

National Legislative Division Weekly

CONGRESS



House Appropriations Committee (HAC) Ranking Member DeLauro (D-CT)

The House will be in session next week, but the Senate will be in recess.

House Appropriations Committee (HAC) subcommittees started to markup up bills this week, even as uncertainty over the debt ceiling problem continued.

HAC ranking member Rep. DeLauro (D-CT) has warned lawmakers that community spending, or earmark, requests could be reduced by as much as 70% if the cuts required by the Republicans' Limit, Save, Grow Act were to be applied.

It remains doubtful that the GOP plan for drastically reducing government spending in exchange for raising the debt ceiling will go into effect. Negotiations at the White House on Tuesday concluded with no clear answers. However, House Speaker McCarthy (R-CA) told reporters there is a better structure in place for conducting negotiations, as the White House has named two key aides to the team. It is almost certain that some level of spending caps will result. Energy permitting is reportedly also expected to be in the final agreement.

The Treasury Department continues to predict June 1 as the date for when it would be forced to default on government obligations. So far, experts say, the financial markets have pretty much ignored the situation, with an expectation it will be resolved. However, without progress by this time next week, the stock market could be expected to decline markedly. If default actually occurs, retirement accounts will be negatively impacted and corporate and consumer credit could be harder and more expensive to obtain, among other impacts.

The Senate Appropriations Committee, this week, released a statement that it will hold markups in June. They had originally hoped to start that process this week. According to some reports, the new dates are June 20 and 21 for the full committee markup.

This week, three of the seven women currently serving in Congress relaunched the Servicewomen and Women Veterans Caucus (Swwv). Rep. Kiggans (R-VA), Rep. Houlihan (D-PA) and Rep. Sherrill (D-NJ) are leading the effort, which has already accumulated 50 members from both sides of the aisle.

Concerns over the mental fitness of Sen. Feinstein (D-CA) continue to grow. Feinstein returned to the Senate last week after a prolonged absence due her hospitalization and recovery from shingles. Even before that, she sometimes appeared confused when speaking with reporters, with her answers frequently

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conflicting with her staff's statements. This week, reporters asked her about her return. Feinstein responded that she had never been gone, and had been in Washington, DC, for the last few weeks working and voting in person. Complicating matters further, on Thursday, Feinstein's office had to issue a statement correcting the Senator on the fact that she did, indeed, have encephalitis during her absence. Feinstein had told CNN earlier in the day that she had a bad flu. The office confirmed that it was indeed the more severe disease.

PACT ACT IMPLEMENTATION

A subcommittee of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, on Tuesday, learned that, as of May 12, 251,584 veterans and family members had completed PACT Act claims, with an 80% approval rate.

Lawmakers expressed concern over the growing backlog in claims. VA witnesses said that was expected, and they are working to deal with it. This year, they have processed 15% more claims than they had at this time last year, despite receiving 30% more claims. The VA continues to hire more employees, train them, and impose mandatory overtime (although a respite will be provided for several weeks during the summer).

On April 17, they completed more than 9,000 claims decisions in a day, the highest level in VA history. They have completed more than 8,000 claims in a day more than 40 times this year, something that had occurred only six times before this year.

The VA intends to publish a list of about 300 potential service presumptions related to toxic exposures in the next few months. VA officials say this is the first time they will have the opportunity to receive public input in this manner, thanks to the PACT Act.

CAMP LEJEUNE STUDY

A study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) this week found a clear connection between exposure to contaminated drinking water at Camp Lejeune and Parkinson disease (PD). The study compared data on Marines and Navy personnel who lived at Camp Lejeune with data on those at Camp Pendleton for at least three months between 1975 and 1985.

The water at Camp Lejeune was contaminated with several trichloroethylene (TCE) and several volatile organic compounds (VOCs) during that time. The water at Camp Pendleton was not.

Researchers found that Camp Lejeune veterans had a 70% higher risk of PD. They also had a significantly increased risk of prodromal PD diagnoses, including tremor, anxiety, and erectile dysfunction.

In an appearance before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee (SVAC) on Wednesday, VA Secretary McDonough noted that service presumptions already exist for those who served or lived at Camp Lejeune. The VA urges, he said, impacted veterans to first speak with the Department before hiring a lawyer as advertised in the wake of the PACT Act's passage, which included provisions for impacted veterans to sue the federal government. McDonough made clear that most veterans likely do not need to hire an attorney to get care and benefits for their health conditions in this situation.

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During that hearing, Sen. Sullivan (R-AK) brought up allegations that some lawyers are charging contingency fees as high as 50% of what the veteran might win from the government. Sullivan pushed committee chair Sen. Tester (D-MT) to act on legislation limiting those fees; Tester called on Sullivan to negotiate with him and Sen. Durbin (D-IL) on another piece of legislation addressing the issue. Nothing was solved, but there is clearly a great deal of passion behind this issue.

LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

In an effort to recognize the weekly accomplishments of our Legionnaires, we will spotlight an individual every week. These individuals demonstrate exceptional grassroots activism by meeting with/contacting their Congressional Representative/Senator to advocate for veterans. Efforts like these truly make a difference and give veterans a voice in Congress.

Frederic Kinkin, Virginia

This week, we are excited to recognize Frederic Kinkin from the Department of Virginia for inviting Rep. Kiggans (R-VA) to the Navy Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (NJROTC) awards ceremony at Cox High School in Virginia Beach. While the Congresswoman could not attend, she provided two Congressional certificates for the student. Mr. Kinkin presented the awards in her name.

Thank you, Mr. Kinkin!

If you have made a grassroots effort and would like to be considered for next week's "Legionnaire of the Week," please fill out the Congressional Contact Report Form [here](#). You can also email me at kisaacson@legion.org.

UPCOMING HEARINGS

- On Tuesday, May 23, the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) will hold a hearing on H.R. 2670 – the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2024.
- On Tuesday, May 23, the House Appropriations will hold a markup hearing on the Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies (MilCon VA) appropriations bill.
- On Tuesday, May 23, the House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC) will hold a hearing titled "COVID-19 Supplemental Funding: Did It Protect and Improve Veteran Care?"
- On Wednesday, May 24, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Technology Modernization will hold a hearing titled "VA Information Technology Contracting: Challenges in Consolidation of Competition and Conflict of Interest"
- On Wednesday, May 24, the House Small Business Committee will hold a hearing titled "Saluting Service: Supporting Veteran Owned Small Businesses."