




AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

OCTOBER 26, 2020

News Driving the Week

- The Department of Veterans Affairs' [annual report on veteran suicides is a month late](#) compared to last year, and department officials so far aren't saying when it will be released. House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano sent a letter to VA Secretary Robert Wilkie, saying he was "dismayed" that the report was delayed since the department usually releases it during Suicide Prevention Awareness Month each September. Connecting Vets previously asked VA about the yearly report when it was not released as expected, but did not receive a response until Oct. 20, when Press Secretary Christina Noel said in an email that the department "is still finalizing its annual suicide data report and will be releasing it this year. A release date has not been set yet." VA's 2019 report found that on average, about 17 veterans died by suicide per day in 2017. That number has remained the same or worsened in recent years despite increased spending and programs aimed at helping.
- Officials for the Department of [Veterans Affairs declined to participate in a Senate hearing](#) about the progress in implementing the Mission Act, a law passed two years ago to help improve health care for veterans. In a letter to Moran, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said the Senate committee did not give the agency enough notice of the Mission Act hearing. The letter states the VA was notified of the hearing on Oct. 15. "I'm very disappointed the administration chose not to participate. I do not know why something as important as implementation as the Mission Act doesn't rise to that important to the VA. Hopefully it's not because they're campaigning across the country," said Sen. Jon Tester of Montana, the ranking Democrat on the veterans' affairs committee. "The legislative branch isn't here as a nuisance. We actually do things and have expectations."
- A new survey paints a bleak picture of [military life during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), highlighting how the effects of the disease widened existing cracks in needs and benefits coverage for service members. Over the past six months, 20% of essential service members, like medical providers, were unable to access



childcare. Military spousal employment worsened and family mental health needs went unmet. The pandemic is taking a particularly hard toll on women and minorities in the military. Kathy Roth-Douquet, CEO and president of Blue Star Families, which conducted the survey, said the military is at risk of losing a generation of female leaders because of COVID-19. More than 70% of women service members reported having to change their childcare plan over the last six months because of the pandemic. Mental health also took a hit over the last six months. According to the survey, 23% of military and veteran families who responded to the survey experienced symptoms of depression and anxiety without a preexisting mental health disorder. A quarter of military families said their mental health needs are not being met.

- As coronavirus restrictions unfurled a dangerous mix of depression and anxiety, the [scourge of suicide cut through a tiny community of amputee veterans](#) in recent months, claiming at least three in a group where isolation is already a potent risk factor. The reasons for suicide are complex and not always known to those left behind, often involving mental health issues, alcohol and substance abuse, financial issues or relationship troubles. But family and friends of the veterans said they believe isolation, triggered by the pandemic, played a role in the three deaths. The men had found second acts by doing things like helping fellow veterans, public speaking and returning to school. Those pursuits, which helped them rediscover purpose and mission, ended abruptly for each of them — and accelerated those veterans into tragedy, friends and family said. Matthew Miller, the director of suicide prevention at the Department of Veterans Affairs, said it is too early to determine the pandemic’s role in veteran suicide because it can take more than a year to collect data from states.

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 - PASSED✓

[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

- President Donald Trump has signed into law a pair of bills to help prevent suicides among veterans. [The Vet Center Eligibility Expansion Act](#) extends Department of Veterans Affairs readjustment counseling and related mental health services to National Guard and Reserve troops who did not deploy to combat areas but instead participated in drug interdiction or fighting national disasters or emergencies. It was sponsored by Republican Reps. Phil Roe and Neal Dunn, and Democratic Rep. Mike Levin.
- [Opinion](#): Start focusing on veterans' health before they enlist

