In Congress:

The House hopes to pass its government funding measures on Tuesday, impeach President Donald J. Trump on Wednesday and then pass implementing legislation for the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) before heading home for a two-week break. The Senate will pass the spending bill on Thursday or Friday and then also leave town. Rumored to be included in these end-of-year spending bills are: TheSECURE Act, aTRIA extension, Ex-Im Bank re-authorization, a short-term flood extension, and some tax provisions which are possibly under consideration.

Lawmakers added $24.7 billion in emergency and “off-book” spending to a nearly $1.4 trillion package as they sought to settle differences and finish the congressional appropriations bills for the fiscal year.

The White House and Congress had reached a $1.37 trillion deal in July that increased defense spending by $22 billion and domestic spending by $12 billion. But the final deal brings the sum total to $1.394 trillion, and includes emergency funding for natural disasters, the 2020 census, medical funding and other priorities. After Appropriations “Cardinals” reached an agreement in principle on government funding for fiscal year (FY) 2020, House and Senate lawmakers will look to pass a series of “minibus” spending packages for each of the 12 bills ahead of the December 20, 2019 deadline.

While GOP leadership expressed optimism about the prospects of support from the President, it ultimately remains to be seen whether he will sign off on the measures if his border-related priorities are not met. If that were to happen the best bet is that Congress
would pass a short-term Continuing Resolution (CR) – but there is a chance, *albeit a small one*, that the President wouldn't sign that either and the government could — once again – shut down during Christmas.

The House will consider 18 bills under suspension of the rules including a bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to enforce the licensure requirement for medical providers of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The Senate will resume consideration of the conference report to accompany S.1790, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 with a vote on the conference report for the $735.2 billion measure.
House Passes Paid Parental Leave for Federal Workers in Defense Bill:

On Wednesday, December 18, the House passed the National Defense Authorization Act, which includes 12 weeks of paid parental leave for all federal employees! The Senate is likely to vote on this bill next week and we expect it to pass.

Thank you to everyone who advocated for the inclusion of paid leave in the NDAA conference agreement! More than 2 million federal workers will soon have access to paid parental leave thanks to your action.

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) passed in a 377-48 vote, with many “no” votes coming from progressive Democrats upset after several of their priorities were removed from the legislation.

See the NDAA here.

The language says that federal workers with one year of service can substitute new, administrative paid parental leave for unpaid Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) leave within 12 months of a child's birth, adoption or foster placement.

Federal employees using paid parental leave must agree to come back to work for at least 12 weeks after leave, though can be waived for serious health issues of the employee or child/for other reasons outside employee's control. Otherwise, health premiums must be repaid.

The compromise bill picked up Republican support that was absent when the House passed its original version of the defense legislation in July, allowing the chamber to send the $738 billion bill to the Senate.

You can read more in the following articles:
- Washington Post: The Health 202: Congress is poised to approve paid family leave for federal workers
- Sinclair Broadcasting Group: Trump, Congress challenged to go further after backing limited paid family leave
- Marketplace: Deal offers paid leave for federal workers, but only new parents
- Bloomberg: Parental Leave Inches Ahead in U.S. on Federal Workers’ Time Off
- NPR: Federal Workers Poised To Get 12 Weeks Paid Parental Leave
- CNN: House passes defense bill that would include paid family leave for federal workers for the first time
- CNBC: Paid parental leave may be coming to more than 2 million Americans
Office of Personnel Management (OPM) - (General Services Administration) GSA Merger:

The Trump administration’s controversial plan to merge most of the federal government’s Human Resources agency with the General Services Administration appears to have been put on hold, at least for now.

A provision of the latest version of the fiscal 2020 National Defense Authorization Act, (NDAA) the result of weeks of negotiation between both chambers of Congress and the White House, stipulates that the administration cannot move any of the Office of Personnel Management’s functions out of the agency until an independent study of the agency’s responsibilities and challenges has been completed.

In May 2019, the administration formally proposed legislation that would authorize the transfer of most of OPM’s functions to GSA, and move the agency’s policy shop to a division within the Executive Office of the President under the leadership of a non-Senate confirmed political appointee.

The NDAA language prevents the transfer of “any function, responsibility, authority, service, system or program that is assigned in law” from OPM to GSA until at least six months after the completion of an independent report on the issue by the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA). NAPA will be tasked with examining OPM’s various functions, both statutory and non-statutory, the challenges associated with carrying out those functions, as well as recommending changes to address those challenges.

The NAPA report is expected to consider cost-benefit analyses, feasibility, and the potential impact on labor-management agreements across the federal government, and will be transmitted to the administration, Congress and the public.

The language in the NDAA bill marks a compromise between the White House and House lawmakers. The Trump administration warned that the House-passed NDAA, which also included a provision blocking the merger, was too onerous by blocking the two agencies from entering routine inter-agency agreements, regardless of whether those agreements were related to the proposed merger.

The NDAA passed the House last week.

Efficient Federal Government:

Federal Information Technology (IT) leaders foresee a significant need for a wide range of IT skills at their agencies over the next two years, with the greatest demand expected for specialists in cloud networking and application development, artificial intelligence, data analysis and enterprise engineering, according to a new survey.
The rapid evolution of cloud-based computing services, the need to meet citizens’ digital services expectations and the explosive growth of data are placing significant pressure on the federal leaders to rethink their workforce needs. IT officials identified more than 20 IT skills that will be in demand in the next two to three years.

The survey, produced by WorkScoop and FedScoop, highlights the ongoing challenges agency leaders continue to face in trying to hire, retain and reskill the federal IT workforce. Fully 7 in 10 government IT leaders view continuing IT skills gaps as having a high or medium impact on the ability to deliver on agencies’ missions, the report found.

The study asked 236 Chief Information Officers (CIOs) and government sector IT leaders about which IT skills are expected to be in greatest demand and the steps they’re taking to acquire the right talent. The report, underwritten by Monster Government Solutions, VMWare, World Wide Technology and Cisco, was developed in consultation with top federal IT and human capital officials.

Respondents to the survey indicated the skills they most need over the next two years are:
- cloud networking and engineering (61 percent)
- cloud application development (53 percent)
- artificial intelligence (49 percent)
- data analysis (47 percent)
- enterprise engineering (40 percent)

There was also high demand for traditional IT skills, including software development, legacy systems and data center networking.

*Read the full report*
Violence Against Women Act (VAWA):

Congress let the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) lapse in February. But 10 months later, legislation to renew the landmark 1994 law has hit a wall in the Senate, where the Senate Majority hasn’t been united behind their own bill.

The House did its part in April to pass VAWA, which, to date, has provided billions of dollars in grants for programs aimed at combatting domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking. It passed a bipartisan bill that renews VAWA for five more years and expands protections for vulnerable populations like LGBTQ and Native American victims of domestic violence. It also includes a gun safety provision that would prohibit people from owning firearms who have been convicted of abusing their dating partners, closing the so-called “boyfriend loophole” in current law.

The Senate didn’t act until last month, when Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) announced that she and Senator Joni Ernst (R-Iowa) had failed to come up with a bipartisan bill after months of trying. Senator Feinstein went on to lead all 47 Democrats in endorsing the House-passed bill and introducing it in the Senate. Senator Ernst responded by accusing them of playing politics with a bill that can’t pass the Senate and unveiled her party’s own bill. Now, neither bill is moving.

Senator Ernst’s bill, meanwhile, has its own problems. It strips out the gun safety provision. It strips out the added protections for LGBTQ and Native victims of violence. Unfortunately, the bill doesn’t have many GOP co-sponsors.

Senator Ernst only has three of the Senate’s eight Republican women supporting her bill: Sens. Marsha Blackburn (Tenn.), Shelley Moore Capito (W.Va.) and Deb Fischer (Neb.). They want a bipartisan bill however, the bill language has weakened protections for Native women, who face horrific levels of violence. This has made it difficult to gain support among members who are hearing from advocacy groups who oppose the bill.

Ernst’s bill eliminates gains made in the 2013 VAWA reauthorization that gave tribes badly needed jurisdiction to prosecute crimes committed by non-Native men who abuse Native women on tribal lands — a common pattern to the kinds of domestic violence faced by Native women. Under Senator Ernst’s bill, these non-Native abusers would no longer have to exhaust tribal court remedies before appealing their case to a federal court.
Violence Against Native Women:

In North America, there is an epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIW). In the United States alone, Native women face the highest rates of domestic violence, sexual assault, and murder—according to the National Institute of Justice, 1.5 million Native American women are survivors of violence. On some reservations, the Urban Indian Health Institute found, they are killed at a rate of up to 10 times the national average.

Native leaders across the continent have been sounding the alarm on this crisis for decades.

Last month, President Trump signed an executive order that created “Operation Lady Justice,” a White House task force that promises to help Native communities confront the epidemic of violence against women. The law promises consultation with tribes on MMIW and establishes a multi-jurisdictional team to review cases. Educational outreach programs and grants to Native communities to help them address violence against women and the missing and murdered will also be established.

The executive order also puts in place a means of collecting and sharing pertinent data among law enforcement agencies, which is desperately needed. The number of Indigenous women who have gone missing in North America is unclear because of this shortcoming, but in 2018, the Urban Indian Health Institute found 506 unique cases of missing and murdered American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls in 71 cities across 29 states. Fifty-six percent, or 280 cases, were murders.

As of 2016, 5,700 American Indian and Alaskan Native women disappeared in the United States, and only 116 of those cases were investigated by the Department of Justice (DOJ).

U.S. Attorney’s offices are responsible for prosecuting cases that fall under federal jurisdiction in Indian country after all tribal court remedies have been exhausted, and all those against non-Native people. Inadequate staffing and a lack of funding contribute to the epidemic. U.S. Attorney General William Barr was present at the signing of the executive order, and, four days prior, had announced an additional plan to address this issue alongside law enforcement and tribal leadership on the Flathead Reservation in Montana.

The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Initiative is a $1.5 million investment by the DOJ that will bring coordinators to 11 U.S. Attorney’s offices to investigate and prosecute criminal cases in Indian Country. In addition, Barr and Interior Secretary David Bernhardt will oversee Operation Lady Justice.
GOP Businesswoman Kelly Loeffler Appointed to Senate in Georgia:

Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp (R) on Wednesday formally introduced Kelly Loeffler, a financial executive and professional women’s basketball team owner, as his choice to fill the state’s forthcoming Senate vacancy.

Loeffler (pronounced “leffler”) will run in a November 2020 special election to fill the remainder of the six-year term Isakson won in 2016. Under Georgia law, all candidates will run on a single ballot. If no candidate wins a majority of the vote needed for outright victory, a runoff election between the top two finishers would be held in January 2021.

Loeffler will become the second woman ever to represent Georgia in the Senate and the first since Rebecca Latimer Felton (D), who became the nation’s first female senator as an appointee in 1922. With Loeffler, the 100-member Senate will have 26 women, an all-time high that includes 17 Democrats and nine Republicans.

Impeachment Update

The House Judiciary Committee early Monday, December 16, released its report on the impeachment inquiry of President Donald Trump. The 658-page, four-part report lays out the case against the president and the charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress.

In part one, the committee explains how the House Intelligence Committee conducted its investigation of the allegations against Trump. Part two explains the standards of impeachment in the Constitution. The third part details the committee’s conclusion that the President abused the power of the presidency.

And the fourth part addresses the charge of obstruction of Congress, concluding that other presidents have provided information to Congress under similar circumstances.

The House Ways and Means Committee will set the rules on Tuesday for the debate in the House on Wednesday, when it is expected to vote to impeach Trump.

More can be found here.