

2024 AMVETS Legislative Priorities

As part of AMVETS' Legislative Advocacy Week (LAW), we would like to share this list of our top priorities for legislative action this year. These priorities are reflective of issues important to AMVETS members nationally and locally, and we urge your support of these initiatives:

1. Mental Health and Suicide Prevention in the VA and Armed Forces
2. Create Equitable Non-Profit Policies for Veteran Non-Profits
3. Support the Immediate Passage of the Major Richard Star Act
4. Increase Women Veterans' Voices in Policy and Government to Address Issues Disproportionately Affecting Them
5. Bolster Recruitment and Retention at VA
6. Create a National Veterans Strategy to align care and benefits to focus on outcomes and success
7. POW/MIA
8. Support the Increase of DIC for Our Survivors
9. Support the Completion of a Successful and Seamless Electronic Healthcare Record
10. Readiness/Recruitment for the Next Generation of Veterans

More information on each can be found below. Please reach out to Danielle Forand (danielle@thenimitzgroup.com) for additional information or questions.

1. Mental Health and Suicide Prevention in the VA and Armed Forces

Since 2019, AMVETS has led the way in highlighting that mental health, more than any other issue, results in the unnecessary loss of lives for the veteran and military community. As a result of AMVETS legislative efforts insisting that the VA try new and innovative approaches to address the issue, Congress passed the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act. The law requires the VA to provide significant grants to community and non-profit organizations as well as requiring the VA to carry out innovative pilot programs to execute novel approaches to tackle the avoidable outcome of death by suicide.

Within this law, the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program (SSG Fox SPGP) was established. AMVETS has been closely monitoring this effort to ensure the program is successful in treating veterans in crisis who search for alternatives to VA mental health care. In December of 2023, the House Veterans Affairs Committee held a hearing on the success of the program, highlighting organizations like

the Boulder Crest Foundation and their partnerships with the VA. These organizations are proving that alternative approaches to mental health care, post-traumatic growth, and improving veterans' overall quality of life are efforts deserving of increased funding and attention.

In November of 2023, the VA released its National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report. It showed overarching trends in veteran suicide, once again displaying an increase in veteran suicide since 2021. The lives of our service members and veterans continue to be our number one priority. AMVETS constantly explores legislative opportunities to address this problem, seek innovative solutions for bringing these numbers down, and do everything we can to keep them down.

Ideal legislative outcomes:

- Congressional leadership will establish a Select Committee on Suicide for Veterans and Servicemembers
- Introduce and support legislation that requires the DoD to establish a proactive footprint to help train servicemembers on what is necessary to live lives worth living and the components that create positive outcomes in our lives.
- Support increased Congressional oversight at the VA to understand the proportion of veterans who previously utilized VA services at any juncture and ultimately died by suicide and ensure the massive VA budget is being used in the best manner to seek alternative solutions for veteran suicide.

2. Create Equitable Non-Profit Policies for Veteran Non-Profits

AMVETS is committed to the passage of a bill that will allow 501c19 congressionally chartered nonprofits to receive tax-deductible donations.

For numerous Congresses, AMVETS has led the charge on legislation that will allow a tax deduction for charitable contributions to specific federally chartered organizations of past or present Armed Forces members. (Under current law, donations to such an organization are only deductible if at least 90% of the organization's membership consists of war veterans. The bill expands the deduction to include organizations that do not meet the wartime service requirement and are federally chartered.)

The non-profit designation for veterans' organizations is 501(c)(19), and this status includes tax exemption and the ability to accept tax-deductible donations. However, an outdated regulation requires these organizations to maintain a membership of at least 90% of wartime veterans to receive tax-deductible contributions. This regulation was likely created in the 1970s when nearly every military veteran was a "war veteran," defined as having served during wartime.

However, there are 2.4 million veterans who do not meet this definition. These men and women are mainly those who honorably served following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and prior to the Persian Gulf War in 1991. These members of the Nation's first "All-Volunteer Force" served knowing full well that they may be called into war.

This antiquated regulation negatively impacts many of America's distinguished and historic veterans' non-profits which are (or are at threat of) losing their ability to receive tax-deductible charitable donations. For example, AMVETS lost its ability to receive tax-deductible donations in 2015. AMVETS is the only one of the "Big 6" Congressionally-chartered veterans service organizations open to all non-wartime veterans. About 38% of AMVETS' 250,000 members are not wartime veterans, leaving the 75-year-old organization unable to accept tax-deductible donations.

This legislation addresses this unintended consequence in the tax code by allowing any congressionally chartered 501 (c)(19) to be eligible to receive tax-deductible charitable donations.

AMVETS is proud to have attended the House Ways & Means Committee markup of the VSO Equal Tax Treatment Act in November of 2023. We now look eagerly forward to seeing this bill get passed the House and Senate this Congress.

3. Support the Immediate Passage of the Major Richard Star Act

AMVETS fully supports the immediate passage of the Major Richard Star Act. For nearly two decades, AMVETS has supported the Bilirakis family in their efforts to end the unfair and antiquated statute preventing veterans from receiving their earned Department of Defense retirement pay and disability compensation from the VA. It is unconscionable that we are reducing retirement pay by every dollar of disability pay received for those who have given so much in defense of our Nation.

4. Increase Women Veterans' Voices in Policy and Government to Address Issues Disproportionately Affecting Them

Addressing mental health issues specific to women is a top priority for AMVETS. In the VA's 2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, the rate at which women choose to end their own lives is over 166 percent higher than members of the same gender who never served. Male veterans, meanwhile, are 43 percent more likely to commit suicide than their peers who have only known civilian life. The rate of increase in suicides by female veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic was four times higher than for male veterans, and a significant correlation was found between suicide by female veterans and their experience with military sexual trauma (MST).

AMVETS played a pivotal role in key legislation led by Senator Gillibrand and others to reduce military sexual trauma and expand health care and benefits. We will continue to champion this issue on Capitol Hill. We will also continue to engage with Congressional staff and other VSOs on women in the military, female veterans, and issues specific to those populations.

AMVETS has also noted the astonishingly low number of veterans working as policy staffers on Capitol Hill and, more specifically, the low number of women and minority veterans working in these positions. As such, we are proud to be teaming up with the HillVets Foundation to work with them to address this shortage of women and minority voices working in these positions.

5. Bolster Recruitment and Retention at VA

The VA has pledged to serve our veterans' health care needs, but the means to accessing this care is different for every veteran. Millions of rural and highly rural veterans face a unique combination of factors that create disparities in health care not found in urban areas. These include inadequate access to care, limited availability of skilled care providers, and additional stigma in seeking mental health care. There is also the continued challenge of the politicization of VA health care.

AMVETS realizes that the best healthcare option for veterans will first provide a strong, well-run, and fully staffed VA. As a support mechanism, AMVETS supports the VA's utilization of private care to provide ease of care to veterans, as is often the case for veterans in rural areas. This community care program has been the subject of many Congressional inquiries during this session.

AMVETS has been a long-time leader in working to ensure that our nation's veterans receive world-class healthcare, and we will continue to support legislation that affords the best option for veterans. AMVETS will also pursue ongoing opportunities for public-private partnerships with the VA to guarantee access to veterans regardless of where they live.

6. Create a National Veterans Strategy to align care and benefits to focus on outcomes and success

AMVETS is fully aware of the challenges of reorienting a VA system that so many veterans have come to rely on. Sadly, veterans currently existing low-lows would have benefited from a more proactive approach had it existed previously. We have to start somewhere because our current policy is misaligned, provides negative incentives, and leads to poor outcomes.

As such, we continue to recommend that Congress create a new office with significant funding; we recommend \$1 billion to be achieved by not providing the casual annual

increase to the mental health budget. The office should be given the mission of creating a National Veterans' Strategy that orients the future goals and vision of a VA that focuses on veterans maintaining their warrior wellness and providing proactive outreach, training, benefits, and services with the intent that they go on to live lives of purpose and meaning while maintaining a state of physical wellness and understanding the components of living a mentally healthy lifestyle.

7. POW/MIA

AMVETS is proud of former President Trump's signing of Senator Elizabeth Warren's legislation, the National POW/MIA Flag Act, into law in November 2019. This bi-partisan legislation requires the display of the POW/MIA flag outside of high-profile Federal buildings and National war memorials throughout the year. Previous law only required the POW/MIA flag to be displayed on Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day, Flag Day, Independence Day, National POW/MIA Recognition Day, and Veterans Day.

AMVETS continues to encourage members of Congress to display the flag outside their offices, as is protocol. This legislation requires the Architect of the Capitol (AOC) to display the National League of Families POW/MIA flag outside of the entrance of the office of each Member of Congress, unless the Member directs the AOC to not display the flag. This requirement applies only to a Member's office in a House or Senate office building within the U.S. Capitol Grounds.

8. Support the Increase of DIC for Our Survivors

For decades, survivors have been working to garner a small increase in Death and Indemnity (DIC) payments for the men and women left behind after our servicemembers die in duty to our nation. Current payments are not even at par with federal workers. We all must ensure that these men and women who paid the ultimate price with their loved ones are well taken care of. Supporting this critical change is a small way to repay that debt and highlight that our nation is grateful for their sacrifice.

The House Veterans Affairs Committee held a hearing on this issue on January 30 of this year. They discussed increasing DIC, as well as other topics relevant to surviving spouses and children. We continue to support these efforts to improve the lives of those families.

9. Support the Completion of a Successful and Seamless Electronic Healthcare Record

AMVETS fully supports the VA's efforts to create a seamless and effective electronic healthcare record (EHR). For decades, the VA has faced the challenge of having to deal with a broken system of transitioning veterans from DoD to the VA. Even today, millions

of veterans are suffering from lost information, lost data, paper records, and more. AMVETS also is keenly aware that VISTA is no longer a tangible option, meaning something has to take place to serve our veterans and servicemembers now adequately and in the future.

AMVETS is adamantly against using this issue for political gain and will vocally and locally fight any members who imply that ending this effort is in our nation's veterans' best interests. Nothing could be further from the truth.

However, AMVETS does support a high level of oversight and holding, particularly, the VA accountable for getting their act together on this project. When the DoD had similar issues, highly competent technical leaders were assigned to lead the implementation and were given strong authority to make decisions and make them happen. We hear numerous insinuations that this project needs to be more adequately led by VA leadership. Numerous project managers have been assigned and reassigned, and the VA at multiple levels of leadership is failing to make timely decisions which is resulting in inadequate delays.

Even so, AMVETS is still working on our veterans' moonshot to fix this long-overdue issue. The VA needs to step up to the plate because they are failing our Nation's veterans on this front. Congress must hold them accountable and possibly lead the charge on calls for resignation. However, we will not tolerate outright calls for an end to this project for short-term political gains, as this is not in the best interest of our current and future veterans and servicemembers.

AMVETS eagerly awaits outcomes from the next launch of the EHR system at the Lovell Federal Health Care Center in Chicago, IL this March.

10. Readiness/Recruitment for the Next Generation of Veterans

AMVETS believes that military readiness is the cornerstone of a nation's defense strategy, ensuring that armed forces are always prepared to respond to various threats. Effective recruitment is crucial in maintaining a robust and skilled military, ready to face any challenges that may arise and safeguard national security.

AMVETS has signed onto relevant letters from the Military Coalition (TMC), endorsed bills aimed at recruitment efforts, and pursued partnerships with organizations seeking to address the health and readiness of our armed forces. We believe that addressing these challenges requires targeted recruitment strategies that emphasize physical fitness and healthy lifestyles, alongside programs within the military to improve the overall health and fitness of service members.