

National Legislative Division Weekly

PUSH IS ON TO BOOST TROOPS' HOUSING ALLOWANCE

Original Article: [CQ Roll Call](#)

Democrats in both chambers have been angling for several years to give military families more money to cover housing costs, and they are at it again — this time with some influential GOP support.

Last year, Rep. Marilyn Strickland, D-Wash., and Sen. Raphael Warnock, D-Ga., filed bills that would require the Defense Department to pay 100 percent of troops' Basic Allowances for Housing, which cover the cost of commercial housing in the United States for the roughly two-thirds of the U.S. active-duty force that does not live in the military services' on-base quarters. **The American Legion supports these bills.**



Rep. Strickland (D-WA)

The rate of reimbursement was 100 percent from roughly 2005 to 2015. But for most of the years since then, the Pentagon has paid 95 percent of the tab while military families have had to cover the other 5 percent. The fiscal 2015 NDAA (PL 113-291) authorized the reduced housing payments as a cost-saving measure.

How much that allowance amounts to in any particular case hinges on the cost of housing in whatever part of the country a servicemember is stationed, plus his or her rank and number of dependents.

At a March 29 hearing of the House Armed Services Committee, Strickland questioned Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III about whether he supports restoring the mandate to pay all 100 percent of a servicemember's housing costs.

Austin said the matter is under review, and he expressed sympathy for Strickland's goal.

“I've heard you, and I've heard our troops and our families and I know this is important,” Austin said. “I would say that we'll do everything we can to make sure that we're taking additional stress off our families and off our troops.”

But Congress may consider taking the matter into its own hands.

When troops have to pay 5 percent of their housing costs, in most cases it means paying \$200 or more per month, according to a survey of servicemembers released last week by Blue Star Families, a support and research group.

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“With the increasing lack of housing supply, servicemembers are increasingly being priced out of options to live near their bases, putting strain on our military families,” said Strickland via email on Tuesday. “Our failure to ensure that servicemembers get all of their Basic Allowance for Housing is not only a housing issue, but also an economic, food access, and readiness issue.”

This year, House Republican Don Bacon of Nebraska, a former Air Force officer and member of the Armed Services Committee, will co-sponsor Strickland’s bill. Bacon’s support could be key to swaying other Republicans to consider supporting the measure, including fiscal hawks who may blanch at the price tag.

Armed Services Chairman Mike D. Rogers, R-Ala., has tapped Bacon to chair a forthcoming new Armed Services panel focusing on quality of life for military personnel.

“It really ticks me off knowing that some of our military members and their families are not able to find good housing within the allowance they are given,” Bacon said in an email. “We have to guarantee that those who are willing to lay their lives on the line have peace of mind knowing their families are in sound, comfortable, clean housing.”

Strickland plans to file her legislation Thursday in the House during a pro forma session. Warnock’s companion bill may be introduced next month, aides said.

Covering 100 percent of the housing costs for U.S troops would cost the Defense Department \$1 billion a year, Pentagon officials have told lawmakers. That figure, while substantial, would occur in the context of a Defense Department that requested \$842 billion for fiscal 2024.

The Strickland-Warnock legislation would require the higher housing allowance, but the \$1 billion would have to be appropriated for the bigger benefit to be realized.

Austin has in the last two years boosted spending on housing allowances in parts of the country where home costs are highest. Now the department is reviewing whether to do away with the requirement that servicemembers have to bear 5 percent of the housing costs — one of several military compensation issues being assessed.

The department can do so on its own authority, aides said, because the NDAA law does not require the U.S. military to only pay 95 percent of the housing allowances — instead the law requires the Pentagon to pay at least 95 percent.

The Defense Department “is reviewing the [Basic Allowance for Housing] methodology and evaluating whether it is feasible and advisable to phase out, or eliminate, the 5 percent cost share,” Gil Cisneros, Defense undersecretary for personnel and readiness, told Strickland in a November letter. “No decisions have been made at this point.”

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GUARDSMEN, RESERVISTS WOULD GET EXPANDED PARENTAL LEAVE UNDER SENATE BILL

Original Article: [Military.com](https://www.military.com)

On the heels of Congress securing a win for active-duty military parents by expanding their parental leave, a bipartisan pair of senators wants [National Guardsmen](#) and reservists to have comparable benefits.

Under the Reserve Component Parental Leave Parity Act, the text of which was obtained by Military.com ahead of its release, Guardsmen and reservists on drill status who are non-birthing parents, adoptive parents or foster parents would get parental leave -- not just birth mothers, as is the case right now.

"Parental leave should be available to all new parents, and service members in the reserves and the National Guard should have the same access to parental leave as those serving on active duty," Sen. Maggie Hassan, D-N.H., said in a statement. "I urge my colleagues to support this bipartisan bill and help to ensure that all service members are given the opportunity to bond with their children."

Hassan is sponsoring the bill with Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska. The bill was quietly introduced last week but has not yet been publicized or previously reported.

The bill comes after the Pentagon and military services earlier this year rolled out an expanded parental leave policy that was mandated by Congress. Under the new policy, new mothers and fathers on active duty, including adoptive and foster parents, get 12 weeks of leave, up from six weeks for new moms and three weeks for non-birthing parents.

That policy applies to Guardsmen and reservists who are on an active status. But those on a drill status still fall under the Reserve Component Maternity Leave Program. Under the maternity leave program, Guardsmen and reservists who give birth can get excused absences with pay and retirement points for 12 training periods, or the equivalent of three weekends, within 12 months of a birth.

Hassan and Murkowski's bill would not change the amount of leave Guardsmen and reservists can take, but would expand the benefit to more than just birth parents. The maternity leave itself is relatively new. It was implemented in summer 2022 after Congress mandated it in the fiscal 2021 National Defense Authorization Act, or NDAA.

Maternity leave was a longtime goal of advocates for part-time service members to get their benefits on par with active-duty troops. But with the expanded parental leave for active-duty members, there's a disparity again.

"Congress' intent was to provide Guardsmen with the same benefit or at least a very, very similar benefit to what those in active duty get, and they don't have the same benefit right now," John Goheen, a spokesperson for the National Guard Association of the United States, told Military.com in a phone interview Wednesday.

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While the association was not familiar with Hassan and Murkowski's bill specifically, Goheen said the lobbying group generally supports any effort to provide benefits parity for Guardsmen.

"We're also supportive of anything that helps Guard soldiers and airmen better balance the various aspects of their life," Goheen added. "It helps us recruit, it helps us retain, if soldiers and airmen are able to balance their work responsibilities, their family responsibilities and their military responsibilities."

"If our part-timers have trouble with family or work coinciding with military, we know which one loses in the end – it's military responsibilities," he said.

The path forward on Hassan and Murkowski's bill is unclear. Asked about the prospects of the bill passing or being folded into the annual, must-pass NDAA, a spokesperson for Hassan told Military.com the senator will "continue working to build support for the legislation among her colleagues."

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.

Todd McKinley, Tennessee

This week, we are excited to recognize Todd McKinley from the Department of Tennessee for meeting with Senator Blackburn (R-TN) in Johnson City to discuss her work on the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC), the war in Ukraine, and the need to support our allies in Afghanistan.

Thank you, Mr. McKinley!

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 Wednesday, April 19, the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Technology Modernization will hold a hearing on pending and draft legislation.
- On Wednesday, April 26, the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee will hold a hearing on pending and draft legislation.