



AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATES

JANUARY 20, 2020

News Driving the Week

- Over 6,000 veterans commit suicide every year, and that number is growing, according to 2019 data from the VA. The report includes data from 2017, the most recent available. There were 6,139 veteran suicide deaths in 2017, an increase of 129 from 2016. “It’s one of our greatest tragedies,” Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tenn., the ranking member of the VA House committee, said. “With the number of suicides on active duty, if we had those kind of casualties in combat ... the country would be on fire.” Lawmakers say they are looking into [efforts to combat the veteran suicide crisis in 2020](#). In December, a House panel passed the Improve Well-Being for Veterans Act, which awards federal funds to programs outside the VA that provide mental health care, saying more than half of veterans who end their own lives aren’t in the VA system. In May, Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., introduced the Sgt. Daniel Somers Veterans Network of Support Act in Congress. If passed, it would require the DOD to create a pilot program for information sharing among relatives and friends designated by each service member — up to 10 people — on VA benefits and services.

- Department of Veterans Affairs [patients seeking private sector health care](#) saw a nearly two-month delay for medical appointments in 2018 and the problem could worsen under the new Mission Act, the VA Office of Inspector General reported Thursday. The inspector general said the number of patients seeking community care will increase from 684,000 to 3.7 million, now that the eligibility for veterans to seek private care has expanded under the Mission Act. Investigators put the bulk of the blame on Health Net, a contractor who handled some of the VA’s referral process, but no longer does business with the department. But after the VA stopped working with Heath Net, department staff still struggled to keep up with workload of referrals to community care, according to the IG’s report. Despite the VA beefing up its hiring every year, federal auditors found five out of seven facilities in the region lack enough administrative staff as of October 2018. A VA spokesperson said the region has remedied some of the issues with lag time.

- More veterans could access [free or reduced-cost dental care](#) if a measure that passed the House on Monday also clears the Senate. House Joint Resolution 80 would approve a request from the Department of Veterans Affairs to begin a pilot program to increase VA-funded dental care options. Only about 8 percent of veterans who get care at VA qualify for VA-backed dental coverage now. The bill was introduced by Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tenn., ranking member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee to kick off a new avenue for veteran benefits through the MISSION Act, which replaced the Choice Act in June 2019. “In addition to increasing veterans’ access to care, the MISSION Act also created a Center for Innovation for Care and Payment to give VA an avenue to test new payment and service delivery models that have the potential to better serve veterans and taxpayers,” Roe said Monday evening. “This resolution would approve the Center’s first waiver request – to allow VA to coordinate free or reduced-cost dental care in the community for veterans who are ineligible for dental care through VA. This would greatly enhance not only the dental care provided to those who have served but also their overall health and well-being.” VA Secretary Robert Wilkie asked Congress for the opportunity to pursue the pilot program, which would allow VA to enter agreements with private dental service providers in the community who agree to provide free or discounted dental care to

veterans who are enrolled in VA health care, but who may not qualify for VA dental care.

- Investigators will not file charges in the case of a Navy veteran and senior Congressional policy advisor who said she was [sexually assaulted at the Washington, D.C. VA Medical Center](#), VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said in a letter Wednesday. Wilkie took his letter a step farther, saying Andrea Goldstein's report of her assault amounted to "unsubstantiated claims," setting off a firestorm from lawmakers and the VA Office of the Inspector General Wednesday evening. Wilkie chastised Takano and his staff in the letter. "We believe that the VA is a safe place for all veterans to enter and receive care and services, but the unsubstantiated claims raised by you and your staff could deter our veterans from seeking the care they need and deserve," Wilkie wrote. "Even prior to this allegation, VA was conducting education of staff on the proper handling of all forms of harassment. We will continue these efforts." But the Office of the Inspector General released a letter in response to Wilkie, saying his accusation was inaccurate. While the case was closed and there were no charges filed, the VA leader's letter "inaccurately characterizes the complaint's allegation as 'unsubstantiated.' This is not an accurate description of the results of our investigation," Inspector General Michael Missal wrote. Takano and Rep. Julia Brownley, D-Calif., chairwoman of the Women Veterans Task Force, released fiery statements in response to what they described as Wilkie's "shameful" letter. "To cast doubt on credible, serious and concerning claims about how women are treated at VA is outrageous," Takano said. "Women veterans are already hesitant to come forward and report sexual harassment and sexual assault because they fear being dismissed and retaliated against ... When my staffer bravely came forward in September, she did so in the spirit of wanting other women veterans to feel safe. But the Secretary's flippant letter is only further evidence to my staffer and others that coming forward is punished, speaking out retaliated against, and that a hostile culture at VA is tolerated."

- Federal officials have just a few weeks to decide whether to go along with [a court ruling giving thousands of veterans an extra year of college tuition benefits](#) or appeal the order in hopes of reversing the potential billions of dollars in new payouts. Last week, the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims issued its final ruling on the case of "BO vs Wilkie," letting stand an earlier decision that the Department of Veterans Affairs practice of making veterans relinquish their Montgomery GI Bill eligibility in order to receive Post-9/11 GI Bill payouts is improper. Federal officials argued in court that the arrangement is designed to make sure veterans aren't doubling up on their government benefits for personal profit. But the court rejected that argument, saying that instead veterans eligible for both programs should receive each set of payouts, just not simultaneously. That means that veterans who use up their 36 months of Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits would still have access to 12 months of Montgomery GI Bill benefits if they paid into the program while they were serving. Under existing federal statute, any government higher education payouts are capped at 48 months.

AMVETS in the News

[Bill to Bring Home Missing Servicemembers Introduced in House, Gains Veterans Organizations' Support](#)

A companion bill to S. 2794, the Bring Our Heroes Home Act (BOHHA), introduced by U.S. Senators Mike Crapo (R-Idaho) and Jeanne Shaheen (D-New Hampshire), was introduced today in the U.S. House of Representatives by Representatives Chris Pappas (D-New Hampshire) and Russ Fulcher (R-Idaho). Crapo and Shaheen today also announced that S. 2794 has received endorsements by three Veterans Service Organizations, including Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), American Veterans (AMVETS) and the Coalition of Families of Korean and Cold War POW/MIAs. "AMVETS supports the passage and implementation of this legislation," wrote Joseph Chenelly, Executive Director of AMVETS. "As an organization of more

than 250,000 members, we are committed to never forget our missing in action and prisoners of war. We commend Senator Crapo for not forgetting their families.”

[HillVets 100 Nominee: Jan Brown](#)

AMVETS National Commander Jan Brown was nominated to the list of HillVets 100. The category she was nominated for, Traditional Non-Profits, honors some of the longest standing non-profit supporters of the veteran community. They continuously show dedicated and committed efforts to bring veteran and servicemembers’ interests to the forefront of the national dialogue, which has made them highly influential and powerful forces in enhancing veterans’ needs. The individuals listed below represent the leadership of these organizations. The HillVets 100 honors 100 veterans, service members, and supporters and their continued contributions to the United States.

Upcoming Events

[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

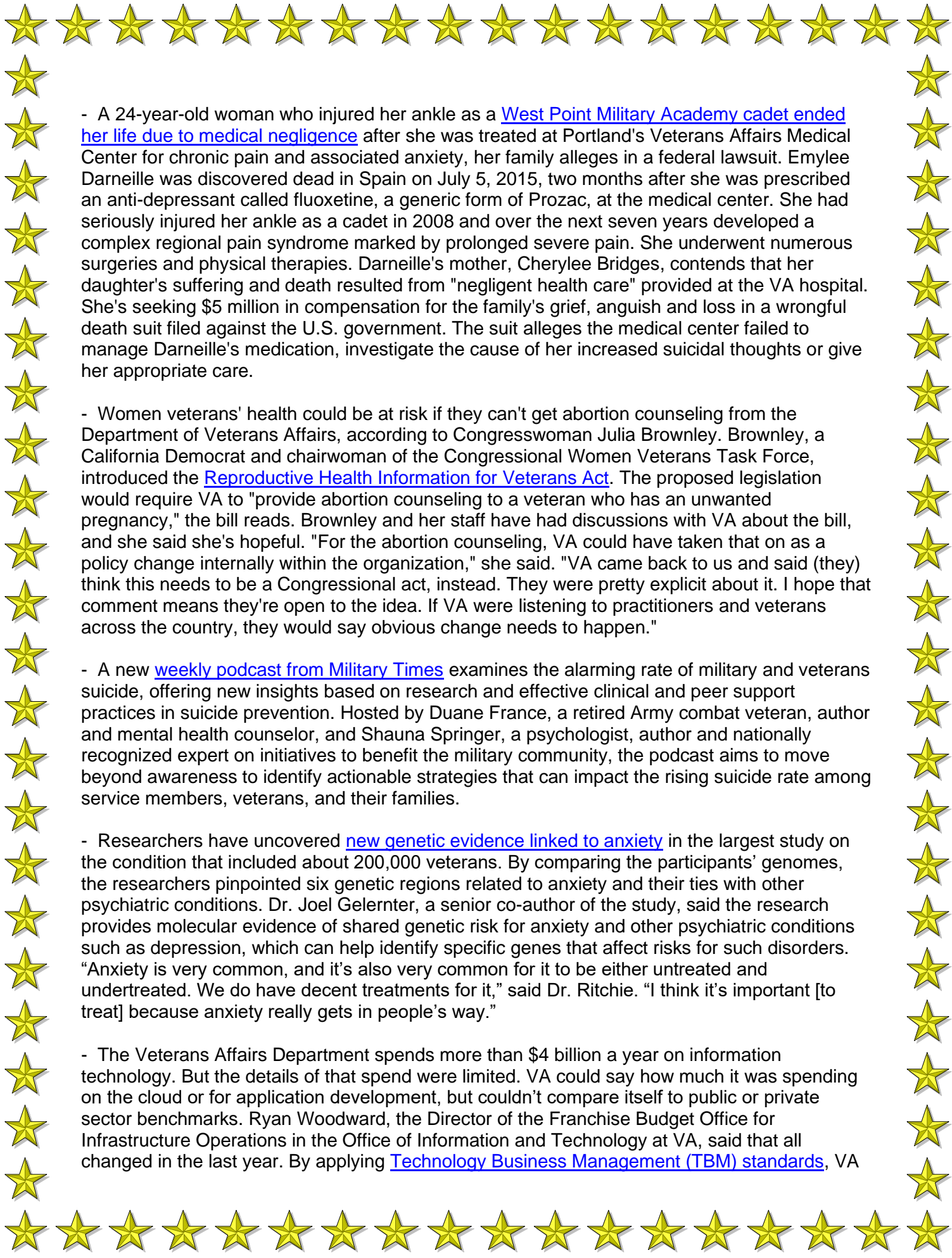
[S. 785](#) Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 introduced by Sen. Jon Tester of MT

[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

- Lawmakers want to know why [thousands of housing vouchers for destitute veterans are going unused each year](#) despite almost 38,000 potential recipients still living on the street. The answer, Veterans Affairs officials testified on Tuesday, is a combination of hiring problems within the federal agency and rising rent costs in areas of the country with some of the largest homeless veterans populations. Outside advocates warned that without solutions to those problems, the national goal of ending homelessness among veterans will remain stalled. At issue are the Housing and Urban Development/Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program, launched in 2008. Over the last 11 years, in coordination with community groups, the program has provided direct housing payments to veterans in an effort to provide a stable living situation, allowing them to more effectively deal with other health and employment issues. Keith Harris, national director of clinical operations in the VA Homeless Program Office, acknowledged at a House Veterans’ Affairs Committee hearing Tuesday that about 14,000 vouchers went unused last year, even though an estimated 38,000 veterans are still considered homeless. Part of that problem is a result of paperwork issues. The department has about 650 case management positions currently vacant (about 16 percent of the federal workforce handling the vouchers). He said if the positions were filled, “HUD-VASH could house over 6,000 additional veterans.” But Harris said the slow pace of federal hiring rules coupled with the slow pace of federal contracting rules have made filling the positions and processing more vouchers difficult.



- A 24-year-old woman who injured her ankle as a [West Point Military Academy cadet ended her life due to medical negligence](#) after she was treated at Portland's Veterans Affairs Medical Center for chronic pain and associated anxiety, her family alleges in a federal lawsuit. Emylee Darneille was discovered dead in Spain on July 5, 2015, two months after she was prescribed an anti-depressant called fluoxetine, a generic form of Prozac, at the medical center. She had seriously injured her ankle as a cadet in 2008 and over the next seven years developed a complex regional pain syndrome marked by prolonged severe pain. She underwent numerous surgeries and physical therapies. Darneille's mother, Cherylee Bridges, contends that her daughter's suffering and death resulted from "negligent health care" provided at the VA hospital. She's seeking \$5 million in compensation for the family's grief, anguish and loss in a wrongful death suit filed against the U.S. government. The suit alleges the medical center failed to manage Darneille's medication, investigate the cause of her increased suicidal thoughts or give her appropriate care.

- Women veterans' health could be at risk if they can't get abortion counseling from the Department of Veterans Affairs, according to Congresswoman Julia Brownley. Brownley, a California Democrat and chairwoman of the Congressional Women Veterans Task Force, introduced the [Reproductive Health Information for Veterans Act](#). The proposed legislation would require VA to "provide abortion counseling to a veteran who has an unwanted pregnancy," the bill reads. Brownley and her staff have had discussions with VA about the bill, and she said she's hopeful. "For the abortion counseling, VA could have taken that on as a policy change internally within the organization," she said. "VA came back to us and said (they) think this needs to be a Congressional act, instead. They were pretty explicit about it. I hope that comment means they're open to the idea. If VA were listening to practitioners and veterans across the country, they would say obvious change needs to happen."

- A new [weekly podcast from Military Times](#) examines the alarming rate of military and veterans suicide, offering new insights based on research and effective clinical and peer support practices in suicide prevention. Hosted by Duane France, a retired Army combat veteran, author and mental health counselor, and Shauna Springer, a psychologist, author and nationally recognized expert on initiatives to benefit the military community, the podcast aims to move beyond awareness to identify actionable strategies that can impact the rising suicide rate among service members, veterans, and their families.

- Researchers have uncovered [new genetic evidence linked to anxiety](#) in the largest study on the condition that included about 200,000 veterans. By comparing the participants' genomes, the researchers pinpointed six genetic regions related to anxiety and their ties with other psychiatric conditions. Dr. Joel Gelernter, a senior co-author of the study, said the research provides molecular evidence of shared genetic risk for anxiety and other psychiatric conditions such as depression, which can help identify specific genes that affect risks for such disorders. "Anxiety is very common, and it's also very common for it to be either untreated and undertreated. We do have decent treatments for it," said Dr. Ritchie. "I think it's important [to treat] because anxiety really gets in people's way."

- The Veterans Affairs Department spends more than \$4 billion a year on information technology. But the details of that spend were limited. VA could say how much it was spending on the cloud or for application development, but couldn't compare itself to public or private sector benchmarks. Ryan Woodward, the Director of the Franchise Budget Office for Infrastructure Operations in the Office of Information and Technology at VA, said that all changed in the last year. By applying [Technology Business Management \(TBM\) standards](#), VA

now understands its IT spending two or three levels down and is driving better decisions and cost savings. "We went from having basic cost data related to call centers or budget object codes or congressional projects to now having data about specific services we are providing, for example, compute, storage and networking. We are able to describe that in much more detail," Woodward said on Ask the CIO. "We are also able to know the total cost of ownership for certain applications, which is very important." "We are using TBM to compare our on-premise costs for applications and services to what we are seeing for applications which have migrated to the cloud. We are also using TBM to try to decide which applications need to go to the cloud at all. There are some business rules that you can apply to the selection of the migration of applications that make it most effective, cost-wise, and give you the best return on investment."



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