medically retired through no fault of their own, often as a direct result of wounds sustained in service to the nation.
- The current \$1-for-\$1 offset policy undermines financial stability for wounded veterans and their families.
- This disparity undermines fairness, morale and the nation's obligation to those who were wounded in defense of the United States.

## WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO

- **Pass H.R.2102 – Major Richard Star Act** to authorize full concurrent receipt for medically retired combat-injured veterans.
- Eliminate statutory offsets that unfairly penalize veterans wounded in combat.
- Ensure parity and fairness across all military retirement categories.



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*A Community of Volunteers Serving Veterans, Military, and their Families*

March 2026

Issue #7 Special Edition

**FROM THE 2025-2026 NATIONAL CHAIR OF THE VA&R PROGRAM**

**Please share the message below to all of our members from  
The American Legion National Commander, Dan Wiley**

"All,

The American Legion Auxiliary/Sons of The American Legion know this all too well—military families already carry more than their fair share of challenges and uncertainty that comes with supporting our loved ones in uniform. One thing that should never be uncertain is whether our service members will be paid for their work.

Right now, Coast Guard families are facing that uncertainty. Missing a paycheck doesn't just affect the service member—it affects spouses, children, rent or mortgage payments, groceries, and every part of family life. No family who is serving this country should have to wonder how they will make ends meet.

Your voice matters. Members of Congress need to hear directly from the families who live this reality every day. [Please take a few minutes to contact your Senators and Representative TODAY and urge them to act immediately to ensure Coast Guard service members receive the pay they have earned.](#)

Our military families sacrifice so much to support the mission. The least our nation can do is ensure that those who serve are paid on time, every time. Thank you for standing up for Coast Guard families."

**Click on the live link in [blue](#) above to contact your Senators and Representatives.  
Do it today- Don't delay!**



# Veteran Homelessness

## BACKGROUND

The Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) annual Point-In-Time (PIT) count provides an estimate that approximately 32,882 veterans are currently experiencing homelessness in the United States, including Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. Veterans make up a disproportionate share of the homeless adult population, representing about 8% to 9% of all homeless adults across these regions. Despite significant progress made since 2009, with sheltered and unsheltered veteran homelessness alike decreasing by 49%, considerable work remains to be done to ensure that no veteran is left without stable housing. Persistence of this issue highlights the need for continued efforts and innovative solutions in addressing the root causes of homelessness among veterans.

## KEY POINTS

- In 2024, 19,031 veterans experienced sheltered homelessness – a decrease of 1,036 veterans (5.2%) from 2023.
- In 2024, 13,851 veterans experienced unsheltered homelessness – a decrease of 1,656 veterans (10.6%) from 2023.
- Female veterans are the fastest-growing demographic among the U.S. homeless population.

## WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO

- **Pass H.R. 1957 – End Veteran Homelessness Act**
- **Pass H.R. 3869 – Every Veteran Housed Act**
- Provide a higher allocation of project-based HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) vouchers for homeless veterans.
- Ensure enhanced use leasing specifically provides permanent benefits, resources, and services to the veteran community.
- Permanently authorize the Supportive Services for Veteran Families program with adequate funding of \$800 million per year.
- Fully fund the Grant Per-Diem program as authorized by the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act at \$350 million per year.



# 32,882

Veterans Experiencing homelessness in the United States in 2024

*Source: The 2024 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR to Congress) Part 1: Point-In-Time Estimates of Homelessness, December 2024*

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# JOIN US FOR THE ULTIMATE MILITARY AND VETERANS COMMUNITY HOME/HEALTH AND CAR SHOW



## Extravaganza



- Military and Veterans Health & Wellness Community Vendors
- Food Trucks
- Guest Speakers
- Car Show: Trophies and Cash Prizes
- DJ
- Military and Veteran Social Gatherings and More!



Rev up your engines and cruise on over to the most anticipated car show of the year! Whether you're a car enthusiast, a collector or just someone who appreciates the beauty of finely crafted automobiles, this event is for you. Our Military and Veterans Appreciation Community Home/Health and Car Show Extravaganza will feature a stunning array of classic cars, muscle cars, hot rods and exotic vehicles from all eras as well as Veteran/Military Community Resources.

📍 Sandra Day O'Connor High School, 25250 N 35th Avenue, Phoenix

For more information and to register your vehicle, vendor or attendee:

🌐 <https://americanlegion3rdannualshow.eventbrite.com>

SEE YOU THERE!



<b>21</b>
<b>MARCH</b>
<b>11 AM - 2 PM</b>



# Winning The War Within

## BACKGROUND

The American Legion is a national leader in advocating for improvements in mental health care and peer support, through the Be the One mission to prevent veteran suicide, risk-detection training, Buddy Check programs and advocacy.

**The veteran suicide epidemic continues to be the No. 1 concern of The American Legion.** Veteran suicide rates have increased by 52% since 2001, now more than double that of civilians.

Veterans grappling with mental health issues are more likely than others to take their own lives. The American Legion is actively combatting the “broken veteran” narrative and believes trauma can be a source of strength. Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) is a recent theory exploring alternative outcomes for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) treatments, but PTG therapies have been difficult for VA to implement.

Through public private partnerships, organizations like the American Legion have the ability to implement peer-support programs for veterans. Many peer-support programs are eligible to apply for the Staff Sergeant Parker Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program which provides funding from VA to these organizations to accomplish their mission and the unique circumstances veterans face.

The American Legion supports alternative options for pain medication; opioid-dependent veterans are 90% more likely than others to die by suicide. The Legion also advocates for an improved Military Sexual Trauma claims process; veterans who have experienced sexual trauma have a 75% higher suicide rate than others.

Another emerging suicide comorbidity is Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), a type of brain injury often caused by multiple mild Traumatic Brain Injuries.

The American Legion urges Congress to continue exploring and expanding alternative and breakthrough therapies, especially those that affect the veteran community such as TBIs, CTE, PTSD and chronic pain.

## KEY POINTS

- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among veterans under 45.
- VA reports 17.5 veterans a day die of suicide, but it may be as high as 44.
- Mental health treatments reduce veteran suicide rates in veterans by 39.77%.
- The American Legion encourages the use of peer-support programs to address feelings of isolation within the veteran community.

## WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO

- **Pass S. 800 – Precision Brain Health Research Act**, or similar legislation, to advance knowledge on how military brain injuries affect veteran suicide.
- **Pass S. 3346 – Freedom to Heal Act** to improve alternative therapy access
- **Pass H.R. 2623 – Innovative Therapies Centers of Excellence Act of 2025** to designate centers of excellence for complimentary alternative medicine and breakthrough therapies.
- Permanently authorize the **Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program**
- Pass legislation which fast-tracks non-opioid alternatives for chronic pain.



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