



AMVETS WEEKLY LEGISLATIVE UPDATE


SEPTEMBER 24, 2019

News Driving the Week

- [Veterans suicides rose in 2017](#) despite concerted efforts in recent years from federal officials and lawmakers to address mental health and emergency intervention services within the military community. Veterans Affairs officials noted in a new analysis released Friday that because of a data delay, their report does not take into effect any new initiatives put in place over the last 22 months. They also emphasized in the report that suicide prevention has become a major public health problem throughout the country, not just in the veterans community. But the increase in the number of veterans who die by suicide represents another setback for advocates who have worked in recent years to address the problem through public awareness campaigns, easier access to psychological treatment and aggressive messaging against the stigma of seeking mental health care. More than 6,100 veterans died by suicide in 2017, about 17 individuals per day. That's up about 2 percent from 2016 and about 6 percent over the previous 12 years. The shift is even more pronounced considering that the total number of veterans in America is decreasing each year, as older generations of former military personnel age. The total number of veterans in America dropped almost 2 percent from 2016 to 2017 (about 370,000 veterans) and was down almost 18 percent from 2005 to 2017. Almost two-thirds of the suicide deaths among veterans in 2017 were individuals who had no contact with the Veterans Health Administration. VA officials in recent years have focused on public outreach efforts to address that problem, noting limited opportunities to share information on support services with veterans who they don't interact with regularly. Find the whole report [here](#).

- The House on Wednesday voted to extend several programs to help low-income, rural and other veterans in need. [The Department of Veterans Affairs Expiring Authorities Act passed with a near-unanimous House vote](#) Wednesday, 417-1. The bill, introduced by Rep. Anthony Brindisi and Rep. Mike Bost preserves several programs. The bill specifically extends funding for financial assistance for supportive services for very low-income veteran families in permanent housing, including appropriations of about \$380 million; adds a one-year extension of the VA's authority to temporarily expand payments and allowances for beneficiary travel for veterans receiving care from vet centers, especially rural veterans who live far from facilities; adds a one-year extension of VA's authority to operate a regional office in the Philippines; and adds a one-year extension of VA's authority related to vendee loans. The goal of the bill is to "extend key VA programs and ensure benefits are not interrupted for America's veterans," Brindisi said in a news release about the bill.

- Be Connected represents a rare — and quiet — spot of [bipartisan cooperation between congressional Democrats and the Trump administration](#), which has moved aggressively to try to turn around the intransigent veteran suicide rate. "We are working well with them," said Representative Mark Takano, Democrat of California and the chairman of the Committee On Veterans' Affairs, referring to the department. He specifically cited the Be Connected program, which focuses on reaching veterans at risk for suicide, whether they live on a Native American reservation at the bottom of the Grand Canyon or in a bustling city. There has been increasing awareness that suicidal veterans often are best reached through members of their own community, and not the federal government. Some of those veterans who may need help do not seek Department of Veterans Affairs services, and some suicides stem from issues not related to military service at all. In March, President



Trump issued an executive order to reduce the suicide rate by assigning other federal agencies — like the Agriculture Department in rural areas — to get involved, and enlisted local governments, veterans groups and social service organizations to pitch in. The approach is a shift for an agency that for years attacked the problem alone, and it has impressed even the Democratic chairman of the House Committee on Veteran Affairs, who has been relentlessly critical of the department, especially over the issue of veteran suicide. The program, called Be Connected, is based on one that worked with Arizona National Guard members who were dying by suicide at increasingly high rates over the last decade, and supported by a 2015 law designed to improve veteran's mental health. It is operated by the Arizona Coalition for Military Families, a statewide public-private partnership that includes the Arizona governors office, the Arizona Department of Veterans Services, the federal veterans department and other partners. It is funded by a combination of federal, state, foundation and corporate sources. The philosophy, he said, is to intervene on "the myriad issues that service members and their families struggle with" before they "lead to crisis." Two years ago, the veterans department became an official partner in the consortium, which has since received 10,000 calls.

AMVETS in the News

[AMVETS plans massive Memorial Day motorcycle rally to replace Rolling Thunder's ride](#)

AMVETS officials will sponsor a three-day, motorcycle-themed demonstration rally in Washington, D.C. next Memorial Day weekend to replace the annual Rolling Thunder celebration that annually draws tens of thousands to the nation's capital. The new event, titled the "Rolling to Remember" Demonstration Run, will run from May 22 to 24 and retain the old event's focus on public awareness of troops still missing in action from overseas conflict. But AMVETS officials said the program will also heavily emphasize more public discussion of the national veterans suicide crisis, which claims 20 lives a day. "(The goal) is to remember those who have yet to come home, to remember those who are in harm's way, and to remember those who came home but are still struggling, to remember we as a country are still a long way to fulfilling our promises to those who served," said AMVETS National Commander Jan Brown during a Friday press conference on the plans at Harley-Davidson of Washington D.C.

[It's Official: AMVETS Will Hold Memorial Day Rally in D.C. to Replace 'Rolling Thunder'](#)

AMVETS made it official Friday: A "Rolling Thunder"-style motorcycle rally will take place next Memorial Day weekend in Washington, D.C., to honor the nation's veterans, POWs and missing-in-action. In a release and at a news conference, leaders of the veterans service organization American Veterans, better known as AMVETS, said they would continue the tradition of the annual three-day rally of thousands of motorcyclists in the nation's capital for the 2020 Memorial Day. Joe Chennelly, the national executive director of AMVETS, said last year that the organization was looking into the possibility of continuing the Rolling Thunder tradition. Last month AMVETS announced it had secured a permit from the National Park Service for a rally from May 22-24, 2020. The 2020 events will be held to "to make the nation, especially our voters, aware of what is happening, what isn't happening and what needs to happen to address our POWs, our MIAs, and our veterans and active-duty service members who are dying by suicide," Chennelly said in a statement. The new event won't use the Rolling Thunder name. Instead, the rally will be called "Rolling To Remember."

[Rolling Thunder gets new life, new focus, new name](#)

The annual military veterans motorcycle run from the Pentagon parking lot to the Vietnam Memorial on the National Mall will continue next Memorial Day weekend under the leadership of a different veterans organization. Military veterans advocacy group American Veterans (AMVETS) has taken the torch of organizing the motorcycle rally after Rolling Thunder, a group that honors prisoners of war

and missing in action service members, decided last year that it would no longer sponsor the event after 32 years. AMVETS is sponsoring a three-day event next to the Lincoln Memorial, where speakers and entertainers will honor POWs and MIA service members and advocate for more resources to help mitigate the high suicide rates among surviving veteran. The event will culminate with the motorcycle rally, which will be officially re-branded the “Rolling to Remember” demonstration run. “This will not be a party. It is a serious demonstration to bring awareness and accountability for POWs and MIAs left behind and suicide prevention,” AMVETS National Executive Director Joe Chenelly said.

Upcoming Events

House Veterans Affairs Committee
Health Subcommittee

MISSION Critical: Care in the Community Update
Wednesday, September 25 10:00 AM
Watch [HERE](#)

Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
Toxic Exposure: Examining the VA's Presumptive Disability Decision-Making Process
Wednesday, September 25 10:00 AM
Watch [HERE](#)

Facebook Live: VA Mental Health Care and Suicide Prevention
Thursday, September 26 1:00 PM
<https://www.facebook.com/AMVETSHQ/>

House Veterans Affairs Committee
Technology Modernization Subcommittee
The Future of VA Scheduling: Implementing a Commercial Off the Shelf Scheduling Solution at the Department of Veterans Affairs
Thursday, September 26 10:00 AM
Watch [HERE](#)

AMVETS Legislative Priorities

[H.R. 1715](#) Charitable Equity for Veterans Act of 2019 introduced by Rep. Ron Kind of WI and Rep. Brad Wenstrup of OH

[H.R. 1997](#) Veterans Posttraumatic Growth Act introduced by Rep. Tim Ryan of OH

[H.R. 3495](#) Improve Well-Being for Veterans Act introduced by Rep. Jack Bergman of MI and Rep. Chrissy Houlahan of PA

[S. 1906](#) Improve Well-Being for Veterans Act introduced by Rep. John Boozman of AR

[H.R. 4154](#) Leave No Veteran Behind Act introduced by Rep. Susie Lee of NV and Rep. Steve Watkins of KS

[H.R. 3025](#) You Are Not Forgotten Act introduced by Rep. Mark Meadows of NC and Rep. Susie Lee of NV

Continued News

- Staff shortages that range from doctors to housekeepers are [hampering health care at veterans hospitals across the country](#), experts told a congressional panel Thursday. Compensation that falls below the private sector and a nationwide shortage of some professions are part of the problem, said Michael Missal, the agency's Inspector General. Staffing issues are not limited to doctors and nurses,

either. Missal said it isn't enough to add health care providers if the facility lacks schedulers, lab technicians or "custodial staff to clean additional rooms." The Government Accountability Office also weighed in at the hearing. In 2016, the watchdog agency cited high attrition, increased workload and staff burnout as contributing to the problem. GAO has issued 40 recommendations to the agency, a dozen of which focused on what GAO calls human capital management. Of those 12, six have been implemented. Staffing problems at the VA "are systemic, longstanding and are undermining its mission," said Robert Goldenkoff, GAO director of strategic issues.

- [The Warriors Research Institute](#), a Waco-based research center that's part of the Baylor Scott & White health system, is receiving a \$500,000 grant from the Texas Veterans Commission Fund for Veterans' Assistance to expand its statewide connected health platform. The center offers telemental health visits free of charge to veterans and their family members who are dealing with post-traumatic stress syndrome and other mental health challenges. The center plans to use the money to expand its Vet PaTHs program, a pilot telehealth project aimed at improving care management for veterans in central Texas. The program is one of many scattered across the country that are using telemedicine to reach out to veterans and their caregivers, offering them access to healthcare services that they might otherwise have difficulty getting, either because of travel concerns or a lack of nearby resources.

- A JAMIA Open study and a Psychiatric Services study both found that the [VA is succeeding in providing enhanced benefits to veterans](#). Both studies indicate a plan by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to use distributed tablet devices to provide telehealth benefits to patients is working. A JAMIA Open study published in August concluded the initiative successfully reached veterans in rural areas and patients with mental health conditions, while a separate study published by Psychiatric Services found the VA's efforts also led to improved clinical efficiency. "Telehealth technology remains a vital platform to provide high-quality healthcare to all veterans, regardless of challenges they may face in accessing care," VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said in a statement. "VA's tablet program is a model that other networked healthcare systems across the country can mirror, and demonstrates the potential of telehealth capabilities in the years to come."

- [Opinion](#): VA treatment should be based on evidence, not political pressure

- [Opinion](#): The VA's suicide prevention strategy will fail



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