



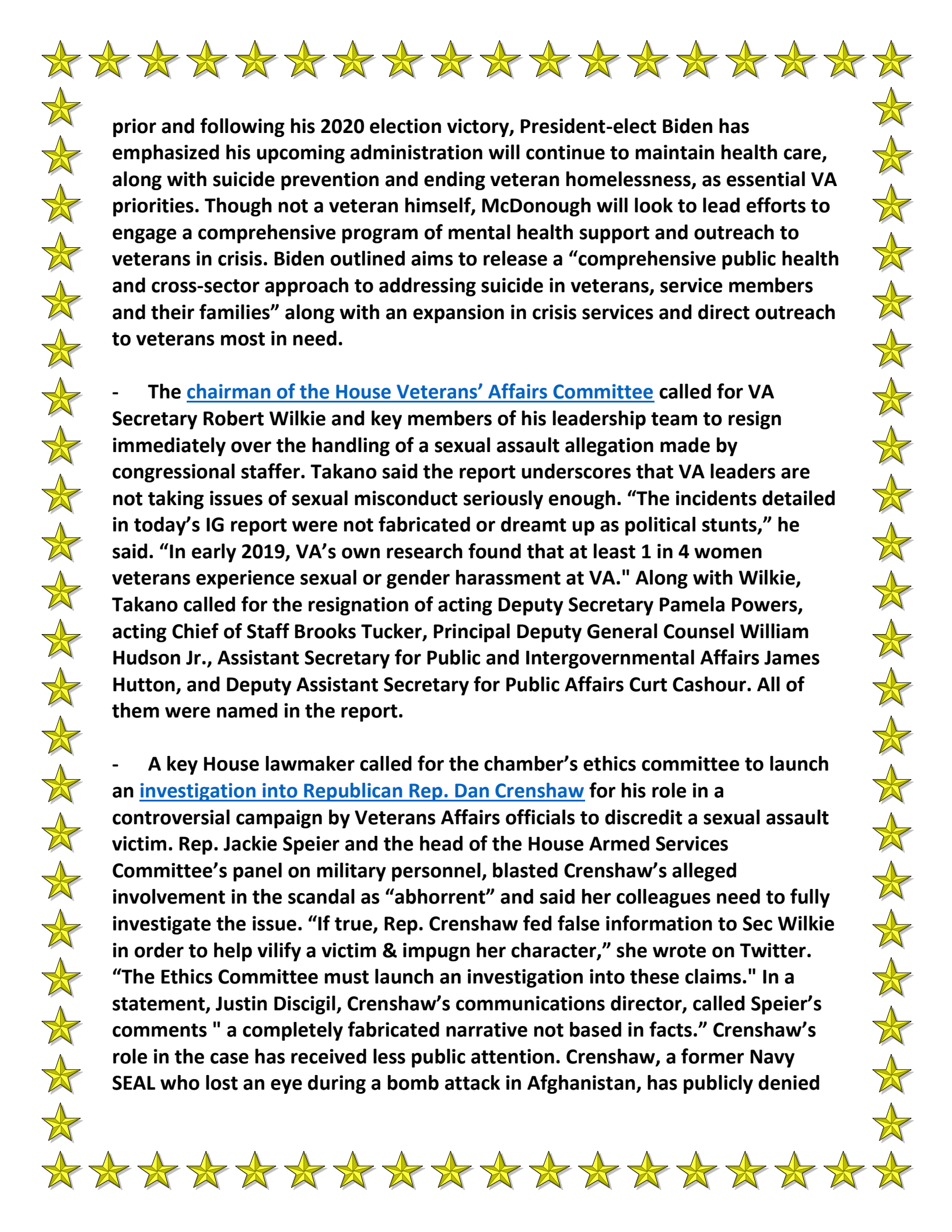
AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

DECEMBER 14, 2020

News Driving the Week

- After a nearly year-long investigation, Veterans Affairs investigators failed to confirm explosive charges that [Secretary Robert Wilkie](#) led a criminal campaign to discredit a veteran who reported a sexual assault at a department medical center. But investigators still blasted senior VA leadership for working to attack critics rather than pursue reforms. “The tone set by Secretary Wilkie was at minimum unprofessional and at worst provided the basis for senior officials to put out information to national reporters to question the credibility and background of the veteran who filed the sexual assault complaint,” the report from the VA Inspector General’s office stated. In at least one instance, investigators found, a senior staffer worked to convince outside media to write a story attacking Goldstein, a move influenced by Wilkie’s combative stance on the issue. “The conduct of VA officials in both regards does not appear consistent with VA’s stated principle to treat all veterans with respect,” the report stated. “Nor does it further VA’s objectives of ensuring that its facilities are safe and welcoming places for all veterans. “Investigators said that while senior officials were focused on Goldstein, “VA failed to address an environment known to be inhospitable to women at the Washington DC VA Medical Center” and ignored other possible reforms that could have been pursued.


- President-elect Joe Biden's transition team has tapped [Denis McDonough to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs](#). McDonough’s nomination comes during a time of ongoing and rapid change for America’s largest civilian agency, with the VA taking a forefront role in both aiding the national coronavirus response as well as broadly modernizing its services and broader IT infrastructure. Representatives from President-elect Biden’s transition team touted McDonough’s experience as a civil servant and noted that his nomination was made in large part due to his skill with navigating crises and complex government programs. McDonough served as White House chief of staff for President Barack Obama from 2013 to 2017. In material published both



prior and following his 2020 election victory, President-elect Biden has emphasized his upcoming administration will continue to maintain health care, along with suicide prevention and ending veteran homelessness, as essential VA priorities. Though not a veteran himself, McDonough will look to lead efforts to engage a comprehensive program of mental health support and outreach to veterans in crisis. Biden outlined aims to release a “comprehensive public health and cross-sector approach to addressing suicide in veterans, service members and their families” along with an expansion in crisis services and direct outreach to veterans most in need.

- The [chairman of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee](#) called for VA Secretary Robert Wilkie and key members of his leadership team to resign immediately over the handling of a sexual assault allegation made by congressional staffer. Takano said the report underscores that VA leaders are not taking issues of sexual misconduct seriously enough. “The incidents detailed in today’s IG report were not fabricated or dreamt up as political stunts,” he said. “In early 2019, VA’s own research found that at least 1 in 4 women veterans experience sexual or gender harassment at VA.” Along with Wilkie, Takano called for the resignation of acting Deputy Secretary Pamela Powers, acting Chief of Staff Brooks Tucker, Principal Deputy General Counsel William Hudson Jr., Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs James Hutton, and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Curt Cashour. All of them were named in the report.

- A key House lawmaker called for the chamber’s ethics committee to launch an [investigation into Republican Rep. Dan Crenshaw](#) for his role in a controversial campaign by Veterans Affairs officials to discredit a sexual assault victim. Rep. Jackie Speier and the head of the House Armed Services Committee’s panel on military personnel, blasted Crenshaw’s alleged involvement in the scandal as “abhorrent” and said her colleagues need to fully investigate the issue. “If true, Rep. Crenshaw fed false information to Sec Wilkie in order to help vilify a victim & impugn her character,” she wrote on Twitter. “The Ethics Committee must launch an investigation into these claims.” In a statement, Justin Discigil, Crenshaw’s communications director, called Speier’s comments “a completely fabricated narrative not based in facts.” Crenshaw’s role in the case has received less public attention. Crenshaw, a former Navy SEAL who lost an eye during a bomb attack in Afghanistan, has publicly denied




any involvement in the case. But investigators said that Wilkie claimed he was approached by the congressman at a December 2019 event where Crenshaw related that he had served in the same unit as Goldstein and implied she was a fraud. That allegation — circulated in emails by Wilkie — was used by multiple top officials to cast doubt on Goldstein’s credibility, investigators said. In an interview with Newsweek earlier this year, Crenshaw said he believes Wilkie confused separate events around that time frame where the two spoke, and denied attacking Goldstein at either event.

- What may be the most significant legislative effort for women veterans in the last two years passed out of the Senate this week, one step closer to becoming law. [The Deborah Sampson Act](#), an omnibus bill intended to remove barriers and improve women veterans' care, passed the House more than a year ago. It was the culmination of years of work for Senate Veterans Affairs Committee ranking member Jon Tester, D-Montana, who introduced the original legislation in 2017, as well as the House Women Veterans Task Force, led by Rep. Julia Brownley. Now, after a few changes, it heads back to the House for final approval before it moves to the president's desk to become law. House Veterans Affairs Committee ranking member Phil Roe said the House is expected to vote to send the bill to the president in coming days. The women veterans' legislation aims to address a range of issues for women veterans -- the fastest growing group of veterans numbering roughly 2 million nationwide. Women have served in the United States military in one form or another since the Revolutionary War, but still struggle to access the Department of Veterans Affairs care and benefits they've earned. Veterans Affairs lawmakers on Capitol Hill have made legislating on their behalf a focus over the last few years, especially as VA statistics show that women who receive care at VA have lower risk of suicide and other health concerns than those who don't.

AMVETS in the News

[National veteran service organizations call for VA Secretary's removal after scathing report](#)

All of the largest national veteran service organizations have called for the removal of the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs following a scathing watchdog report that found he and his senior staff sought to discredit a veteran who reported being sexually assaulted at a VA hospital. Disabled American Veterans (DAV) was the first major veteran service organization to call




for VA Secretary Robert Wilkie's removal Friday evening, opening the floodgates for its fellow organizations. DAV was soon joined by AMVETS, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) -- all among the largest and most influential nonpartisan veteran service organizations in the country. AMVETS accused Wilkie of betraying the trust veterans place in VA. "AMVETS supports DAV's call to remove VA Secretary Wilkie," AMVETS National Commander Jan Brown said Friday. "Women veterans already hesitate to use VA services for a number of reasons and we need a Secretary who will make our community feel welcomed. I am calling on the VA Secretary to resign immediately."

[Major veterans groups call for VA secretary's ouster following damning report](#)

A day after the Veterans Affairs Inspector General blasted VA Secretary Robert Wilkie for his handling of a sexual assault allegation at a department hospital, most of the country's major veterans organizations called for his immediate firing, citing a lack of confidence in his leadership. "Secretary Wilkie and several members of his executive staff violated the trust of a fellow veteran who came forth with serious allegations of sexual assault," said Veterans of Foreign Wars Executive Director B.J. Lawrence. "Instead of taking this veteran's allegations seriously, the Secretary and his key staff sought to discredit and vilify the veteran. We will not tolerate this behavior at our VA." VFW's statement followed similar ones from Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, AMVETS, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, Minority Veterans of America, the NYC Veterans Alliance and the Modern Military Association of America.

[Post 9/11 military needs on Biden's mind in VA secretary search](#)

Joe Chenelly, the national executive director for the military advocacy group AMVETS, said a post-9/11 pick for secretary of veterans affairs would be able to grasp the evolving challenges and needs of veterans. "I know a lot of people who have a disdain for Washington who are really qualified people, great leaders and great thinkers," Mr. Chenelly said. "This is a generation that's really coming into its own now." He said Mr. Murphy seems to have an inside track on the job. Others mentioned for the post include former Rep. Chet Edwards, Texas Democrat, and Robert McDonald, a former CEO of Procter & Gamble who held the VA position during the Obama administration. Mr. Murphy was heavily involved in the Biden campaign in the crucial state of Pennsylvania and was



“among the best if not ‘the’ best congressmen for veterans,” said Mr. Chenelly, who spent more than seven years in the Marine Corps and fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mr. Chenelly questions whether Mr. Murphy has the management experience to run such a large and historically unwieldy department. “The VA is absolutely massive. It’s hard to find people who are qualified,” Mr. Chenelly said. “There’s probably no perfect candidate out there,” he said. “They all seem to have the right mindset about growing the VA.”

[Some veterans groups disappointed Biden’s pick for VA chief never served in uniform](#)

Veterans groups anticipating President-elect Joe Biden’s pick for Veterans Affairs secretary envisioned at least one trait: the Day 1 credibility of having served in uniform. The pick was so unexpected that Amvets, a veterans service organization, had prepared news releases centered on other candidates but not any material on McDonough, said executive director Joe Chenelly. Amvets was looking forward to a woman or a veteran of post-9/11 military to lead VA, Chenelly said, in a pivotal moment when female veterans are the fastest growing group within VA. “We were thinking this was going to be history, but not this kind of history,” Chenelly said. “We’re a little concerned, but we have open ears. We want to hear as soon as possible about his vision.”

[Some veterans groups say they were caught off guard by Biden’s pick for VA secretary](#)

The choice of Denis McDonough by President-elect Joe Biden to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs surprised some veterans advocates because they said he is not a veteran or medical expert and lacks the experience of running a large bureaucracy. “Maybe a post-9/11 veteran. Maybe a woman veteran. Or maybe a veteran who knows the VA exceptionally well,” said Joe Chenelly, national director of AMVETS, another advocacy group. “We are looking forward to hearing from President-elect Biden on his thinking behind this nomination.”

[AMVETS National Commander Reacts to Nomination of Denis McDonough for VA Secretary](#)

Today, President-elect Joe Biden selected Denis McDonough to serve as the next Secretary of Veterans Affairs. While we are concerned that this nominee is not a veteran and may not fully understand the Department of Veterans Affairs and

its complexities, we are in need of new ideas and leadership. We believe Denis McDonough is a leader with the knowledge and vision to deliver results. We hope he is up to the task to deliver results for our country's greatest heroes and we support him in this endeavor.

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

Continued News

- The continuing stress on health care workers, a possible employee mass exodus at the end of the pandemic, and veterans delaying needed health care could combine to create even more of [a strain on the Veterans Administration health care system](#) after the pandemic ends, said the official in charge of that system. "The workforce is tired, and they're mentally exhausted..... I have very significant concerns that on the other end of this, we will see significant retirements that's going to challenge us," said Dr. Richard Stone, executive in charge of the Veterans Health Administration. Stone said he has personally seen the signs of stress and burnout in the faces of personnel in VA medical facilities, and said he's reassuring employees that VHA is continuing to hire more personnel. Since March, VHA has hired 60,000 employees, and increased its nursing ranks by 11,000. The Office of Personnel Management has supported VA's efforts by drastically reducing the hiring time — from 100 days in some places, to less than 20 days, Stone said. But it's getting harder to hire medical personnel, as the pool of employees is drying up, he said. Stone is also concerned about the inability of employees to take leave and recharge — which many employees especially do around the holidays. As the holidays approach,

the COVID cases are increasing.

- [Opinion](#): Pandemic prompts Wounded Warrior Project and Fortune 500 company to jointly address veterans' mental health
- [Opinion](#): What the veteran community needs — a leader who puts accountability first

