



# AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

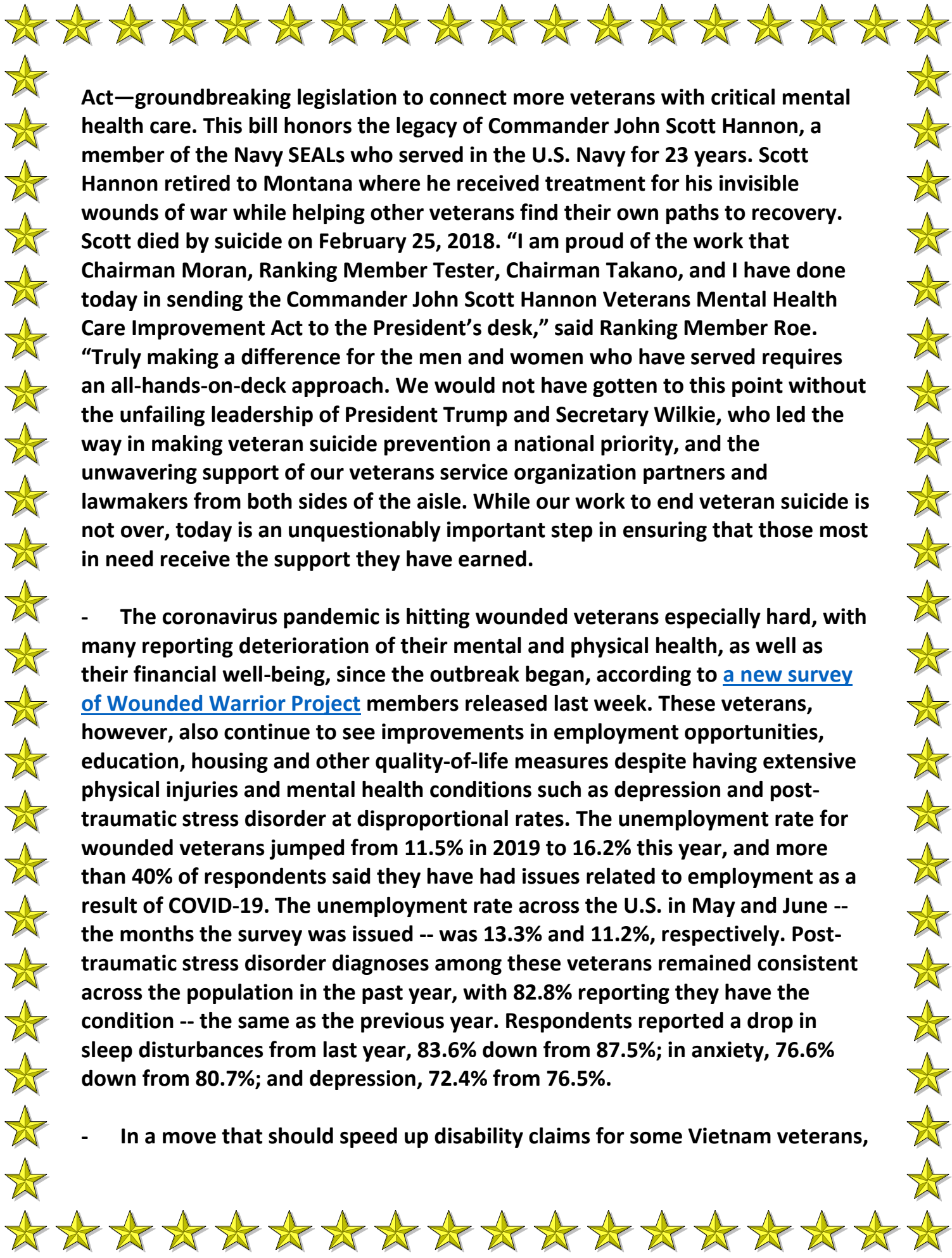
## SEPTEMBER 28, 2020

### News Driving the Week

- [Military suicides have increased by as much as 20 percent](#) this year compared to the same period in 2019, and some incidents of violent behavior have spiked as service members struggle under COVID-19, war-zone deployments, national disasters and civil unrest. While the data is incomplete and causes of suicide are complex, Army and Air Force officials say they believe the pandemic is adding stress to an already strained force. The Pentagon refused to provide 2020 data or discuss the issue, but Army officials said discussions in Defense Department briefings indicate there has been roughly a 20 percent jump in overall military suicides this year. The numbers vary by service. The active Army's 30 percent spike — from 88 last year to 114 this year — pushes the total up because it's the largest service. The Army Guard is up about 10 percent, going from 78 last year to 86 this year. The Navy total is believed to be lower this year. Army leaders say they can't directly pin the increase on the virus, but the timing coincides.

- Last week, VA officials told Capitol Hill lawmakers that 2,828 of the 12,582 disability claims filed by veterans related to [burn pit exposure](#) from 2007 to 2020 were approved -- about 22%. In 2019, VA said it had approved about 20% of the more than 11,000 claims filed, denying about 80%. More than 50% of those were denied because of lack of evidence linking their conditions with exposures. Under current policy, veterans who sicken after being exposed to toxic hazards during their service must prove that their illnesses were caused by those exposures unless VA considers the illness a "presumptive." More than 213,000 veterans and troops also have added themselves to VA's Burn Pits and Airborne Hazards Registry, but that registry is entirely voluntary, and officials and advocates have repeatedly said that it doesn't come close to reaching the total number of those affected. VA estimates as many as 3.5 million veterans may have been affected by burn pits and other airborne hazards during service.

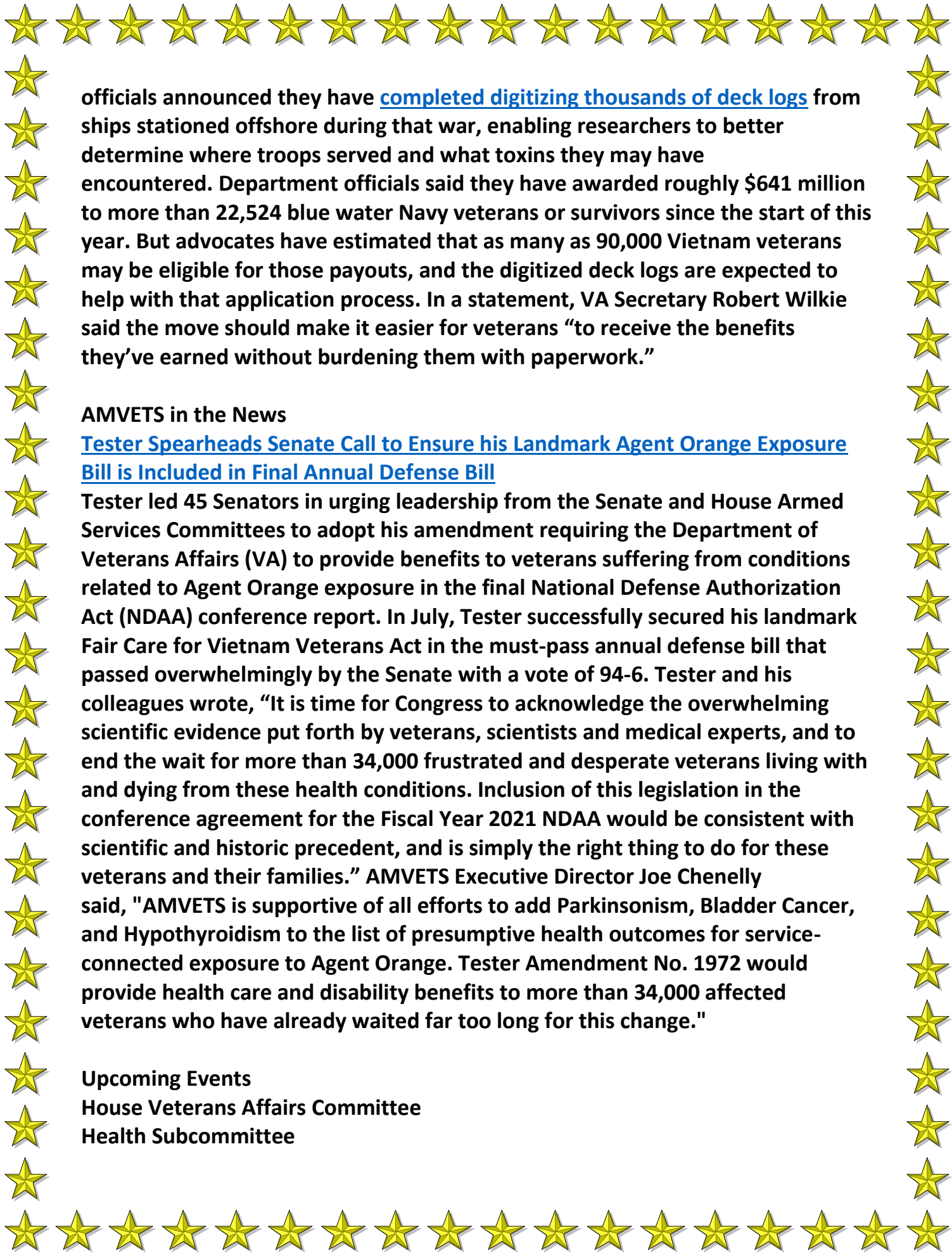
- The U.S. [House of Representatives unanimously passed S.785](#), the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement



**Act—groundbreaking legislation to connect more veterans with critical mental health care. This bill honors the legacy of Commander John Scott Hannon, a member of the Navy SEALs who served in the U.S. Navy for 23 years. Scott Hannon retired to Montana where he received treatment for his invisible wounds of war while helping other veterans find their own paths to recovery. Scott died by suicide on February 25, 2018. “I am proud of the work that Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Tester, Chairman Takano, and I have done today in sending the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act to the President’s desk,” said Ranking Member Roe. “Truly making a difference for the men and women who have served requires an all-hands-on-deck approach. We would not have gotten to this point without the unfailing leadership of President Trump and Secretary Wilkie, who led the way in making veteran suicide prevention a national priority, and the unwavering support of our veterans service organization partners and lawmakers from both sides of the aisle. While our work to end veteran suicide is not over, today is an unquestionably important step in ensuring that those most in need receive the support they have earned.**

**- The coronavirus pandemic is hitting wounded veterans especially hard, with many reporting deterioration of their mental and physical health, as well as their financial well-being, since the outbreak began, according to [a new survey of Wounded Warrior Project](#) members released last week. These veterans, however, also continue to see improvements in employment opportunities, education, housing and other quality-of-life measures despite having extensive physical injuries and mental health conditions such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder at disproportional rates. The unemployment rate for wounded veterans jumped from 11.5% in 2019 to 16.2% this year, and more than 40% of respondents said they have had issues related to employment as a result of COVID-19. The unemployment rate across the U.S. in May and June -- the months the survey was issued -- was 13.3% and 11.2%, respectively. Post-traumatic stress disorder diagnoses among these veterans remained consistent across the population in the past year, with 82.8% reporting they have the condition -- the same as the previous year. Respondents reported a drop in sleep disturbances from last year, 83.6% down from 87.5%; in anxiety, 76.6% down from 80.7%; and depression, 72.4% from 76.5%.**

**- In a move that should speed up disability claims for some Vietnam veterans,**



officials announced they have [completed digitizing thousands of deck logs](#) from ships stationed offshore during that war, enabling researchers to better determine where troops served and what toxins they may have encountered. Department officials said they have awarded roughly \$641 million to more than 22,524 blue water Navy veterans or survivors since the start of this year. But advocates have estimated that as many as 90,000 Vietnam veterans may be eligible for those payouts, and the digitized deck logs are expected to help with that application process. In a statement, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said the move should make it easier for veterans “to receive the benefits they’ve earned without burdening them with paperwork.”

#### AMVETS in the News

#### [Tester Spearheads Senate Call to Ensure his Landmark Agent Orange Exposure Bill is Included in Final Annual Defense Bill](#)

Tester led 45 Senators in urging leadership from the Senate and House Armed Services Committees to adopt his amendment requiring the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide benefits to veterans suffering from conditions related to Agent Orange exposure in the final National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) conference report. In July, Tester successfully secured his landmark Fair Care for Vietnam Veterans Act in the must-pass annual defense bill that passed overwhelmingly by the Senate with a vote of 94-6. Tester and his colleagues wrote, “It is time for Congress to acknowledge the overwhelming scientific evidence put forth by veterans, scientists and medical experts, and to end the wait for more than 34,000 frustrated and desperate veterans living with and dying from these health conditions. Inclusion of this legislation in the conference agreement for the Fiscal Year 2021 NDAA would be consistent with scientific and historic precedent, and is simply the right thing to do for these veterans and their families.” AMVETS Executive Director Joe Chenelly said, "AMVETS is supportive of all efforts to add Parkinsonism, Bladder Cancer, and Hypothyroidism to the list of presumptive health outcomes for service-connected exposure to Agent Orange. Tester Amendment No. 1972 would provide health care and disability benefits to more than 34,000 affected veterans who have already waited far too long for this change."

#### Upcoming Events

House Veterans Affairs Committee  
Health Subcommittee

**MISSION Critical: Assessing Community Care Wait Times.**  
**Wednesday, September 30 10:00 AM**  
Watch [here](#)

**House Veterans Affairs Committee**  
**Technology Modernization Subcommittee**  
**Examining VA's Ongoing Efforts in the Electronic Health Record Modernization Program**  
**Wednesday, September 30 2:30 PM**  
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

[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



**September 28, 2020**