



Good morning fellow AMVETS,

Congress is in session this week and next and then they will be leaving for a three week recess break for Christmas. The next two weeks will seemingly be busy for Congress. The December 3 deadline is still looming for a government shutdown if there isn't a funding fix passed. Hopefully you read our notification last week regarding the effort we're putting into the NDAA. Those stories are also included in the update below.

-Paul Shipley, AMVETS National Third Vice Commander

## News Driving the Week

- Democrats are preparing [a temporary funding fix to keep the government open](#) into the new year, with federal cash set to run out at midnight on Friday. The House could vote as early as Wednesday to avert a shutdown, sending the stopgap measure to the Senate. While leaders have yet to settle on an end date, they are mulling mid to late January. That span would buy top lawmakers and the White House less than two months to hash out a bipartisan deal, which would include revamped spending totals for the military and all the other federal agencies that have been running on autopilot since the new fiscal year began on Oct. 1. The Biden administration, through the Office of Management and Budget, has pressured congressional leaders to launch talks on a sweeping government funding deal. White House officials argue that flat funding, even in the short term, could hurt public health efforts and military readiness. "There is absolutely no appetite for a government shutdown on either side," said Rep. Chuck Fleischmann, his party's top lawmaker on the House panel that funds the Department of Homeland Security.

- More than a dozen veteran service organizations came together to call on Congress to keep long-sought changes to the way the military handles sexual assault cases in the final version of the [2022 National Defense Authorization Act](#). The changes are part of a sweeping military justice measure that would remove the decision to prosecute sexual assault and certain other serious crimes from the chain of command and set up an independent prosecutor to make the call. "The scourge of sexual assault in the military is a serious concern and demands a real solution, not a watered-down provision slipped in the final bill behind closed doors. Retaining the full provision will ensure that the will of this strong majority of both houses of Congress is respected," wrote the 15 organizations. "It is well known that survivors have to deal with backlash after reporting the crime, singling out military sexual assault could potentially increase the instances of retaliation. It is imperative that military sexual assault is viewed, and prosecuted, on the same level as any other non-military felony crime," according to the letter. This would also address other inequities

identified in the military judicial system, the organizations wrote. The Government Accountability Office in 2019 found that Black service members are twice as likely to face judicial proceedings and Hispanic troops are 1.5 times as likely.

- Joe Biden grew animated in the congressional conference room in 2016 as, for the first time, he publicly connected the brain cancer that had killed Beau Biden to the [toxic burn pits](#) his son had been exposed to during his service in the military. But now that Biden is president, many advocates for veterans say he is not going nearly as far or as fast as he should to ensure that soldiers who served near burn pits and other toxic sites receive the health care they deserve. Administration officials insist Biden is doing all he can to get help for those who need it. Last Veterans Day, the White House announced measures aimed at addressing the issue, such as exploring whether rules should be rewritten to boost the presumption of a link between burn pits and certain conditions. But in interviews with leaders from seven veterans groups, there was broad agreement that those actions fell far short of what is needed as service members continue to die of toxic exposures. What is needed, she and other advocates say, is comprehensive legislation to automatically cover nearly two dozen medical conditions. On a recent call with Sen. Jon Tester, who has filed such a bill, Biden emphasized support but was clear that he wants VA to rewrite its rules as well, according to a White House official, who said administrative actions can take place quicker than any legislative one.

- A growing body of research into PTSD and service animals paved the way for President Joe Biden to sign into law the [Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers \(PAWS\) for Veterans Therapy Act](#). The legislation, enacted in August, requires the Department of Veterans Affairs to open its service dog referral program to veterans with PTSD, and to launch a five-year pilot program in which veterans with PTSD help train service dogs for other veterans. A congressionally-mandated VA study, published earlier this year on the impact of service dogs on veterans with PTSD suggests those who partnered with these animals have less suicidal ideation and more symptom improvement than those without them. Until now, the federal dog referral program - which relies on non-profit service dog organizations to pay for these dogs and to provide them to veterans for free - required that the veteran have a physical mobility issue, such as a lost limb, paralysis or blindness, in order to participate. Those with PTSD but without a physical disability were on their own in qualifying and arranging for a service dog. The new effort created by the federal law will be offered at five VA medical centers nationwide, in partnership with accredited service dog training organizations - to give veterans with PTSD the chance to train mental health service dogs for fellow veterans. It's modeled on an existing program at the Palo Alto, Calif. VA.

- President Joe Biden signed into law [three new bills designed to clear up lingering concerns with veterans policy issues](#), including a better accounting of how pandemic funds are being spent by the Department of Veterans Affairs. All three measures easily passed Congress earlier this month and were approved by the president without comment. The accounting bill, named the "VA Transparency and Trust Act of 2021," will require department officials to provide biweekly reports to Congress about how pandemic relief funds are being spent and mandate the VA Inspector General look into those costs for any evidence of fraud or waste. The second bill mandates a report by VA officials within a year on "the policies, use, and maintenance of cameras deployed by the department for patient safety and law enforcement." The final bill signed by Biden, known as the "Veterans and Family Information Act," will require VA make all fact sheets for the department available in the 10 most commonly spoken languages in America other than English.

## AMVETS in the News

### [Vets groups worry military sexual assault reforms will be dropped from Congress' defense bill plans](#)

Veterans groups are urging lawmakers not to drop provisions in the annual defense authorization bill to overhaul how military sexual misconduct cases are prosecuted amid worries that congressional leaders are already backing away from the idea. "The scourge of sexual assault in the military is a serious concern and demands a real solution, not a watered-down provision slipped in the final bill behind closed doors," a coalition of leading advocates wrote to House and Senate leaders. "Retaining the [reforms] will ensure that the will of this strong majority of both houses of Congress is respected." Signers of the letter include officials from Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, AMVETS, Student Veterans of America, the Service Women Action Network and Vietnam Veterans of America. At issue is the controversial Military Justice Improvement Act, provisions of which were already approved by the full House membership and the Senate Armed Services Committee earlier this year. The proposal would move felony crimes out of the traditional military chain of command and into a new specially trained group of military prosecutors.

## Upcoming Events

## Continued News

- The family of a Navy veteran who committed suicide outside a central Georgia VA hospital in 2019 has settled a lawsuit for \$1 million. [Gary Steven Pressley](#), 29, was found on April 5, 2019, in his vehicle in the parking lot of the Carl Vinson VA Medical Center in Dublin. The Barnesville resident had a gunshot wound to his chest. Pressley's sister, Lisa Johnson, told authorities she had called the VA to report that her brother was threatening suicide. After that call, according to Wilson's lawsuit, VA officials did nothing to help Pressley, and he killed himself. Wilson filed an \$8.2 million wrongful death claim against the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and other defendants in February 2020 in U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Georgia. The VA settled its portion of the lawsuit on Oct. 22 for \$1 million, according to a court filing. Pressley's suicide occurred during a five-day span in which three veterans committed suicide outside VA facilities. The VA has been criticized and investigated for not providing sufficient or timely help to veterans. But the rate of veteran suicides improved from 2018 to 2019, according to a September 2021 report issued by the VA, the most recent data available.
- [Opinion](#): Our Sacrifices Were Meaningful, But We Need Help: The Afghan Withdrawal and Veterans' Mental Health

The Nimitz Group  
Washington, DC  
[justin@thenimitzgroup.com](mailto:justin@thenimitzgroup.com)  
[thenimitzgroup.com](http://thenimitzgroup.com)

