

NATIONAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION COMMISSION

TOPIC 1: ECONOMY

The coronavirus pandemic is, first and foremost, a health crisis, but it has also had a profound economic impact. The unemployment rate in the U.S. was 3.5 percent in February. By April, amid a nationwide shutdown to stem the spread of the virus, it had risen to 14.7 percent, the highest rate since the Great Depression. Before the outbreak, the U.S. economy had been enjoying the longest period of growth in history.

The current recession is different from other recent downturns, like the 2008 financial collapse, which saw a more gradual decline caused by instability within the economy itself. The virus, however, caused the economy to collapse almost overnight. Some economic indicators rebounded strongly as lockdowns were lifted in parts of the country, raising hopes of a V-shaped recovery in which things return to normal as rapidly as they had declined. President Trump called the economy “a rocket ship” after the release of promising unemployment numbers in early June.



Despite those gains, there are signs that the recovery is stalling as the number of COVID-19 cases spike in several parts of the country. It's too soon to know the full economic impact of major outbreaks that have hit states like Arizona, Florida and California. But some economists have expressed concern that the economy may be on the brink of a true collapse.

Though the recent resurgence in the virus may make a V-shaped recovery unlikely, there are still reasons for optimism. Though key economic indicators like unemployment and consumer spending suggest a dire scenario, the actual impact of the downturn on Americans may be less extreme than those numbers may indicate.

A \$2 trillion stimulus package passed by Congress in March — which included \$1,200 direct payments, boosted unemployment payments by \$600 a week and hundreds of billions of dollars in loans for businesses — has been credited with preventing the worst-case scenario for the economy over the past few months. Bans on evictions at the federal and state level, along with mortgage relief, have helped struggling families remain in their homes. The stock market has regained most of the losses it suffered at the onset of the pandemic.

These hopeful signs may be hiding the true state of an economy on the brink of another major crash that sends the country into a depression, some economists fear. One of the major reasons for concern is the end of many measures that have kept the nation afloat. Enhanced unemployment is set to expire at the end of July, and the loans may not be enough for businesses to keep their doors open. Eviction moratoriums are also due to end soon. State budgets have cratered because of lost tax revenue.

It's unclear whether Congress would be willing to spend more money to keep these programs running and bail out states. A worst-case scenario envisioned by economists could see federal assistance drying up at the same time businesses begin to shut down in mass, state government jobs disappear, and millions of Americans lose their homes. The combined result of all these crises hitting at once could even spark another financial collapse like the one that caused the Great Recession, experts fear.

[Reported by Ariel De Jesus]

HOUSEHOLD		DATA				
Table A-5. Employment status of the civilian population 18 years and over by veteran status, period of service, and sex, not seasonally adjusted						
[Numbers in thousands]						
Employment status, veteran status, and period of service	Total		Men		Women	
	July 2019	July 2020	July 2019	July 2020	July 2019	July 2020
Unemployed	316	699	262	591	54	108
Unemployment rate	3.4	7.9	3.2	7.5	5.0	10.7

The national unemployment rate is 10.2 percent (July 2020). Gulf War II veterans' unemployment rate is 8.2 percent.ⁱ Currently, the unemployment rate for Gulf War II women veterans is 7.9 percent (Down from 10.1 percent in May).

In July 2020, the veteran unemployment rate is 7.9%, down from 8.6% last month and 9.1% two months ago. The comparable non-veteran unemployment rate was 11.1% in June and 10.2% in July

TOPIC 2: CONFERENCE CALLS

On Monday, August 10, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division had conversations with selected SAAs, including Nevada and Virginia, on the needed data to perform meaningful oversight and screening of schools to determine those most at risk. Call with RBS Project Coordinator Woodall on plans for robust oversight of IHL institutions and unaccredited NCDS. Continued calls with SVAC staffers to discuss continued work on HR 4625 and pending legislation in the Senate. Conversations with NASAA president and treasurer to discuss RBS grant and project were held as well as discussion of pending legislation and in state residency issues driven by COVID.

On Tuesday, August 11, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division spoke with time Winters, Director, Transition Assistance Program (TAP), Department of Labor – Veterans Employment and Training Services (DOL-VETS). We discussed the status of servicemembers who are transitioning from active duty. In-person TAP has been suspended since mid-March to

virtual using the Joint Knowledge Online (JKO). With the sheer numbers of servicemembers leaving the military, the Department of Defense needs to find a more suitable and user-friendly platform. DoD is in the middle of moving to a new Learning Management System instead of JKO.

On Tuesday, August 11, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division held conversations with SVAC staffers on 9/10. Sen. Lankford new LA wanted to put the 90/10 provisions through the SVAC committee but encouraged staffers to stick by decision to not do that as it needed to go through HELP committee to address chapter 10 issues and also Senator Alexander is still supporting moving it with HEA. Also discussed additional Covid package sections (in that pending legislation), including Mitigating Circumstances for drops related to COVID and in-state residency. Do not see this legislation moving. SVAC is to send a draft of the latest 4625 for our review and markup. Conversation with George Bush Institute on leading Policy working group and path forward to a play book for institutions. Agreed to lead the group.

On Tuesday, August 11, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division along with the Legislative Division met with staff from Senator Loeffler's office regarding the Legion supported Verification Alignment and Service-disabled Business Adjustment Act or the VA-SBA Act (HR 1615). This week, Senator Loeffler introduced the VA-SBA Act in the Senate and The American Legion has provided a letter of support.

On Tuesday, August 11, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division held a call with the Lumina Foundation to provide updates on our credentialing advocacy. We have recently signed off on a report writer for our 2021 Credentialing Research paper: Lisa Lutz from SOLID Design, who has previously assisted in authoring the two prior Legion credentialing reports.

On Wednesday, August 12, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with the staff of the legislative division. We discussed the bill HR 4941 Veteran Employment Transition Act" or the "VET Act." The bill would allow certain veterans' service organizations to contact veterans regarding benefits and to better inform veterans of employment opportunities. This bill is supported by Resolution No. 70: Improve Transition Assistance Program. A letter of support is being drafted; once approved, it will be submitted.

On Wednesday, August 12, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division discussed with VA the challenges of providing meaningful oversight and the proper role of compliance and risk based surveys in that oversight. Participants in the call included NASAA President, EdCounsel team and RBS team as well as Education Deputy Director and VA IT staff. Excellent conversation on available data at VA to help with oversight and also VA continues to seek contract with an outside vendor to provide reliable outcome measures. Complaints would also factor into decisions about which schools needed more rigorous oversight. Conversation with Wake Forest University Alumni Council and student veteran experience in COVID environment. Students will be returning to campus this semester. And will be given the opportunity to study remotely if there are issues or concerns that develop. Project Coordinator for RBS model team to discuss next steps.

On Wednesday, August 12, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division held a call with the Arnold Foundation to provide updates on our education advocacy. With congress currently in August Recess, we will be focusing on raising awareness of education advocacy amongst Department leadership.

On Thursday, August 13, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division had conversations with Project Coordinator for RBS model team to discuss next steps to prepare for RBS pilot program. Also Section II Data requested a call with EdCounsel and NASAA leadership

to discuss what data is needed for meaningful site visits and to ensure quality education. Conversations with HVAC staffers (minority and majority) on 4625 and pending legislation. Also conversation with VFW legislative director on the work being done to bring about passage of SB 785 and briefed him on education issues we might pursue together.

On Thursday, August 13, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division attended a small business webinar hosted by Foresight CFO. As COVID-19 lockdown continue to adversely affect small businesses many of them are folding. The session was focused on best practices when selling a company and how to defer capital gain taxes when you sell highly appreciated assets. Business owners can potentially save themselves seven figures in taxes if they had the right tax strategy advisor and Growth CFO at their side.

On Thursday, August 13, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division had a conference call with our point of contact with the Lumina Foundation to discuss ongoing efforts to assist veterans who are looking for employment as they transition out of the military. In June of 2019, The American Legion and The Lumina Foundation created The Military Credential Advisory Initiative led by a team of critical stakeholders from industry, institution, Academia and Armed Forces to document the best practices, strategies, and successes driven from the previous round table discussions and Credentialing summits hosted by The American Legion. The purpose of these initiatives (summits and roundtables) was to enhance further successful and accelerated training and credentialing pathways for transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses.

On Thursday, August 13, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division along with the Legislative Division engaged staff from the Senate Small Business Committee to discuss the VA-SBA Act and reporting requirements in the stimulus package. Despite the new grants and lending programs recently created to assist small business during the COVID-19 closings, little effort has been made to collect data from various demographics of the small business community to gauge the resiliency of veteran small businesses. The American Legion is asking for a reporting requirement in order to gauge the wellbeing of the veteran small businesses.

On Thursday, August 13, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division held a meeting with Veterans Education Success to discuss several concerns with their education advocacy. VES staff agreed to work directly with the VE&E Division moving forward to ensure that communications lines are not crossed.

On Friday, August 14, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division held a teleconference call with the Department of Texas, Texas Veterans & Workforce Commission, Fort Hood, and Fort Bliss. We discussed the upcoming event with the Dept of Texas.

On Friday, August 14, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division along with Education Counsel, Lumina and NASAA attended weekly meeting on needed data for sight visits, presentation on the project for DOD and NASAA, and pilot program preparation.

On Friday, August 14, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division along with the Legislative Division engaged staff from the House Veterans Affairs' Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations to discuss the adverse affect COVID-19 pandemic shuttering some of the prime vendors that supply critical medical supplies to the VAMCs. This poses a potential risk in VA's medical supply chain and also resulted in many small business resellers not being paid for supplies already delivered to VA facilities until the contractual dispute has been settled between VA and the prime vendor.

TOPIC 3: TRACKING LEGISLATION

GI Bill of Rights Equity Commission Act: Establish the independent National Commission on GI Bill Equity to identify veterans of World War II who were denied the full effect of their GI Bill benefits because of contemporaneous local, State, and Federal Government policies that discriminated against African Americans.

(Tracked by John Kamin)

Resolution: None on file, presenting for review at Fall NEC.

Status: Currently on hold, has not been introduced

HR 6800, the Heroes Act: Allows VA to provide transport and purchase food, shelter, phones, clothing, blankets and toiletry items for homeless veterans; Authorizes VA to set up temporary encampments on the grounds of VA Medical Centers to allow homeless veterans to shelter on VA parking lots temporarily; Allows VA to provide reimbursements to social service providers receiving grants for the costs of services for minor children.

(Tracked by Davy Leghorn)

[Resolution No. 324: Support Funding for Homeless Veterans](#)

HR 7445: To amend title 38, United States Code, to expand eligibility for home loans from the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to certain members of the reserve components of the Armed Forces.

This bill was submitted for the July 23, 2020 testimony.

[Resolution No. 329: Support Home Loan Guaranty Program](#)

HR 1615: The American Legion supports legislation that would streamline and improve the verification process for veteran-owned small businesses and veteran-owned small businesses.

[Resolution No. 155: Support Verification Improvements for Veterans' Business](#)

Passed at the 2016 National Convention.

(Tracked by Davy Leghorn)

HR 2224: To direct the Secretary of Labor to prioritize services to homeless veterans with dependent children in carrying out homeless veterans' reintegration programs and for other purposes.

(Tracked by Ariel De Jesus/John Kamin)

[Resolution No. 326: Support Funding for Additional Housing for Homeless Veterans with Families](#)

S. 2594: To amend title 5, United States Code, to modify specific requirements concerning service and retirement for veterans' Preference for federal hiring.

(Tracked by Ariel De Jesus)

[Resolution No. 317: Enforcing Veterans' Preference Hiring Practices in Federal Civil Service](#)

HR 1196, Jobs for Veterans Act of 2019: This bill allows an increased work opportunity tax credit for employers who hire veterans who have been certified as discharged or released from active duty in the Armed Forces after September 11, 2001, and who begin working for the employer after December 31, 2019, and before January 1, 2024. This increased credit is in addition to any work opportunity tax credit allowed to a veteran with a service-connected disability.

(Tracked by Ariel De Jesus/John Kamin)

[Resolution No. 354: Work Opportunity Tax Credit Program](#)

HR 7010, Paycheck Protection Program Flexibility Act of 2020: This bill significantly changes the terms of the PPP loans to be more advantageous to small businesses. Including more flexibility

in applying the loan to other expenses besides payroll and benefits and extending the time frame for expending the loan.

(Tracked by Davy Leghorn)

HR 4625: To require education programs to be approved by the VA to abide by the Principles of Excellence to include a ban on deceptive or misleading recruiting, clear information about total costs and program requirements, accommodation for deployments, ensuring a point of contact for veterans, and not being under a punitive action by an accreditor.

(Tracked by John Kamin)

[Resolution No. 318: Ensuring the Quality of Servicemember and Veteran Student's Education at Institutions of Higher Education](#)

HR 6957: To direct the Secretaries of Defense and Veterans Affairs to treat a period of full-time National Guard duty, performed in response to the national emergency declared on March 13, 2020, by the President concerning COVID-19, as not shorter than 90 days.

(Tracked by John Kamin)

Currently studying for appropriate resolution.

HR 4941 Veteran Employment Transition Act” or the “VET Act” was sponsored by Representative Andy Kim. The last action on the bill was in the House on 12/02/2019; it was referred to the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. The bill's goal is to improve the Transition Assistance Program. The bill would allow certain veterans' service organizations to contact veterans regarding benefits and to better inform veterans of employment opportunities. The Service groups would inform veterans of the benefits and employment opportunities with the Federal, State, and local governments. The groups inform veterans of events for in the area.

(Tracked by Ariel De Jesus) Pending Letter of Support

[Resolution No. 70: Improve Transition Assistance Program](#)

H.R.7003 is a bill sponsored by Rep. Takano, Mark D-CA-41 and was introduced 05/22/2020. The bill would authorize a pilot program in the Department of Defense to enhance efforts to provide job placement assistance and related employment services directly to members of the National Guard, Reserves, and veterans of the Armed Forces. The last action on the bill was 05/22/2020 and referred to the Committee on Armed Services.

(Tracked by Raymond Lorminey/Ariel De Jesus)

[Resolution No. 81: Transition Assistance Program Employment Workshops for National Guard and Reserve Members](#)

Coronavirus Emergency Borrower Defense (E-BD) Act: to require the Department of Education to grant full student loan discharges to three specific emergency categories of defrauded borrowers—specifically borrowers covered by:

- (1) Department of Education findings against Corinthian.
- (2) Department of Education findings against ITT Tech; and
- (3) State attorneys general group discharge applications made before the date of enactment.

(Tracked by John Kamin)

[Resolution No. 82: Preserve Veteran and Servicemember Rights to Gainful Employment and Borrower Defense Protections](#)

HR 7111: Veterans Economic Recovery Act of 2020: Require the Secretary of VA to carry out a rapid retraining program that provides eligible veterans up to 12 months of retraining assistance

for in-demand occupations. These 12 months of benefits would be equivalent to payments made to students and schools through the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

(Tracked by John Kamin)

This bill was submitted for the July 23, 2020 testimony.

[Resolution No. 316: Support Employment of Veterans in the Public and Private Workforce](#)

Homeless Veteran Coronavirus Response Act: The bill allows VA to use existing funds for a broader range of services; authorizes the Department to collaborate with outside organizations to facilitate shelters on its properties; loosens restrictions on Grant and Per Diem (GPD) payments, and requires VA to ensure veterans participating in VA homeless programs have access to VA telehealth services.

(Tracked by Teresa Lewis)

[Resolution No. 326: Support Funding for Additional Housing for Homeless Veterans with Families](#)

HR 4920, Department of Veterans Affairs Contracting Preference Consistency Act of 2020: is a bill that would allow AbilityOne companies to keep their preferential treatment at the Department of Veteran Affairs after 2016 with some compromises. The Senate initially sent it back to the House after it was passed for changes. Those changes have been reconciled and the bill cleared its last hurdle before it is sent to the White House.

Draft Bill: Home loan benefits for National Guard to amend title 38, United States Code, to expand eligibility for home loans from the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to certain members of the reserve components of the Armed Forces.

(Tracked by John Kamin)

We submitted written testimony for the July 23, 2020 hearing.

[Resolution No. 329: Support Home Loan Guaranty Program](#)

Draft Bill: JSF - To amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify the scope of procedural rights of members of the uniformed services concerning their employment and reemployment rights, and for other purposes.

(Tracked by Davy Leghorn)

We submitted written testimony for the July 23, 2020 hearing.

Draft Bill: USERRA Protections for State Active Duty - To amend title 38, United States Code, to extend particular employment and reemployment rights to members of the National Guard who perform State active duty. Submitted written testimony to the Legislative Division.

(Tracked by Ariel De Jesus)

We submitted written testimony for the July 23, 2020 hearing.

[Resolution No. 315: Support Employment and Reemployment Rights of National Guard and Reservists Returning from Deployment](#)

TOPIC 4: EMPLOYMENT

In a recent article it was noted that nearly 700,000 veterans remain unemployed. This speaks volume about the true status of our veterans. The American Legion is encouraged to see state government's go the extra mile to assist America's heroes in these challenging times.

As the General Assembly prepares to tackle the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic during this month's special session, legislators should remember the challenges facing Virginia's veteran population. With one of the nation's largest veteran populations at more than 730,000, Virginia's veteran policies have an impact beyond the commonwealth



700,000 veterans are still unemployed. Some states providing additional assistance.

Recent veteran employment data highlights the troubles some veterans are encountering as the economy slowly recovers. The most recent data from the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that the total unemployment rate for veterans in July was 7.9%, lower than the non-veteran unemployment rate of 10.5%.

However, the unemployment rate for female veterans of the Gulf War-era I (defined as service from 1990 to 2001) remains at 13.2%, almost twice as high as the overall veteran average. The data indicates that many young female veterans are having a more difficult time finding jobs during the recovery.

Our legislators have the power to help these veterans in a time of great need. The state of Minnesota provides two programs that Virginia would do well to emulate. In March, Minnesota created two special programs for veterans financially impacted by the pandemic.

The first grant, the COVID-19 Disaster Relief Grant, provides veterans and their families with \$1,000 so long as they can prove some negative financial impact due to COVID-19. The second grant, the COVID-19 Special Needs Grant, provides financial assistance to veterans and their families through a one-time payment directly to creditors; no funds are distributed directly to veterans. This grant is designed to assist financially burdened veterans pay utility bills, insurance premiums, rent or mortgage payments.

The General Assembly will address many worthy causes this month, but the cost of the proposed grant program is minimal. The state of Minnesota earmarked \$6 million in total for both grant programs. Because Minnesota's veteran population is slightly less than half the size of Virginia's veteran population, a Virginia grant program would likely double in cost.

In early July, Finance Secretary Aubrey Layne reported that the projected \$1 billion budget shortfall turned out to only be \$236.5 million at the end of the fiscal year. Soon, legislators will decide how to allocate the more than \$2 billion in new spending that the commonwealth froze in April in response to the pandemic — assistance for our veterans should be part of that conversation.

Spending \$12 million to \$15 million is a small price to support a critical section of Virginian society. Aside from the purely moral argument for such a grant program, Virginia's veterans bring real, tangible benefits to the commonwealth.

As reported in the 2015 Veterans Civic Health Index, veterans volunteer an average of 160 hours a year — 25% more hours than their civilian counterparts. Further, 17.7% of veterans are involved in local civic organizations, compared to just 5.8% of non-veterans. Regarding cultural contributions, veterans are far more trusting of their neighbors, at a rate of 62.5%, compared to 55.1% of non-veterans.

Veterans are willing to volunteer their time, participate in the workings of the community, and spread a sense of trust and security at higher rates than the rest of the population — all highly desirable traits for a society grappling with an unprecedented pandemic.

The special session will be a time of tough budgetary decisions but helping veterans under financial strain with a needs-based grant program should remain a popular, bipartisan issue. The federal government and the commonwealth have spent a great deal of time and treasure supporting our veterans. Adjusting to civilian life can prove difficult, adjusting during a pandemic even more so. Let us not fail a group whom we have already asked so, so very much.

[Reported by Ariel De Jesus]

TOPIC 5: VETERAN HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

The number of people without a home dropped by 4 percent since last year, setting a new low for homelessness in the state, according to a recent survey conducted by the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness.

The 2020 Point-in-Time Count, an annual volunteer census of the homeless population in the state, saw decreases in the overall number of individuals experiencing homelessness and the number of veterans experiencing homelessness in the state.

The count identified 2,904 people experiencing homelessness in Connecticut, representing a 4 percent decrease since 2019 and a 35 percent decrease since 2007. This includes 1,947 adults, 305 family households and 560 children.



The Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness

The coalition said it was the lowest count ever recorded in Connecticut.

“We applaud the work of our Connecticut partners in achieving a 35 percent decline in homelessness since 2007,” said David Tille, New England regional administrator at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. “Connecticut has been an innovative leader in their work to end homelessness, and we applaud their efforts and look forward to continuing our work together.”

The count also found 45 individual veterans staying in emergency shelters, a decrease of 9 percent from 2019.

Families experiencing homelessness, however, increased slightly this year with two more families (305 in total) staying in shelters compared to last year, according to the survey. One family was found not in a shelter, the survey found.

“This report outlines the dedication and good work of the housing and homeless service providers throughout Connecticut and illustrates some very encouraging trends,” said Commissioner Miriam

Delphin-Rittman, of the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. “We still have work to do, but this year’s PIT shows that we have been on a positive course.”

Results of the Youth Outreach and Count, a separate census for youths between the ages of 13 and 24, will be released in a separate report, the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness said. Nearly 600 volunteers in January canvassed local census blocks in teams to identify people experiencing homelessness for the 2020 Point-in-Time Count.

[Reported by Ariel De Jesus]

TOPIC 5a: VETERAN HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

HOMELESS VETERANS

On August 3rd, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development announced the award of over \$74 million in grants to 12 state housing finance agencies to support affordable rental housing for extremely low-income persons with disabilities. The awards will support up to five years of rental assistance for approximately 2,400 units of housing in buildings participating in project rental assistance through HUD’s Section 811 Supportive Housing for Persons with Disabilities program.

https://www.hud.gov/press/press_releases_media_advisories/HUD_No_20_118

[Reported by Teresa Lewis]

TOPIC 6: CAREER FAIRS

ALL IN-PERSON CAREER FAIRS SCHEDULED THROUGH SEPTEMBER HAVE BEEN CANCELLED, SUSPENDED, OR POSTPONED.

The American Legion is working on future virtual workshops and career fairs.

National, Department of Texas, and the Texas Veterans Commission will be hosting a Virtual Career Fair September 15th, 10 am – 4:00 pm CST

Newly discharged veterans claiming benefits totaled 14,225, a decrease of 2,046 from the prior week.

The mission of The American Legion's National Veterans Employment & Education Commission is to take actions that affect the economic well-being of veterans, including issues relating to veterans' education, employment, home loans, vocational rehabilitation, homelessness, and small business.

[Reported by Ariel De Jesus]

TOPIC 7: SMALL BUSINESS

The American Legion has been working on multiple resolutions to ensure the advancement of a safer and self-reliant America in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The global pandemic exposed weaknesses in America's supply chain and small business manufacturing infrastructure. Excessive outsourcing of our national supply chain for domestic manufacturing undermined our national security and created unnecessary supply scarcity during an national emergency.



Sen. Graham Visits S.C. Mill To Promote U.S.-Made PPE Proposal

America must insource our supply chain for certain emergent products like disinfectants, protective gear and medical technologies. Going beyond commercial standards of “Made in US,” we must ensure that every aspect of raw material sourcing, manufacturing, packaging and delivery of these products are sourced in America or allied countries. Working with Senator Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina), The American Legion began exploring a response to secure our

national supply chain in the next stimulus package.

U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham has sent a letter to White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows urging the Trump administration to include provisions of Graham's legislation, the U.S. MADE Act, into any Phase IV relief package that may come before Congress.

Graham visited manufacturing facilities making Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for front-line medical personnel in May. He noted South Carolina, with its long tradition in textiles and advanced manufacturing, could play a leading role in helping the United States become less dependent on China for critical medical equipment. Next week, Graham will formally introduce the U.S. MADE Act in the Senate. President Trump will have the authority to implement the ‘Buy America’ provisions of the bill immediately.

“China has laid the groundwork required to dominate the PPE market as part of their effort to maintain a grip on the global public health industrial supply chains,” wrote Senator Graham. “Unfortunately, we have seen in stark clarity the problems this placed on our ability to manufacture a robust and reliable supply of PPE. I urge you to support efforts in the upcoming COVID relief package to ensure the federal government is no longer reliant on China for the procurement of PPE.”

“American companies are reluctant to make long term investments in domestic PPE production because of the uncertainty in future market conditions,” continues Graham. “However, the ability to supply our own PPE is an issue of national security. Just as we don't rely on China to supply military uniforms we must not rely on them to supply our PPE.”

“COVID-19 has brought unprecedented challenges to the United States. We can seize this moment by finally achieving PPE manufacturing independence and ensuring the United States is prepared to win the war against COVID-19. I encourage you to incorporate provisions of the U.S. MADE Act in President Trump's COVID relief proposal,” concluded Graham.

[Reported by Davy Leghorn]

TOPIC 7a: SMALL BUSINESS

As part of the Veterans Employment & Education (VE&E) Division's Rural America's Initiative, VE&E continues to track economic development and available local business resources in the Top 10 most impoverished states (and the District of Columbia)

1. **MISSISSIPPI:** On August 25, 2020, the [Mississippi Entrepreneurial Launch Pad \(MELP\) MSBDC](https://clients.mssbdc.org/workshop.aspx?ekey=28400051) is hosting the “Steps to Correctly Establish a Small Business in the State of Mississippi” workshop. Topics include regulations such as licenses and permits, legal forms of business ownership, business insurance, business checking account, and important dates associated with updating and maintaining the business in good standing.
<https://clients.mssbdc.org/workshop.aspx?ekey=28400051>
2. **NEW MEXICO:** Activate New Mexico (ActivateNM) is committed to nurturing New Mexico's entrepreneurial community and thus, promoting prosperity in the state. During this period of adjustment to working remotely, ActivateNM powered by CNM Ingenuity is hosting a Startup Retool series for small businesses and startups in New Mexico to digitize their businesses. In this series, local entrepreneurs and resource providers will share strategies and platforms to retool small businesses. Small businesses or start-ups will learn how to grow and engage with customers online. These networking sessions on the 3rd Thursday of every month online. See upcoming session and to RSVP, please go to [events calendar](https://activatenm.com/2020/07/startup-networking-in-new-mexico-august/). Links to additional workshops can be found at: <https://activatenm.com/2020/07/startup-networking-in-new-mexico-august/>
3. **LOUISIANA:** Sixteen Louisiana companies have become the inaugural participants in a new initiative to accelerate business growth and develop meaningful relationships among second-stage companies. The American Academy of Entrepreneurs was launched in July by Louisiana Economic Development and the Michigan-based Edward Lowe Foundation, which hopes to expand the academy to growing businesses in regions throughout the U.S. The initiative began July 28-30 with intensive, retreat-style programming for participants via Zoom technology. Participating companies are paired with mentor businesses, depending on their current phase of growth, to generate the most value from the relationship. Following the virtual retreat, the paired companies will engage in six monthly one-on-one meetings to collaborate and focus on an identified scope of work.
https://www.opportunitylouisiana.com/led-news/news-releases/news/2020/08/04/louisiana-launches-mentorship-program-for-small-businesses?_hsmi=92600986&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-970qMvZGxONpChRp8fe7SqHP_zsEqW2DFqAAWkXTHhm4fhGH2tNQSpQrGmiopXBMSZY0SRQNE10RMLNWH1UR6zYdyMPHeZhG5QbLntbUZfn-zA4j4
4. **KENTUCKY:** Kentucky offers incentives for new and expanding industry, small businesses, workforce training and more.
https://ced.ky.gov/kyedc/pdfs/Incentive_Program_Overview.pdf?80
5. **ARKANSAS:** On June 6, 2020, the Arkansas Economic Development Commission (AEDC) Division of Rural Services has awarded community grants totaling more than \$317,500 to 39 counties and communities across the state. The Division of Rural Services awarded Arkansas

counties and communities a total of \$317,571.78 through two grant programs: the Rural Community Grant Program and the County Fair Building Grant Program. Both the Rural Community Grant Program and the County Fair Building Grant Program require a 50 percent match for counties and communities to qualify.

- a. The next cycle deadline for the Rural Community Grant Program and County Fair Building Grant Program begins August 6, 2020. For more information about grants administered by AEDC, visit www.ArkansasEDC.com.
6. **ALABAMA:** Governor Kay Ivey has committed \$100 million in Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding to deliver free internet access to eligible K-12 students in their homes this fall. The State of Alabama will use the funds to purchase internet service for low-income households with K-12 students so the children can participate in distance learning.

On July 31, 2020, Governor Kay Ivey announced the Alabama Broadband Connectivity for Students program. ABC for Students will use federal CARES Act funds to purchase internet service to connect qualifying low-income households with K-12 students so that they can participate in educational activities online, including homework and distance learning.

On August 5, 2020, the State issued a Request for Information (RFI) to seek commitments from qualified, established internet service providers to provide broadband internet to qualified K-12 students through a contract with the State of Alabama for purposes of participation in the ABC for Students program:

<https://abcstudents.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ABC-for-Students-RFI-August-5-2020.pdf>

7. **WEST VIRGINIA:** On August 10, 2020, Gov. Justice announces \$20 million in paving projects across West Virginia.
[https://transportation.wv.gov/communications/PressRelease/Pages/Gov.-Justice-announces-\\$20-million-in-paving-projects-across-West-Virginia.aspx](https://transportation.wv.gov/communications/PressRelease/Pages/Gov.-Justice-announces-$20-million-in-paving-projects-across-West-Virginia.aspx)

On Tuesday, August 18, 2020, the U.S. Small Business Administration West Virginia District Office is hosting a “PPP Forgiveness EZ application Training – made easy as 1, 2, 3!” workshop.
<https://www.sba.gov/events/1669928>

8. **ARIZONA:** On August 10, 2020, the Arizona State Department of Health Services issued a phased re-opening plan with recommendations for the eventual safe reopening of paused businesses in the State of Arizona. The Plan includes data-driven benchmarks, phased re-opening, and requirements to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.
https://www.azdhs.gov/director/public-information-office/index.php?utm_source=TWITTER&utm_medium=AZDHS&utm_campaign=covid19&utm_content=3572711518&linkId=96704403#news-release-081020

9. **DISTRICT of COLUMBIA:** On August 18, 2020, the District of Columbia’s Small Business Resource Center is hosting a virtual workshop on Government Contracting.
<https://dcbiz.ecenterdirect.com/events/45768>. They are also hosting a virtual workshop on “Tips for Creating Effective Capability Statements for Marketing to Government Buyers+ on August 19th.
<https://dcbiz.ecenterdirect.com/events/45774>

10. **GEORGIA:** On August 25, 2020, the Georgia Department of Economic Development's International Trade Division is hosting a free webinar on Trade Opportunities in Israel.

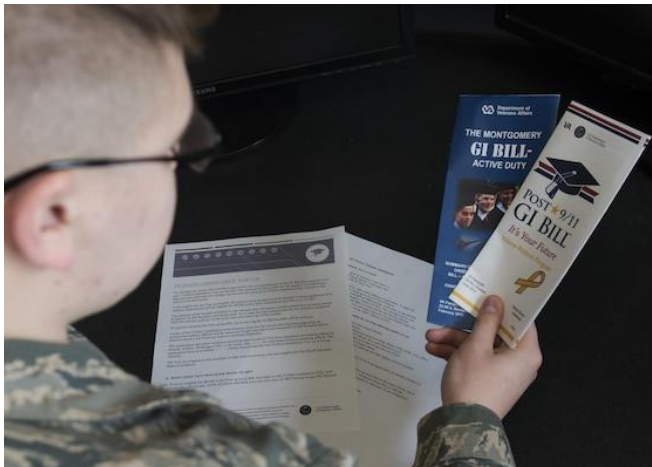
On August 6, 2020, Governor Brian P. Kemp, in conjunction with the Georgia Department of Economic Development, announced a strong start to the first month of fiscal year 2021, as the state attracted new investment projects. In the month of July, Georgia announced roughly \$574 million in new investments and 3,629 new jobs created in nearly every region of the state.

11. **TENNESSEE:** On July 15, 2020, Congressman David Kustoff (TN-08) announced a \$500,000 loan and \$150,000 grant for Obion County to construct an airplane hangar, a \$18,300,000 loan for Crockett County to expand and renovate the Crockett County Middle and High School, and a \$4,000,000 loan for the Town of Somerville to construct a fire station and renovate the existing law enforcement station. This funding is part of the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) \$153 million investment to build and improve critical community facilities across our nation. It will benefit nearly two million rural residents in 23 states.

[Reported by Teresa Lewis]

TOPIC 8: EDUCATION

Senators John Hoeven (R-N.D.) and John Boozman (R-Ark.) announced Monday that the Office of Secretary of Defense (OSD) will work with the Department of Veterans Affairs to enable



members of the Guard and Reserve to concurrently use Federal Tuition Assistance and GI Bill benefits to fund their education, similar to active duty servicemembers. This achieves the goals of Hoeven and Boozman's bill, the Montgomery GI Bill Parity Act, which Senators Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) and Kevin Cramer (R-N.D.) joined as original cosponsors.

In addition, Hoeven last year led a bipartisan group of senators in urging Defense Secretary Mark Esper to address the issue, and the senator has since been actively working with the OSD to reverse the 2014 Department of

Guard members to see changes in GI Bill benefits

Defense decision that prohibited this concurrent use for Reserve component servicemembers. Today's announcement will enable Guard and Reserve members to receive the full education benefits to which they are entitled, and OSD expects the change to become effective by the end of the year.

"The National Guard and Reserve components are a central part of our nation's defense, both at home and abroad, and our efforts were all about ensuring these servicemembers can access the benefits they have earned," Senator Hoeven said. "We appreciate the administration for working

with us to restore the full education benefits for our Guard and Reserve members, and we look forward to the policy change being fully implemented later this year.”

“I’m pleased the Department of Defense has updated its policy to provide National Guard and Reserve members the access to education benefits they have earned in the manner Congress intended. This is a commonsense solution that will allow all servicemembers the same opportunities to fund their education,” Senator Boozman said.

“I’m glad to see that the Department has found a way to restore parity to the Montgomery GI Bill’s application. The educational opportunities provided to men and women in the Guard are both a thank you for their volunteering to serve, and a smart investment in future leaders of our military and of their communities,” Senator Leahy said.

“Creating more ways for our troops to receive an education helps them become better, smarter soldiers and airmen and build better lives for themselves after they serve. It also helps our military leaders recruit the next generation of service-members,” Senator Cramer said. “I am glad to see the Defense Department following the provision I authored in last year’s National Defense Authorization Act which strongly encouraged the Department to take this action. I hope it is swiftly implemented, and I urge the Trump Administration to continue finding ways to improve the lives and well-being of our troops.”

American Legion "Resolution No. 104: GI Bill Fairness for Activated National Guard Servicemembers" supports legislation provide Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for active-duty eligible National Guard and Reserve servicemembers.

SPECIAL: VETERANS' MAIL-ORDER PRESCRIPTIONS

As U.S. Postal Service delays grow and spread, the Department of Veterans Affairs is rushing to get prescriptions to veterans on time.

The vast majority of VA prescriptions are fulfilled by mail from a group of seven massive, automated hub pharmacies across the country, the Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacy (CMOP) system. That centralized pharmacy system processes about 80% of all VA outpatient prescriptions, and 90% of those are shipped through USPS. The other prescriptions are typically filled at local VA medical facilities.

VA's mail-order pharmacy system processes nearly half a million prescriptions daily and each working day, more than 330,000 veterans receive a package of prescriptions in the mail. Veterans who live further from VA medical facilities, especially in rural and remote areas of the country, often depend on mail-order prescriptions.

[Connecting Vets](#) first reported the delays, according to dozens of veterans, VA pharmacy staff and pharmaceutical company leaders, on Wednesday. By Friday, nearly 100 veterans and caregivers, along with dozens of VA employees, pharmaceutical leaders and USPS staff confirmed that Postal Service issues are delaying veterans' medications.

This week, VA told Congress it plans to mitigate the medication delays by sending prescriptions earlier, according to sources with knowledge of those conversations. VA is developing a communications plan to inform veterans of the possibility of delays and that the department plans to send prescriptions out for delivery earlier than expected.



Congress demand USPS, VA fix 'alarming' delays of veterans' mail-order prescriptions

VA told Congress that USPS delays may be worse in some areas, including New York, New Jersey, Arizona and Michigan. In those areas, VA is converting its deliveries from USPS to UPS 2nd Day Air or FedEx temporarily.

VA also is setting up a new USPS code to help the Postal Service identify and prioritize veteran prescription deliveries. That code is already in place for first-class and priority mail packages, and the two agencies are working to expand it to other mail categories.

Many of the veterans and staff who reached out to media spoke on condition of anonymity because they said they feared retaliation from the department, stigma for the medications they use or were not authorized to speak publicly. They provided documents showing medication shipping delays, internal memos and more. Most said they had not yet heard from VA about delays. Some said healthcare providers warned them during recent telehealth appointments to order refills earlier and that mail-order was their only option, as some VA facilities are still limiting visitors because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Veterans and their caregivers reported to media outlets they've faced wait times that have doubled, tripled or worse. Some reported wait times as long as three weeks or more for prescriptions that previously took a few days. Others said medical equipment deliveries were also delayed. Many expressed concerns about going to VA in person to retrieve medications during the pandemic.

VA's website says prescriptions "usually arrive within three to five days" of being ordered or even an average of "60 hours from filling to delivery," and advises veterans to request refills at least 10 days in advance of running out.

A VA pharmacy chief described the USPS delays for prescriptions as "critical breaks in veterans' therapy," adding, "we are swamped with patient complaints over delivery delays." Other VA staff who work in pharmacies across the country echoed those comments, saying they worried about veterans with chronic health conditions who depend on medication for pain, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and other serious physical and mental health concerns.

The pharmacy chief said VA has had "reports of veterans in withdrawal and/or off antidepressants that are experiencing relapse" and neither USPS or VA leaders have provided specific solutions.

"So far we are on our own," the pharmacy chief said. "(We're) using lots of UPS and FedEx overnight when we know someone is short."

But local VA facilities can only do so much when they only fulfill up to 20% of prescriptions, compared to the 80% fulfilled at VA's centralized mail order facilities.

VA's online My HealtheVet tool allows veterans to track their mail-order prescriptions. For some veterans who spoke to Connecting Vets, their medications have been sitting at post office locations for weeks with no movement.

"I had to get an emergency refill from my doctor who was good enough to do it," said one veteran said.

"I have been experiencing medication delays with little to no assistance offered from the VA," said a Florida veteran, who added that while VA advises veterans order refills before they run out, not all medications can be ordered early. She's gone without some of her critical medication for a week. "Currently, I am experiencing adverse side effects from not having my medication and I have only been offered reassurance that 'it's on the way.' This is unacceptable. Some veterans take life-saving medications. The VA needs a serious inquiry into how to prevent this issue from continuing."

Another veteran said going without his prescription for a week because of USPS delays landed him in the hospital.

"They've never been late," he said of his mail-order prescriptions. "They often show up early ... This time, I had to wait and I thought I could make it through until they arrived but I was wrong."

Connecting Vets tried multiple times to confirm with VA officials that the department is aware of delays for veterans' prescriptions.

VA Press Secretary Christina Noel refused to respond to those questions, saying only:

"VA always encourages veterans to order routine prescriptions in advance. When it comes to emergent prescriptions, VA fills them onsite or uses commercial carriers to ensure timely delivery."

USPS is now headed by a new Postmaster General, Louis DeJoy, who took over on June 15. DeJoy, a top donor to President Donald Trump, issued a memo during his first month leading USPS which mentioned the Post Office's continued financial struggles and announced new policies, including that the Post Office would now accept delayed mail to save costs.

"One aspect of these changes that may be difficult for employees is that — temporarily — we may see mail left behind or mail on the workroom floor or docks (in Processing and Distribution Centers), which is not typical," the memo reads, adding that USPS should avoid overtime payments caused by "late and extra trips."

The memo, first reported by The Washington Post, directed employees to leave mail behind at distribution centers if it would delay carriers on their routes. USPS warned customers months before DeJoy took over that the coronavirus pandemic could cause mail delays. USPS is one of the country's largest veteran employers, with nearly 100,000 veterans on staff (about 15% of the total USPS workforce). About 60% of the veterans working at USPS have a disability rating, the agency estimates.

This week, Capitol Hill Democrat leaders, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, called for an investigation of USPS delays in a letter to DeJoy and for DeJoy's recent policies to be reversed to avoid further delays.

Cole Butterfield, an Army veteran and American Postal Workers Union leader in Oregon, said postal workers nationwide tried to warn USPS leaders of the dangers of delaying mail, including prescriptions for veterans, seniors and people with disabilities. He said his wife is a disabled veteran who relies on USPS for her medication.

"That has now come to pass," he said. "Parcel volumes are at or above Christmas volumes. However, even first-class letter mail is being delayed in many installations ... The delaying of mail is troubling and borderline criminal. In the past, workers have been disciplined or fired for delaying mail. The USPS provides a vital service to all Americans, especially to our veterans.

"I assure you that postal workers nationwide are outraged. We care about the mail and we care about our customers."

American Legion "Resolution No. 344: Support Federal Legislation that Protects the Employment of Veterans in the U.S. Postal Service Mail Processing Facilities that are Slated for Closure" urges Congress to support legislation requiring the U.S. Postal Service to preserve current service standards guaranteeing the delivery of First Class mail within 1-3 days, preserving quick mail transit times for the Department of Veterans Affairs claims documentation and/or medications.

The National Veterans Employment & Education Division is investigating this issue further.

[Reported by John Kamin]

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Week Ending: 8/14/20
