



AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

OCTOBER 19, 2020

News Driving the Week

- President Donald [Trump signed the Commander John Scott Hannon bill into law](#) Saturday that contains dozens of methods to prevent suicide among veterans, including measures to boost mental health research and staffing at the Department of Veterans Affairs and establish a multimillion-dollar grant program for state and local groups. Senators Jerry Moran and Jon Tester, leaders of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, said the bipartisan bill had the potential to reform mental health care at the VA and improve veterans' access to lifesaving mental health services. Most notably, the bill will offer up to \$174 million during the next five years to state and local groups that provide suicide-prevention services to veterans and their families. Lawmakers believe the program will create better collaboration between the organizations and the VA. They think the partnership will result in earlier identification of veterans who are at risk of suicide, giving mental health providers more time to intervene. In addition to the Commander John Scott Hannon Act, Trump on Saturday signed into law the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020. The new law designates 9-8-8 as the universal phone number for mental health emergencies.
- Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs Ranking Member Jon Tester and House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Chairman Mark Takano are expressing [serious concerns over the increasing politicization of the Department of Veterans Affairs](#)—including the potential misuse of taxpayer funds and other government assets, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, in an effort to benefit the reelection of President Trump and certain Republican candidates seeking office in 2020. “Leaders at VA have historically risen above partisan politics,” the members wrote in a letter to VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “Unfortunately, our review of publicly available information, media reports, social media postings, and other data suggests that the travel, events, and other related official actions of VA senior leaders are steering the Department away from its apolitical mission and potentially using Department resources in an attempt to tip the scale in favor of the President and other Republican candidates. Furthermore, efforts to engage in overtly political activity may have come at the expense of legitimate functions of the Department’s mission—to provide health care, benefits, and memorial services to our nation’s veterans, as well as care for their families. This mission should bring together Americans and

all elected officials, rather than divide us along party lines.”

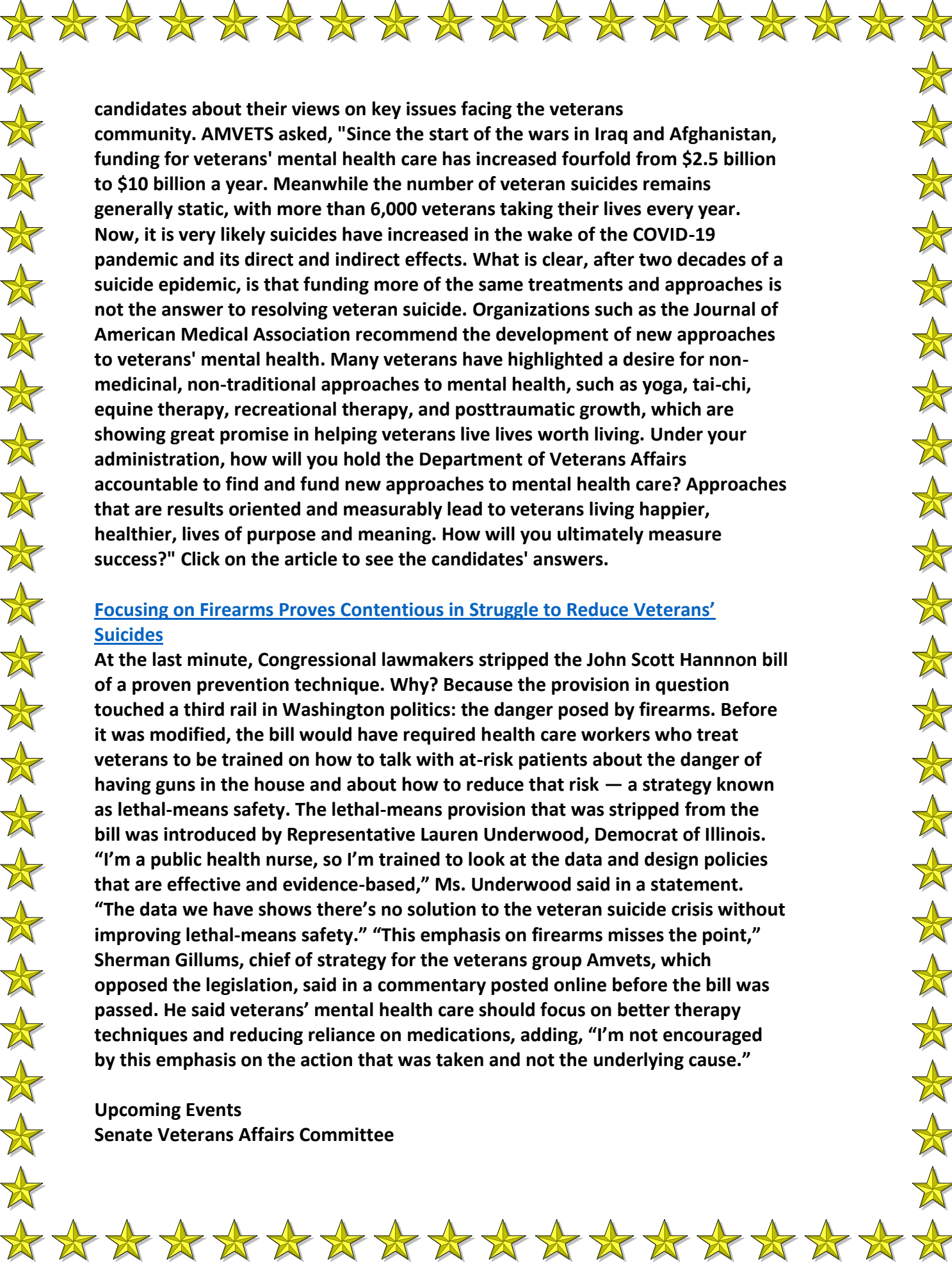
- Both President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden offered in-depth veterans policy plans in their responses to the [Military Times Veteran Presidential Forum](#). Some of the biggest takeaways were Biden's promise for new tax credit for caregivers of veterans, Trump eyeing further expansion of medical care options outside VA, Biden's plan for a special commission on military sexual assault, Trump's promise that veteran employment will rebound, Biden's pledge for a better focus on toxic exposure issues. Trump has made the Mission Act — which dramatically expanded community care programs in VA — a key part of his re-election campaign push, saying it has for the first time given veterans meaningful access to private-sector medical care covered by federal dollars. Trump says the expansion has made the VA experience better, and he responded to a question from the Independence Fund that he is looking ahead at doing more to broaden the rules. In response to a question from Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America about sexual assault trauma among veterans, Biden said he would start his presidency by “immediately appointing a commission of military leaders, survivors, advocates and experts to give me — in 90 days — recommendations as to what else we should be doing.”

- [The Department of Veterans Affairs has lost the domain rights to GIBill.com](#), which some advocates fear could open the potential for scammers to target veterans. “VA acquired this domain as part of a court settlement in 2012,” Christina Noel, a spokeswoman for the department, said in a statement. “Unfortunately, VA lost ownership of it during the Obama administration in 2015 because the person in charge of maintaining the domain left VA service and VA leaders at the time had no continuity plan in place.” Some lawmakers and advocates are urging the VA to get the website back because they are worried the status of the site could prompt a group to try again to take advantage of student veterans. “Unfortunately, predatory schools continue to target student veterans,” said Rep. Mike Levin, D-Calif., the chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs subpanel on economic opportunity. “We must make sure that veterans have accurate information about the quality of the education they receive, and VA must do more to crack down on these predatory schools. That includes those who have used platforms like [GIBill.com](#) to scam veterans. I hope VA will step up and protect student veterans from predatory organizations taking advantage of the [GIBill.com](#) domain.”

AMVETS in the News

[How will Trump and Biden handle veterans issues? Here’s what they told us.](#)

In anticipation of the upcoming presidential election, Military Times partnered with a dozen veterans organizations earlier this year to ask the major party



candidates about their views on key issues facing the veterans community. AMVETS asked, "Since the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, funding for veterans' mental health care has increased fourfold from \$2.5 billion to \$10 billion a year. Meanwhile the number of veteran suicides remains generally static, with more than 6,000 veterans taking their lives every year. Now, it is very likely suicides have increased in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and its direct and indirect effects. What is clear, after two decades of a suicide epidemic, is that funding more of the same treatments and approaches is not the answer to resolving veteran suicide. Organizations such as the Journal of American Medical Association recommend the development of new approaches to veterans' mental health. Many veterans have highlighted a desire for non-medicinal, non-traditional approaches to mental health, such as yoga, tai-chi, equine therapy, recreational therapy, and posttraumatic growth, which are showing great promise in helping veterans live lives worth living. Under your administration, how will you hold the Department of Veterans Affairs accountable to find and fund new approaches to mental health care? Approaches that are results oriented and measurably lead to veterans living happier, healthier, lives of purpose and meaning. How will you ultimately measure success?" Click on the article to see the candidates' answers.

[Focusing on Firearms Proves Contentious in Struggle to Reduce Veterans' Suicides](#)

At the last minute, Congressional lawmakers stripped the John Scott Hannon bill of a proven prevention technique. Why? Because the provision in question touched a third rail in Washington politics: the danger posed by firearms. Before it was modified, the bill would have required health care workers who treat veterans to be trained on how to talk with at-risk patients about the danger of having guns in the house and about how to reduce that risk — a strategy known as lethal-means safety. The lethal-means provision that was stripped from the bill was introduced by Representative Lauren Underwood, Democrat of Illinois. "I'm a public health nurse, so I'm trained to look at the data and design policies that are effective and evidence-based," Ms. Underwood said in a statement. "The data we have shows there's no solution to the veteran suicide crisis without improving lethal-means safety." "This emphasis on firearms misses the point," Sherman Gillums, chief of strategy for the veterans group Amvets, which opposed the legislation, said in a commentary posted online before the bill was passed. He said veterans' mental health care should focus on better therapy techniques and reducing reliance on medications, adding, "I'm not encouraged by this emphasis on the action that was taken and not the underlying cause."

Upcoming Events
Senate Veterans Affairs Committee

VA MISSION Act: Assessing Progress Implementing Title I
Wednesday, October 21 9:30 AM
Watch [here](#)

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 - PASSED✓

[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

- A collaborative effort between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the National Archives and Records Administration is helping to determine ship locations and [digitize more than 1,800 Blue Water Navy ships logs from the Vietnam era](#). According to a VA blog post, the data contained in these ships' deck logs is critical in determining qualifying ship locations in accordance with the law. For the first time, VA will have each of the ships mapped with precision, providing a comprehensive view of their locations. NARA's and VA's collaboration has already assisted in granting more than 22,524 claims since Jan. 1, 2020, according to the blog post. More than 29 million images from U.S. Navy and Coast Guard deck logs have been digitized.

- White employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs were twice as likely to be chosen for promotions to management positions they applied for as [Black employees of the VA](#), data shows. About 12% of white VA employees are in leadership positions. Fewer than 4% of Black VA staff are in positions of leadership. But VA took issue with how the union framed that data. Press Secretary Christina Noel said that "many applicants" chose not to submit demographic information, "making the data incomplete and not definitive." VA also fired back at AFGE leadership specifically, arguing that the union lacked credibility in its attacks on the department because Kelley, its national president, faces litigation for allegedly "fostering a culture that turned a blind eye to allegations of harassment" and, Noel said, "racial slurs by the former AFGE national president."

- [A sailor from the USS Theodore Roosevelt's crew died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound](#) as the crew prepares to redeploy. Navy officials first confirmed to both Navy Times and USNI News that the male sailor stationed at Naval Air Station North Island, Calif. "was standing security watch on Lima Pier" when he "suffered a self-inflicted gunshot wound." The sailor died in the early morning after being transported to the University of California-San Diego Medical Center's Trauma Center. The identity of the sailor is being withheld pending notification of next of kin.

- Cerner made changes to its [EHR implementation process in 2020](#), and so far, the early feedback has been positive, according to a KLAS performance report. Following a negative 2019 KLAS report, on average, Cerner's large EHR implementation clients rated the vendor's overall performance roughly 20 percent higher than its old implementation approach. Respondents said 'loyalty' increased from a C- to B+, 'operations' increased from a D to a B+, 'services' increased from a C to a B, and 'relationships' increased from a B to an A, clients still reported a few issues with the implementation.

