



AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

DECEMBER 21, 2020

News Driving the Week

- House lawmakers finalized a [massive, sweeping veterans policy measure](#) which includes new protections for student veterans, new aid for veterans hurt by the ongoing pandemic and long sought-after improvements to VA services aimed at women veterans. The bill — named for former Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Johnny Isakson and retiring House Veterans’ Affairs Committee ranking member Phil Roe, R-Tenn. — is also the culmination of several years of lobbying by veterans advocates on a host of issues. Some provisions are aimed simply at creating better oversight of hot-button issues in the Department of Veterans Affairs. New studies are mandated on toxic exposure issues, support services for homeless women veterans, veterans job licensing programs and department health care shortcomings. One of the most notable sections of the bill is the Deborah Sampson Act, legislation pending for four years in Congress which would enact a series of reforms aimed at improving services for women veterans across the department. It includes \$20 million for retrofitting health care facilities “to make it safer and easier for women veterans to get care.” Many advocates say VA hospitals lack basic facilities for women such as private examination areas, maternity rooms and female-specific equipment. The bill mandates that every VA facility have at least one women’s health primary care provider and authorize a new \$1 million annual program for a women veterans health care residency program.

- During his 12 years in Congress, [Representative Phil Roe](#) has seen the Department of Veterans Affairs' budget balloon from \$94 billion in 2008 to \$240 billion this year. But as he prepares to retire, he has lingering doubts about how well the money was spent. "Throwing more money at something doesn't mean you get a better outcome," Roe, who will go home to Johnson City, Tennessee, when the new Congress is sworn in next month, cautioned the incoming Biden administration. He said one of his major concerns in leaving Congress is the lack of progress in suicide prevention at the VA. Roe cited the loss of an average of 20 veterans to suicide daily despite the \$9.4 billion in the VA's current budget mental health services. For years, VA officials have said that suicide prevention is the department's "highest clinical priority." "The results haven't changed at all; we haven't affected the rate one notch," Roe said, adding that there won't be progress if Congress and the VA continue to address the issue from "the 30,000-foot level in Washington, D.C." "We haven't done a very good job. It's almost

\$10 billion being spent" on mental health at the VA with little to show for the effort thus far, he said. "It's got to be solved at the ground level where the veteran lives -- someone knows someone who's in trouble, knows a guy or a gal who's in trouble. Get them somewhere where they can get help," Roe said.


- Republican and Democratic lawmakers called on the Department of Veterans Affairs this week to continue its nine-month [pause on billing veterans for medical debts](#) after the agency announced it would start collections again in January. In response to the calls from lawmakers, VA Press Secretary Christina Noel said that while the VA has the authority to continue deferring debt collections, the department will still restart collections after this month. The VA does not have the authority to waive the debts altogether, she said. The department started postponing debt collections in April because of the widespread job losses caused by the coronavirus pandemic. In August, the VA extended the deferment until Dec. 31. Earlier this month, the VA sent letters to veterans and notified them of their outstanding balances.

- President Donald Trump reiterated his vow to [veto the annual defense authorization bill](#) rather than allow it to become law, but White House officials still have not provided a timeline for when that attempt to block the legislation may happen. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said on the Senate floor Tuesday that "if President Trump takes the rather ridiculous step of veto-ing a pay raise for our troops in order to defend the honor of dead Confederate traitors (or whatever other contrived grounds he comes up with), Congress must override that veto." The 4,500-plus-page bill authorizes a broad array of military equipment purchases and personnel policies, including renewal of dozens of specialty pays and bonuses, granting new disability benefit eligibility for thousands of Vietnam veterans, and the launch of several new military family assistance and housing programs set next year. But Trump has objected to the measure in recent days because he believes it benefits China. Members of Congress call that criticism nonsensical and off-base. House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith has said in recent days that if Trump's veto is not overridden, lawmakers don't have a backup plan for the authorization bill. Crafting a second measure will take months, and likely still won't address the social media legal issues the president says he wants in the bill.

AMVETS in the News

['I hung up and vomited' — Veteran sexual assault survivors say VA's outreach retraumatized them](#)

An attempt by Veterans Affairs officials this week to improve their outreach to military sexual misconduct victims left several of those victims retraumatized due to what they called an insensitive approach to the issue. The incident — a town hall



meeting via telephone in which women were cold-called and transferred into a conversation about sexual abuse with little warning — comes as the VA department’s leadership is embroiled in controversy over their own handling on a sexual assault claim at a VA medical center last year. Advocates criticized the approach as poorly thought out and potentially harmful, rather than building positive connections with veterans. Lisa Wilken, chair of the AMVETS National Women Veterans Committee, was among the veterans unexpectedly contacted for the call and had the same reaction. The Air Force veteran has testified before Congress in the past about problems with VA treatment of military sexual trauma survivors. “As a rape survivor, I choose when I want to talk about my trauma,” she said. “So getting an unannounced call wasn’t appreciated at 5 p.m. when I had just started to get dinner started. “As soon as the sharing started, I hung up because it wasn’t a good time for me to go in that head space. It was insensitive of them to do, even if they mean well. It shows me their efforts are for show and not even well meaning, due to lack of thought.”

[Big six veterans groups ask Trump to fire VA Secretary Wilkie immediately](#)

The nation’s leading veterans groups on Wednesday formally requested that President Donald Trump fire Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie immediately from his Cabinet post, saying that the VA administrator “no longer has the trust or confidence of America’s veterans.” The letter — signed by leaders from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, AMVETS and Vietnam Veterans of America — is the latest damning assessment of Wilkie’s ability shepherd the department following the release of an inspector general report last week criticizing his handling of a sexual assault allegation late last year. “The findings make clear that the secretary himself established a defensive posture and made decisions to personally disparage the veteran and circumvent the subsequent IG investigation,” the letter states. “This is a tremendous breach of trust among veterans, and Secretary Wilkie must be held accountable. His actions not only threaten to deter veterans from seeking care at VA, but also undermine the efforts of VA staff who have been working to bring an end to sexual harassment throughout the department.”

[Why veterans groups want Trump’s VA secretary to resign](#)

America’s six leading veterans organizations have joined together to demand the resignation of the secretary of veterans affairs after a federal investigation found he aimed to discredit a female veteran who filed a sexual harassment claim instead of properly investigating the matter. In a letter to President Donald Trump this week, the heads of the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, AMVETS, Vietnam Veterans of America, and Paralyzed Veterans of America demanded that he remove VA Secretary Robert Wilkie from his post. “His actions not only

threaten to deter veterans from seeking care at VA, but also undermine the efforts of VA staff who have been working to bring an end to sexual harassment throughout the department,” the groups wrote. Wilkie, however, has defied calls to step down.

[Six largest veterans groups call for VA secretary's firing](#)

The country’s six largest veterans groups on Wednesday called for Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Robert Wilkie to be fired over a watchdog report revealing that he disparaged a congressional aide who said she was sexually assaulted at a VA facility. The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans (DAV), AMVETS, Paralyzed Veterans of America and Vietnam Veterans of America wrote in a letter to the White House that Wilkie had lost the trust of veterans over the conclusions in the bombshell report and that his actions could prevent people from seeking care from the VA. “This is a tremendous breach of trust among veterans and Secretary Wilkie must be held accountable,” they wrote. “His actions not only threaten to deter veterans from seeking care at VA, but also undermine the efforts of VA staff who have been working to bring an end to sexual harassment throughout the department.”

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

- Disabled veterans will see a [dramatic increase in their life insurance coverage](#), and new protections in how traumatic injury insurance claims are paid out, under reforms included in a massive veterans bill passed by Congress this week. The legislation — named for former Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., and outgoing House Veterans’ Affairs Committee ranking member Phil Roe, R-Tenn. — lifts cap for the Service-Disabled Veterans Insurance program from \$10,000 to \$40,000 in a move that advocates say is long overdue. The new legislation requires that troops or veterans denied the benefits — which can total up to \$100,000 for some injuries — get a detailed explanation of the reasons for the denial, and that

those same criteria be used in subsequent appeals of the claims. Both of the insurance changes are set to go into effect early next year, pending the president's signature on the legislation.

- [Opinion](#): Fire Robert Wilkie

- [Opinion](#): It's Time for a New, 'Heart to Heart' Approach to Help End Veteran Suicide

