



# AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE


## SEPTEMBER 14, 2020

### News Driving the Week

- The top Veterans Affairs lawmakers in Congress may be close to an agreement that would pave the way for [major veterans suicide prevention legislation to pass](#) before the end of this year. Sen. Jerry Moran said during a Senate Veterans Affairs Committee hearing that there were ongoing negotiations with his counterpart in the House, Chairman Mark Takano, on a deal to pass Senate and House priority legislation. "We have reached an understanding that the House will take up (the bill) on Sept. 21 or 22," Moran said, adding that the agreement "presumably" includes House passage without any amendments. The next day, during a House committee meeting on a separate slate of veteran suicide prevention bills, Takano said a deal may be close, but had not been finalized, and he had not yet spoken directly to Moran. At the end of that House hearing, Takano said he believed the two chambers were nearing a deal.

- Department of Veterans Affairs leaders have said repeatedly that veteran suicide prevention is a top priority for the agency, but [VA does not have accurate information on how many veterans have died by suicide at its own hospitals](#), parking decks, and cemeteries, a new watchdog report found. Dozens of veterans have died by suicide on VA property but the department doesn't keep accurate or complete records of those deaths, according to a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report. The report shows that VA's process for identifying "on-campus" suicides doesn't include checking for accuracy in those reports -- so VA's numbers are inaccurate. When investigators reviewed VA's data, it found errors in the 55 reported deaths on VA property from October 2017 to September 2019, including 10 deaths that should never have been included and four that should have been. VA Acting Chief of Staff Brooks Tucker said they planned to create a committee to evaluate the issues GAO revealed in its report and said the committee's review would be complete by July 2021.

- A group of Senators is calling on the Department of Veterans Affairs



to [expand telehealth coverage for veterans' families](#) during the coronavirus pandemic to include telephone calls and text messaging. In a letter to VA Secretary Robert Wilkie, the group says beneficiaries of the VA's Civilian Health and Medical Program (CHAMPVA) are covered for real-time audio-visual telemedicine consults, but many people don't have easy access to that technology. The Senators note in their letter that in many cases, including Medicare, Medicaid, and private health plans, telehealth coverage during the pandemic has been expanded to include different providers, locations, and modalities – including audio-only phone calls, text messages, e-mails, and fax messages. While nearly everyone agrees that telehealth coverage will be expanded permanently to meet demand beyond the current state of emergency, there's plenty of debate over what emergency measures will be kept in place and what will be scrapped. This includes audio-only phone calls, which supporters say are necessary to boost healthcare access in rural areas. Critics, meanwhile, say the platform isn't secure, and it doesn't meet the needs of a valid provider-patient relationship.

- The national veteran's advocacy group, Mission Roll Call (MRC), launched [a mental health campaign called "From My Frontline to Yours"](#) to share the lessons military veterans have learned from the challenges related to their service to those affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The group's campaign aims to bring national attention to the mental health needs of veterans, frontline healthcare workers, and others who have experienced trauma and loss during the Covid-19 crisis. The campaign is especially relevant in September, which is "National Suicide Prevention Month." In addition to the "From My Frontline to Yours" campaign, MRC also supports Operation Deep Dive (OpDD), a four-year study about the causes and impacts of how to identify and prevent suicide and non-natural death among veterans. The joint study is a partnership between America's Warrior Partnership (AWP) and researchers at the University of Alabama and is funded by a grant from the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation.

#### AMVETS in the News

##### [IG: Millions of veterans waiting to hear about canceled VA appointments](#)

The department canceled 7.3 million in-person appointments from March 15 to May 1 as the pandemic spread through the United States, and then canceled an additional 4 million appointments through June 15. Most of the appointments were rescheduled or replaced with phone or video consultations. However, the

department has yet to track or reschedule about 3 million appointments, the VA Office of Inspector General found. Sherman Gillums Jr., a Marine veteran and chief advocacy officer for AMVETS, described the situation as “one of the greatest tests the agency has ever faced.” “We anticipated that the number of veterans with canceled appointments could go pretty high,” Gillums said. “To now hear that the number of needed follow-ups could be between 2 to 3 million presents us with the sobering reality of how Covid-19 has impacted access to care.”

#### Upcoming Events

House Oversight and VA Digital Modernization Virtual Event

Wednesday, September 16 8:30 AM

Register [here](#)

House Veterans Affairs Committee

Technology Modernization and EO Subcommittee

Moving Beyond Patchwork Systems: The Future of Education Services IT

Wednesday, September 16 10:00 AM

Watch [here](#)

House Veterans Affairs Committee

OI Subcommittee

Modernizing VA’s Medical Supply Chain: Lessons Learned from the Pandemic

Wednesday, September 16 2:00 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**

**Continued News**

- In a lawsuit filed in federal court on Tuesday, a Navy veteran living in Richland County claims medical staff at the William Jennings Bryan Dorn [VA center in Columbia failed to inform him an HIV test](#) he took in 1995 came back positive, allowing the disease to progress untreated for decades. Medical records at Dorn, included in the suit, record the veteran's positive HIV test in documents from November 1995, but he claims he was never informed of the results, even as subsequent files note the test results. The suit requests an unspecified amount of punitive damages, to be determined by a jury.

- Former Vice President Joe Biden said that [the greatest challenge for the Department of Veterans Affairs is filling tens of thousands of job vacancies](#) and, if elected president, he would supercharge the VA's budget to boost wages to compete with the private sector. "Right now, we're facing a staffing shortage ... of nearly 50,000 positions," Biden said. "Many are critical roles: nurses, psychiatrists, and psychologists. We need to cut the red tape to be able to hire them, make wages competitive with the private sector. We haven't done that." Biden said some private care is needed, especially in rural areas where access to VA hospitals is not feasible for patients. However, he said investing in the VA system should take precedence because the agency is better equipped to tackle the care needs of the nine million veterans who it serves. Biden said this includes expanding telehealth services, especially in rural areas, and caregiver support.

- The Signals program at the [VA utilizes artificial intelligence](#) systems typically used in the customer experience industry to monitor responses based on tone and language and respond immediately to at-risk veterans. About 2,800 crisis alerts have been routed to VA offices, according to Medallia, providing early intervention for more than 1,400 veterans in need within minutes of being alerted. Through surveys, Medallia collects customer feedback for the VA that seeks to understand veterans as customers with other identities outside of their military service.

- [Opinion](#): This World Suicide Prevention Day, let's recommit to protecting

the lives of our veterans

- [Opinion](#): Veteran suicide awareness campaigns are about not just veterans but civilians too
- [Opinion](#): The ongoing tragedy of veteran suicide: Why legislation is needed now
- [Opinion](#): Veteran suicide prevention must not become partisan issue for Congress



**September 14, 2020**