



Good morning fellow AMVETS,

Happy Thanksgiving to you all. Please remember all of our service members who will be away from their families this Thanksgiving.

Our legislative team put up a fight against the Senate Armed Services Committee last week. Behind closed doors, the Committee leadership is trying to pass the NDAA without the Vanessa Guillen Military Justice Improvement and Increasing Prevention Act included. The MJIIIPA would ensure justice for service members like Vanessa Guillen who were victims of serious crimes.

-Paul Shipley, AMVETS National Third Vice Commander

News Driving the Week

- Disability payouts for new conditions related to burn pit smoke and other [combat zone toxic exposure](#) incidents likely won't happen for another six months at the earliest, but Veterans Affairs leaders insist they're moving as quickly as they can to address the problem. On Veterans Day, White House officials announced plans to dramatically overhaul the process for approving new illnesses and injuries believed connected to military toxic exposure cases. That includes a 90-day review of numerous rare cancers believed linked to military burn pits, with recommendations on whether they should be given fast-track benefits status. But even if those conditionals are approved, it will take at least another three months before payouts to eligible veterans can begin, VA Secretary Dennis McDonough said. That puts checks in the mail no earlier than late May 2022, and likely later if the rulemaking process for those changes has any delays. Veterans Affairs officials have estimated more than 3.5 million troops were exposed to the toxic smoke from burn pits during overseas deployments over the last 20 years. VA officials are expected to announce the results of their first new review — focused on cancers believed linked to burn pits — in mid-February.

- A National Security Subcommittee of the House Oversight and Reform Committee hearing was to address [military and veteran suicide prevention](#) and how to support military families after the loss of a loved one. Subcommittee Chairman Rep. Stephen F. Lynch said the VA has employed evidence-based clinical intervention strategies to prevent suicides and has encouraged partnerships with mental health organizations, while the Department of Defense has designed programs to better identify suicide warning signs on social media and has promoted the safe handling of firearms and other lethal means. The White House released a fact sheet on earlier this month that lists strategies to reduce military and veteran suicide, which include educating veterans and their families on reducing access to lethal weapons or drugs,

improving access to effective care, addressing risk factors that might lead to suicide and sharing data. “The strategy outlines a government-wide, cross-section, and data-based approach to addressing the public health and national security crisis,” Lynch said. Johnny Jones, who is on the board of veterans’ advocacy group Boot Campaign, said the DoD should improve its transition processes for service members who are leaving. He noted a civilian receives up to a year of training to become a service member, but the transition back into civilian life could take less than two weeks. Retired Brig. Gen. Jack Hammond, who served in the Army for more than 30 years and led combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, recommended that Congress engage private hospital systems and academic medical centers and that the Pentagon “take a more aggressive approach towards suicide prevention in a proactive manner.”

- Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough warned against a scheme by some Republicans to avoid approving [a new federal budget](#) and instead pass a stop-gap measure that freezes funding at last year’s amounts for the next 10 months. “It would have very serious ramifications for community care, very serious ramifications for direct care — meaning very serious ramifications for care for our veterans,” he said. Congress failed to approve a new federal budget by the start of the new fiscal year on Oct. 1. Instead, it passed a measure that funded the government at last year’s amounts until Dec. 3. Congress must act before Dec. 3 to avoid a government shutdown. Democrats are considering a bill that would fund the government for an extra couple of weeks, meaning Congress would have to act again to pass another bill days before Christmas. Democrats are hoping the idea will prompt Republicans to instead discuss a new, sweeping federal budget deal. Republicans, however, are considering a long-term continuing resolution, or CR, that would drag out last year’s spending levels until the beginning of October 2022, Politico reported. The action would freeze the government budget at levels enacted under former President Donald Trump. Democrats are seeking a 10% funding increase for the VA in fiscal 2022, bringing its total budget to nearly \$270 billion. Forcing a 10-month continuing resolution would keep the VA at last year’s budget of \$243 billion — an amount last negotiated under Trump’s administration.

- Veterans Affairs officials insist they are getting better at processing [disability claims related to military sexual trauma](#), but outside critics say more still needs to be done to restore victims’ faith in the department’s systems. “Because military sexual trauma can affect veterans’ mental and physical health, work, relationships and other aspects of their everyday life, it is imperative that VA provide veterans who have suffered MST with the full benefits and services they are due,” said Michael Missal, Inspector General for the department, in testimony before the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee. While veterans who claim post-traumatic stress disorder from combat are often only required to prove they served overseas, PTSD claims related to military sexual trauma often require veterans to detail their abuse and provide supporting evidence, even in cases where such actions could worsen a veteran’s mental health. Research from Missal’s office in recent years has estimated that VA processors have mishandled thousands of veterans’ military sexual trauma claims, including failures to give specially trained staff enough time to fully review the cases. VA officials said they are working on more fixes. They are reviewing whether those specialists should be given more time each week for work dedicated to the military sexual trauma cases. Other improvements are expected to be unveiled in early 2022.

- The only person charged in connection with the murder of [Army Spc. Vanessa Guillén](#) at Fort Hood, Texas, last year is trying to get the charges thrown out. Cecily Aguilar, the girlfriend of the soldier accused of killing Guillén in April 2020, was arrested in July last year. In July 2020, Aguilar was charged with one count of conspiring with Robinson to dispose of Guillén’s body, and two counts of attempting to dispose of her body. Aguilar’s attorneys unsuccessfully tried to have her confession thrown out last year, arguing that she wasn’t advised of her Miranda rights ahead of an interrogation by authorities. Now her defense is pushing to have a series of charges from a second indictment against Aguilar dropped. Aguilar’s defense argues that the charges in the second indictment aren’t specific enough and cite many of the same issues in multiple counts. The “lack of specificity causes the charges to be unconstitutionally vague,” their argument says. “And raises the risk of multiple trials against Ms. Aguilar for the same conduct.” According to Guy Womack, a military defense attorney and legal expert, it’s not uncommon for defense teams to file these types of motions, but cases are unlikely to be dismissed because of them.

AMVETS in the News

[TESTER, MORAN CHAMPION BIPARTISAN BILL TO IMPROVE RURAL VETERANS’ ACCESS TO MEDICAL DISABILITY EXAMINATIONS](#)

Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester and Ranking Member Jerry Moran are championing bipartisan legislation to improve rural veterans’ access to medical disability examinations. Geography or mobility issues often limit rural and housebound veterans’ access to quality and timely medical disability examinations. The Senators’ Reform and Update Rural Access to Local (RURAL) Exams Act of 2021 aims to address this inequity by increasing

transparency of the medical disability examination program and authorizing the Department of Veterans Affairs to offer contract examiners incentives to provide better service to rural and housebound veterans. "AMVETS supports the RURAL Exams Act," said Joseph Chenelly, AMVETS Executive Director. "According to VA, almost a quarter of all veterans in the United States, 4.7 million veterans, reside in rural communities. We are pleased that Senators Tester and Moran have introduced legislation that will require the VA to report how they intend to improve rural access to medical disability exams. It is our hope that upon passage of this bill, rural veterans will enjoy easier access to timely and quality medical disability exams without raising the cost for veterans."

Continued News

- Adding lithium to usual care for veterans with major depression or bipolar disorders did not reduce incidence of suicide-related events, according to results of a randomized [clinical trial published in JAMA Psychiatry](#). "The new trial did not find evidence of an antisuicidal effect of adding lithium to complex treatment regimens in relatively small numbers of mostly male veterans with complex, although realistic, psychopathological conditions, given relatively brief treatment with low circulating levels of lithium," they wrote. "Thus, its findings cannot be taken as evidence that lithium lacks antisuicidal effects. An ironic final note is that recruiting participants to such trials may be made difficult by an evidently prevalent belief that the question of antisuicidal effects of lithium is already settled, which it certainly is not."

- By July 2022, sending a text to the number 988 will connect people to suicide prevention services. The Federal Communications Commission voted Thursday, Nov. 18, to expand quick access to the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) — which is a "network of local crisis centers that provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress" — by creating an ability to text 988 to reach the lifeline. The vote comes as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has increased the need for mental health services in the United States and as advocates and experts have emphasized the importance of easy and more inclusive access to the lifeline. The FCC voted in July 2020 to establish 988 as the nationwide number for the hotline.

- The process for [upgrading so-called "bad paper" discharges](#) could get a speed boost while a Pentagon program that helps transitioning service members work as teachers could be restored if some veteran groups and lawmakers have their way. Advocates are pushing to include the changes in the annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), currently awaiting action on Capitol Hill. Senators Gary Peters and Steve Daines offered an amendment to the proposed \$740 billion-plus NDAA to reduce the growing backlog of discharge upgrade reviews for veterans diagnosed with post traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury. Much of the delay can be attributed to the logjam at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in St. Louis, part of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), on requests for records to support claims on disability, health care and other benefits, as well as the documentation needed to support discharge upgrade petitions. In a letter to the House Committee on Government Oversight and Reform, David Ferriero, the head of NARA, said that "the backlog of public requests stands at over 550,000" at the NPRC but did not give a breakdown on how many of those requests involved discharge upgrades.

- Lawmakers want military medical professionals to keep taking care to their fellow service members even after they leave the ranks. House lawmakers gave final approval to the [Hire Veteran Health Heroes Act](#), which requires Veterans Affairs leaders to work with Defense Department officials to identify separating troops with health care occupations who may help fill open medical jobs in veterans hospitals. The legislation would require the two departments to provide information on open positions in the Veterans Health Administration to troops within a year of their scheduled retirement or separation from the military. Officials would focus on not only the individual's medical specialty but also preference for where to live after separation.

- Children and spouses of veterans who die from service-connected injuries will be guaranteed in-state tuition rates under new legislation approved by Congress this week. The measure — the [Colonel John M. McHugh Tuition Fairness for Survivors Act](#) — passed without objection in the House. Senate lawmakers had approved the legislation back in June. The change is expected to affect about 150,000 surviving dependents, potentially saving them tens of thousands in higher education expenses each year. The change had been a priority of numerous veterans groups in recent years. Bonnie Carroll, president and founder of the Tragedy Assistance Program For Survivors, praised the bill as "much needed legislation" that could be life changing for thousands of veterans' families. President Joe Biden is expected to sign it into law in coming days, but no timeline for that action has been announced.

- Bipartisan legislation introduced by U.S. Senators Susan Collins and Tammy Duckworth and U.S. Representative Lauren Underwood that will help address the maternal mortality crisis among women veterans passed both the Senate and House by overwhelming margins and is now headed to President Biden's desk to be signed into law. There are more than half a million women veterans in our nation who are under the age of 40. [The Protecting Moms Who Served Act](#) will commission the first-ever comprehensive study on the scope of

America's maternal health crisis among women veterans—with a focus on racial and ethnic disparities on maternal health outcomes—while also supporting maternal care coordination programs at Department of Veterans Affairs facilities.

- [Opinion](#): Veterans Health Administration increases care provided under MISSION Act

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