



# AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

## November 26, 2019

### News Driving the Week

- The particulars of a proposed bill intended to provide the Department of Veterans Affairs grants to community groups for veteran suicide prevention created [tension on a normally bipartisan Congressional veterans committee](#). Bill supporters said the proposed legislation creates a pilot program to provide grants to community groups that could help hard-to-reach veterans in areas underserved by the VA, or far from VA services. Opponents said the bill doesn't include enough oversight for the money or groups it would be awarded to. The proposed bill, which has been awaiting a hearing since summer, has yet to be finalized and negotiations are ongoing. House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif., sparred with VA Secretary Robert Wilkie over specifics in various versions of the bill. Wilkie argued that the \$18 million in grants in the proposed bill is "not a lot of money for us" compared to VA's \$9.5 billion mental healthcare budget within its \$220 billion overall budget. Following his part of the hearing, Wilkie said he believes Congress is "close" to a passable bill. Wilkie said he believes Bergman's compromise bill is "the best way forward," but added he had no major concerns with Takano's proposed bill, so long as either bill do not create "massive bureaucracy" and allow any qualified groups that could help veterans, regardless of their size to apply for the grants.
- VA researchers recently announced plans to conduct [a major study on environmental exposures during military service and the connection to illnesses](#) in those veterans. VA also plans to look at potential intergenerational effects of military exposures, which may or may not include studying children of exposed veterans. VA Chief of Research Development Rachel Ramoni said VA scientists have spoken with hundreds of veterans about the toxic exposures they say they've experienced during deployments. Because of those conversations, Ramoni said VA is planning "major investment in toxic exposures." Veterans "for good reason have been irritated with us as an organization because we have not done a lot of work, especially clinical work, on military exposures," Ramoni said during a conference in Washington, D.C. last week focused on veteran prostate cancer. "I have apologized to them ... I have committed that, in (Fiscal Year 2021), we are going to make major investments in toxic exposures. We are in the planning phases for that now, but in (Fiscal Year 2021), we will start to roll that out. That's something that will cut across all our research."

- A Congressional committee took a major step Wednesday when it voted to advance a bill to the House floor that could [end the prohibition of marijuana](#) and allow the Department of Veterans Affairs to recommend its use to veterans. It was the first-ever vote to remove marijuana from the Controlled Substances Act. The VA has used marijuana's classification as a Schedule I drug under the Act as the reason it could not allow its doctors to recommend its use to veterans. Past attempts by Congress -- even those with some bipartisan support -- have been met with opposition from VA leaders. In the Senate, some of those measures have been met with opposition from Republican leadership. The House Judiciary Committee took one of the biggest steps in marijuana legislation on Capitol Hill yet. The committee voted to approve H.R. 3884, the Marijuana Opportunity, Reinvestment and Expungement (MORE) Act. The bill still needs a vote from the entire House before it passes to the Senate. If it is approved in the Senate, it moves on to the president's desk for final approval to become law.

- Senate lawmakers on Thursday took another step toward erasing [the threat of a government shutdown](#) over the Thanksgiving holiday by passing a four-week budget extension, raising the possibility of a Christmas shutdown instead. The move came over continued objections from some defense lawmakers who warned the short-term budget deals jeopardize military planning by keeping Pentagon funding stuck at last fiscal year's levels and adding future uncertainty into long-range procurement plans. But House lawmakers advanced the deal by a 231-192 vote on Wednesday and the Senate by a 74-20 vote a day later, noting that without the one-month reprieve federal workers would have faced furloughs and program halts starting Friday morning. President Donald Trump has indicated he will sign the measure, meaning the new budget extension would run out on Dec. 20.

### **AMVETS in the News**

#### [Helping Each Other Through an Injury](#)

Watch Sesame Street in Community's feature of Sherman Gillums and his family.

### **AMVTES 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

[H.R. 3495](#) Improve Well-Being for Veterans Act introduced by Rep. Jack Bergman of MI and Rep. Chrissy Houlahan of PA

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

[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**

- The fate of "bad paper" veterans is now at the heart of a class-action lawsuit aiming to erase the blight of ["bad paper" discharges against post-9/11 veterans](#) diagnosed for PTSD, traumatic brain injury and associated service-connected issues. And in a ruling that could ultimately impact hundreds of thousands of veterans, a federal judge has rejected the Navy's motion to throw the litigation out of court. In New Haven, Connecticut, on Nov. 7, U.S. District Judge Charles Haight Jr., gave the green light to lead plaintiff and Iraq war veteran Tyson Manker to proceed with discovery actions against Navy Secretary Richard Spencer. The litigation, Manker v. Spencer, is supported by the National Veterans Council for Legal Redress and the Yale Law School Veterans Legal Services Clinic. The Yale students are arguing that nearly a third of the 2 million Americans who've served in Afghanistan and Iraq came home mentally or emotionally impaired by the experience. If the suit prevails, Manker says Congress should codify any new standards into the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which could extend protections to veterans beyond the boundaries of the 9/11 generation. Class-action suits are difficult to win, but there is a precedent concerning the Army. In 1979, some 10,000 soldiers had their OTH discharges automatically upgraded after a federal court ruled that drug urinalysis results used to expel them had been illegally employed. In 2017, Yale students filed a class-action complaint against the Army Discharge Review Board for perceived biases against soldiers with PTSD. Like the Manker suit, Kennedy v. Esper has also survived a motion to dismiss.

- The Department of Veterans Affairs, which already has the country's largest telemedicine program, delivered [more than 2.6 million episodes of telehealth care](#) in Fiscal Year 2019. The milestone—reached between October 2018 and September 2019—represents a 17 percent increase in overall telehealth visits over the previous fiscal year, according to new data released by the VA. In FY2019, health visits enabled by VA Video Connect—the technology program that enables providers to connect with veteran's personal mobile device, smartphone, tablet or computer—increased by 235 percent. VA Video Connect is meant to provide fast, easy, encrypted, real-time access to care wherever veterans might be located. Last month, the VA launched an Accessing Telehealth through Local Areas Stations (ATLAS) pilot in Eureka, Mont., as part of its Anywhere to Anywhere telehealth initiative. ATLAS is intended to provide timely care for veterans who live long distances from VA medical centers or have poor internet connectivity at home. The agency is planning to open other pilot sites in select American Legion posts, Veterans of Foreign Wars posts and Walmart stores.

- The Federal Communications Commission Chairman Ajit Pai proposed the FCC move forward with establishing [988 as the national suicide prevention and mental health services hotline](#). "This crisis is disproportionately affecting at-risk populations," Pai said. "Twenty veterans die by suicide every day. Between 2008 and 2016, there were more than 6,000 veteran suicides each year." The FCC's official recommendation to create the three-digit hotline was originally made this past August, following a report that showed a three-digit number would improve access for those in crisis. The number's similarity to 911 hopes to significantly increase the hotline's effectiveness. For veterans, the hotline also provides access to specialized help, thanks to the FCC's coordination with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

- For years, the [Department of Veterans Affairs released veterans' private, personally-identifying information](#) despite being warned of the risks, a recent watchdog report shows. The VA Office of the Inspector General reviewed the Veterans Benefits Administration and found that its staff disclosed millions of names, social security numbers, dates and places of birth and more because it purposefully stopped redacting that information in claims requested under the Privacy Act. Veterans' information, as well as that of their spouses and dependents, may have been released and "could cause those individuals significant harm," the OIG report said. During the audit, investigators found 1,027 unredacted names and social security numbers in a random sample of 30 requested claims, the report shows. And in the three years since VBA stopped redacting the information, the agency processed about 379,000 requests, putting "millions of people at risk of identity theft."

- [Opinion](#): Mark Takano keeps using partisan tactics when legislating veterans issues
- [Opinion](#): The U.S. Military Can Lead The Way In Mental Health And Suicide Prevention
- [Opinion](#): Mental health care isn't one-and-done — like any journey, you have to commit



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