



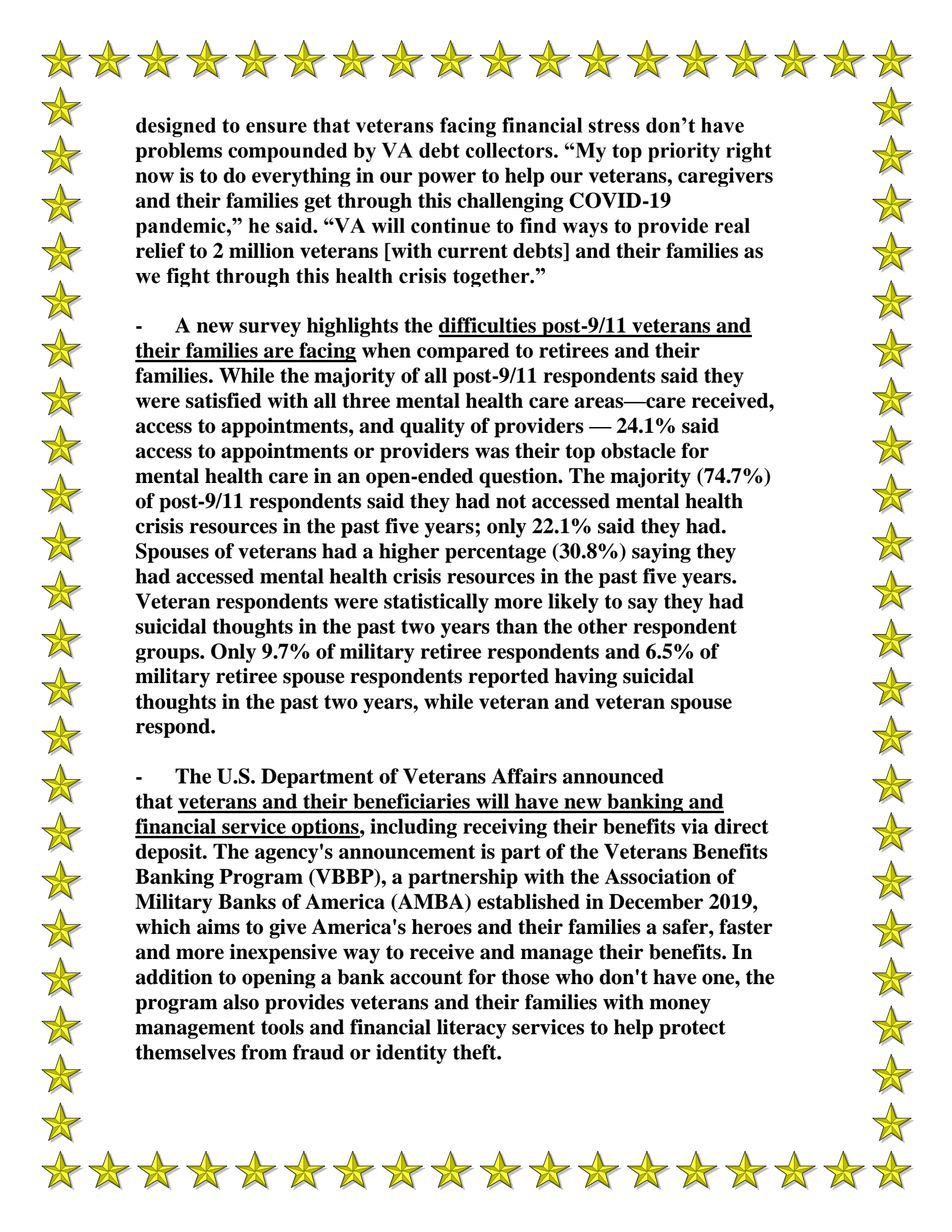
AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

FEBRUARY 24, 2021

News Driving the Week

- To date, VA has administered more than 1.3 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. While VA has been relatively quick to inoculate its health care workers who were first priority under the VA's vaccination plan, reaching the broader veteran population has and will continue to be more difficult with limited supply. When it comes to vaccinating veterans, VA is focused on the 9.3 million who are enrolled with the department to receive health services. Still, VA doesn't have the supplies to vaccinate the broader population of veterans who aren't eligible for VA health care at this time, Richard Stone, VA acting undersecretary for health, said. In the meantime, VA is on the hunt for additional funding for its COVID-19 response. The Biden administration has proposed another \$17 billion for the department, which House Democrats are hoping to secure through the budget reconciliation process. Republicans in Congress, however, have been deeply skeptical of the funding request. Congress already gave VA more than \$19 billion last year through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The department obligated \$6.5 billion of that funding for COVID-19 response during the last year. It'll commit the remaining funds during this fiscal year, Stone said. Additional funding would go toward healthcare costs and personal protective equipment, VA said, as well as several large-scale modernization efforts.

- Veterans Affairs officials will extend their suspension of debt collection on benefits overpayments and medical co-pays through September. The department had paused those debt repayments in April 2020, in response to the coronavirus outbreak. The suspension ended at the start of January, but department officials in recent weeks had received pressure from lawmakers and outside advocates to continue to show leniency in light of the ongoing pandemic. In a statement, VA Secretary Denis McDonough said the latest move is



designed to ensure that veterans facing financial stress don't have problems compounded by VA debt collectors. "My top priority right now is to do everything in our power to help our veterans, caregivers and their families get through this challenging COVID-19 pandemic," he said. "VA will continue to find ways to provide real relief to 2 million veterans [with current debts] and their families as we fight through this health crisis together."

- A new survey highlights the difficulties post-9/11 veterans and their families are facing when compared to retirees and their families. While the majority of all post-9/11 respondents said they were satisfied with all three mental health care areas—care received, access to appointments, and quality of providers — 24.1% said access to appointments or providers was their top obstacle for mental health care in an open-ended question. The majority (74.7%) of post-9/11 respondents said they had not accessed mental health crisis resources in the past five years; only 22.1% said they had. Spouses of veterans had a higher percentage (30.8%) saying they had accessed mental health crisis resources in the past five years. Veteran respondents were statistically more likely to say they had suicidal thoughts in the past two years than the other respondent groups. Only 9.7% of military retiree respondents and 6.5% of military retiree spouse respondents reported having suicidal thoughts in the past two years, while veteran and veteran spouse respond.

- The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs announced that veterans and their beneficiaries will have new banking and financial service options, including receiving their benefits via direct deposit. The agency's announcement is part of the Veterans Benefits Banking Program (VBBP), a partnership with the Association of Military Banks of America (AMBA) established in December 2019, which aims to give America's heroes and their families a safer, faster and more inexpensive way to receive and manage their benefits. In addition to opening a bank account for those who don't have one, the program also provides veterans and their families with money management tools and financial literacy services to help protect themselves from fraud or identity theft.

To many in the Department of Veterans Affairs, the veterans community, and both parties in Congress, the unusual program created to stop corruption, the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection (OAWP), has only carried out more of it. Its disarray, one of the challenges confronting newly confirmed Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough, represents an unkept promise by a president who proclaimed he would drain the swamp of corruption — especially at the long-troubled bureaucracy of close to 400,000 employees that cares for veterans. Trump appointees cycled in and out of leadership roles, hiring unqualified friends and producing substandard inquiries of senior leaders' misconduct, VA's inspector general found. Two of three directors in four years had no investigative background. Instead of acknowledgment, whistleblowers faced reprisal. With more than 3,400 complaints logged since 2017, an annual budget of \$23 million and a staff of 100, the office recommended discipline against just 32 of thousands of senior leaders through mid-January, a number that struck some lawmakers as disappointingly low. It's unclear how many managers were actually disciplined. Former spokeswoman Christina Noel wrote in an email that in the final two years of the Trump administration, the accountability office "filled the vast majority of its key leadership positions and hired qualified investigative supervisors to ensure a robust investigative and oversight capacity." She wrote that it "has taken several steps to ensure that whistleblower identity is protected." Asked why so few senior leaders were disciplined, Noel said that was largely out of the office's control because it was set up to recommend discipline, but not to impose it.

