





The 118th Congress begins...

As I highlighted previously our Executive Director, Joe Chenelly, and our lead lobbyist, Justin Brown were invited to personally deliver AMVETS legislative priorities to incoming Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, Mike Bost (IL-R).

We now want to make sure everyone also has a copy of these important priorities that have us continuing to be lead on mental health and suicide, with an emphasis this Congress on the crisis at DoD. We are also stepping up to

highlight how are surviving spouses are long overdue for increase in their DIC benefits, as well as taking on concurrent receipt to end the harmful policy that disallows our retirees from receiving their retired pay and disability pay.

AMVETS testimony will take place March 8th on Capitol Hill. For the first time since 2019, AMVETS are invited and encouraged to be present as Commander McLean testifies. We will also be hosting an awesome legislative reception on the evening of March 8th so please be sure to drop by.

With high regard,

-Paul Shipley, AMVETS National Third Vice Commander

AMVETS Legislative Priorities for the 118th Congress

Mental Health and Suicide Prevention in the VA and Armed Forces

Since 2019, AMVETS has led the way highlighting that mental health, more than any other issue, resulted in the unnecessary loss of lives for the veteran and military community. As a result of AMVETS legislative efforts insisting that the VA try new and innovative approaches to address the issue, Congress passed the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act. The Act requires VA to provide significant grants to community and non-profit organizations as well as requiring VA to carry out innovative pilot programs to execute novel approaches to tackle the avoidable outcome of death by suicide.

AMVETS will be closely monitoring this effort to ensure the program is successful in treating the majority of veterans that have given up on VA as their location of choice to receive help with their mental health care.

AMVETS has also, for years, called for Congress to create a Special Committee to tackle the suicide crisis facing DoD and our veterans. We continue to highlight that the piecemeal approach to this issue across numerous committees results in expensive, poor, and noncontiguous approaches with lethal outcomes.

The lives of our servicemembers and veterans continue to be our number one priority.

Increase Women Veterans' Voices in Policy and Government to Address Issues Disproportionately Affecting them

Addressing mental health issues specific to women is a top priority for AMVETS. The rate at which women choose to end their own life is 180 percent higher than members of the same gender who never served. Male

veterans, meanwhile, are 140 percent more likely to commit suicide than their peers who have only known civilian life.

AMVETS played a pivotal role in key legislation championed by Senator Gillibrand and others to reduce military sexual trauma and expand health care and benefits. We will continue to champion this issue on Capitol Hill. However, AMVETS has also noted the astonishingly low number of veterans working as policy staffers on Capitol Hill and, more specifically, the low number of women and minority veterans working in these positions. As such, we are proud to be teaming up with the HillVets Foundation to work with them to address this shortage of women and minority voices working in these positions.

Bolster Recruitment and Retention at VA

The VA has pledged to serve our veterans' health care needs, but the means to accessing this care is different for every veteran. Millions of rural and highly rural veterans face a unique combination of factors that create disparities in health care not found in urban areas, such as inadequate access to care, limited availability of skilled care providers, and additional stigma in seeking mental health care. There is also the continued challenge of the politicization of VA health care. AMVETS realizes that the best healthcare option for veterans will first provide a strong, well-run, and fully staffed VA! As a support mechanism, VA will utilize private care when it makes sense in order to provide ease of care to veterans, as is often the case for veterans in rural areas.

As such AMVETS strongly supports Chairman Tester's, and Senator Boozman's legislation, that is aimed at providing the VA with more tools to compete for highly qualified medical personnel, support training for current and future VA clinicians to ensure veterans receive the highest quality of care, and provide more oversight and public transparency on VA's efforts to address vacancies. This legislation would also better prepare VA to manage care for the thousands of veterans newly eligible under the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act.

AMVETS has been a long-time leader in working to ensure that our Nation's veterans receive world-class healthcare, and this legislation affords the best option for veterans and VA leadership to ensure that is where we are headed.

Create Equitable Non-Profit Policies for Veteran Non-Profits

AMVETS is committed to passage of a bill that will allow 501 c-19 congressionally chartered nonprofits receive tax deductible donations. For numerous Congresses, AMVETS has led the charge on legislation that will allow a tax deduction for charitable contributions to specific federally chartered organizations of past or present Armed Forces members. (Under current law, donations to such an organization are only deductible if at least 90% of the organization's membership consists of war veterans. The bill

expands the deduction to include organizations that do not meet the wartime service requirement and are federally chartered.)
The non-profit designation for veterans' organizations is 501(c)(19), and this status includes tax exemption and the ability to accept tax-deductible donations. However, an outdated regulation requires these organizations to maintain a membership of at least 90% of wartime veterans to receive tax-deductible contributions. This regulation was likely created in the 1970s when nearly every military veteran was a "war veteran," defined as having served during wartime.

However, there are 2.4 million veterans who do not meet this definition. These men and women are mainly those who honorably served following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and prior to the Persian Gulf War in 1991. These members of the Nation's first "All-Volunteer Force" served knowing full well that they may be called into war.

This antiquated regulation negatively impacts many of America's distinguished and historic veterans' non-profits who are (or are at threat of) losing their ability to receive tax deductible charitable donations. For example, AMVETS lost its ability to receive tax-deductible donations in 2015. AMVETS is the only one of the "Big 6" Congressionally-chartered veterans service organizations open to all non-wartime veterans. About 38% of AMVETS' 250,000 members are not wartime veterans, leaving the 75-year-old organization unable to accept tax-deductible donations.

This legislation addresses this unintended consequence in the tax code by allowing any congressionally chartered 501 (c)(19) to be eligible to receive tax-deductible charitable donations.

National Veterans Strategy is needed to align care and benefits to focus on outcomes, and success

AMVETS is fully aware of the challenges of reorienting a VA system that so many veterans have come to rely on. Sadly had a better system existed veterans currently existing low-lows would have benefited from a more proactive approach had it existed previously. We have to start somewhere because our current policy is misaligned, provides negative incentives, and leads to poor outcomes.

As such, we recommend that Congress create a new office with significant funding; we recommend \$1 billion dollars to be achieved by not providing the casual annual increase to the mental health budget. The office should be given the mission of creating a National Veterans' Strategy that orients the future goals and vision of a VA that focuses on veterans maintaining their warrior wellness and providing proactive outreach, training, benefits, and services with the intent that they go on to live lives of purpose and meaning while maintaining a state of physical wellness, and understanding the components of living a mentally healthy lifestyle.

Support Immediate Passage of the Major Richard Star Act

AMVETS fully supports the immediate passage of the Major Richard Star Act. For nearly two decades, AMVETS has supported the Bilirakis family in their efforts to end the unfair and antiquated statute preventing veterans from receiving their earned Department of Defense retirement pay and disability compensation from the VA. It is unconscionable that we are reducing retirement pay by every dollar of disability pay received for those who have given so much in defense of our Nation.

Support the Increase of DIC for our Survivors

For decades; survivors have been working to garner a small increase in Death and Indemnity (DIC) payments for the men and women left behind after our servicemembers die in duty to our Nation. Current payments are not even at par with federal workers. We all have a duty to ensure that these men and women who paid the ultimate price with their loved ones are well taken care of. Supporting this critical change is a small way to repay that debt and highlight that our Nation is grateful for their sacrifice.

Support the Completion of a Successful and Seamless Electronic Healthcare Record

AMVETS fully supports VA's efforts to create a seamless and effective electronic healthcare record (EHR). For decades VA has faced the challenge of having to deal with a broken system of transitioning veterans from DoD to the VA. Even today, millions of veterans are suffering from lost information, lost data, paper records, and more. AMVETS also is keenly aware that VISTA is no longer a tangible option, meaning something has to take place to serve our veterans and servicemembers now adequately and in the future.

AMVETS is adamantly against using this issue for political gain and will vocally and locally fight any members who imply that ending this effort is in our Nation's veterans' best interests. Nothing could be further from the truth.

However, AMVETS does support a high level of oversight and holding, particularly, the VA accountable for getting their act together on this project.

When DoD had similar issues, highly competent technical leaders were assigned to lead the implementation and were given strong authority to make decisions and make them happen. We hear numerous insinuations that this project needs to be more adequately led by VA leadership. Numerous project managers have been assigned and reassigned, and VA at multiple levels of leadership are failing to make timely decisions which is resulting in inadequate delays.

Even so, AMVETS is still working on our veterans' moonshot to fix this long overdue issue. VA needs to step up to the plate because they are failing our Nation's veterans on this front. Congress must hold them accountable and possibly lead the charge on calls for resignation. However, we will not tolerate outright calls for an end to this project for short-term political gains, as this is not in the best interest of our current and future veterans and servicemembers.

POW/MIA

President Trump signed Senator Elizabeth Warren's legislation, S. 693 the National POW/MIA Flag Act into law in November 2019. This bi-partisan legislation requires the display of the POW/MIA flag outside of high-profile Federal buildings and National war memorials throughout the year. Previous law only required the POW/MIA flag to be displayed on Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day, Flag Day, Independence Day, National POW/MIA Recognition Day, and Veterans Day.

AMVETS praised the President and Senator Warren for her leadership in the passage of this act. Still, we are also hoping that it will encourage members of Congress to display the flag outside their offices, as is protocol.

This legislation requires the Architect of the Capitol (AOC) to display the National League of Families POW/MIA flag outside of the entrance of the office of each Member of Congress, unless the Member directs the AOC to not display the flag. This requirement applies only to a Member's office in a House or Senate office building within the U.S. Capitol Grounds.

Current Endorsed Legislation

Bill Number	Title of Bill	Senate Sponsor	House Sponsor	Status
	Helping Heroes Act	Senator Patty Murray		Pre-Introduction
	Charitable Equity for Veterans Act	Senator Cassidy	Representative Brad Wenstrup	Pre-Introduction
S. 414	Caring for Survivors Act	Senator Tester	TBD	Introduced in the Senate
	Major Richard Star Act	Senator Jon Tester	Representative Gus Bilirakis	Introduced
	Military Spouse Hiring Act	Senator Kaine	Representative Don Beyer	Pre-Introduction
	The Veterans Equal Access Act		Representative Blumenauer	Pre-Introduction

Hearings and Events on the Hill

March 7-11

AMVETS Legislative Advocacy Week

Wednesday March 8th

Commander Don McLean to Testify before a Joint House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Hearing

Reception to Follow at Phoenix Park Hotel

Friday March 10

Silver Helmet Gala



Starting July 16th, 988 will be a universal entry point so that no matter where you live in the U.S., you can easily access 24/7 emotional support.

In the meantime, please continue to share 1-800-273-TALK (8255) to be connected with a trained, caring counselor.

We're here for you.

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