



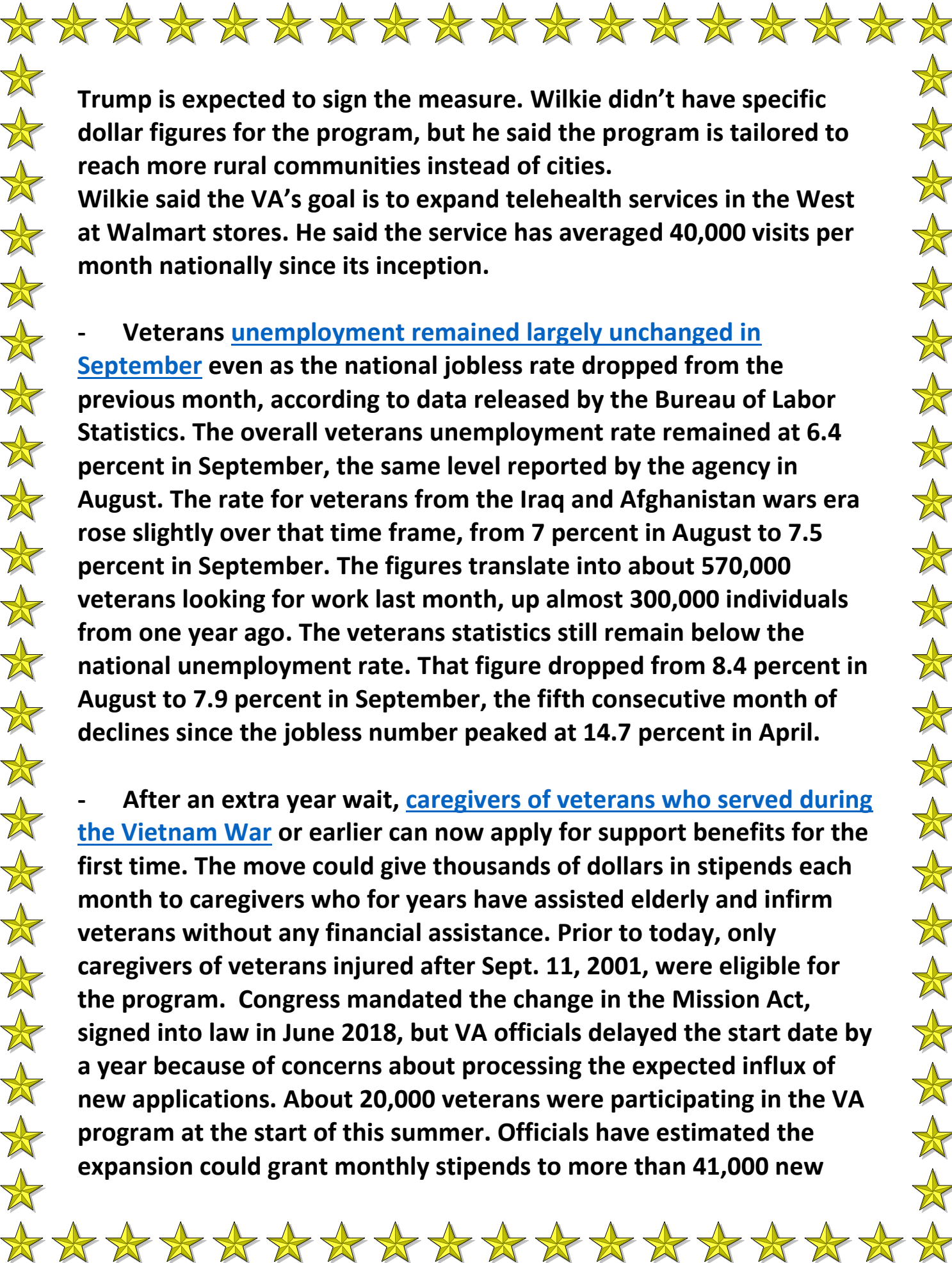
AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

OCTOBER 5, 2020

News Driving the Week

- Programs granting veterans broader access to doctors outside the Veterans Affairs health care system were supposed to speed up times for medical care. Now House Democrats are charging it may be slowing down appointments instead. Last week, members of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee blasted administration officials for failing to set clearer guidelines for [VA's community care programs](#) despite repeated warnings from watchdogs that such limits were needed to ensure the best care for veterans. In a report released earlier last week, Government Accountability Office researchers said VA leaders for the last seven years have not established any wait-time performance measures for the outside medical appointments, even though VA's in-house wait times face heavy scrutiny. Representative Julia Brownley said, "For the first time we have data that clearly shows this program is not great, and it is not delivering on President Trump's promise to veterans of more timely care. It should come as no surprise that veterans are still standing in line for weeks and weeks and weeks to see community providers." GAO officials earlier this week recommended new legislation to force VA officials into wait-time standards for the outside care programs. Brownley did that, including in the measure requirements that VA publish wait times for community care in the same way they do for VA services.

- During a stop at the VA Medical Clinic in Kalispell, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie delivered a message that while COVID-19 cases are on an upswing, [suicide is still the chief health concern for veterans](#). Wilkie touted Senate Bill 785, which was recently passed in the U.S. House of Representatives by voice vote. He said President



Trump is expected to sign the measure. Wilkie didn't have specific dollar figures for the program, but he said the program is tailored to reach more rural communities instead of cities.

Wilkie said the VA's goal is to expand telehealth services in the West at Walmart stores. He said the service has averaged 40,000 visits per month nationally since its inception.

- Veterans [unemployment remained largely unchanged in September](#) even as the national jobless rate dropped from the previous month, according to data released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The overall veterans unemployment rate remained at 6.4 percent in September, the same level reported by the agency in August. The rate for veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars era rose slightly over that time frame, from 7 percent in August to 7.5 percent in September. The figures translate into about 570,000 veterans looking for work last month, up almost 300,000 individuals from one year ago. The veterans statistics still remain below the national unemployment rate. That figure dropped from 8.4 percent in August to 7.9 percent in September, the fifth consecutive month of declines since the jobless number peaked at 14.7 percent in April.

- After an extra year wait, [caregivers of veterans who served during the Vietnam War](#) or earlier can now apply for support benefits for the first time. The move could give thousands of dollars in stipends each month to caregivers who for years have assisted elderly and infirm veterans without any financial assistance. Prior to today, only caregivers of veterans injured after Sept. 11, 2001, were eligible for the program. Congress mandated the change in the Mission Act, signed into law in June 2018, but VA officials delayed the start date by a year because of concerns about processing the expected influx of new applications. About 20,000 veterans were participating in the VA program at the start of this summer. Officials have estimated the expansion could grant monthly stipends to more than 41,000 new

veteran families in coming years, and cost about \$3 billion over the next five years.

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

- Officials from the largest federal workers union hailed news of an upcoming investigation into [problems of racism within the Department of Veterans Affairs](#), saying that attention on the problem is overdue. The Washington Post reported that the Government Accountability Office had agreed to investigate charges of racism within the department stemming from an AFGE membership survey during the summer. About 78 percent of employees surveyed by the union labeled racism a “moderate to serious problem” within the department. VA officials called it a sham. “The senators’ request to GAO is nothing more than a shameful attempt to besmirch the reputations of hundreds of thousands of dedicated career government employees at VA,” department spokeswoman Christina Noel said in a statement. According to VA, more than 40 percent of VA employees were minorities as of fiscal 2018, the most recent data available.

- Veterans Administration estimates 17 veterans take their life every day. That statistic is alarming and has organizations like [Wounded Warrior Project](#) (WWP) working to help veterans in crisis find the help they need. During Suicide Prevention Awareness Month, WWP helped train warriors, families, and others that connect with veterans regularly to identify the signs someone may be considering ending their life. With this online training, WWP also provided the tools to help intervene and get someone in crisis to a safe place. The hour-long training created by Living Works helps make participants more comfortable addressing suicide, keep a loved one safe in times of distress, and can provide peace of mind by preparing someone to help.

- [Opinion](#): Congress Is Making Bipartisan Progress in Supporting America's Veterans



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