



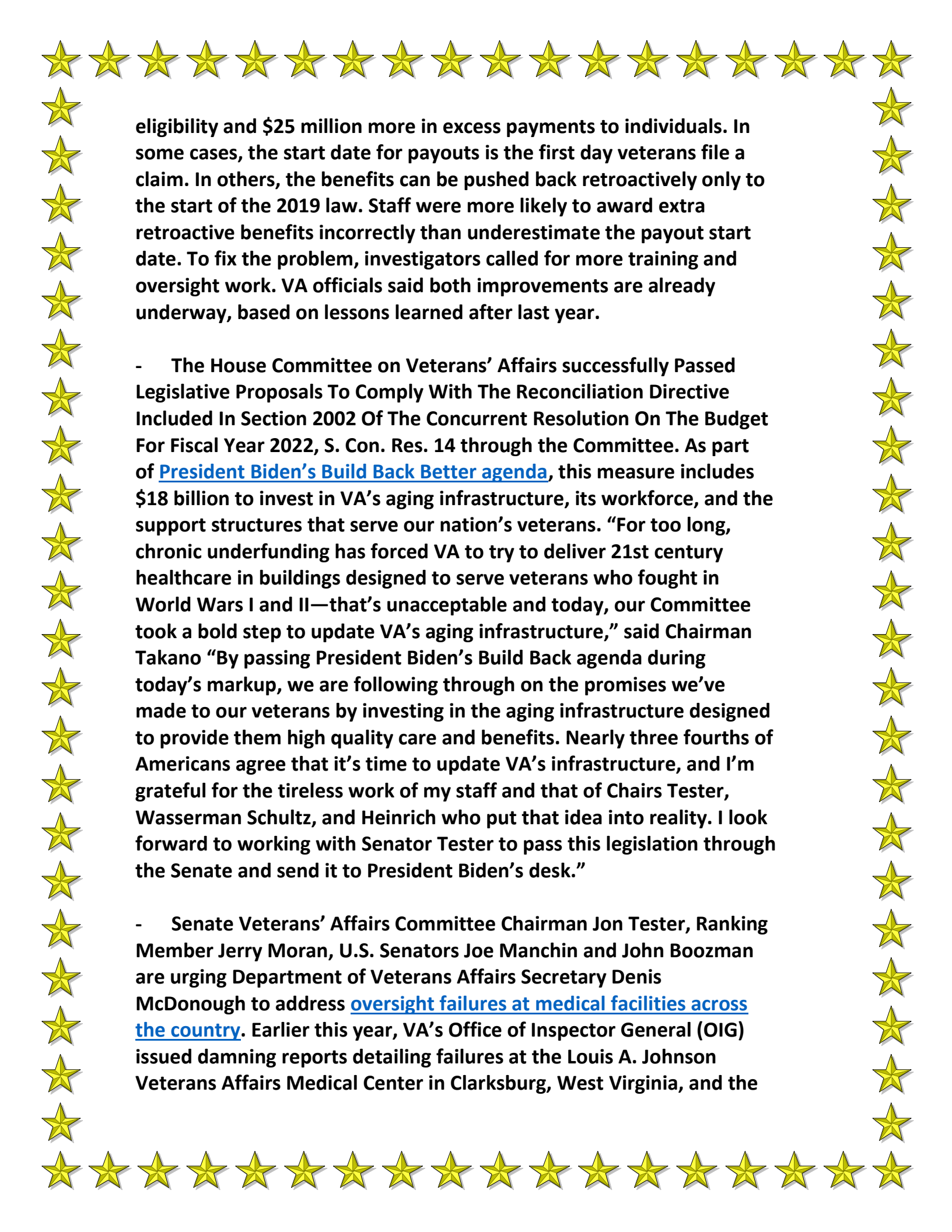
AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

SEPTEMBER 14, 2021

News Driving the Week

- Veteran [suicides fell to their lowest level in 12 years](#) in 2019, down more than one death a day from the previous year's levels, according to new data released by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Despite that, the rate of suicides among veterans remains almost double the rest of the American public, accounting for more than 32,000 deaths from 2015 to 2019. Federal data on suicide rates have lagged two years behind current conditions, and the latest report from VA does not include any records from the pandemic, which mental health experts warned could exacerbate mental health conditions and lead to suicidal thoughts among individuals. The 6,261 veteran deaths by suicide in 2019 are 399 fewer than 2018 and equate to about 17 per day. That figure is well below the often-quoted "22 a day" statistic regarding veterans suicide, which was based on an estimate used by VA officials a decade ago. "I think you're seeing the manifestation of core truths within suicide prevention; number one, that suicide is preventable," said Dr. Matt Miller, director of the VA Suicide Prevention Program. "There are evidence-based programs, intervention actions that can be taken within clinical settings and within community settings that can make a meaningful difference."

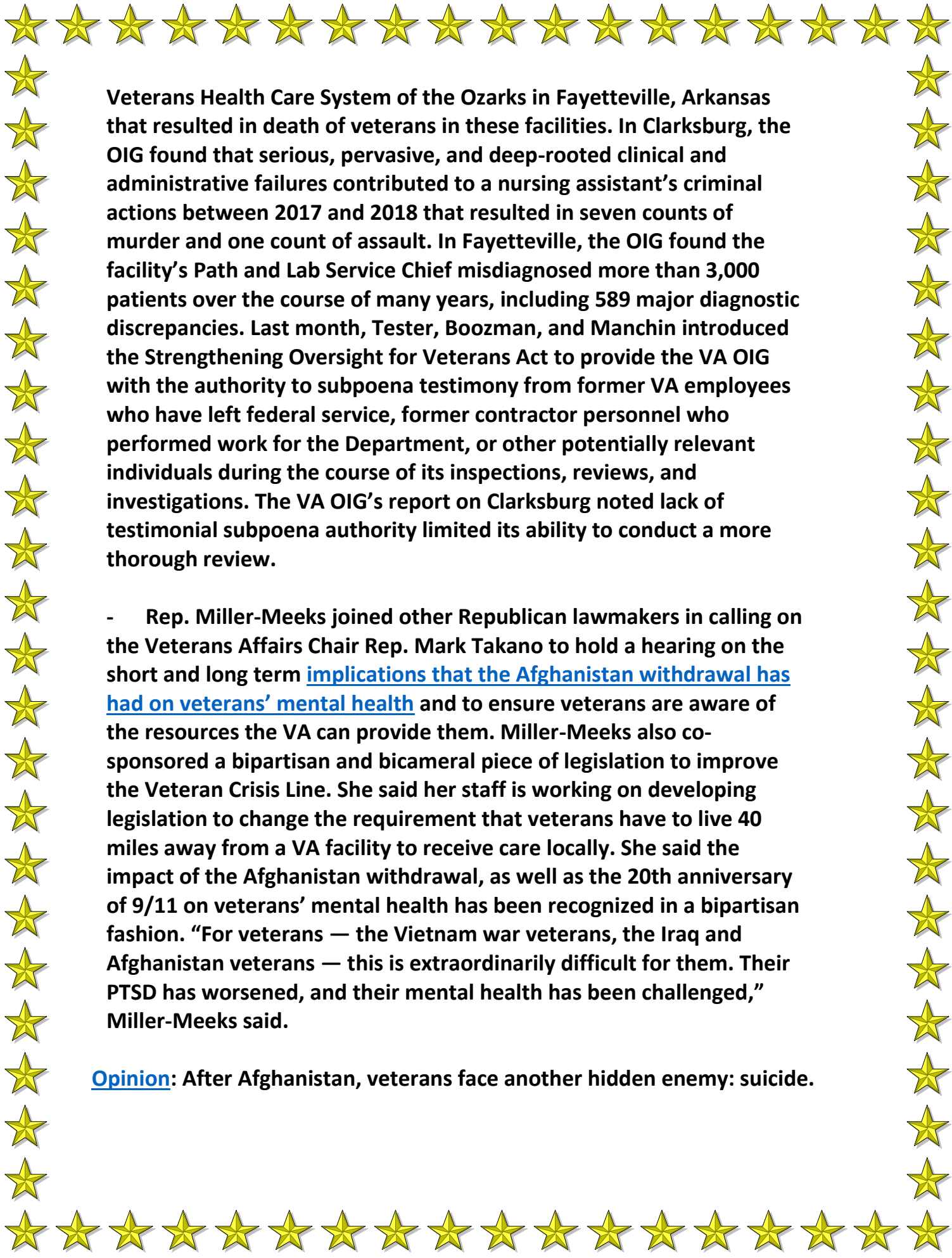
- Blue Water Vietnam veterans are getting their disability benefits paid out by the Department of Veterans Affairs, but it might not be exactly how much they deserve, according to a new watchdog report. The VA Inspector General's Office found that while department staff have done a good job at getting benefits flowing to newly eligible veterans covered by [the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act](#) two years ago, nearly half of the claims decisions investigators reviewed from 2020 were "inaccurate." The mistakes total an estimated \$37 million: about \$12 million in underpayments based on veterans



eligibility and \$25 million more in excess payments to individuals. In some cases, the start date for payouts is the first day veterans file a claim. In others, the benefits can be pushed back retroactively only to the start of the 2019 law. Staff were more likely to award extra retroactive benefits incorrectly than underestimate the payout start date. To fix the problem, investigators called for more training and oversight work. VA officials said both improvements are already underway, based on lessons learned after last year.

- The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs successfully Passed Legislative Proposals To Comply With The Reconciliation Directive Included In Section 2002 Of The Concurrent Resolution On The Budget For Fiscal Year 2022, S. Con. Res. 14 through the Committee. As part of [President Biden's Build Back Better agenda](#), this measure includes \$18 billion to invest in VA's aging infrastructure, its workforce, and the support structures that serve our nation's veterans. "For too long, chronic underfunding has forced VA to try to deliver 21st century healthcare in buildings designed to serve veterans who fought in World Wars I and II—that's unacceptable and today, our Committee took a bold step to update VA's aging infrastructure," said Chairman Takano "By passing President Biden's Build Back agenda during today's markup, we are following through on the promises we've made to our veterans by investing in the aging infrastructure designed to provide them high quality care and benefits. Nearly three fourths of Americans agree that it's time to update VA's infrastructure, and I'm grateful for the tireless work of my staff and that of Chairs Tester, Wasserman Schultz, and Heinrich who put that idea into reality. I look forward to working with Senator Tester to pass this legislation through the Senate and send it to President Biden's desk."

- Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester, Ranking Member Jerry Moran, U.S. Senators Joe Manchin and John Boozman are urging Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough to address [oversight failures at medical facilities across the country](#). Earlier this year, VA's Office of Inspector General (OIG) issued damning reports detailing failures at the Louis A. Johnson Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Clarksburg, West Virginia, and the



Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks in Fayetteville, Arkansas that resulted in death of veterans in these facilities. In Clarksburg, the OIG found that serious, pervasive, and deep-rooted clinical and administrative failures contributed to a nursing assistant’s criminal actions between 2017 and 2018 that resulted in seven counts of murder and one count of assault. In Fayetteville, the OIG found the facility’s Path and Lab Service Chief misdiagnosed more than 3,000 patients over the course of many years, including 589 major diagnostic discrepancies. Last month, Tester, Boozman, and Manchin introduced the Strengthening Oversight for Veterans Act to provide the VA OIG with the authority to subpoena testimony from former VA employees who have left federal service, former contractor personnel who performed work for the Department, or other potentially relevant individuals during the course of its inspections, reviews, and investigations. The VA OIG’s report on Clarksburg noted lack of testimonial subpoena authority limited its ability to conduct a more thorough review.

- Rep. Miller-Meeks joined other Republican lawmakers in calling on the Veterans Affairs Chair Rep. Mark Takano to hold a hearing on the short and long term [implications that the Afghanistan withdrawal has had on veterans’ mental health](#) and to ensure veterans are aware of the resources the VA can provide them. Miller-Meeks also co-sponsored a bipartisan and bicameral piece of legislation to improve the Veteran Crisis Line. She said her staff is working on developing legislation to change the requirement that veterans have to live 40 miles away from a VA facility to receive care locally. She said the impact of the Afghanistan withdrawal, as well as the 20th anniversary of 9/11 on veterans’ mental health has been recognized in a bipartisan fashion. “For veterans — the Vietnam war veterans, the Iraq and Afghanistan veterans — this is extraordinarily difficult for them. Their PTSD has worsened, and their mental health has been challenged,” Miller-Meeks said.

[Opinion](#): After Afghanistan, veterans face another hidden enemy: suicide.