



# **AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE**

## **APRIL 12, 2021**

*Good afternoon AMVETS Membership,*


*There are a lot of hearings on the schedule this week. We are going to be closely watching the House Appropriations hearing on Thursday morning covering the VA budget. This hearing will determine the dollars assigned to all programs within VA. We have heard there will be a 75% increase in the suicide prevention budget. We will be watching on Thursday to hopefully find out more details about the larger mental health budget. The link to watch the hearing live is located below in the "Upcoming Events" section.*

*-Bill Clark, AMVETS National Third Vice Commander*

### **News Driving the Week**

- President Joe Biden is proposing an \$8.5 billion boost for the Department of Veterans Affairs under his 2022 budget plan. Biden's plan would increase domestic spending by 16% overall, including an 8.2% increase for the VA, bringing its total discretionary spending for 2022 to \$113.1 billion. According to the budget summary, Biden prioritized veteran homelessness, suicide prevention and caregiver support. The plan allocates \$97.5 billion to VA health care, an increase of \$7.6 billion from 2021. The money includes boosts to women's health and mental health, the summary states. The plan calls for a significant increase – about 75% – to the VA's suicide prevention efforts. The budget for these efforts would total \$542 million, about \$230 million more than in 2021. This includes funding to increase the capacity of the Veterans Crisis Line, which is a suicide prevention hotline for veterans and their families.

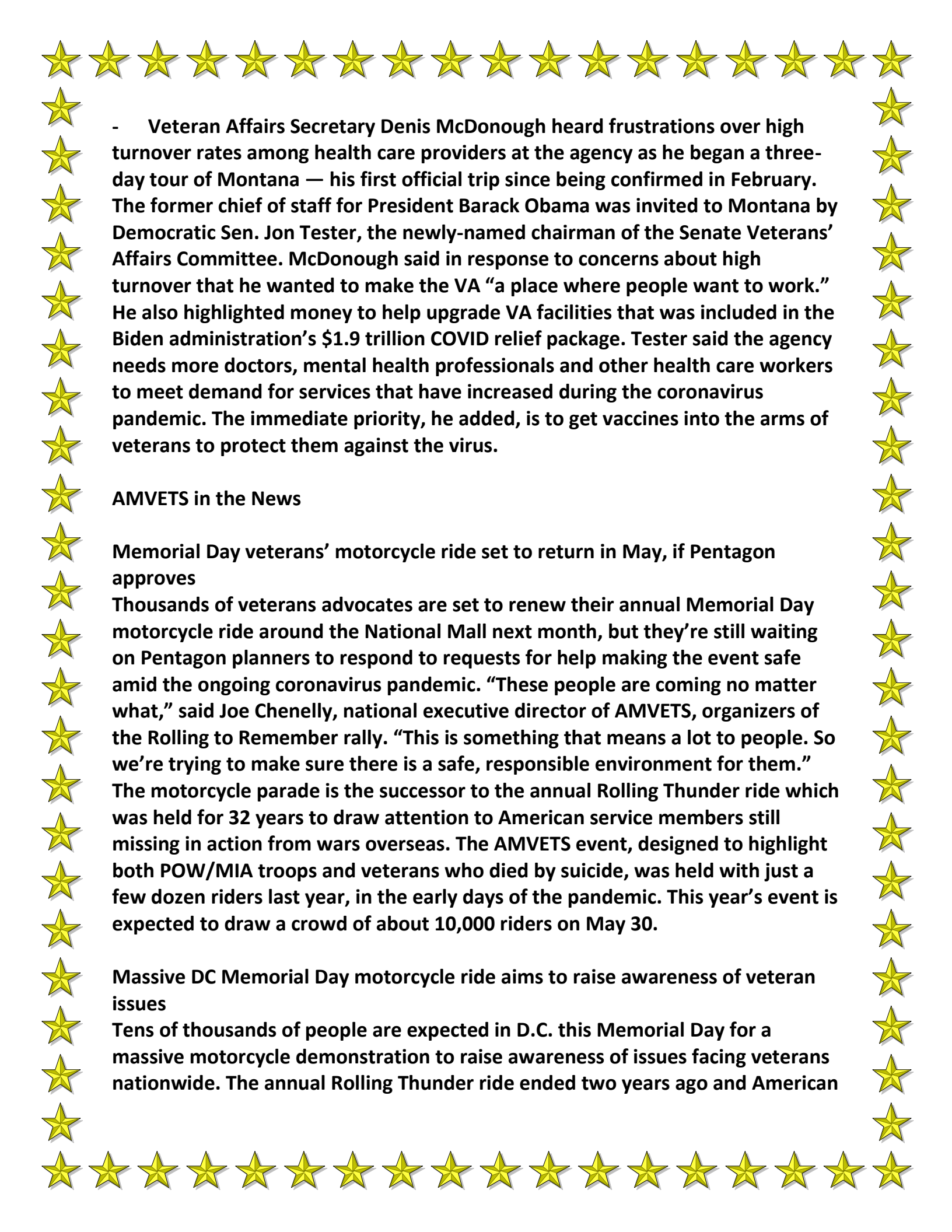
- As demand for mental health services and suicide prevention programs increases within Veterans Affairs offices, staffers there may be at risk of exhaustion and burnout if changes aren't made to better track and manage those employees, an outside watchdog warned. In a new report, the Government Accountability Office said that department leaders have not done a



thorough enough review of VA suicide prevention teams' staffing, workloads and challenges. Without that, they cautioned, leaders do not have enough visibility over operations to ensure new prevention programs are being implemented properly. "VA is taking steps to ensure staffing data resources are regularly updated at each medical center and monitored monthly at the Veterans Integrated Service Network and program office level," VA Secretary Denis McDonough said in a statement.

- Finding stable housing for veterans experiencing homelessness not only provides dramatic improvements for their lives but also potential large cost savings for Veterans Affairs medical programs, according to new research published from department researchers. Officials monitoring one California VA outreach program found that the number of emergency room visits and total costs of that care both dropped by more than half for veterans experiencing homelessness six months after they found shelter through department assistance programs. The potential savings are significant. In the study of the VA Palo Alto Health Care System's partnership with local emergency housing providers, medical care costs for veterans experiencing homelessness dropped from about \$127,000 before housing to less than \$60,000 afterwards. The most recent HUD figures estimate about 37,200 veterans were without stable housing at the start of 2020. Estimates for 2021 — which will include the impact of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic on the issue — are expected sometime this fall.

- A group of 50 House lawmakers is demanding immediate improvements to the Department of Veterans Affairs system for investigating sexual harassment complaints after a woman was stalked and intimidated by a call center employee who used his post to look up her personal information. In a letter sent this week to VA Secretary Denis McDonough, the group — led by Assistant House Speaker Katherine Clark — said they are "deeply concerned about the sexual harassment of women veterans and employees at the department" and urged immediate implementation of legislation recently passed by Congress mandating a centralized reporting system for all such complaints. In a statement, VA officials confirmed the previously unreported event and said the individual involved no longer works for the department.



- **Veteran Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough heard frustrations over high turnover rates among health care providers at the agency as he began a three-day tour of Montana — his first official trip since being confirmed in February. The former chief of staff for President Barack Obama was invited to Montana by Democratic Sen. Jon Tester, the newly-named chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. McDonough said in response to concerns about high turnover that he wanted to make the VA "a place where people want to work." He also highlighted money to help upgrade VA facilities that was included in the Biden administration's \$1.9 trillion COVID relief package. Tester said the agency needs more doctors, mental health professionals and other health care workers to meet demand for services that have increased during the coronavirus pandemic. The immediate priority, he added, is to get vaccines into the arms of veterans to protect them against the virus.**

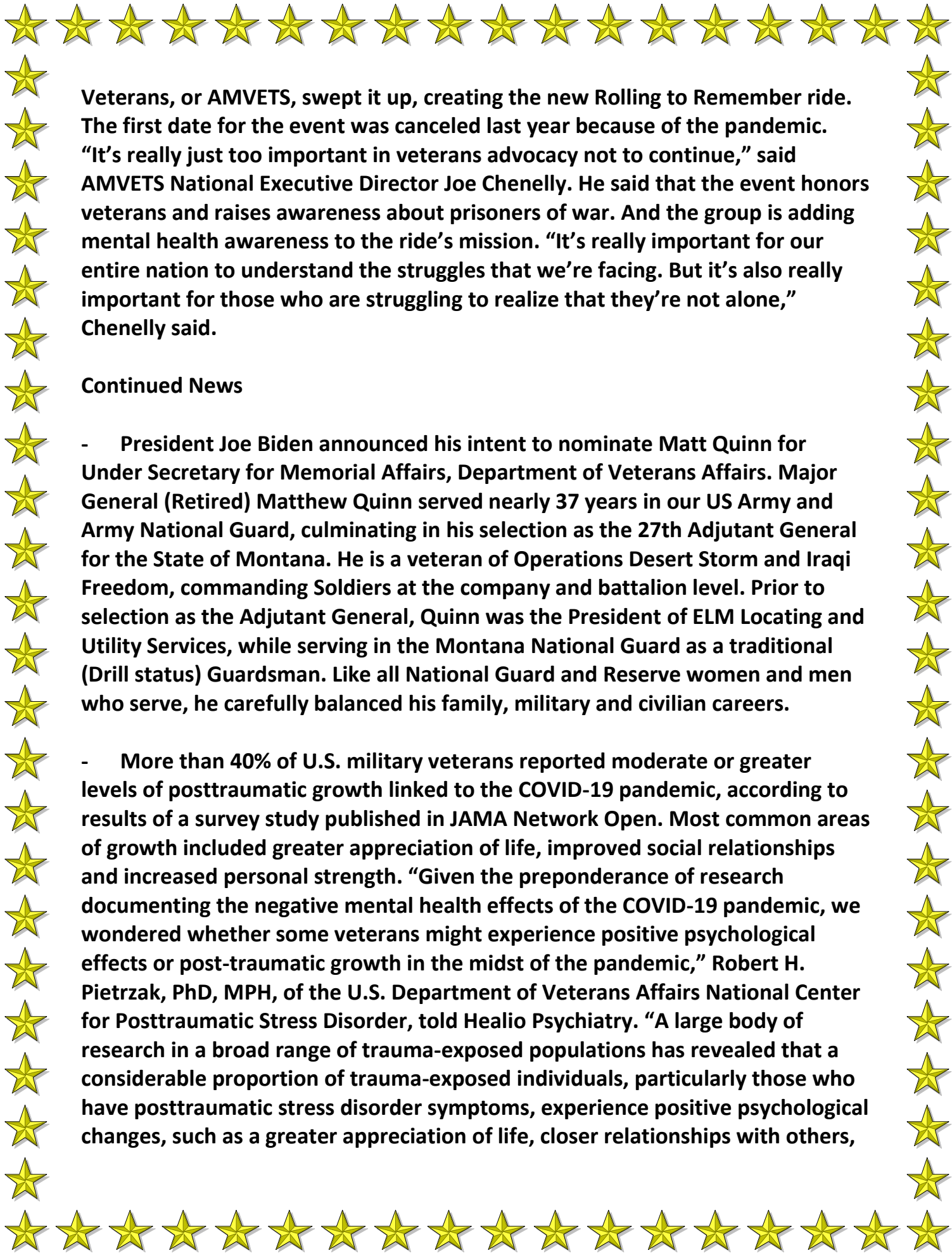
#### **AMVETS in the News**

**Memorial Day veterans' motorcycle ride set to return in May, if Pentagon approves**

**Thousands of veterans advocates are set to renew their annual Memorial Day motorcycle ride around the National Mall next month, but they're still waiting on Pentagon planners to respond to requests for help making the event safe amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. "These people are coming no matter what," said Joe Chenelly, national executive director of AMVETS, organizers of the Rolling to Remember rally. "This is something that means a lot to people. So we're trying to make sure there is a safe, responsible environment for them." The motorcycle parade is the successor to the annual Rolling Thunder ride which was held for 32 years to draw attention to American service members still missing in action from wars overseas. The AMVETS event, designed to highlight both POW/MIA troops and veterans who died by suicide, was held with just a few dozen riders last year, in the early days of the pandemic. This year's event is expected to draw a crowd of about 10,000 riders on May 30.**

**Massive DC Memorial Day motorcycle ride aims to raise awareness of veteran issues**

**Tens of thousands of people are expected in D.C. this Memorial Day for a massive motorcycle demonstration to raise awareness of issues facing veterans nationwide. The annual Rolling Thunder ride ended two years ago and American**



**Veterans, or AMVETS, swept it up, creating the new Rolling to Remember ride. The first date for the event was canceled last year because of the pandemic. “It’s really just too important in veterans advocacy not to continue,” said AMVETS National Executive Director Joe Chenelly. He said that the event honors veterans and raises awareness about prisoners of war. And the group is adding mental health awareness to the ride’s mission. “It’s really important for our entire nation to understand the struggles that we’re facing. But it’s also really important for those who are struggling to realize that they’re not alone,” Chenelly said.**

### **Continued News**

**- President Joe Biden announced his intent to nominate Matt Quinn for Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, Department of Veterans Affairs. Major General (Retired) Matthew Quinn served nearly 37 years in our US Army and Army National Guard, culminating in his selection as the 27th Adjutant General for the State of Montana. He is a veteran of Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom, commanding Soldiers at the company and battalion level. Prior to selection as the Adjutant General, Quinn was the President of ELM Locating and Utility Services, while serving in the Montana National Guard as a traditional (Drill status) Guardsman. Like all National Guard and Reserve women and men who serve, he carefully balanced his family, military and civilian careers.**

**- More than 40% of U.S. military veterans reported moderate or greater levels of posttraumatic growth linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to results of a survey study published in JAMA Network Open. Most common areas of growth included greater appreciation of life, improved social relationships and increased personal strength. “Given the preponderance of research documenting the negative mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, we wondered whether some veterans might experience positive psychological effects or post-traumatic growth in the midst of the pandemic,” Robert H. Pietrzak, PhD, MPH, of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, told Healio Psychiatry. “A large body of research in a broad range of trauma-exposed populations has revealed that a considerable proportion of trauma-exposed individuals, particularly those who have posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms, experience positive psychological changes, such as a greater appreciation of life, closer relationships with others,**

greater awareness and utilization of personal strengths, enhanced spiritual development and identification of new possibilities or purpose for one's life. However, no study has looked at whether the COVID-19 pandemic may foster positive psychological changes, so we looked into this using data from a nationally representative sample of U.S. military veterans."

- **Opinion: Congress must address the toxic exposure our veterans have endured**

