



Good morning fellow AMVETS,

As we are fast approaching the holidays the AMVETS Legislative team is working hard to make sure your legislative priorities are being made known on Capitol Hill. The most important stories to pay attention to this week include the recently released CBO score that accompanies the Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxins (PACT) Act and the updates coming from the NDAA. Senator Gillibrand is asking for a separate floor vote on the Military Justice Improvement Increasing Prevention Act (MJIIIPA). The Senate has a legislative markup on Wednesday in which they will discuss 25 different bills, some of which AMVETS has supported

-Paul Shipley, AMVETS National Third Vice Commander

## News Driving the Week

- Congressional plans to dramatically expand disability benefits for military toxic exposure victims could cost nearly \$85 billion in the next five years and more than \$280 billion over the next decade, according to a new analysis from the Congressional Budget Office. The hefty price tag is likely to cause significant concern among lawmakers considering the legislation. House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano said he is still committed to passing the measure into law. The plan — dubbed the [Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxins \(PACT\) Act](#) — was introduced by Takano over the summer. As many as one out of every five living American veterans could receive some sort of new disability payout or medical care under the proposal. It includes adding hypertension to the list of illnesses presumed caused by military service in Vietnam and presumptive status for radiation poisoning for thousands more veterans who served in areas where nuclear testing and weaponry was used. CBO officials estimated that about 1 million veterans will be eligible for new medical care options in the next five years under the bill, and more than 2 million will be eligible for new disability payouts. Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee officials offered a similar measure earlier this year which the CBO said could cost \$188 billion over 10 years. That plan includes fewer retroactive benefits and some limits on the toxic exposure payouts.

- A bipartisan group of Senators criticized the final version of the [National Defense Authorization Act](#) that passed the House late, saying the bill does not go far enough to reform the military justice system for survivors of sexual assault. Sen. Kristen Gillibrand, a Democrat from New York, criticized the removal of provisions in the version of the NDAA that passed the Senate earlier this year, saying that without them, commanders have the power to choose the jury, witnesses and grant or deny witness immunity. In the version that passed the House, military commanders would have to forward complaints of sexual

harassment against their subordinates to an independent investigator. Commanders are also removed from "decisions related to the prosecution of covered crimes," which include rape, sexual assault, murder, and manslaughter, according to the bill. Those decisions will instead be moved to an Office of the Special Trial Counsel that would be created in each service. At the Pentagon, spokesman John Kirby hailed the provisions as "an historic initiative here, removing those crimes and related crimes, the prosecution of them outside of the chain of command." But Gillibrand believes those measures are not strong enough to fully reform the military justice system. In her proposal, commanders would be removed from the chain of command and from military judicial procedures around the prosecution of those crimes entirely when one of their subordinates is accused of sexual assault and harassment. Senators Gillibrand, Grassley and Ernst called for a separate floor vote on their bill to make sure these reforms are made to the military justice system. "Majority Leader (Chuck) Schumer and Speaker (Nancy) Pelosi support not just this bill but having a standalone vote on it, so there is a path forward, and we will be taking it," Gillibrand said. In an agreement made by party leaders in both chambers, there will be no debate or added amendments to the NDAA in the Senate.

- During a Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing today, Chairman Jon Tester questioned [Kurt D. DeBene](#) on his qualifications to serve as Assistant Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs for Information and Technology—a position responsible for the vision, management, and operation of the Agency's Office of Information and Technology. If confirmed, DeBene will be tasked with delivering adaptable, secure, and cost-effective technology services to VA employees and veterans "If confirmed, you would be responsible for managing all VA information technology matters—from broadband in VA facilities, to staff laptops, to cybersecurity efforts on behalf of VA employees and veterans," said Tester. "So if your office doesn't work well, employees can't do their jobs, veterans may not get their GI Bill payments on time, and an app for veterans to schedule their health care appointments might not function... From your experience in the private sector, how would you approach setting up a process so every part of VA has its top IT needs addressed?" DeBene recognized that while there would be tradeoffs, he is committed to working in collaboration with VA's different offices and the VA Secretary to prioritize projects that would further the mission of the Department. During the hearing, Tester also pressed DeBene on how he would work to strengthen and increase the transparency of VA's IT operations, to make sure projects are on time, on budget, and deliver the necessary functions.

- Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committee leaders are pushing to increase the resiliency of [Department of Veterans Affairs' medical supply chain](#) and make responsible use of taxpayer dollars. "We write to urge you to initiate an updated needs analysis and revised plan to properly align the number, size, and cost of the Veterans Health Administration Regional Readiness Centers with the actual level of demand for their services," the members wrote in a letter to VA Secretary Denis McDonough. "We appreciate the VHA team's explanation to our staffs of the rationale for reducing the originally projected space to a smaller, more manageable space closer to VHA's anticipated needs. We hope an updated analysis of VHA's projected needs will help reduce the overall square footage being used for Regional Readiness Centers. This initiative must increase the resiliency of VA's medical supply chain while making responsible use of taxpayer dollars." Regional Readiness Centers were established during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic to aid in the management and resupply of personal protective equipment to better support VA in its ongoing mission to protect veterans and staff during the national health emergency. Currently, the VA is operating two Regional Readiness Centers spanning four facilities: a West Coast Regional Readiness Center consisting of an approximately 100,000-square-foot warehouse in San Joaquin, California, and a Northeastern Regional Readiness Center consisting of an 863,000-square-foot warehouse in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, a 100,000-square-foot warehouse in New Cumberland, Pennsylvania, and a 50,000-square-foot warehouse in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.

- The Department of Veterans Affairs has announced a retooled plan that includes a [revised EHR management structure](#), a strengthened Office of the Functional Champion, a new deputy chief information officer for EHR and a newly established program executive director for EHR Integration position. That latter position will be filled by Dr. Terry Adirim, currently serving as the acting assistant secretary of defense for health affairs. The VA also announced that it planned to go live in Columbus in March 2022, with another deployment tentatively scheduled for Walla Walla, Washington, that same month. Altogether, 11 more deployments are on the calendar for 2022, wrapping up with the facility in Portland, Oregon, on November 5. "Cerner has and will maintain onsite support at Mann-Grandstaff. We remain committed to Secretary McDonough, the providers and staff, and veterans," said Brian Sandager, general manager and senior vice president of Cerner Government Services. "Cerner will continue partnering with VA to gain access to the site, ensuring the program continues to move forward successfully.

## Upcoming Events

### Senate Veterans Affairs Committee

Business Meeting

Wednesday, December 15 3:00 PM

Watch [here](#)

## Continued News

- U.S. Senators Kevin Cramer and Richard Blumenthal, members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, introduced the [Veterans Justice Outreach Improvement Act](#), legislation to require the Department of Veterans Affairs to expand and improve outreach about the Veterans Justice Outreach program to ensure every veteran eligible for VJO is aware of the program. In 2009, the VA established the Veterans Justice Outreach program to help support justice-involved veterans. Through VJO, specialists at each VA medical center work with local courts, jails, and law enforcement offices - including those in veteran-specific treatment courts - to identify justice-involved veterans, assess their needs, and connect them with VA benefits and services. In 2020, 36,365 veterans were served through VJO. The Veterans Justice Outreach Improvement Act would also require the VA to increase the number of VJO specialists in rural, remote, and underserved areas and to improve training and establish performance goals, measures, and timelines for VJO specialists. The VA would further be required to report to Congress on the availability and efficacy of veterans treatment courts.

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