



# AMVETS WEEKLY LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

## NOVEMBER 12, 2019

### News Driving the Week

- A bill to dramatically [expand private-sector mental health care for veterans](#) that has been at the [center of partisan attacks among House Veterans' Affairs Committee members](#) will be the focus of a closed-door congressional roundtable on Nov. 13. Lawmakers are hoping to craft a compromise plan and ease tensions. The bill, which has drawn support from both Republicans and Democrats, would award grants to private-sector mental health experts in an effort to provide quicker and more convenient treatments for veterans in distress. Supporters have argued it could be a valuable new tool in the effort to reduce veterans suicide. In a letter to House leaders earlier this fall, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie called the legislation a chance “to get at the root causes of the suicide crisis in the nation.” Committee ranking member Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tenn., said before that walk out that “lives are at risk” with every day the legislation is delayed. Takano said he still has concerns about the legislation, particularly what oversight and standards will be established for groups receiving the grants. “We need new solutions that will increase coordination among community-based nonclinical services, improve the quality of life for veterans and their families, and help prevent veteran suicide as a result,” Takano said in a statement Tuesday. “However, to ensure veterans have access to these services, we must ensure the infrastructure exists to connect veterans with the community-based organizations seeking to serve them and that critical accountability and quality assurance measures are in place.”

- A health program for veterans that President Trump heralds as a triumphant success is struggling to make its network of doctors as large as required to meet an aggressive expansion of [care outside the Department of Veterans Affairs health facilities](#), officials said. The company managing the new program in a majority of the states said it would probably need millions of dollars more to meet the plan’s coverage goals. Under a new law, known as the Mission Act, veterans who need to drive for at least 30 minutes to a government-operated veterans hospital — rather than 40 miles under old standards — can receive primary care and mental health services outside the department’s traditional system. Officials at Optum Public Sector Solutions, the third-party administrator for the new health plan for veterans across a large portion of the United States, recently told congressional aides that they were unable to guarantee a health care network large enough to accommodate all the veterans who might seek care under the new system. They suggested that more money — perhaps as much as \$75 million — would be needed to help build a larger network. “The \$75 million figure is an early estimate based on nothing more than guesswork,” said Christina Mandreucci, a spokeswoman for the veterans department. “While there are almost always costs involved in contract modification, both V.A. and Optum believe they will be a fraction of that total, with future estimates driven by network utilization data.” Officials from Optum came to Capitol Hill several weeks ago to update staff members, who were startled to hear that the network as envisioned under the original contract would unlikely be able to meet the needs of a major influx of new veterans. A few weeks later, officials from the veterans department traveled to Capitol Hill to

discuss the Mission Act and its progress, and it became clear that Optum did not have enough providers in the right locations, said one Senate official, surprising many in the room.

- A bill to improve veterans' access to mental health care and reduce veteran suicide rates will get a committee vote next year if, as expected, Sen. Jerry Moran becomes chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, Moran and co-sponsor Sen. Jon Tester said Wednesday. Committee Chairman Sen. Johnny Isakson of Georgia is retiring at the end of this year, and Moran, of Kansas, is the Republican next in seniority. Speaking at a Washington Post panel discussion, Moran said [veterans' mental health care and suicide prevention will be a priority of the committee](#) when he becomes chairman and he will work "to see that legislation occurs." Tester, D-Montana, said the bill will be put to a committee vote in early 2020. The measure was introduced in March to improve health care provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs to veterans across the country. The bill also would allow veterans to be treated with innovative suicide prevention initiatives like animal therapy, yoga, meditation and acupuncture. Tester said in parts of Montana, private groups are already taking veterans out on fly-fishing trips, which have helped many of them manage mental health issues.

- [Sen. Johnny Isakson](#) doesn't believe that the Department of Veterans Affairs will ever be "fixed," no matter what lawmakers do. Isakson will leave the Senate at the end of this year, citing "mounting health challenges" including a Parkinson's disease diagnosis. His departure comes at a key moment for the committee and the department. With a presidential election looming next year, maintaining any focus on veterans issues could be a significant struggle. Keeping the committee's work from collapsing into political infighting could be even more difficult. And Isakson insists that despite some recent negative headlines, VA is in better shape now than at any point in the last five years. "VA is going to have to work better in the future than it is working now, but it is working now," he said. "A lot of people have perceptions that VA is only what you read about in the newspaper, and it's not."

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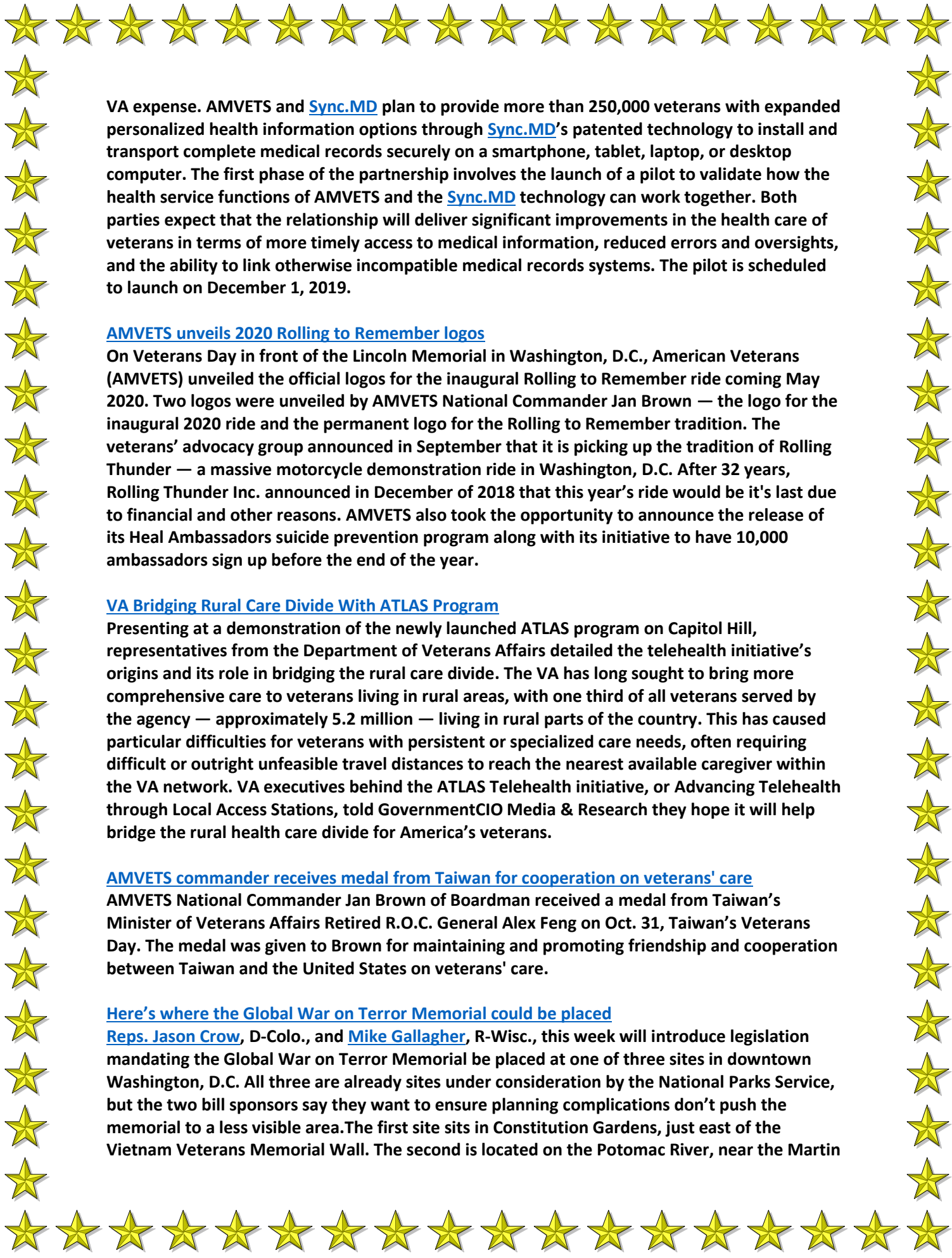
#### Clients in the News

##### [AMVETS Applauds Passage of POW/MIA Flag Act, Urges Congress to Follow Suit](#)

AMVETS praises Congress and the President for passing and signing into law Thursday the POW/MIA Flag Act. This important new law requires the display of the POW/MIA flag outside of high-profile Federal buildings and National war memorials throughout the year. AMVETS is hopeful that this will serve as encouragement for members of Congress to properly display the flag outside their offices, as is protocol. "It was not that long ago that the iconic black and white flag that means so much to so many was a fixture up and down every hallway of Capitol Hill," said AMVETS National Commander Jan Brown. "That was not the case this past summer, when AMVETS leaders went from office to office, talking to members of Congress and their staff, asking them to once again properly display the POW/MIA flag outside their offices."

##### [AMVETS Partners with Sync.MD to Revolutionize Veteran Health Records Management](#)

AMVETS and [Sync.MD](#) announced a strategic partnership formed for the purpose of streamlining health record management for veterans. This follows the implementation of the VA MISSION Act in June 2019 that allows eligible veterans to choose care in the community at



VA expense. AMVETS and [Sync.MD](#) plan to provide more than 250,000 veterans with expanded personalized health information options through [Sync.MD](#)'s patented technology to install and transport complete medical records securely on a smartphone, tablet, laptop, or desktop computer. The first phase of the partnership involves the launch of a pilot to validate how the health service functions of AMVETS and the [Sync.MD](#) technology can work together. Both parties expect that the relationship will deliver significant improvements in the health care of veterans in terms of more timely access to medical information, reduced errors and oversights, and the ability to link otherwise incompatible medical records systems. The pilot is scheduled to launch on December 1, 2019.

#### [AMVETS unveils 2020 Rolling to Remember logos](#)

On Veterans Day in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., American Veterans (AMVETS) unveiled the official logos for the inaugural Rolling to Remember ride coming May 2020. Two logos were unveiled by AMVETS National Commander Jan Brown — the logo for the inaugural 2020 ride and the permanent logo for the Rolling to Remember tradition. The veterans' advocacy group announced in September that it is picking up the tradition of Rolling Thunder — a massive motorcycle demonstration ride in Washington, D.C. After 32 years, Rolling Thunder Inc. announced in December of 2018 that this year's ride would be its last due to financial and other reasons. AMVETS also took the opportunity to announce the release of its Heal Ambassadors suicide prevention program along with its initiative to have 10,000 ambassadors sign up before the end of the year.

#### [VA Bridging Rural Care Divide With ATLAS Program](#)

Presenting at a demonstration of the newly launched ATLAS program on Capitol Hill, representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs detailed the telehealth initiative's origins and its role in bridging the rural care divide. The VA has long sought to bring more comprehensive care to veterans living in rural areas, with one third of all veterans served by the agency — approximately 5.2 million — living in rural parts of the country. This has caused particular difficulties for veterans with persistent or specialized care needs, often requiring difficult or outright unfeasible travel distances to reach the nearest available caregiver within the VA network. VA executives behind the ATLAS Telehealth initiative, or Advancing Telehealth through Local Access Stations, told GovernmentCIO Media & Research they hope it will help bridge the rural health care divide for America's veterans.

#### [AMVETS commander receives medal from Taiwan for cooperation on veterans' care](#)

AMVETS National Commander Jan Brown of Boardman received a medal from Taiwan's Minister of Veterans Affairs Retired R.O.C. General Alex Feng on Oct. 31, Taiwan's Veterans Day. The medal was given to Brown for maintaining and promoting friendship and cooperation between Taiwan and the United States on veterans' care.

#### [Here's where the Global War on Terror Memorial could be placed](#)

[Reps. Jason Crow](#), D-Colo., and [Mike Gallagher](#), R-Wisc., this week will introduce legislation mandating the Global War on Terror Memorial be placed at one of three sites in downtown Washington, D.C. All three are already sites under consideration by the National Parks Service, but the two bill sponsors say they want to ensure planning complications don't push the memorial to a less visible area. The first site sits in Constitution Gardens, just east of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. The second is located on the Potomac River, near the Martin

Luther King Jr. and Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorials. The third is between the Korean War Veterans Memorial and the World War II Memorial. All of the sites are in areas frequented by tourists on foot and tour bus companies. No site design work has been started yet. Officials from the foundation are in the midst of a public opinion campaign about ideas for what the memorial should include, and fundraising for the effort.

#### Upcoming Events

##### House Veterans Affairs Committee

Hijacking our heroes: exploiting veterans through disinformation on social media  
Wednesday, November 13 2:00 PM  
HVC 210

##### House Veterans Affairs Committee

Technology Modernization Subcommittee  
Cybersecurity challenges and cyber risk management at the department of veterans affairs  
Thursday, November 14 10:00 AM  
HVC 210

##### House Appropriations Committee

Mil-Con VA Subcommittee  
Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection's Failures at VA  
Thursday, November 14 10:00 AM  
2362-A Rayburn

#### Introduced Legislation

##### House Veterans Affairs Committee

Introduced 11/08/2019: [H.R.5030](#) - To direct the Comptroller General of the United States to take certain actions regarding suicides by veterans and mental health care furnished by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

[H.R.5029](#) - To require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to staff each medical center of the Department of Veterans Affairs with at least one suicide prevention coordinator, and for other purposes.

[H.R.5027](#) - To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to furnish free and comprehensive mental health care to former members of the Armed Services, and for other purposes.

[H.R.5024](#) - To amend title 38, United States Code, to expand health care coverage provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs during the transition of members of the Armed Forces from service in the Armed Forces to civilian life, and for other purposes.

##### Senate Veterans Affairs Committee

Introduced 11/07/2019: [S.2825](#) - A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide child care assistance to veterans receiving certain training or vocational rehabilitation, and for other purposes.

[S.2822](#) - A bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to develop and maintain a suicide risk management and prevention and lethal means training course for certain employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

[S.2821](#) - A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to

allow a veteran to receive a full year supply of contraceptive pills, transdermal patches, and vaginal rings, and for other purposes.

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### Continued News

- Military retirees and eligible survivors will receive a [1.6% boost in their monthly pay](#) beginning in January based on the Pentagon's annual cost of living adjustment, the Defense Department announced Wednesday. The increased pay will be doled out to most military retirees, survivors of service members who died on active or inactive duty and survivors of retirees who participated in the Survivor Benefit Plan, which pays the family of someone who opted for monthly annuities following the death of an eligible military retiree. The 2020 adjustment is less than last year's 2.8% increase, but it is comparable to adjustments in other recent years. For retirees and survivors receiving the 1.6% boost, the increase amounts to an extra \$16 for every \$1,000 in government benefits received. Individuals who retired at the rank of E-7 and served 20 years will see about \$38 extra per month. An individual who retired at the rank of O-5 and also served 20 years will see a \$72 boost each month of 2020.
- Two Republican senators are demanding answers from the Department of Veterans Affairs on ["alarming" reports of sexual misconduct at VA](#). Sens. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, and Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.V., sent a letter to Secretary Robert Wilkie calling for information to "identify gaps in VA's policies, prevent reoccurrence of such incidents and hold perpetrators accountable." The senators gave Wilkie a deadline of Nov. 14 to respond to their [letter](#).
- The Apple health record app that lets patients download their [medical data](#) on their phones is now live for VA patients, just in time for Veteran's Day. The VA and Apple initially announced their partnership in February. It's not clear when Android users will get the same capability. The agency said it will make health records accessible on other devices and software but mentioned no specifics.
- [Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie](#) has a bold prediction for the 2020 election: His department's programs are going to come out a winner. "I don't see how, no matter what is in store electorally, how anyone goes back on selling VA short in terms of the budget," Wilkie said in a sit-down with [Military Times](#) on Thursday. "We have massive (reform) programs that were undertaking, like the electronic health record. Those are expensive. Wilkie, who took over the [\\$200-billion-plus department](#) 16 months ago amid substantial leadership turmoil within VA, said he believes the department is stronger than it has been in decades, thanks to legislation passed by lawmakers in recent months and institutional reforms from the administration.
- [Representative Steve Watkins](#) introduced two new bills aimed at addressing the nation's veteran suicide epidemic. Watkins introduced the VA Suicide Prevention Services Act and the VA Suicide Prevention Services Accountability Act. One would require the Department of Veteran Affairs to ensure each VA medical center is staffed with at least one full-time suicide prevention coordinator. The other would ensure accountability in the VA's mental health and

suicide prevention services. In a statement Rep. Watkins said "one veteran suicide is enough to warrant action, twenty a day deserves our utmost attention. Our veterans deserve better.

- According to the NIH, an average of 22 American veterans commit suicide *every day*. This grim statistic is what prompted a national nonprofit, [Vets Lives Matter Now](#), and a Georgia based wellness company, Healthy Place Botanicals™ to team up and provide a building that addresses the myriad of reasons our veterans are struggling with mental and physical health issues. The building, aptly named Veterans Healthy Place, will be the largest non-government facility in the country and will honor all branches of the military. Veterans Healthy Place will be a one stop facility that provides supportive solutions to the very real problems our veterans, active duty personnel and military families face every day. One floor will house offices for medical and general wellness healthcare providers. Another floor will host a social gathering spot similar to a USO. Executive office spaces for veteran focused businesses and nonprofits will take up another floor. The ground floor will have a dedicated memorial space and a “garden of gratitude” for visiting veterans to enjoy.

- [Opinion](#): Let's find a better way to stop veteran suicides
- [Opinion](#): This Veterans Day, know that the U.S. military is losing to the war called suicide
- [Opinion](#): More Can Be Done to Save Veterans from Suicide



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