



AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

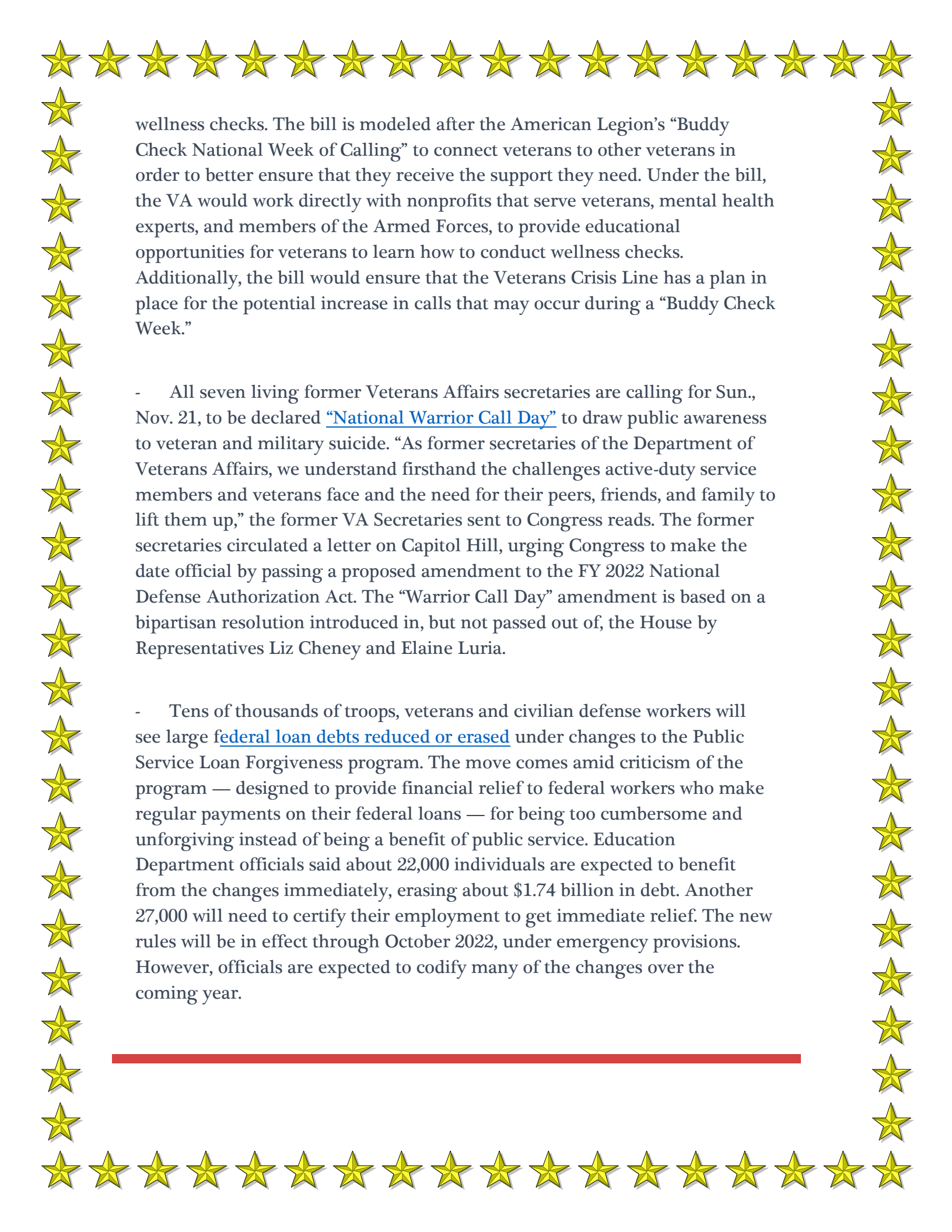
October 12, 2021

News Driving the Week

- Two members of the U.S. Senate are proposing bipartisan legislation to reduce the risk of veteran suicides by requiring federal officials to reach out to them within three weeks of ending their military service. The measure would compel the Department of Veterans Affairs to send a veteran's information to the local VA center within a week of a veteran's departure from the military. The local VA officials then have to reach out to the veteran within two weeks of getting that information. [The Vet Center Outreach Act](#) would require the VA to send an alert to a local VA Vet Center nearest to where a veteran resides within seven days of that veteran separating from the military, along with information that can help the VA Vet Center engage in personalized outreach to the veteran.

- Millions of veterans must begin [paying back debts to the Department of Veterans Affairs](#) now that the agency resumed collections following an 18-month pause. The collection of debts from medical co-pays and benefits overpayments had been stalled to help ease financial hardships caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The pause initially ended Jan. 1, but VA officials extended it through September after receiving pressure from lawmakers and advocates who argued the economic effects of the pandemic were still being felt by veterans. The VA resumed debt collections Oct. 1. Beginning in January 2022, the agency will restart deducting veterans' debts from their benefits payments. About 2 million veterans owe debts to the VA. The department sent letters to the veterans notifying them that payments would now come due.

- The U.S. Senate unanimously passed bipartisan legislation introduced by U.S. Senators Joni Ernst, a combat veteran, and Maggie Hassan, a member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, that would direct the Department of Veterans Affairs to designate one week per year as ["Buddy Check Week"](#) to organize outreach events and educate veterans on how to conduct peer



wellness checks. The bill is modeled after the American Legion’s “Buddy Check National Week of Calling” to connect veterans to other veterans in order to better ensure that they receive the support they need. Under the bill, the VA would work directly with nonprofits that serve veterans, mental health experts, and members of the Armed Forces, to provide educational opportunities for veterans to learn how to conduct wellness checks. Additionally, the bill would ensure that the Veterans Crisis Line has a plan in place for the potential increase in calls that may occur during a “Buddy Check Week.”

- All seven living former Veterans Affairs secretaries are calling for Sun., Nov. 21, to be declared [“National Warrior Call Day”](#) to draw public awareness to veteran and military suicide. “As former secretaries of the Department of Veterans Affairs, we understand firsthand the challenges active-duty service members and veterans face and the need for their peers, friends, and family to lift them up,” the former VA Secretaries sent to Congress reads. The former secretaries circulated a letter on Capitol Hill, urging Congress to make the date official by passing a proposed amendment to the FY 2022 National Defense Authorization Act. The “Warrior Call Day” amendment is based on a bipartisan resolution introduced in, but not passed out of, the House by Representatives Liz Cheney and Elaine Luria.

- Tens of thousands of troops, veterans and civilian defense workers will see large [federal loan debts reduced or erased](#) under changes to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program. The move comes amid criticism of the program — designed to provide financial relief to federal workers who make regular payments on their federal loans — for being too cumbersome and unforgiving instead of being a benefit of public service. Education Department officials said about 22,000 individuals are expected to benefit from the changes immediately, erasing about \$1.74 billion in debt. Another 27,000 will need to certify their employment to get immediate relief. The new rules will be in effect through October 2022, under emergency provisions. However, officials are expected to codify many of the changes over the coming year.



AMVETS in the News

[Meet Navy veteran Gregory Heun, new AMVETS national commander](#)

Gregory Heun was elected by delegates from across the nation at AMVETS' 76th national convention, which took place in August in Greensboro, N.C. "What an honor it has been to serve you over the years. I cannot wait to continue to do so at our organization's highest position," Commander Heun during his Installation Ceremony. "This is the greatest [veteran service organization] in the world. No doubt about it." Heun, a Navy veteran and native of Kentucky who still lives in the Bluegrass State, began his association with AMVETS in 2002 and has risen through the national ranks over the years, serving as a post commander, department commander, 3rd, 2nd, and 1st National Vice Commander en route to leading the organization. Heun served in the Navy from 1984–1991 as an Aviation Structural Mechanic Second Class, serving aboard multiple aircraft carriers and airfields. He has also received accommodations from multiple naval captains. Heun told CBS' Eye on Veterans that the top priority for AMVETS will continue to be suicide awareness and prevention.

Upcoming Events

House Veterans Affairs Committee

Violent Domestic Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans

Wednesday, October 13 10:00 AM

Watch [here](#)

House Veterans Affairs Committee

Health Subcommittee

Legislative Hearing

Wednesday, October 13 2:00 PM

Watch [here](#)



Continued News

- [Veterans unemployment rates](#) held steady in September even as the outlook across America improved for most other job seekers. Bureau of Labor Statistics officials announced the unemployment rate for all veterans last month was 3.6 percent, the same as in August. It's only the second time since the start of the coronavirus pandemic in America in March 2020 that the rate has been below 4.0 percent. The rate among younger veterans — individuals who served in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars era — rose slightly from August (3.1 percent) to September (3.5 percent). However, economists have warned that because of smaller sample sizes with that specific population, monthly changes can be more dramatic than with the overall veterans figures.

- Federal Trade Commission officials are vowing to crack down on “shady” recruiting tactics used on service members and veterans by [for-profit colleges](#) with harsh new financial penalties for offenders. The commission sent notices to 70 of the largest for-profit colleges alerting them of the potential for fines of more than \$43,000 per offense for unfair or misleading recruiting tactics. Officials said the move comes in response to a 70 percent increase in complaints around education and recruiting issues between 2018 and 2020. The idea behind the regulation is to ensure that for-profit institutions aren't funded solely by federal monies, but instead also include significant investment by students interested in furthering their education. However, under a loophole in federal statute, GI Bill benefits and Defense Department Tuition Assistance programs were not counted as federal dollars, despite being taxpayer-funded benefits. That incentivized schools to target those groups and their stable, reliable tuition money. The changes approved last spring undid that loophole, but FTC officials said that troops and veterans remain heavily targeted by the schools. “Up until today, veterans and service members have been seen as a gravy train for some of the worst schools in America, exploiting grandiose marketing schemes and even outright lies to keep investors happy,” said William Hubbard, vice president at Veterans Education Success. “This changes all of that,” he added. “This is the FTC declaring war on some of the worst schools in higher education. Students will have a greater chance of going to better schools without all the tricks up the sleeves of so many fly-by-night programs.”

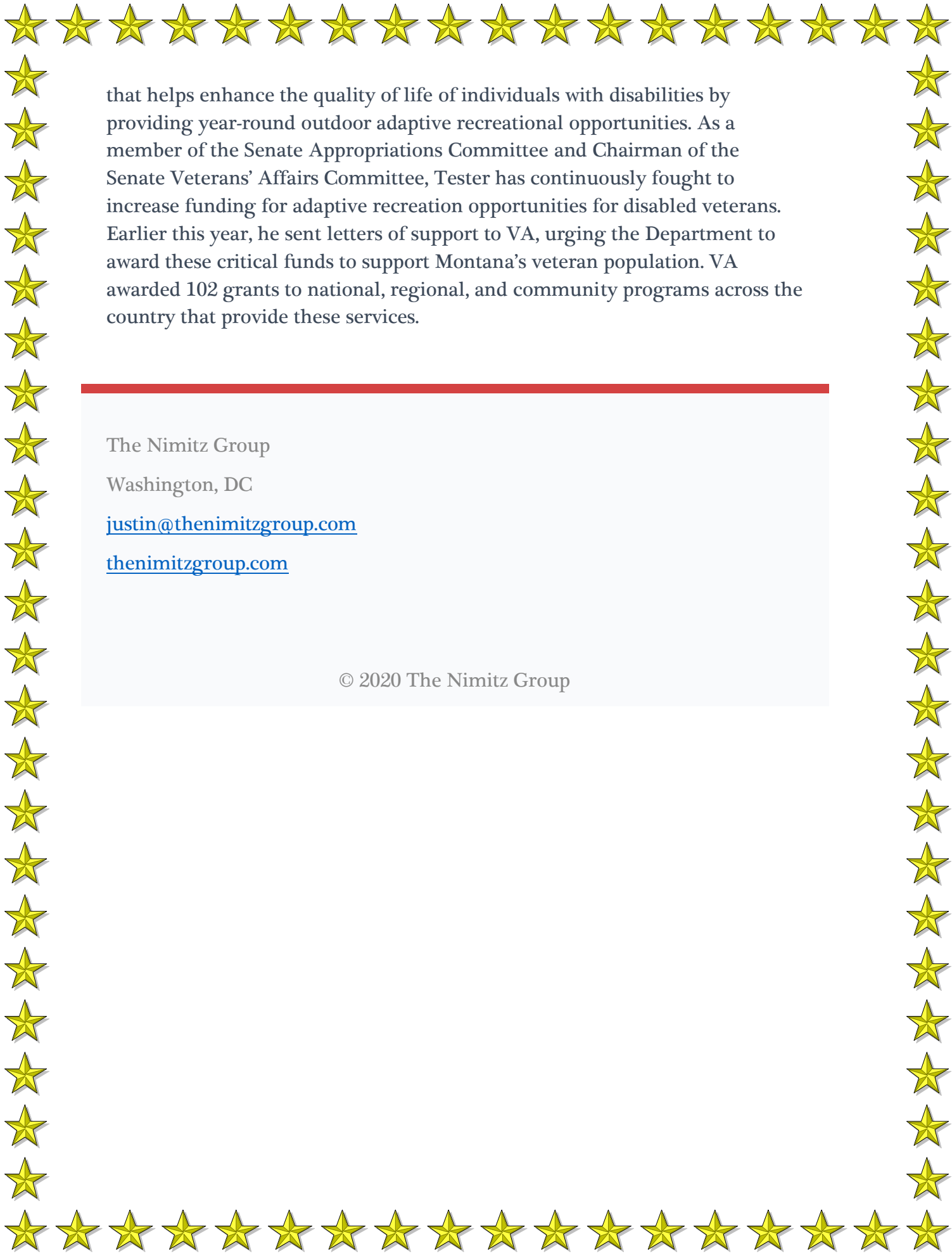


- The Department of Veterans Affairs has announced the expansion of their [Veterans Legacy Memorial](#) (VLM) website, which now contains individual webpages for nearly 4.5 million veterans interred in national, state, territorial and tribal veterans cemeteries.

The just-announced expansion added individual webpages for nearly 500,000 veterans interred in 93 state, territorial and tribal veterans cemeteries to the existing four million webpages for veterans interred in VA's 155 national cemeteries. More than 22,000 virtual submissions have been made to veterans' profile pages in VLM since the site launched in 2019. All content uploaded or submitted to a veteran's personal memorial webpage is reviewed by moderators before being posted.

- Since 2009, the Department of Veterans Affairs has had more acting [chief information officers](#) than permanent ones. And the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on IT Modernization is worried about all of this turnover. After the Senate confirmed Roger Baker in 2009 to be the assistant secretary in the Office of Information and Technology and CIO, VA has had only two other permanent CIOs: LaVerne Council and James Grfrerer. The average tenure of an acting CIO is more than 10 months, including one who lasted almost two years, according to the committee's research. Dr. Neil Evans, the chief officer for Connected Care and who is performing the delegable duties of the assistant secretary for information and technology and CIO, became the sixth acting technology leader since 2009 at the end of August. Rep. Matt Rosendale, ranking member of the Subcommittee on IT Modernization, said this is one of the main reasons why VA continually struggles with major IT projects.

- U.S. Senator Jon Tester announced \$158,500 has been awarded by the Department of Veterans Affairs to help disabled veterans in Montana improve their independence, well-being, and quality of life through [adaptive sports and therapeutic arts programs](#) in Billings and Whitefish. Funding is provided under VA's Adaptive Sports Grant Program, which provides grants across the country to support veterans' physical and mental health. Of the total \$158,500, \$88,500 has been awarded to Horses Spirits Healing, Inc., a nonprofit organization outside of Billings that specializes in equine therapy for veterans. \$70,000 has been awarded to Disabled Recreation Environmental Access Movement (DREAM) Adaptive Recreation, Inc. in Whitefish, an organization



that helps enhance the quality of life of individuals with disabilities by providing year-round outdoor adaptive recreational opportunities. As a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee and Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, Tester has continuously fought to increase funding for adaptive recreation opportunities for disabled veterans. Earlier this year, he sent letters of support to VA, urging the Department to award these critical funds to support Montana's veteran population. VA awarded 102 grants to national, regional, and community programs across the country that provide these services.

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