

Congress courts veterans leading up to election

KEVIN FREKING - Associated Press - Associated Press

Congress is using its relatively few working days before November's general election to send a message of support to the nation's 21 million-plus veterans. No legislative breakthroughs are expected, but lawmakers in both parties hope the late push will help them make their case to a critical voting bloc.

Senate Democrats are pushing President Barack Obama's proposal to establish a job corps for veterans. The bill would dedicate \$1 billion over five years for the hiring of veterans as police officers and firefighters and for employing others to restore and protect public lands.

House Republicans plan a series of hearings reviewing the Veterans Affairs Department's performance on key issues, such as its lack of progress in reducing the disability claims backlog.

Lawmakers want to return to their districts to campaign for re-election as soon as possible. House members could leave as early as Friday and are expected to stay in Washington no later than the end of next week. The Senate is likely to have a shortened September schedule too.

That means almost no time to pass substantive legislation — but enough time to try to score some points with voters.

For example, Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York, a key Democratic Party strategist, wants a procedural vote on the House Republican budget plan written by Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, the GOP vice presidential nominee. In the House, Republicans are promising a vote on a bill called the No More Solyndras Act, which would phase out Energy Department loan guarantees for solar and wind energy companies. It's unlikely to come up for a vote in the Democratic-controlled Senate.

California-based Solyndra Inc. went bankrupt last year after receiving a federal loan guarantee, even as some White House aides raised red flags. The company is a focal point for Republican criticism of President Barack Obama's green-energy policy.

In a nod to veterans, the Senate is scheduled to vote Tuesday on whether to proceed with a bill to establish the Veterans Jobs Corps. The legislation borrows from the concept of the Civilian Conservation Corps, which put nearly 3 million people to work during the Great Depression planting trees and building roads and parks.

The unemployment rate for veterans had been dropping gradually when it hit a bump in the latest jobs report, which showed the unemployment rate for Iraq and Afghanistan vets at 10.9 percent. That was nearly 2 percentage points higher from

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Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

the previous month. Economists warn not to put too much stock into one month's report.

Obama unveiled the Veterans Jobs Corps proposal in early February. Neither chamber moved swiftly to act on the proposal, but Democrats have now brought the measure from Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., to the floor.

"The heroes who fought for their country overseas shouldn't have to fight for a job once they get home," Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said Monday.

The Senate's veterans' jobs program bill would be paid for mostly by requiring the IRS to recover more money from Medicare providers who are delinquent on their tax bills and by requiring the State Department to rescind or deny passports to anyone who owes more than \$50,000 in unpaid taxes.

Veterans groups have largely been supportive of establishing the jobs corps, but there has not been a clamoring for that specific program. It's considered one of several steps that could improve the jobs picture for veterans.

Ramsey Sulayman, legislative associate at the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, said he understands that it's an election season and "everybody's angling," but he also believes lawmakers in both chambers are making a good-faith effort to help veterans as the session winds down.

"You hope people are doing things for altruistic reasons, but the bottom line is, if they're helping out veterans, we're happy with that," Sulayman said.

Even if the Senate ends up passing the measure, it probably will go nowhere in the House. Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, said his committee has received few details about the program and said he's focused on expanding existing job-training programs with the VA.

"What we're focused on is helping veterans find long-term unemployment and not some gimmick," Miller said.

Meanwhile, the House committee will be focusing on oversight. A hearing scheduled for next week will look at an array of challenges that the VA is facing, such as lengthy wait times that many veterans have experienced when seeking mental health care or in resolving disability claims.

"This is not political in any sense," Miller said. "Lives are at risk and the VA needs to be laser-focused on finding solutions to ensure our veterans who are suffering from the invisible wounds of war are treated quickly when they reach out for help."

Source URL (retrieved on 09/30/2014 - 10:14am):

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