



Good morning fellow AMVETS,

We hope you had a rejuvenating and healthy holiday break. We are entering 2022 with a renewed focus and commitment to our members and all veterans. There is some good news in the update below. Senators Tester and Moran introduced the Veterans Benefits Improvement Act which AMVETS has supported. President Biden signed two bills into law that could help veterans exposed to burn pits.

-Paul Shipley, AMVETS National Third Vice Commander

## News Driving the Week

- President Biden signed two bills into law that could help tens of thousands of veterans who claim they became ill from [exposure to burn pits](#). The pair of bills, included in the \$768 billion National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for 2022, will bring sweeping reform to the military's use of burn pits, expand a registry of service members exposed to the crude trash incineration method while serving overseas, and enhance medical training for health care providers. The two bills signed into law include the Department of Defense (DoD) Burn Pits Health Provider Training Act (H.R. 4397), which will require the DoD to implement mandatory training for all medical providers working for the department on the potential health effects of burn pits. The Burn Pit Registry Expansion Act (H. R. 4400) will require the DoD and the Veterans Administration to expand their registry to include military members who were stationed in Egypt and Syria. Both bills are expected to take effect immediately with the provider training act helping to train doctors to catch early signs of toxic exposure in an effort to provide more timely care.

- Of the six service branches, the Army reported the highest rate of suicide in 2020 at 36.4 deaths per 100,000 enlisted. Of the 580 total service members who died by suicide last year, approximately 30% were active duty. This has led to bipartisan calls for greater support for active duty service members facing mental health crises, with senators Joni Ernst and Mark Kelly having proposed legislation to address this under the [Save Our Servicemembers \(S.O.S\) Act of 2021](#). The core provisions of the bill rest on implementing recommendations from an April 2021 Government Accountability Office (GAO) review of Defense Department suicide prevention efforts. These steps include assessing the efficacy of DOD's non-clinical suicide prevention efforts, improving DOD's data collection through developing consistent suicide-related definitions to be used department-wide, and strengthening collaboration between Pentagon offices dedicated to mental health, namely the Defense Suicide Prevention Office (DSPO) and the Psychological Health Center of Excellence. The S.O.S. Act has also received statements of support from

major veteran service organizations, including both the Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion. In responding to the increasing rate of enlisted suicides, the White House released a comprehensive plan for reducing veteran and military suicides. The stated priorities fall within a five-part strategy to address the contributing factors to suicide and mental health crises, including reducing poverty, food insecurity, and barriers to care access.

- Congress won't start dealing with [the federal budget](#) again in earnest until after the holidays, but Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough isn't waiting until then to sound the alarm on the issue. In a press call with reporters, McDonough called reports of a possible full-year budget extension for federal agencies a looming disaster for veterans care, veterans benefits and department operations. "The Veterans Health Administration budget would be shorted \$941 million in community care funds. ... The construction account would be \$458 million below the president's request, causing delays and cost increases. And the Veterans Benefits Administration would be \$259 million lower, which would prevent us from hiring and training staff," McDonough said. The new fiscal year for the federal government began Oct. 1 without a new budget adopted by Congress. Lawmakers twice have extended fiscal 2021 spending levels into the new fiscal year, with those authorities set to end in mid-February. House and Senate leaders will have to reach a new budget extension or negotiate a full-year budget plan by then in order to avoid a partial government shutdown.

- The Department of Veterans Affairs created a new executive-level position dedicated solely to housing veterans in Los Angeles, where there are more homeless former service members than in any other city in the country. The department announced that it created the position of [senior executive homelessness agent for Greater Los Angeles](#) and tapped Keith Harris, a licensed clinical psychologist, to take the role. Harris previously worked as national director of clinical operations for the Homeless Programs Office within the Veterans Health Administration. In the new position, Harris will be tasked with managing 4,000 employees who provide outreach, case management, health care and housing services to over 200,000 veterans who are either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. McDonough started his efforts in Los Angeles by promising to get all homeless veterans living in the area known as "veterans row" into housing by Nov. 1. About 40 people were living along veterans row, a homeless encampment just outside the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center, when McDonough visited the facility in October. McDonough announced on Nov. 11, Veterans Day, that the VA accomplished that goal. In addition to eliminating veterans row, McDonough vowed to house another 500 homeless veterans in Los Angeles in time for the holidays. Speaking to reporters Monday, VA Deputy Secretary Donald Remy said the VA had surpassed that goal and found housing for 537 veterans.

- A [memorial for veterans of the Global War on Terror](#) is now set to be built on the National Mall, and a tribute to Medal of Honor recipients will be included nearby.

Plans for both sites were signed into law by President Joe Biden, advancing months of work by advocates on both projects. Supporters hailed the news as an important step to keep military sacrifices and heroism at the forefront of the American public's mind. Groundbreaking on both memorials is likely years away. Lawmakers approved the National Mall location for the new GWOT memorial as part of this year's defense authorization bill, which was finalized by the White House. Foundation officials will now shift their focus to working with National Park Service officials on identifying a specific site for the memorial, a process that likely puts construction still several years away.

## AMVETS in the News

### [Tester, Moran Carry Out Bipartisan Push to Tackle Veterans' Claims Backlog](#)

Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester and Ranking Member Jerry Moran are introducing bipartisan legislation today to tackle the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) claims backlog and provide veterans with timelier access to their earned benefits. The Senators' bill received strong backing from VA during a Committee hearing last month. The Senators' Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2021 would bolster employee recruitment for the Board of Veterans' Appeals and improve VA's scheduling of veterans' medical disability exams by increasing communication between contractors conducting disability exams, Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), and attorneys assisting veterans with their claims. "At our 2021 National Convention, AMVETS members voted to pass resolution 22-04 to improve VA claims and appeals," said Joseph Chenelly, Executive Director, AMVETS. "We urge Congress to ensure adequate funding and trained staff levels for the Department of Veterans Affairs to improve upon the timeliness and accuracy of all claims and appeals being filed. AMVETS is supportive of the bipartisan Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2021. This bill is a step in the right direction to improving the claims backlog and ensuring high quality service to all veterans. In addition to this legislation, we also urge Congress to fully support the National Personnel Record Center in order to deplete the backlog."

## Continued News

- [Johnny Isakson](#), an affable Georgia Republican politician who rose from the ranks of the state legislature to become a U.S. senator known as an effective, behind-the-scenes consensus builder, died on December 19. He was 76. Isakson's son John Isakson told The Associated Press that his father died in his sleep before dawn at his home in Atlanta. Isakson's famous motto was, "There are two types of people in this world: friends and future friends." That approach made him exceedingly popular among colleagues. As chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, he worked to expand programs offering more private health care choices for veterans. Isakson previously cited his long friendship with U.S. Rep. John Lewis, an Atlanta Democrat and civil rights hero, as an example of two men willing to put party aside to work on common problems.

- The Department of Veterans Affairs reported nearly [23,000 active cases of the coronavirus](#) last week -- more than at any other point during the pandemic. The active case count reached 22,911 last week, surpassing a high set in January. The record-breaking number of cases among VA patients reflects trends nationwide. The United States hit an all-time high last week of more than 265,000 new coronavirus cases per day on average, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. Of the 139 VA hospitals included in the department's database, 80 of them reported at least 100 active cases. In total, the VA has reported more than 405,000 positive cases of the coronavirus since the pandemic began. During that time, 17,693 VA patients have died, as well as 237 agency employees.

- [Opinion](#): 5 Ways Post-Traumatic Growth Helps You Recover With Resilience

- [Opinion](#): Empowering America's veterans can help reduce suicide

- [Opinion](#): Young troops are taking their own lives at double the rate of their civilian peers. Why?

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