




AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

FEBRUARY 2, 2020

News Driving the Week

- Lawmakers are considering a host of bills to deal with [the ongoing problem of veterans suicide](#), but still haven't reached a clear consensus on which ones will get top priority or even enough support to become law. On Tuesday, House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano, D-Calif., unveiled his newest suicide prevention proposal, dubbed the Veterans ACCESS Act. The measure would require the Department of Veterans Affairs to pay for any veterans' emergency mental health care treatments, regardless of individual's discharge status or where the visits take place (including private-sector facilities). In March, the White House is scheduled to unveil the results of a year-long, multi-department effort to provide new solutions to the problem of veterans suicide. VA Secretary Robert Wilkie has lead the task force spearheading that effort, and has promised a "roadmap for veteran suicide prevention" for both federal agencies and local community organizers. But in recent months, Wilkie and Takano have sparred over solutions to the problem. Another piece of suicide prevention legislation — dubbed the Veterans IMPROVE Act — was passed by the House Veterans' Affairs Committee after significant revisions by Takano, which lost most Republican lawmakers support. On the opposite side of Capitol Hill, Sen. Jerry Moran scheduled a mark-up hearing on Wednesday that included several measures dealing with veterans mental health, including a bipartisan measure targeting VA suicide prevention efforts that he has promoted as a top legislative goal for the year. The Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act passed out of committee and if passed into law would allow for quicker hiring of mental health professionals by VA, expanding new veterans' access to VA health care, and bolster funding for mental health care in rural and underserved regions. While nothing specific blocks lawmakers from passing each of the IMPROVE, ACCESS and Commander Hannon Acts, the different focus from different lawmakers could result in a fractured legislative effort to produce significant legislation on suicide prevention.

- A bill has been introduced in the U.S. Senate that would aim to expand mental



health treatment options for veterans suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Senators Martha McSally, of Arizona, and Tim Kaine introduced the [Veterans Posttraumatic Growth Act](#) on Tuesday. According to a release, the bill would require the Department of Veterans Affairs to conduct a pilot program to study the benefits of nonprofit posttraumatic growth programs compared to traditional models of mental health care. "Our bill makes a small investment that could have an enormous impact on improving mental health care for veterans," added Kaine. "Launching this pilot program is a step we can and should take to provide more veterans with access to the treatment necessary to cope with mental health issues following service to our country."

- A new bill introduced in the House Tuesday would grant free emergency mental health care to all veterans, paid for by the Department of Veterans Affairs. [The Veterans' Acute Crisis Care for Emergent Suicided Symptoms \(ACCESS\) Act](#) introduced by House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Rep. Mark Takano would direct VA to pay for or provide emergency mental health care to all veterans. The bill includes care for veterans who are not otherwise eligible for VA healthcare benefits; have any and all enrollment statuses or service connections; and have any discharge, including dishonorable. Veterans would have the option to call the Veterans Crisis Line, go to the ER or alert other qualified medical professionals of their crisis who will be able to "pre-clear" that veteran for treatment on the VA's dime, a "far simpler" option in times of crisis, Takano said. Veterans would then be eligible for up to 30 days of inpatient care or 90 days of outpatient care, which can also be extended at the discretion of the VA Secretary, according to the bill. To qualify, a veteran must have at least 90 cumulative days of service, according to the text of the bill, such as completing basic training and an additional training school, Takano said. Guard and Reservists will qualify for care under the bill, though many do not qualify for VA health care otherwise.

- Under pressure from Congress to determine whether to add four diseases to [the list of Agent Orange-related conditions](#), Department of Veterans Affairs officials have disputed a scientific panel's findings and said they will wait for additional research to conclude before making what could be a \$15.2 billion decision. In a report sent to the House and Senate Veterans Affairs committees on Monday, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said VA experts "noted significant concerns and limitations" with several National Academies of Sciences,

Engineering and Medicine, or NASEM, reports concluding that there is suggestive or sufficient evidence linking development of bladder cancer, hypothyroidism, Parkinson's-like tremors and hypertension to exposure to herbicides for defoliation in the Vietnam War. According to Wilkie, NASEM did not identify any "definitive causal links" between Agent Orange and the diseases, and at least two — hypertension and bladder cancer — have other risk factors besides herbicide exposure, such as age, diet and tobacco use, that can contribute to their development.

- Lawmakers admonished the Department of Veterans Affairs on Wednesday over reports of veterans committing suicide at its facilities, as well as its [lack of progress in reducing veteran suicide rates](#). House Veterans Affairs Committee members questioned VA staff in a hearing about suicide weeks after the latest VA Inspector General report found institutional failures at one facility that led to a veteran's suicide. Renee Oshinski from the Veterans Health Administration tried to reassure lawmakers that the VA takes these situations seriously and is working on the local level to fix concerns. "This is the most difficult thing for any provider, to lose someone," she said. "When you know that the VA is there to do something good for people and instead they harm themselves." Rep. Elaine Luria, D-Virginia, asked Oshinski how the VA is addressing staffing shortages, especially those in the mental health field. She said she had learned that the Hampton VA clinic in her district had a mental health personnel vacancy rate of 35.5%. The national VHA vacancy rate is 10%. "We've made some tremendous progress in the last few years," Oshinski said. "However, there are pockets -- and you are mentioning one of those -- [where] we still have difficulty trying to bring staff onto the level that we need to support the demand, because you have a very high-growing area where we have a lot of veterans seeking care."

Upcoming Events

-EST Time Zone-

Senate Veterans Affairs Committee

VA MISSION Act: Update on the Implementation of the Community Care Network

Wednesday, February 05 9:30 AM

Watch [here](#)

House Veterans Affairs Committee

OI Subcommittee

Women Veterans Task Force

Examining How the VA Supports Survivors of Military Sexual Trauma

Wednesday, February 5 10:00 AM

Watch [here](#)

House Veterans Affairs Committee

EO Subcommittee

Pending Legislation

Thursday, February 6 10:00 AM

Watch [here](#)

House Veterans Affairs Committee

Senate Veterans Affairs Committee

Testimony from AMVETS National Commander Jan Brown

Wednesday, February 26 2:00 PM

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

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

[S. 785](#) Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 introduced by Sen. Jon Tester of MT

[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

- A long list of [bills passed through the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee](#) on Wednesday, including:

Department of Veterans Affairs Tribal Advisory Committee Act: Creates a VA advisory committee for tribal and Indian affairs.

Highly Rural Veteran Transportation Program Extension Act: Provides VA funds

to award grants to veteran service organizations that help transport veterans living in remote areas to VA facilities.

Ensuring Quality Care for Our Veterans Act: Directs VA to contract with a third party to investigate doctors with revoked licenses or malpractice allegations.

Veterans Improved Access and Care Act: Require VA to launch a pilot program to speed up the hiring process for new medical providers to join VA.

Department of Veterans Affairs Information Technology Reform Act: Aims to improve management of IT projects and investments by VA.

Sergeant Daniel Somers Veterans Network Support Act: Requires VA to launch a pilot program on information sharing between VA and designated relatives or friends of veterans about the benefits available to them.

Veterans' Preference Parity Act: Changes eligibility criteria to include all retired veterans and veterans who are dishonorably discharged to qualify for federal hiring preference if they served more than 180 consecutive days on active duty.

Identifying Barriers and Best Practices Study Act of 2019: Calls for a study of disability and pension benefits for the Guard and Reserves.

Helping Expand and Launch Transitional Health for Women Veterans Act:

Directs VA to carry out the Women's Health Transition Training pilot program through at least 2020.

- Traditionally ["masculine" traits can exacerbate post-traumatic stress disorder](#) that's especially difficult to treat, according to a robust new study in the journal *Psychology of Men and Masculinities*. For the study, researchers looked at 17 studies including more than 3,500 military veterans to see how traits like self-reliance affected their mental health after experiencing trauma. They found that the more veterans believed they should be tough and appear unemotional, the more likely they were to develop PTSD, have severe PTSD symptoms, and avoid seeking mental health treatment for those symptoms.

- Three senators want the Government Accountability Office to evaluate the process [non-citizen service members](#) go through to become naturalized.

Senators Tammy Duckworth (D-Ill.), Dick Durbin (D-Ohio), and Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) say they fear recent policies from the Defense Department and the and Department of Homeland Security, may affect the naturalization process for service members not born in the U.S. The senators noted a decline of non-citizens in the military attaining naturalization from 2010 to 2018.

- Federal prosecutors have begun presenting evidence to a grand jury in anticipation of criminal charges a day after a key senator complained he has been kept in the dark about [a string of suspicious veteran deaths in West Virginia](#). The investigation is now centered on a former nursing assistant at the Louis A. Johnson Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Clarksburg, [W.Va.](#) Thus far, federal investigators and VA officials have not identified what medical personnel may have been involved in the deaths, but have said they were looking into hospital staff. Attorney General William Barr has become personally involved in the case, asking officials for periodic updates on the status of the cases.

- [Opinion](#): Committee on Veterans Affairs sends important message during tense Senate time

- [Opinion](#): Senate VA Committee boosts veteran suicide prevention efforts



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