



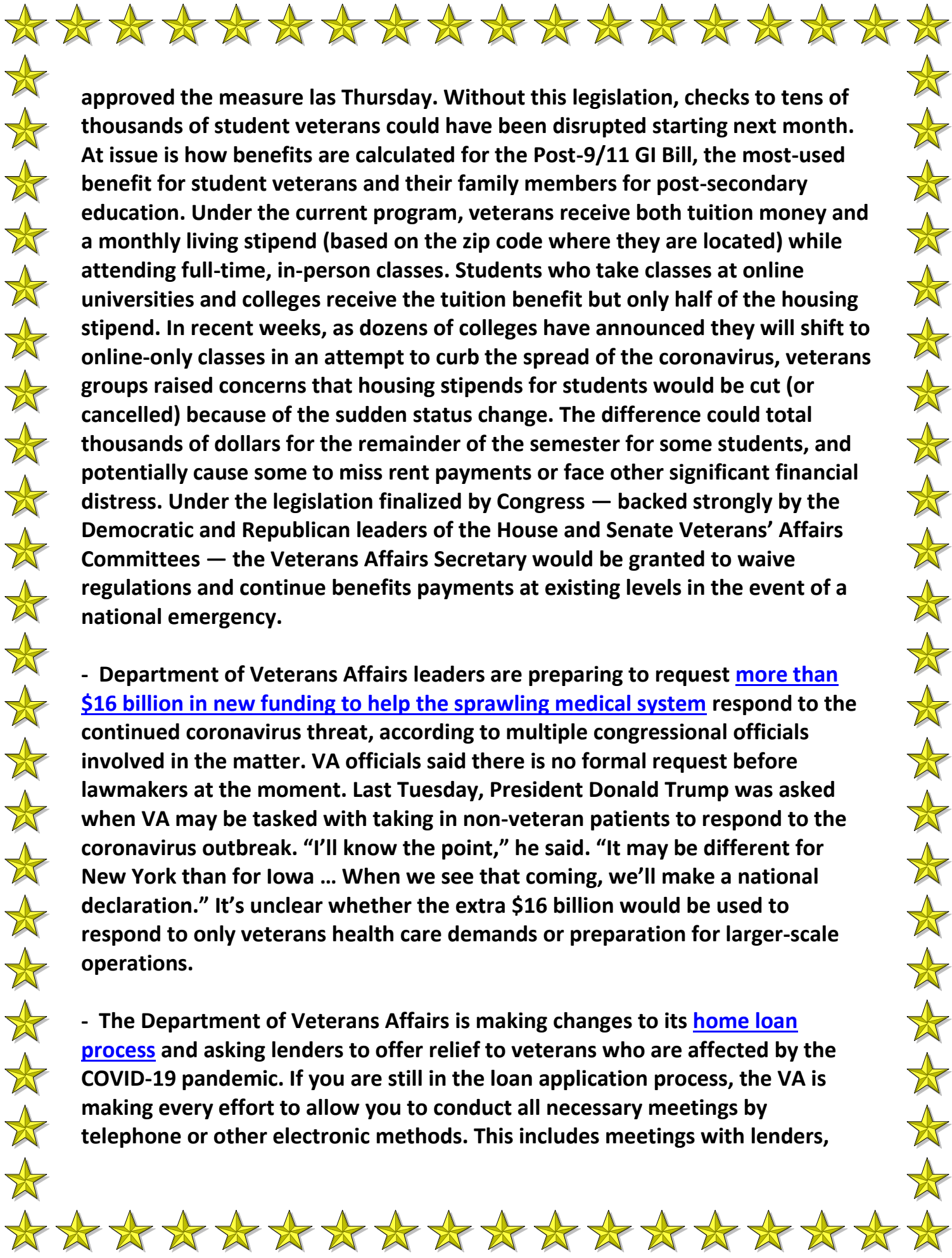
AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATES

MARCH 23, 2020

News Driving the Week

- The VA should be perfectly positioned to [treat patients from afar](#), keeping both veterans and department employees away from possible exposure to the coronavirus. But in these early days of the pandemic response, many in the department say it's not working out. VA employees are finding it difficult to use the department's network. The issues are critical for an agency that both cares for a large, medically complex population — veterans — and is also expected to serve as the backup for the health care system writ large — the VA's so-called fourth mission. Making sure hospital beds are available by treating less urgent patients from afar is essential to preventing the health system from becoming overwhelmed. The department has long touted its telehealth capabilities; in November, it announced that 900,000 veterans used its telehealth services in fiscal year 2019, a 17 percent increase over the year before. It's unclear precisely how widespread the problems are as the pandemic grows. Multiple unions representing VA employees have reported issues, and some workers have contacted congressional offices as well. Beefing up the department's internet infrastructure is a key task in the months ahead. The department this week requested \$1.2 billion in supplemental funding to add bandwidth supporting more telehealth visits and telework capabilities. One House staffer said the department doesn't know how many employees are currently teleworking, though it estimates 75,000. The department thinks it can support approximately double that, if not slightly more, and is hoping to eventually support 300,000 employees of its nearly 400,000-strong workforce working remotely. Reports of problems have reached the congressional level, with multiple staffers confirming they'd heard issues about slow networks interfering with work. Congress has been trying to check in on the department's response generally, asking Wilkie for updates on the number of coronavirus tests processed per day. The House Veterans' Affairs Committee raised the IT issue in a letter to Wilkie last Wednesday.

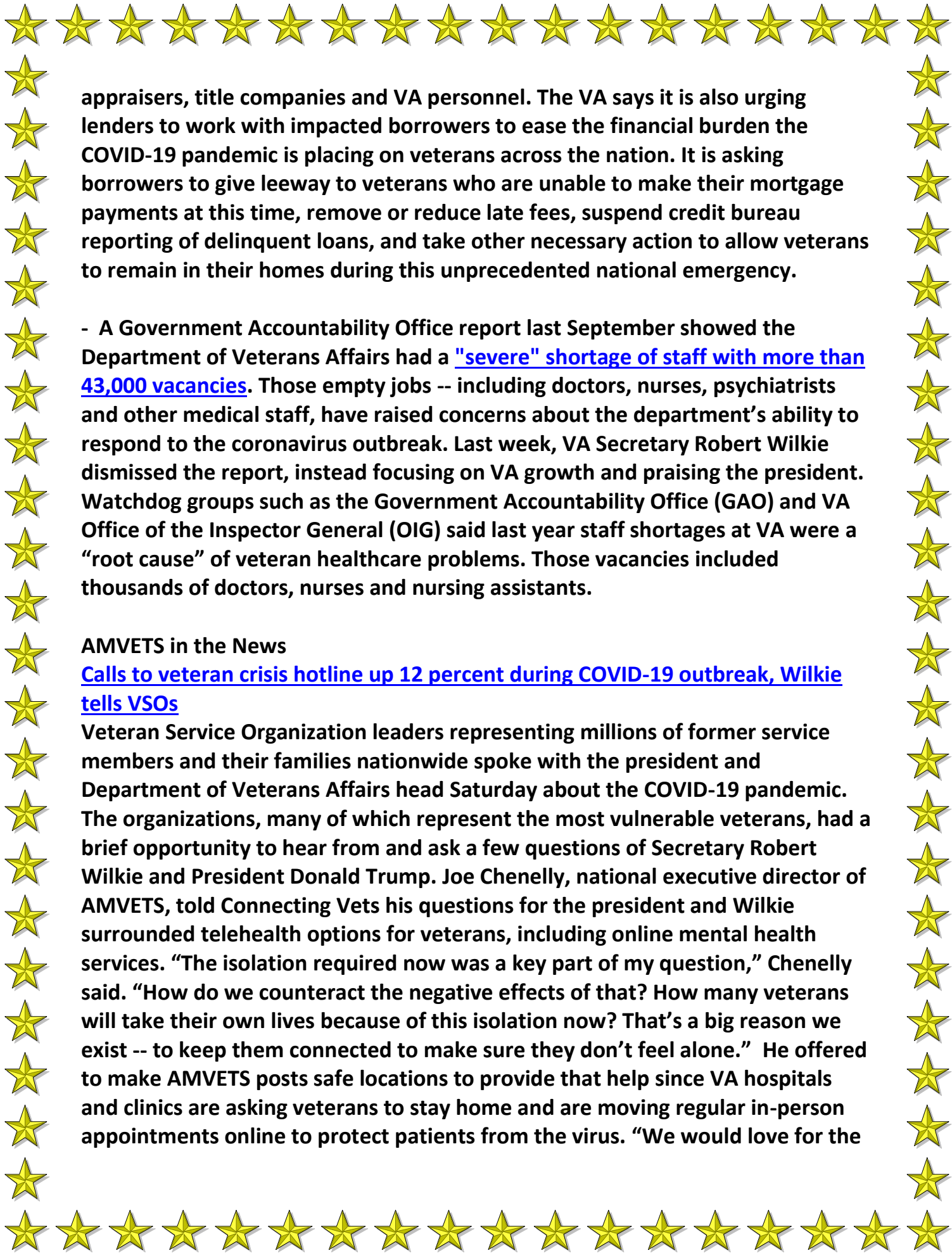
- Emergency legislation to [protect student veterans from losing their GI Bill benefits](#) because of college closings related to the coronavirus outbreak is headed to the president's desk for final signature after House lawmakers



approved the measure las Thursday. Without this legislation, checks to tens of thousands of student veterans could have been disrupted starting next month. At issue is how benefits are calculated for the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the most-used benefit for student veterans and their family members for post-secondary education. Under the current program, veterans receive both tuition money and a monthly living stipend (based on the zip code where they are located) while attending full-time, in-person classes. Students who take classes at online universities and colleges receive the tuition benefit but only half of the housing stipend. In recent weeks, as dozens of colleges have announced they will shift to online-only classes in an attempt to curb the spread of the coronavirus, veterans groups raised concerns that housing stipends for students would be cut (or cancelled) because of the sudden status change. The difference could total thousands of dollars for the remainder of the semester for some students, and potentially cause some to miss rent payments or face other significant financial distress. Under the legislation finalized by Congress — backed strongly by the Democratic and Republican leaders of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees — the Veterans Affairs Secretary would be granted to waive regulations and continue benefits payments at existing levels in the event of a national emergency.

- Department of Veterans Affairs leaders are preparing to request [more than \\$16 billion in new funding to help the sprawling medical system](#) respond to the continued coronavirus threat, according to multiple congressional officials involved in the matter. VA officials said there is no formal request before lawmakers at the moment. Last Tuesday, President Donald Trump was asked when VA may be tasked with taking in non-veteran patients to respond to the coronavirus outbreak. "I'll know the point," he said. "It may be different for New York than for Iowa ... When we see that coming, we'll make a national declaration." It's unclear whether the extra \$16 billion would be used to respond to only veterans health care demands or preparation for larger-scale operations.

- The Department of Veterans Affairs is making changes to its [home loan process](#) and asking lenders to offer relief to veterans who are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. If you are still in the loan application process, the VA is making every effort to allow you to conduct all necessary meetings by telephone or other electronic methods. This includes meetings with lenders,



appraisers, title companies and VA personnel. The VA says it is also urging lenders to work with impacted borrowers to ease the financial burden the COVID-19 pandemic is placing on veterans across the nation. It is asking borrowers to give leeway to veterans who are unable to make their mortgage payments at this time, remove or reduce late fees, suspend credit bureau reporting of delinquent loans, and take other necessary action to allow veterans to remain in their homes during this unprecedented national emergency.

- A Government Accountability Office report last September showed the Department of Veterans Affairs had a ["severe" shortage of staff with more than 43,000 vacancies](#). Those empty jobs -- including doctors, nurses, psychiatrists and other medical staff, have raised concerns about the department's ability to respond to the coronavirus outbreak. Last week, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie dismissed the report, instead focusing on VA growth and praising the president. Watchdog groups such as the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and VA Office of the Inspector General (OIG) said last year staff shortages at VA were a "root cause" of veteran healthcare problems. Those vacancies included thousands of doctors, nurses and nursing assistants.

AMVETS in the News

[Calls to veteran crisis hotline up 12 percent during COVID-19 outbreak, Wilkie tells VSOs](#)

Veteran Service Organization leaders representing millions of former service members and their families nationwide spoke with the president and Department of Veterans Affairs head Saturday about the COVID-19 pandemic. The organizations, many of which represent the most vulnerable veterans, had a brief opportunity to hear from and ask a few questions of Secretary Robert Wilkie and President Donald Trump. Joe Chenelly, national executive director of AMVETS, told Connecting Vets his questions for the president and Wilkie surrounded telehealth options for veterans, including online mental health services. "The isolation required now was a key part of my question," Chenelly said. "How do we counteract the negative effects of that? How many veterans will take their own lives because of this isolation now? That's a big reason we exist -- to keep them connected to make sure they don't feel alone." He offered to make AMVETS posts safe locations to provide that help since VA hospitals and clinics are asking veterans to stay home and are moving regular in-person appointments online to protect patients from the virus. "We would love for the

administration to be able to leverage the volunteers, locations and expertise that we have to help,” Chenelly said. “We’re working on ways we can help.”

[Salute with AMVETS Commander Jan Brown](#)

Bob Peters speaks with AMVETS Commander Jan Brown about being the first Women AMVETS Commander. Jan Brown discusses upcoming legislation as well as her experiences within the Air Force and the changes she has seen for women in the military.

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



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