

AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

MARCH 9, 2021

Good morning AMVETS Membership,

The VA is facing some upcoming issues of re-scheduling all of the medical appointments that were canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Secretary of VA Denis McDonough urged the Senate to pass the American Rescue Plan so that VA could begin treating veterans who put off health care visits during the pandemic. More than 19 million appointments were canceled or deferred in the past year. There are a couple hearings on Capitol Hill this week that we will be tracking, but make sure to mark your calendars for March 18 to watch Commander Jan Brown's testimony in front of the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.

-Bill Clark, AMVETS National Third Vice Commander

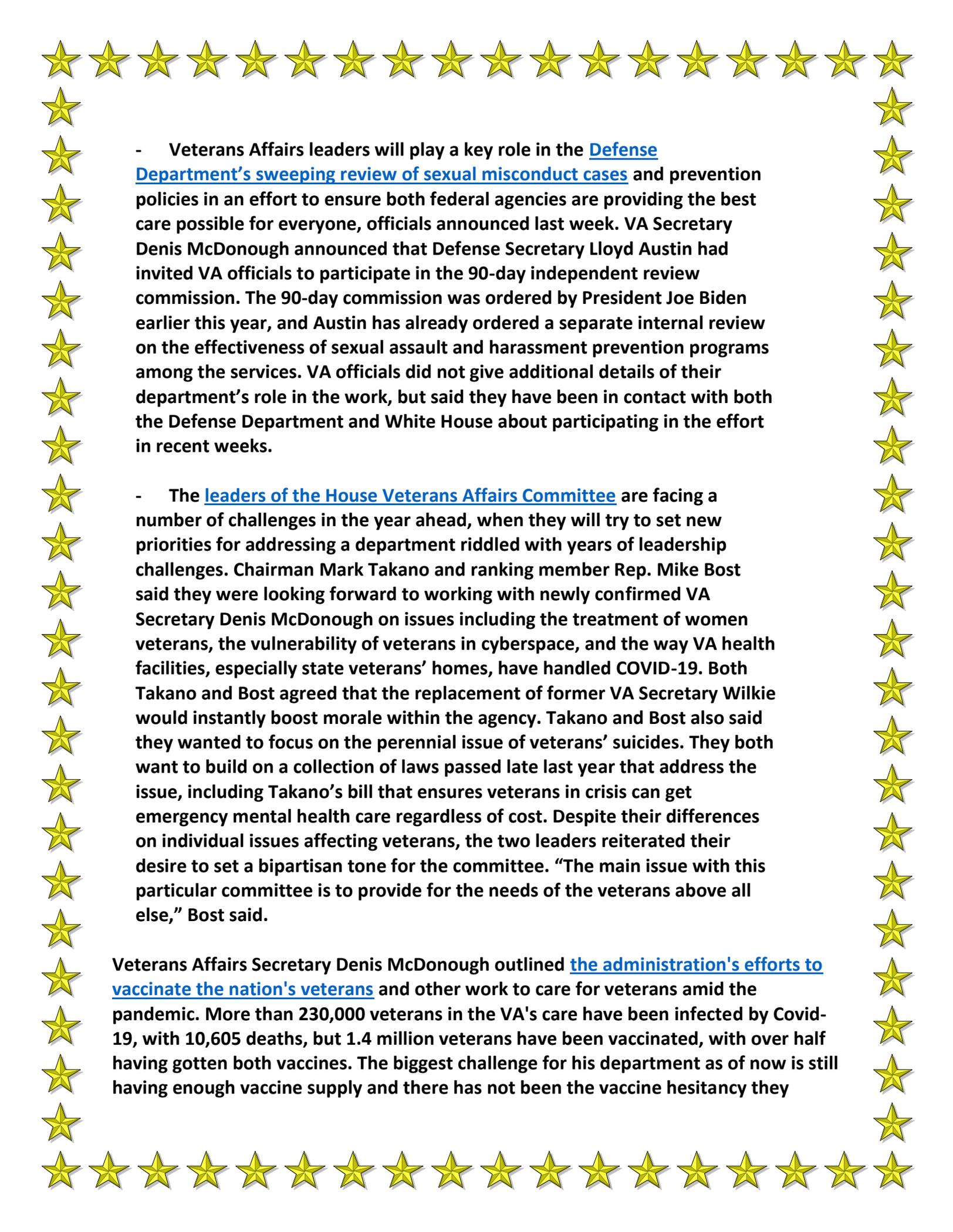
News Driving the Week

- During his first appearance in the White House briefing room, Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough urged the Senate to pass [President Joe Biden's coronavirus relief bill](#). The bill, titled the American Rescue Plan, totals \$1.9 trillion and includes billions in relief aid for the VA. McDonough said the money was needed to treat veterans who have put off health care visits during the pandemic. More than 19 million appointments were canceled, changed or deferred in the past year, he said. For the VA, Biden's plan gives about \$15 billion for veterans' health care, staffing, suicide prevention, research and women's health, as well as expanding telehealth, serving homeless veterans and improving medical facilities. Millions of dollars would go to state-run veterans' homes and the VA Office of the Inspector General. The legislation has undergone changes in Senate negotiations. The bill no longer includes a measure to raise the federal minimum wage, and Biden has agreed to limit the number of Americans who would receive the \$1,400 stimulus checks. Democratic leaders are pushing to approve the bill by mid-March. Expanded unemployment benefits put in place last year are set to expire March 14.
- Veterans Affairs officials still have millions of coronavirus vaccines to distribute in coming months, but they are already warily eyeing the next



massive medical challenge to follow: [making up millions of medical appointments for veterans](#) who have put off routine and specialty care because of virus concerns. Federal medical experts have estimated that as many as 41 percent of Americans have deferred regular check-ups or non-emergency care visits since last spring, when public officials ordered business closures and stay-at-home orders in an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19. VA officials said that they have made up some of those lost appointments through telehealth. In a roundtable with reporters this week, VA Secretary Denis McDonough said that the number of online appointments has increased almost 20-fold in the last year, from 2,500 a day last March to 45,000 a day this month. VA undersecretary for health Richard Stone said medical officials are already preparing for the flood of rescheduled appointments. At the height of the pandemic, about 6,000 workers a day were unable to work because of contract tracing or personal illness. That number is down to around 1,000 a day now, effectively giving VA an influx of extra workers to handle rising patient demands. He said that as veterans receive vaccines, they are also being informed of services that have reopened (to make up for missed medical appointments) and of other resources available to them.

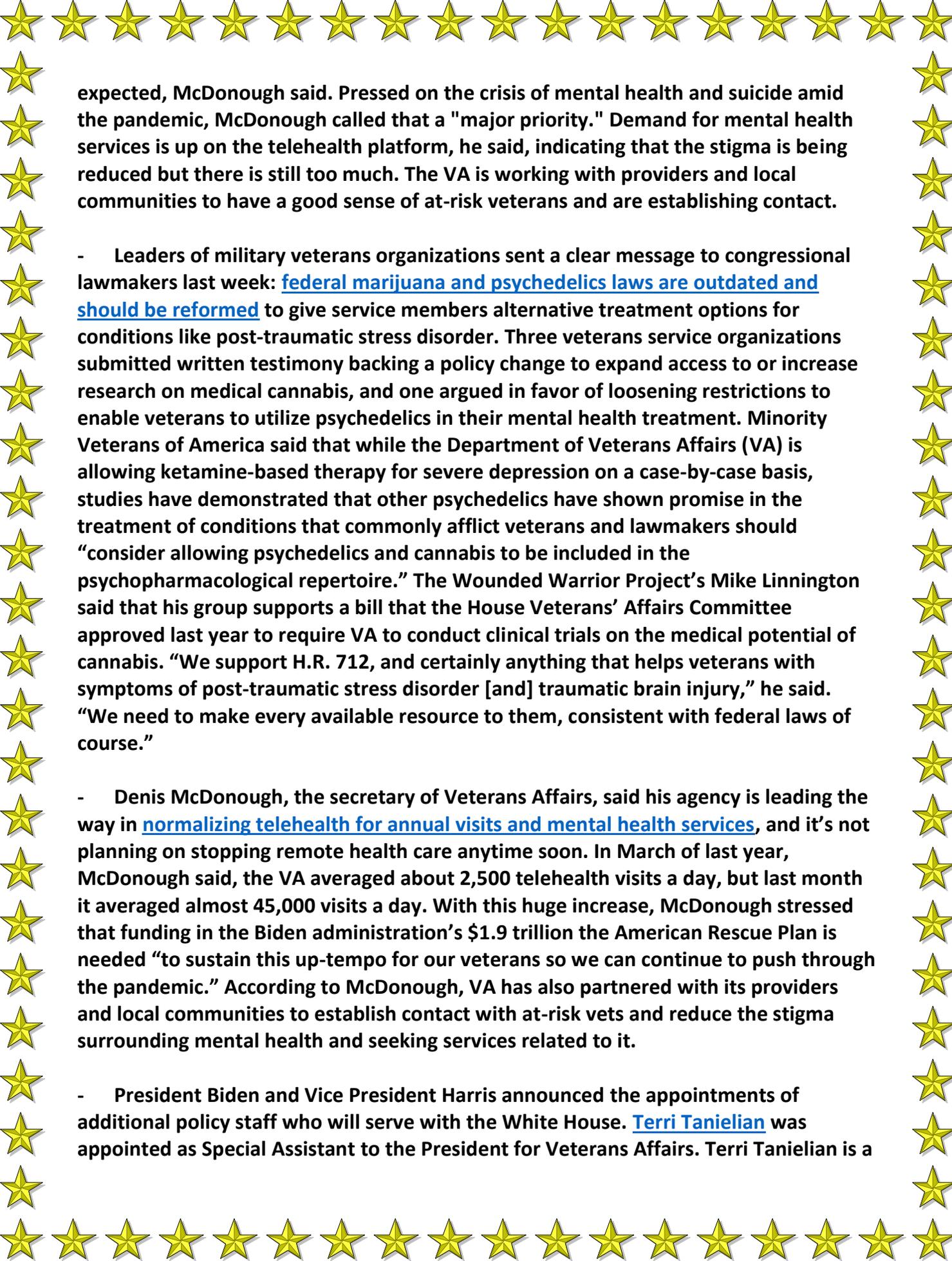
- A key [annual report on veteran homelessness](#) was never released last year, and now lawmakers want to know why the "urgent" data is missing when it may be more important than ever before. Each year, the Department of Housing and Urban Development releases a "Point-in-Time" count of unhoused people, particularly veterans. HUD conducted its annual count in January 2020, but never released its report -- a major resource for Congress in making decisions about how to legislate and allocate resources to respond to veteran homelessness. The leaders of the House and Senate Veterans Affairs committees sent a letter to Acting HUD Secretary Matt Ammon, urging him to release the data. Not even Department of Veterans Affairs leaders have reviewed the report yet, they wrote. The lawmakers said the data in the report is critical to the work to end veteran homelessness. "In order to effectively address barriers to access shelter, health care, and benefits for this particularly vulnerable population, we all need to be working with the most up-to-date information available," they wrote in their letter. The lawmakers asked HUD for a timeline on the 2020 report, what issues kept it from being released, how it will prevent a future delay for the 2021 report and how HUD will work with VA to address veteran-specific challenges or findings from the 2020 and 2021 reports, according to the letter.



- Veterans Affairs leaders will play a key role in the [Defense Department's sweeping review of sexual misconduct cases](#) and prevention policies in an effort to ensure both federal agencies are providing the best care possible for everyone, officials announced last week. VA Secretary Denis McDonough announced that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin had invited VA officials to participate in the 90-day independent review commission. The 90-day commission was ordered by President Joe Biden earlier this year, and Austin has already ordered a separate internal review on the effectiveness of sexual assault and harassment prevention programs among the services. VA officials did not give additional details of their department's role in the work, but said they have been in contact with both the Defense Department and White House about participating in the effort in recent weeks.

- The [leaders of the House Veterans Affairs Committee](#) are facing a number of challenges in the year ahead, when they will try to set new priorities for addressing a department riddled with years of leadership challenges. Chairman Mark Takano and ranking member Rep. Mike Bost said they were looking forward to working with newly confirmed VA Secretary Denis McDonough on issues including the treatment of women veterans, the vulnerability of veterans in cyberspace, and the way VA health facilities, especially state veterans' homes, have handled COVID-19. Both Takano and Bost agreed that the replacement of former VA Secretary Wilkie would instantly boost morale within the agency. Takano and Bost also said they wanted to focus on the perennial issue of veterans' suicides. They both want to build on a collection of laws passed late last year that address the issue, including Takano's bill that ensures veterans in crisis can get emergency mental health care regardless of cost. Despite their differences on individual issues affecting veterans, the two leaders reiterated their desire to set a bipartisan tone for the committee. "The main issue with this particular committee is to provide for the needs of the veterans above all else," Bost said.

Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough outlined [the administration's efforts to vaccinate the nation's veterans](#) and other work to care for veterans amid the pandemic. More than 230,000 veterans in the VA's care have been infected by Covid-19, with 10,605 deaths, but 1.4 million veterans have been vaccinated, with over half having gotten both vaccines. The biggest challenge for his department as of now is still having enough vaccine supply and there has not been the vaccine hesitancy they



expected, McDonough said. Pressed on the crisis of mental health and suicide amid the pandemic, McDonough called that a "major priority." Demand for mental health services is up on the telehealth platform, he said, indicating that the stigma is being reduced but there is still too much. The VA is working with providers and local communities to have a good sense of at-risk veterans and are establishing contact.

- Leaders of military veterans organizations sent a clear message to congressional lawmakers last week: [federal marijuana and psychedelics laws are outdated and should be reformed](#) to give service members alternative treatment options for conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder. Three veterans service organizations submitted written testimony backing a policy change to expand access to or increase research on medical cannabis, and one argued in favor of loosening restrictions to enable veterans to utilize psychedelics in their mental health treatment. Minority Veterans of America said that while the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is allowing ketamine-based therapy for severe depression on a case-by-case basis, studies have demonstrated that other psychedelics have shown promise in the treatment of conditions that commonly afflict veterans and lawmakers should “consider allowing psychedelics and cannabis to be included in the psychopharmacological repertoire.” The Wounded Warrior Project’s Mike Linnington said that his group supports a bill that the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee approved last year to require VA to conduct clinical trials on the medical potential of cannabis. “We support H.R. 712, and certainly anything that helps veterans with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder [and] traumatic brain injury,” he said. “We need to make every available resource to them, consistent with federal laws of course.”

- Denis McDonough, the secretary of Veterans Affairs, said his agency is leading the way in [normalizing telehealth for annual visits and mental health services](#), and it’s not planning on stopping remote health care anytime soon. In March of last year, McDonough said, the VA averaged about 2,500 telehealth visits a day, but last month it averaged almost 45,000 visits a day. With this huge increase, McDonough stressed that funding in the Biden administration’s \$1.9 trillion the American Rescue Plan is needed “to sustain this up-tempo for our veterans so we can continue to push through the pandemic.” According to McDonough, VA has also partnered with its providers and local communities to establish contact with at-risk vets and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health and seeking services related to it.

- President Biden and Vice President Harris announced the appointments of additional policy staff who will serve with the White House. [Terri Tanielian](#) was appointed as Special Assistant to the President for Veterans Affairs. Terri Tanielian is a

nationally recognized expert in veteran policy as well as mental health policy. Most recently, she served as a Senior Behavioral Scientist at the RAND Corporation where she led several landmark studies examining the needs of military service members, veterans, their families, and their caregivers. She has expertise in suicide prevention, sexual assault prevention and response, and behavioral health. In 2019, she served as a RAND Congressional Fellow with the House Committee on Veterans Affairs where she informed evidence-based policy making designed to reduce veteran suicide. She has also served on several national advisory committees related to improving mental health responses to disasters, terrorist incidents, and public health emergencies. She has more than 100 peer-reviewed publications on topics ranging from improving access to and quality of mental health and substance use treatment, improving public health emergency preparedness and response, and improving support systems for veterans, military families, and caregivers. Born in upstate New York, Tanielian graduated from Boston University and received her Master of Arts degree from The American University.

- A group of House lawmakers are reigniting calls to expand access to service dogs for veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder amid a growing number of studies that show the treatment works. Rep. John Rutherford reintroduced the [Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers Act](#) that would create a \$10 million grant program led by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The bill proposes qualified nonprofit organizations receive a stipend worth \$25,000 per veteran to pair that person with a service dog. When Rutherford reintroduced the PAWS Act in 2019, it drew bipartisan support in the House, but further action on it failed. The legislation was first introduced in 2016.

- [Opinion](#): A new VA wait-time scandal is brewing and we have no way to know how big it is

