

# **AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE**

## **March 2, 2021**

**Good morning AMVETS Membership,**

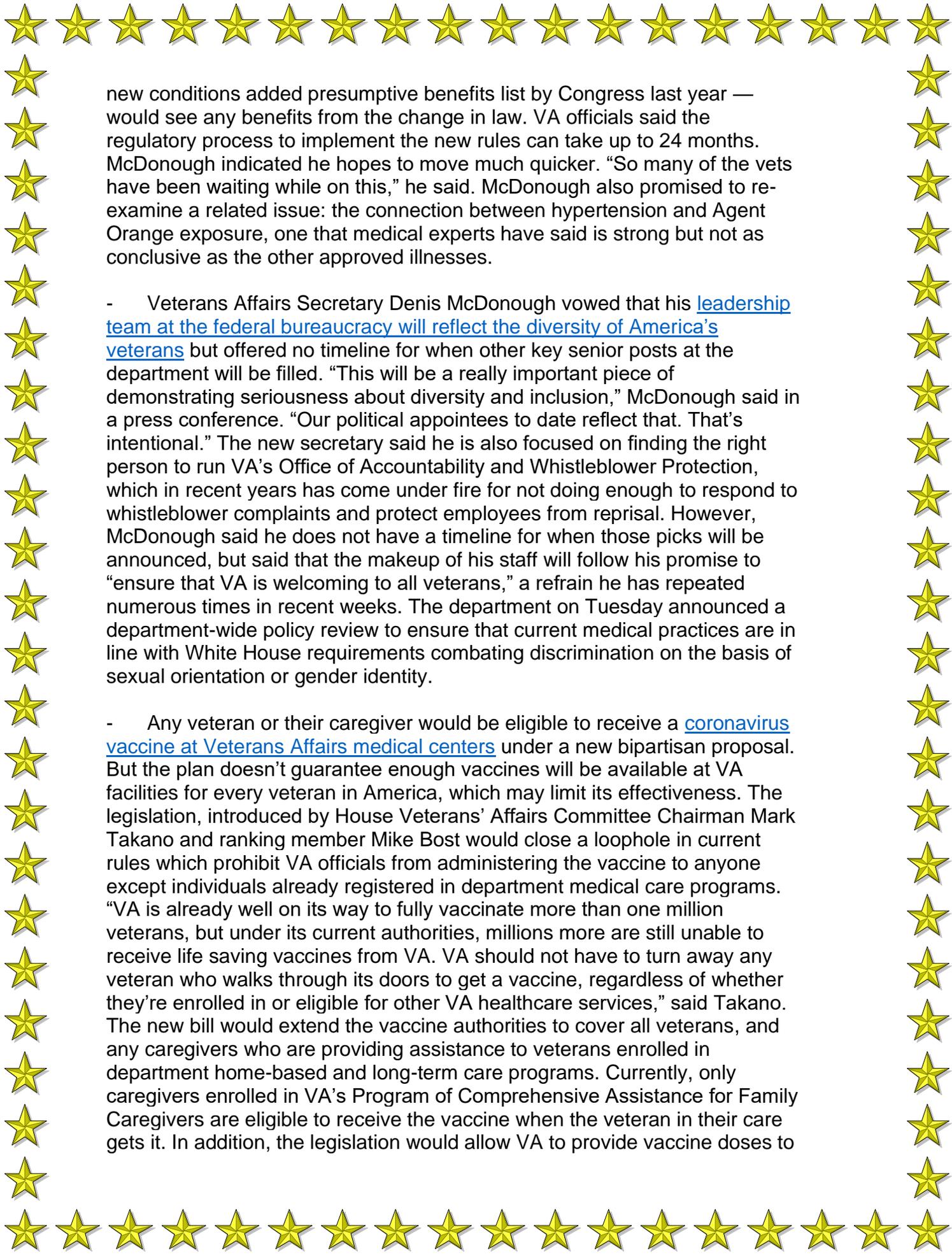
**As you all know, AMVETS has been working on Agent Orange presumptive illnesses for years now and how benefitting it is to see Senate lawmakers moving ahead, namely, they hope to add high blood pressure to the list of illnesses presumed to be caused by Agent Orange. As they are making this one of their legislative priorities, there will be numerous VSO presentations this week and multiple organizations testifying on Wednesday and Thursday. AMVETS will testify on 18Mar.**

**-Bill Clark, AMVETS National Third Vice Commander**

### **News Driving the Week**

- Senate lawmakers will make a push this year to add officially [high blood pressure to the list of illnesses presumed to be caused by Agent Orange](#) exposure during the Vietnam War, a move that could open disability payments to more than 160,000 veterans. Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester said the issue will be a major early focus for his committee, and he has already begun work on legislative fixes for the issue. Tester and committee ranking member Jerry Moran sent a letter to Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough asking him to exercise his own authority and fast-track the issue. At stake is as much as \$15 billion in new disability payouts to veterans over the next decade. Last year, Congress added three new illnesses to that presumptive list: bladder cancer, hypothyroidism and Parkinson's-like symptoms. VA officials are still working through the details of how that change will be implemented and when affected veterans will start to see payouts. The move is expected to affect about 34,000 veterans. Nearly five times as many individuals could be affected if high blood pressure is added to the list.

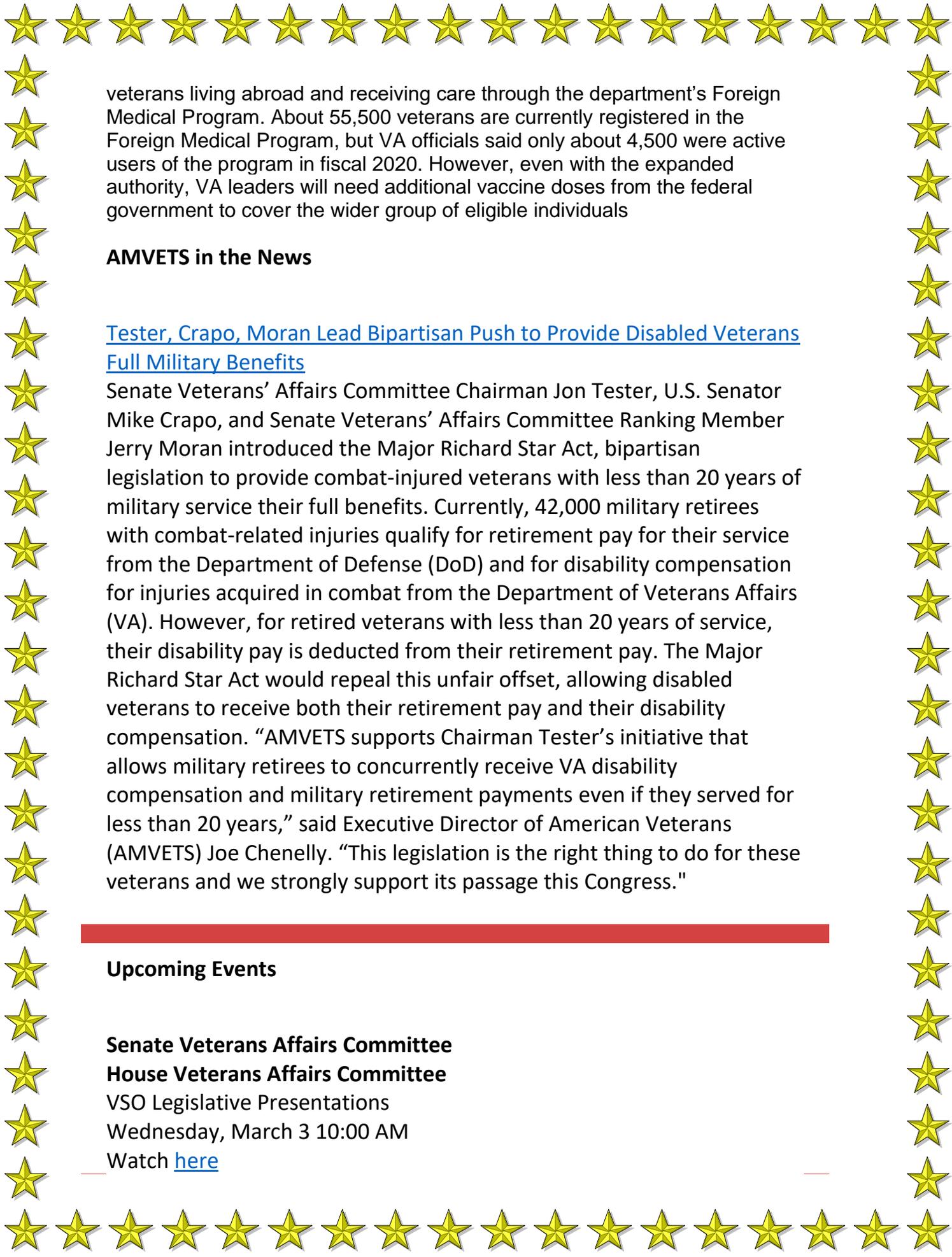
- Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough promised an "urgent" review of new rules regarding [presumptive benefits status for Vietnam veterans](#) suffering from serious illnesses related to toxic chemical defoliant exposure, but offered no specific timeline for when veterans may see those changes put in place. In January, officials from President Donald Trump's VA leadership team said it could be months or years before veterans suffering from bladder cancer, hypothyroidism and Parkinson's-like symptoms — three



new conditions added presumptive benefits list by Congress last year — would see any benefits from the change in law. VA officials said the regulatory process to implement the new rules can take up to 24 months. McDonough indicated he hopes to move much quicker. “So many of the vets have been waiting while on this,” he said. McDonough also promised to re-examine a related issue: the connection between hypertension and Agent Orange exposure, one that medical experts have said is strong but not as conclusive as the other approved illnesses.

- Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough vowed that his [leadership team at the federal bureaucracy will reflect the diversity of America’s veterans](#) but offered no timeline for when other key senior posts at the department will be filled. “This will be a really important piece of demonstrating seriousness about diversity and inclusion,” McDonough said in a press conference. “Our political appointees to date reflect that. That’s intentional.” The new secretary said he is also focused on finding the right person to run VA’s Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection, which in recent years has come under fire for not doing enough to respond to whistleblower complaints and protect employees from reprisal. However, McDonough said he does not have a timeline for when those picks will be announced, but said that the makeup of his staff will follow his promise to “ensure that VA is welcoming to all veterans,” a refrain he has repeated numerous times in recent weeks. The department on Tuesday announced a department-wide policy review to ensure that current medical practices are in line with White House requirements combating discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.

- Any veteran or their caregiver would be eligible to receive a [coronavirus vaccine at Veterans Affairs medical centers](#) under a new bipartisan proposal. But the plan doesn’t guarantee enough vaccines will be available at VA facilities for every veteran in America, which may limit its effectiveness. The legislation, introduced by House Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano and ranking member Mike Bost would close a loophole in current rules which prohibit VA officials from administering the vaccine to anyone except individuals already registered in department medical care programs. “VA is already well on its way to fully vaccinate more than one million veterans, but under its current authorities, millions more are still unable to receive life saving vaccines from VA. VA should not have to turn away any veteran who walks through its doors to get a vaccine, regardless of whether they’re enrolled in or eligible for other VA healthcare services,” said Takano. The new bill would extend the vaccine authorities to cover all veterans, and any caregivers who are providing assistance to veterans enrolled in department home-based and long-term care programs. Currently, only caregivers enrolled in VA’s Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers are eligible to receive the vaccine when the veteran in their care gets it. In addition, the legislation would allow VA to provide vaccine doses to



veterans living abroad and receiving care through the department's Foreign Medical Program. About 55,500 veterans are currently registered in the Foreign Medical Program, but VA officials said only about 4,500 were active users of the program in fiscal 2020. However, even with the expanded authority, VA leaders will need additional vaccine doses from the federal government to cover the wider group of eligible individuals

### **AMVETS in the News**

#### [Tester, Crapo, Moran Lead Bipartisan Push to Provide Disabled Veterans Full Military Benefits](#)

Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester, U.S. Senator Mike Crapo, and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Ranking Member Jerry Moran introduced the Major Richard Star Act, bipartisan legislation to provide combat-injured veterans with less than 20 years of military service their full benefits. Currently, 42,000 military retirees with combat-related injuries qualify for retirement pay for their service from the Department of Defense (DoD) and for disability compensation for injuries acquired in combat from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). However, for retired veterans with less than 20 years of service, their disability pay is deducted from their retirement pay. The Major Richard Star Act would repeal this unfair offset, allowing disabled veterans to receive both their retirement pay and their disability compensation. "AMVETS supports Chairman Tester's initiative that allows military retirees to concurrently receive VA disability compensation and military retirement payments even if they served for less than 20 years," said Executive Director of American Veterans (AMVETS) Joe Chenelly. "This legislation is the right thing to do for these veterans and we strongly support its passage this Congress."

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### **Upcoming Events**

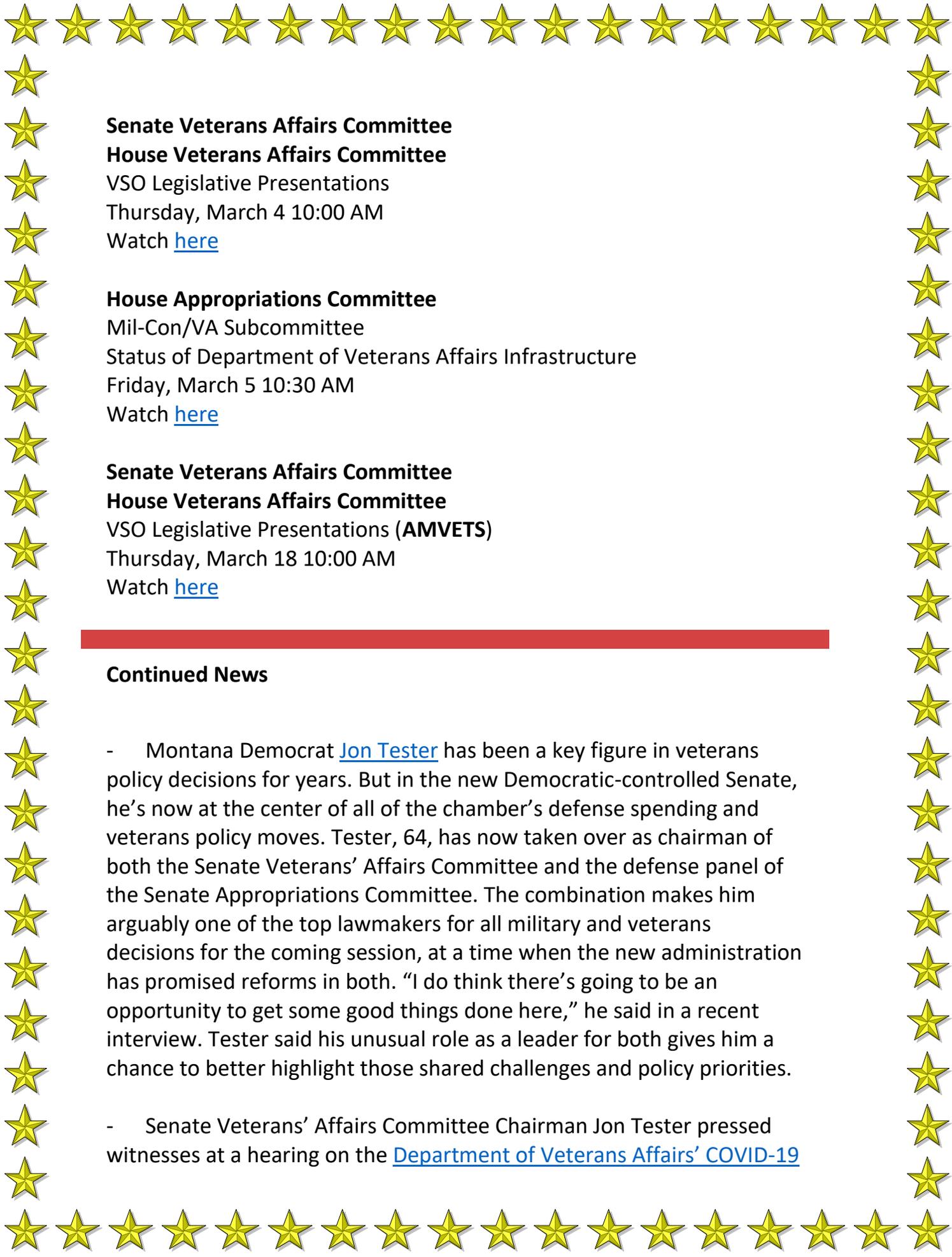
#### **Senate Veterans Affairs Committee**

#### **House Veterans Affairs Committee**

VSO Legislative Presentations

Wednesday, March 3 10:00 AM

Watch [here](#)



**Senate Veterans Affairs Committee**  
**House Veterans Affairs Committee**

VSO Legislative Presentations  
Thursday, March 4 10:00 AM  
Watch [here](#)

**House Appropriations Committee**

Mil-Con/VA Subcommittee  
Status of Department of Veterans Affairs Infrastructure  
Friday, March 5 10:30 AM  
Watch [here](#)

**Senate Veterans Affairs Committee**  
**House Veterans Affairs Committee**

VSO Legislative Presentations (**AMVETS**)  
Thursday, March 18 10:00 AM  
Watch [here](#)

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**Continued News**

- Montana Democrat [Jon Tester](#) has been a key figure in veterans policy decisions for years. But in the new Democratic-controlled Senate, he's now at the center of all of the chamber's defense spending and veterans policy moves. Tester, 64, has now taken over as chairman of both the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and the defense panel of the Senate Appropriations Committee. The combination makes him arguably one of the top lawmakers for all military and veterans decisions for the coming session, at a time when the new administration has promised reforms in both. "I do think there's going to be an opportunity to get some good things done here," he said in a recent interview. Tester said his unusual role as a leader for both gives him a chance to better highlight those shared challenges and policy priorities.

- Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester pressed witnesses at a hearing on the [Department of Veterans Affairs' COVID-19](#)

[vaccine rollout](#), and efforts to combat vaccine hesitancy and reach more veterans and staff in Montana. During the hearing, VA confirmed that recent Tester efforts secured an increase of 600,000 additional doses from the Biden Administration for veterans. Tester has been pushing for an increase in vaccines for veterans, and at today's hearing pressed Acting Under Secretary for Health Dr. Richard Stone on the Department's vaccination program. Dr. Stone confirmed that VA's allotment of Federal vaccines will more than double for next week.

