

National Legislative Division Weekly

NEVER FORGET THE FALL OF AFGHANISTAN COMMANDER'S MESSAGE

Dear American Legion Family members and friends,

It was two years ago when we were collectively dismayed at how swiftly the Taliban reasserted control over Afghanistan. Once the withdrawal of American troops gained momentum, we only knew it was a matter of time.

Still the speed of the Taliban takeover unleashed anger, frustration and concern for Afghanistan interpreters and other allies who risked their lives to help U.S. troops during the 20-year war.

Predictably, Taliban rule has plunged Afghanistan into a floundering economic state where human rights are compromised, malnutrition is rampant and education is shoved aside.

And our allies' lives remain in danger.

As veterans we understand what it means to say, "No one gets left behind." For two decades, our troops fought shoulder-to-shoulder with trusted Afghan allies who served as translators, protected troops from harm and fought for freedom. And to this day, the brave Afghan women who undertook missions with Green Berets and Navy Seals as Female Tactical Platoons have Taliban bounties on their heads.

We must continue our two-fold fight for them.

The United States must honor its promises and provide lasting protection for Afghans who have safely resettled in America as well as those who were left behind. The American Legion is urging Congress to pass [the Afghan Adjustment Act](#), which would allow Afghans who fought alongside our servicemembers the opportunity to apply for permanent legal residency after undergoing additional vetting.

Join this mission to support our Afghan allies by sending a message to Congress through [our Grassroots Action Center](#).

Thank you for what you do every day on behalf of our nation's veterans, servicemembers, their families and the communities in which they live.

National Commander

Vincent J. "Jim" Troiola

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PANEL'S REPORT PROPOSES SLEW OF MILITARY BUDGETTING CHANGES

[[From C.Q. News](#)]

Leaders of a commission tasked with overhauling the Pentagon's notoriously cumbersome approach to buying weapons want to see the military adopt a budgeting process that bolsters coordination with Capitol Hill and embraces innovative technologies.

In an interim [report](#) released Tuesday, the 14-member panel endorsed a mix of potential future recommendations and other actions that could be implemented immediately targeting the Defense Department's six-decade-old planning, programming, budgeting and execution system, known as PPBE.

The process, which has long been a focus of reformation attempts, has drawn criticism for being inflexible and unresponsive to both the fast-evolving threat environment and new capabilities that could prove vital in addressing it. But while Congress mandated the panel's creation, it's unclear how willing lawmakers — who are often hesitant to grant DOD more flexibility at the risk of giving up their oversight powers — will be to embrace the resulting recommendations.

Formed under the fiscal 2022 National Defense Authorization Act ([PL 117-81](#)), the PPBE panel has seven months to go until it publishes its final report. But in the meantime, vice chair Ellen Lord encouraged lawmakers to use the newly released initial findings to shape consideration of the in-the-works defense appropriations and policy bills, the latter of which has passed the House and Senate.

"I have very high expectations that some of these actions that can be implemented now will be," Lord, a former Pentagon acquisition chief, told reporters Tuesday during a Defense Writers Group event. She noted what she called "the demand signal for change" amid the ongoing war in Ukraine and the threat posed by China.

"Many in the building and on the Hill believe we need change; it's just not clear what the path is," Lord added. "And that's why we thought we should start with actions that could be implemented now."

Moving out

Among the more immediate steps commissioners are endorsing are methods for improving communication between DOD and Congress, including the addition of a mid-year budget update.

That briefing, which would come in June or July each year, would give lawmakers the chance to tweak their defense policy and appropriations bills to better reflect evolving needs and reflect tech changes, the interim report argues.

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Part of the challenge with doing that now stems from the long-term planning that's baked into the budgeting process, in which officials often wait two years in between initiating a new program and receiving dollars to fund it.

Technology and military requirements may shift in that window, necessitating program changes. But more broadly, the report noted that "the time consuming nature of the process is antithetical to moving at speed."

On the Hill, the congressional defense committees receive what Bob Hale, the commission's chair, called "an avalanche of information" with the DOD budget's submission each year, which is due in February but often delivered late.

But after that, Hale, who previously served as DOD comptroller, said congressional staffers told the panel that information is "episodic" and sometimes inconsistent with what was previously provided.

"If we can get this dialogue going, I think it would one, help improve relationships between DOD and Congress on PPBE-related issues and hopefully limit the amount of changes that have to be made," he said Tuesday. "Congress may agree with some of these and make some of these changes in their markups and in their conference so fewer changes would have to be made in execution."

The commission also backed a restructuring of the so-called justification books that DOD submits to Congress as part of its budget request, which provide detailed information on defense programs and their cost. And commissioners advocated for the electronic transmission of those documents to the Hill to allow for them to be searchable, sortable and updated — part of a bigger push to enhance electronic information-sharing between the Pentagon and Congress.

'Crawl, walk, run' process

In addition to the early actions recommended in the interim release, the document simultaneously highlights bigger items that could be tackled in the March 2024 final report after commissioners gather more feedback.

The inclusion of both, Lord said, underscores the panel's "multistep process," which she characterized as "kind of a crawl, walk, run."

"I believe we can crawl with the actions that we say are ready to be implemented now," she said, while the yet-to-be-finalized potential recommendations would take more of a mid- and long-term approach to altering PPBE.

One area that falls into that second camp is the commission's interest in mitigating issues caused by continuing resolutions that fund the government at current levels. That includes allowing new programs to begin under a CR — an ask Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall is [spearheading](#) this session.

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Kendall's framework would let DOD jump-start early-stage work on new projects without an official budget in place. But the commission is considering taking a different route, per the interim report: green-lighting new starts under a CR if all four congressional defense committees approve those programs within their respective bills.

"The goal here is to not take away power from Congress, but if they've agreed to it, all of them, then maybe you could go forward onto a CR as a way of mitigating adverse effects," Hale said.

In the months to come, the commission will collect feedback on its interim findings and potential recommendations. But once that final report is released, Lord said a new question will drive commissioners forward: "How do we get this implemented?"

"The interim report is really only the beginning," she said. "It's between now and the end of the year that I think our most substantive work will happen."

VHA UPDATE

[\[From Gray & Associates, L.C.\]](#)

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) continues to grow. According to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Under Secretary of Health Dr. Elnahal, the VHA now has 400,740 employees, an historic high. The organization has "far surpassed" the goal of hiring 52,000 people this year and has grown by 5.5% since the start of the fiscal year.

The new hires include 27,236 employees in the seven highest priority occupations. The VHA hopes to hire 30,000 physicians, nurses, LPNs, nursing assistants, schedulers, food service workers, and housekeeping aides by the end of the fiscal year. Elnahal pointed to current trends, and expressed confidence this will be achieved.

The VHA continues to take an average of 180 days to onboard new employees, which Elnahal acknowledges is "obviously, way too long." They implemented a standardized hiring process starting June 1, and he hopes the process will soon shorten.

Elnahal expects the VHA workforce to continue to grow. However, as the next fiscal year approaches, they will take a "close look" at hiring goals in order to focus upon areas in which staffing continues to fall short.

Elnahal wants to increase the VA's presence in the country's health care training pipeline, especially in mental health. History has shown that many people who train at the VA want to work there, in part due to the Department's unique mission.

The VHA is also preparing for the next big PACT Act deadline. The legislation created a special enrollment opportunity for veterans who served in the theater of combat operations within Central

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Command after 9/11 or in combat against a hostile force during the period after November 11, 1998. Among this cohort, individuals who left the military between September 11, 2001, and October 1, 2013, originally had five years in which they could directly enroll in the VA regardless of service-connected injuries. The PACT Act gives these veterans a new period, until September 30, 2023, to enroll in the VA if they did not do so previously.

Elnahal told reporters today this provides lifetime enrollment in VA health care. Those without a service-connected condition would be in a higher priority group, but at least they would be enrolled.

The VA is currently pressure testing its online enrollment website ahead of the new deadline in order to avoid the problems that arose earlier this month as veterans filed for backdated PACT Act claims. Elnahal does not expect similar issues to arise, as the system has been improved for greater capacity and because this cohort of veterans is much smaller.

The VHA's pause on expanding the Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM) initiative continues. Elnahal said they will measure success through "demonstrable improvements" in end users' satisfaction with the system. He is focused on having a "significant presence" at each of the five sites using the new EHR, both in person and virtually, to achieve faster ticket response times as users identify issues.

LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

It is now recess for both the House and the Senate! Be on the lookout for Congressional town halls in your area – start by checking your member of Congress's website for any information.

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.

[Steve Robertson, Virginia](#)

We are honored to recognize Steve Robertson from the Department of Virginia this week. Representing the American Legion, Mr. Robertson provided insight to the office of Congresswoman Spanberger (D-VA) regarding the implementation of CHAMPVA benefits.

Your help is greatly appreciated, Mr. Robertson!

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 jkamin@legion.org.

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UPCOMING HEARINGS

There will be no hearings as both Chambers of Congress are home for the August recess.