



AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

FEBRUARY 11, 2020

News Driving the Week

- [The psychotherapy approaches considered by the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense to be front-line treatments for military-related PTSD don't work for up to two-thirds of patients](#), a new report published in JAMA Insights finds. Cognitive processing therapy, or CPT, and prolonged exposure therapy, PE, are two approaches for treating post-traumatic stress disorder that focus on a patient's traumatic experiences and helps them process the memories associated with the horrific events. But a review of results from several large clinical studies conducted since 2015 on military personnel and veterans, researchers with New York University's Grossman School of Medicine found these psychotherapies have limited success in these patients, despite recommendation as preferred treatments in the VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guidelines for the Management of PTSD and Acute Stress Disorder. In a literature review also published in JAMA in 2015, the NYU researchers questioned the effectiveness of the trauma-focused treatments, given that nearly a quarter of patients who tried CPT or PE dropped out of therapy. They found that 70 percent of CPT or PE patient did experience symptom reduction, but two-thirds still met the criteria for having PTSD.

- Eight months after the Department of Veterans Affairs launched the [MISSION Act](#) to expand private care opportunities for veterans, the agency still doesn't know how many appointments have been completed or how much the expansion cost. Senate Veterans Affairs Committee leaders told VA officials they were frustrated over the lack of information, wondering how the VA was celebrating the initiative as a success. A recent Inspector General report warned that at some VA's, referrals to private care already had lengthy wait times -- nearly two months -- even before MISSION launched, and that the problem could worsen without change. "This committee has concerns about how the VA is building out the network (of private providers) and its ability to meet veteran demand," Chairman Moran said. "We must take this opportunity to learn from (the Inspector General report) and have honest conversations about difficulties that could threaten the networks well before it is fully developed. We owe it to veterans to get MISSION right the first time." Lawmakers originally allocated about \$15 billion for MISSION Act expanded private care in VA's most recent budget. Tester asked Stone if that \$15 billion would be enough. But Richard Stone, executive in charge of the Veterans Health Administration said he didn't know.

- The confusion surrounding [the firing of former Deputy Secretary James Byrne](#) calls into question the stability of leadership for the Department of Veterans Affairs, which oversees health care for more than 9 million veterans and is in the midst of a multi-year overhaul of key military and medical records systems. Individuals close to a Byrne are disputing department leaders' assertions that the move was a mundane business decision, instead characterizing it as a surprise attack on a well-respected administrator. Byrne has not yet publicly commented on the move, which was announced Monday in a two-sentence statement by VA leaders. Byrne served as the second-highest ranking official in VA for almost 18 months, first in an acting capacity and for the last five months as the deputy secretary after his confirmation in September. Sources within VA said that the firing was handled in a hostile and sudden manner, with armed security officers escorting Byrne out of the building shortly after he was

informed of his dismissal. Byrne had previously been considered as a potential VA secretary replacement at some point in the future.

- The White House on Monday is expected to release a [\\$4.8 trillion budget](#) for fiscal 2021 that would boost spending for some national security and veterans programs, but includes major cuts to foreign aid and non-Defense agencies. The Trump administration would increase military spending by 0.3% (to \$740.5 billion) and decrease non-defense spending by 5% (to \$590 billion), which is below the budget cap Congress and the White House agreed to last summer. The administration is proposing funding increases for a number of agencies, including: NASA (12%), the Veterans Affairs Department (13%), the National Nuclear Security Administration (19%) and the Homeland Security Department (3%). The White House is expected to send its budget request to Congress on Monday afternoon.

- Secretary of Veterans Affairs [Robert Wilkie personally sought damaging information about a congressional aide](#) who said she was sexually assaulted in a VA hospital, according to an anonymous complaint to the House committee the woman works for. In addition, a former senior official with direct knowledge of the matter said Wilkie discussed damaging information he collected about the aide and suggested using it to discredit her. Another person said he spoke with other officials who were in those discussions, and they corroborated the former senior official's and the written complaint's account. The people interviewed spoke on the condition of anonymity, saying they feared retaliation. While the inspector general and prosecutors investigated Andrea Goldstein's allegation, Wilkie initiated what the complaint described as "his own investigation into Ms. Goldstein's credibility and military record." On Friday, a congressional committee asked the Department of Veterans Affairs watchdog to investigate allegations that senior officials, including Secretary Robert Wilkie, attempted to gather potentially damaging information about a woman who alleged she was sexually assaulted at a VA medical center. The House Committee on Veterans Affairs said the senior official may have used government resources and time to gather adverse information in an effort to discredit the woman's claims. VA officials denied the allegations.

AMVETS in the News

[House passes bill to allow VA to fund service dogs for veterans with PTSD](#)

The House passed a bill Wednesday that would allow the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to begin a project connecting service dogs and veterans. The bill, if implemented, could be critical step to improve Veterans' mental health care. The Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers for Veterans Therapy Act, authored by Rep. Steve Stivers (R-Ohio), would launch a program presenting federal grants to nonprofits providing service dogs to veterans suffering mental health issues. The VA would assess the effectiveness of dog therapy, according to a Stars and Stripes report. Joe Chenelly, national executive director of American Veterans said, "When it comes to curbing suicide, the time to act is now...Every day matters and the status quo is untenable," Chenelly said in a statement last month.

Upcoming Events

House Veterans Affairs Committee

Health Subcommittee

Achieving Health Equity for America's Minority Veterans

Tuesday, February 11 2:00 PM

Watch [here](#)

House Veterans Affairs Committee

Technology Subcommittee

Data Privacy and Portability at VA: Protecting Veterans' Personal Data
Wednesday, February 12 10:00 AM
Watch [here](#)

House Veterans Affairs Committee
Health Subcommittee
OI Subcommittee
Mission Critical: Examining Provider Relations During the Transition to VA's New Community Care Program
Wednesday, February 12 2:00 PM
Watch [here](#)

House Veterans Affairs Committee
Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
Testimony from AMVETS National Commander Jan Brown
Wednesday, February 26 2:00 PM

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

- Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie said he wants to work with investigators to review the case of a Navy veteran and senior [Congressional advisor who said she was sexually assaulted at a VA hospital](#). Last fall, Andrea Goldstein, a Naval intelligence officer now serving in the Reserves, said she was sexually assaulted and harassed at the Washington, D.C. VA Medical Center on Sept. 20. On Wednesday, Wilkie told reporters at the National Press Club in Washington that he was "not satisfied" with the "resolution" Goldstein's case and said he was working with the Office of the Inspector General to re-examine the case. The Office of the Inspector General told Connecting Vets Wednesday that the investigation is closed and there are no current plans to reopen it.

- Veterans will continue to see improvements in VA services, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said at ["State of the VA" speech](#) Feb. 5 at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. These improvements for Veterans include increased innovation—including the VA's first 5G hospital—along with decreased wait times for appointments and better overall care. Wilkie said the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End the National Tragedy of Suicide, or PREVENTS, task force is weeks away from releasing recommendations. The task force will include a community integration and collaboration proposal, a national research strategy and an implementation strategy. Wilkie said he will recommend that VA opens up financial support. This includes charities, local governments and non-governmental organizations to help Veterans. Veterans also see changes in how VA uses Whole Health, setting a

standard for care. Wilkie said programs like yoga, aqua therapy, music therapy and art therapy were unheard of decades ago. Now, he said VA uses a Whole Health approach to develop a personalized health plan.

- Members of Congress introduced a bipartisan bill to create a pilot Department of Veterans Affairs program to get veterans with post-traumatic stress or other mental health concerns service dogs. The [Puppies Assisting Wounded Service Members \(PAWS\) for Veterans Therapy Act](#) introduced by Rep. Steve Stivers, R-Ohio, and a group of other members, would require the Department of Veterans Affairs to implement a five-year program to issue grants to nonprofits that provide service dogs to veterans with PTSD or other post-deployment mental health concerns. On Feb. 5, the House passed that bill by voice vote. The PAWS Act provides the funds needed for veterinary health insurance for the dogs, hardware for the dogs to perform tasks to help their veterans and payment for travel for the veteran to bring the service dog home.

- For nearly two years, about one in five [veteran military sexual trauma claims](#) were wrongfully denied or improperly handled by the Department of Veterans Affairs, officials told Congress Wednesday. In September 2019, VBA completed a review of about 9,700 previously-denied MST claims from Oct. 1, 2016 through June 30, 2018. Of the 9,700 the agency reviewed, about 1,900 "required additional development" so they were initially wrongly denied or improperly handled, VBA Undersecretary for Field Operations Willie Clark told Congress. About one in four women veterans experience sexual harassment or assault at VA facilities. Generally, women veterans are about seven times more likely to experience military sexual trauma than men. Assault and harassment have also been linked to deaths by suicide and homelessness among women veterans. Women veterans are more than twice as likely to die by suicide than non-veteran women. MST survivors face nearly twice the risk of homelessness.

- [Opinion](#): 'He Was Implying I Was a Liar': What Happened After I Was Sexually Assaulted at the VA



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