



AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

APRIL 19, 2021


Good afternoon AMVETS Membership,

The first couple articles below will give you a good look into President Joe Biden's 2022 budget request for the Department of Veterans Affairs: an increase by \$8.5 billion. If you missed Executive Director Joe Chenelly's Rolling to Remember call to action last week, watch it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4DKSLi5eyQ>. AMVETS is participating in a closed-door roundtable with the House Veterans Affairs Committee this Wednesday to discuss "The Role of VSOs in Eliminating Sexual Harassment at the Department of Veterans Affairs." This roundtable will be in conjunction with the committee's Women Veterans Task Force. Unfortunately, the meeting is closed-door so it won't be broadcast online.

-Bill Clark, AMVETS National Third Vice Commander

News Driving the Week

- Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough urged Congress to back a massive funding increase to boost efforts in homelessness assistance and suicide prevention, and address the agency's crumbling and outdated medical infrastructure. McDonough highlighted the need to dramatically increase the department's already mammoth budget by \$8.5 billion, or 8.2%, to \$113.1 billion total as part of President Joe Biden's 2022 budget request. The agency is the second largest part of the federal government in terms of size and budget, which has ballooned over the decades with no signs of slowing down. In Biden's 2022 budget request, suicide prevention program spending would jump by more than 74%, rising from \$310 million currently to \$540 million. Between 2005 and 2018, 89,160 veterans died by suicide, according to the most recent data from the VA -- more than the number of Americans killed in each major U.S. conflict except World War II and the Civil War. Despite Congress' efforts and an ever-rising VA budget, there's no evidence the federal government has put a dent in the veteran suicide crisis, with the VA's data showing little change in the suicide numbers each year.



- Secretary McDonough testified before a House Appropriations subcommittee about President Joe Biden's proposed budget for the VA. For health care specifically, Biden proposed \$97.5 billion — an increase of \$7.6 billion from 2021. The proposed increase is largely because of an increase in veterans using private-sector doctors, VA Secretary Denis McDonough said. McDonough said he was open to moving the community care budget back to mandatory spending but that it would require Congress to take action.

"We've been having those conversations but frankly that's a conversation that we have to have with you," McDonough said. The hearing marked the first time McDonough defended the proposed funding increase to Congress. He's expected to return to Capitol Hill as lawmakers work on the federal budget for fiscal 2022.

- On both sides of the political aisle, lawmakers in Washington are ramping up efforts to expand care for veterans who became sick after breathing the toxic fumes. And the litany of bills illustrate the growing appetite in Congress to address the issue, especially with President Joe Biden believing his son died from toxic exposure. Michigan Reps. Elissa Slotkin and Peter Meijer introduced a bill that removes a key barrier to health benefits for veterans exposed to toxic fumes while serving overseas. It is the seventh piece of legislation introduced in Congress in recent weeks designed to help veterans who were exposed to fumes from burn pits while serving on military installations. The bill introduced by Slotkin and Meijer would formally recognize veterans who served near burn pits on overseas deployments were exposed to airborne hazards and other toxins, easing the veterans' burden of proof. Dubbed a "concession of exposure" bill, it would concede veterans' exposure during deployed services.

- Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough led hundreds of employees in a pledge against domestic violence and sexual harassment and assault, vowing to never "commit, excuse or stay silent" about the behavior. The pledge was part of the White Ribbon campaign, a worldwide movement that asks men and boys to help end gender-based violence and promote gender equity. When McDonough took over, more than 50 House members sent him a letter asking him to protect veterans against sexual harassment and assault and increase accountability inside the agency. McDonough addressed the importance of open communication among VA employees about harassment and assault. "This pledge has to be more than words we speak," he said. "It has to be the example we set, the standard we abide by, and it has to be the communication we have as an organization where we have respect for each other." Hundreds of leaders at VA facilities across the nation joined in on the pledge, and McDonough encouraged them to have their employees take it, as well. McDonough also established a task force to find solutions to improving inclusion,

diversity, equity and access at the VA. The task force, with 17 members, is supposed to provide concrete recommendations by July 31.

AMVETS in the News

Tester, Murkowski Introduce Bipartisan Bill to End Unfair Offset of Military Retiree Pay and Disability Benefits for Veterans

Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester and U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski are introducing bipartisan legislation to end the unfair offset of retirement pay and disability benefits for nearly 400,000 military retirees. Under current law, thousands of veterans who receive military pay from the Department of Defense take a dollar-for-dollar pay reduction for any disability compensation they receive from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The Senators' bipartisan Retired Pay Restoration Act would eliminate the current offset that prevents veterans with less than a 50 percent disability rating from receiving benefits from both agencies. "Retired, disabled veterans are entitled to VA compensation due to their service-connected conditions just as they are entitled to retired pay or Combat-Related Special Compensation because of their service. The Retired Pay Restoration Act will eliminate offsets that veterans have faced for too long," said Executive Director of AMVETS Joe Chenelly.

Pentagon roadblock causing issues for Rolling to Remember on Memorial Day weekend

Rolling To Remember, and hundreds of thousands of veterans on motorcycles, will be arriving in Washington, D.C. on Memorial Day weekend just like they have for the past 32 years. It's a tradition to use the Pentagon's parking lot as a staging area for everyone before they ride over to the National Mall. This year the Pentagon gave the approval to use the parking lot and then days later revoked the permit. The veterans who ride are members of American Veterans, or Amvets for short. It's a Congressionally-chartered veterans service organization, representing the interests of 20 million veterans. On March 11, the Pentagon's Special Event Team sent an email to AMVETS saying "your approved permit is attached." Seven days later the Pentagon revoked the permit, saying there was a routing error.

Continued News

- A bipartisan coalition of congressional lawmakers on reintroduced legislation that would federally legalize medical marijuana for military veterans. The bill is being sponsored by Reps. Barbara Lee and Dave Joyce, both co-chairs of the Congressional Cannabis Caucus, in the House, along with nine other original cosponsors. On the

Senate side, Sen. Brian Schatz is leading the proposal, and he's joined by five other lawmakers, including Sen. Bernie Sanders. The Veterans Medical Marijuana Safe Harbor Act would temporarily allow veterans to legally possess and use cannabis under federal law, as recommended by doctors in accordance with state law. Physicians with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) would also be allowed for the first time to issue such recommendations. Further, it would require VA to study the therapeutic potential of marijuana for pain and reducing opioid misuse. Currently, VA allows its physicians to talk about cannabis use with veterans, but they're prohibited from issuing recommendations that would allow them to obtain marijuana from state-legal markets. For the fiscal years 2022 and 2023, the bill would set aside \$15 million for VA to administer the policy change. The legalization and physician recommendation provisions of the legislation would expire after five years, unless renewed by Congress.

- The Veterans Crisis Line mishandled an interaction with a veteran who shot and killed a family member after the call ended, a federal watchdog reported. The Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General said the response was "insufficient and delayed," and that the crisis line responder "failed to take action" to prevent the death. The VA inspector general reported that the responder didn't properly assess the risk of the situation. The responder also failed to relay critical information to the supervisors "that likely would have resulted in an immediate emergency response," the report states. "Additionally, the responder delayed timely intervention by taking a personal break," investigators wrote. Senator Jon Tester, chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, sent the VA a list of questions, including one about the responder's employment status.



