



THE AMERICAN LEGION
Veterans Strengthening America

OFFICE OF THE NATIONAL COMMANDER

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November 21, 2023

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman, Armed Services Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Rogers
Chairman, Armed Services Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member, Armed Services Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member, Armed Services Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairmen Reed and Rogers, and Ranking Members Wicker and Smith:

On behalf of The American Legion and our 1.6 million dues-paying members, I want to thank you and the members of the U.S. House and Senate for your consistent support of our nation's uniformed services, veterans, and their families. As an organization of veterans who fought for our freedoms, The American Legion believes the national security of the United States of America is upheld by maintaining a well-funded Department of Defense, an excellent quality of life for troops, and a sensible transition between service and separation. We also believe that the current National Defense Strategy emphasizes the need for a strong and capable military force that is prepared to meet a wide range of challenges, from great power competition to emerging technologies and non-state actors.

As your committees reconcile the differences between the House and Senate versions of the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act, we urge Congress to include the following provisions in the final version of the bill.

Basic allowance for housing (Senate Sect 602) A recent analysis reveals that rental prices surrounding the five most populous military bases in the U.S. have skyrocketed 43.9% since January of 2018. However, the BAH rates across all military ranks have only risen by an average of 18.7%. DoD requires more flexibility to ensure junior servicemembers living off-base can receive an adequate and equitable BAH to meet their needs and afford housing in the communities where they serve.

Absorb BAH By 1 Percent (House Sect 4401) Servicemembers and families living on-base have their Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) cover 100% of the rent and utility costs. However, those off-base only have BAH cover 95% of rent and the utilities. We need to end this cost-cutting measure levied on our troops. Bringing the BAH rate to 96% is an incremental step toward that worthy goal.

Eliminate BAH from the Basic Needs Allowance Calculation (House Sect 621) We are pleased with the progress that has been made on the Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) but believe that more needs to be done to expand eligibility to low-income servicemembers and their families who are struggling with food insecurity. Excluding Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) from the BNA calculation would increase eligibility, which would improve the overall quality of life for servicemembers and their families.

Opposition of Congress to suspension, termination, denunciation, or withdrawal from North Atlantic Treaty (Senate Sect 1399AA) U.S. participation in essential collective security alliances, provided our allies contribute their fair share, is a foreign policy priority of The American Legion. We believe Congressional debate and approval are required for any actions regarding our North Atlantic Treaty.

Transition Assistance for servicemembers departing military service (House Sects 571, 575) While the 2019 NDAA instituted significant improvements to the Transition Assistance Program, more updates are required to optimize the long-term execution, effectiveness, and timeliness of this essential program. DoD must do more to ensure successful transition of servicemembers to civilian life.

Invest in Skillbridge Program for servicemembers departing military service (House Sects 570, 573, 576) Since 2011, the Skillbridge program has provided more than 50,000 servicemembers with valuable experience and training in various civilian industries as part of a successful transition out of military service. The funding allocated for Skillbridge in these sections is an investment in strengthening America through veteran employment, and we urge the continued support for this valuable program.

Arlington National Cemetery Expansion (House Sect 1821) The House's inclusion of report language on the expansion of Arlington National Cemetery as it approaches capacity is an important milestone to prevent the reduction of burial benefits. In the interim, we continue to strongly advocate for the passage of The Expanding America's National Cemetery Act (H.R. 1413).

Portability of certain professional credentials held by servicemembers (House Sect 599G) Obtaining professional credentials can lead to successful careers in a variety of fields; nevertheless, it is important to know if the credential is both valid, and applicable, for use in the respective field, as well as the location in which it will be used. It is equally important that the Department of Veterans Affairs collaborates with licensing authorities to ensure that service members can in fact use their professional credential in the respective field, and location, of their choosing upon transitioning from the military.

Extension of eligibility for health benefits under TRICARE Reserve Select for survivors (House Sect 702/Senate Sect 701) The American Legion thanks the House and Senate for including the Sergeant First Class Michael Clark TRICARE Reserve Parity Act in their respective versions of the NDAA. This legislation, if enacted, will ensure survivors of National Guard and Reserve servicemembers receive TRICARE coverage for the same length of time as survivors of Active Component servicemembers, demonstrating our nation's continued commitment to our National Guard and Reserve.

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Major Richard Star Act (H.R. 1282/S. 344) We are disappointed that this important legislation was not included in the House or Senate version of the FY24 NDAA. We are thankful for the tremendous bipartisan support in both the House and Senate to preserve full retired pay for medically retired combat veterans, regardless of the amount of any VA disability check. The American Legion remains committed to getting this signed into law.

The American Legion applauds the tremendous work of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees in your continued effort to maintain a strong national defense and to ensure a ready military force. We appreciate your continued leadership and support of these issues which are important to servicemembers, veterans, and their families.

For God & Country,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Seehafer', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Daniel J. Seehafer
National Commander

cc: Members of the House and Senate
Armed Services Committees