



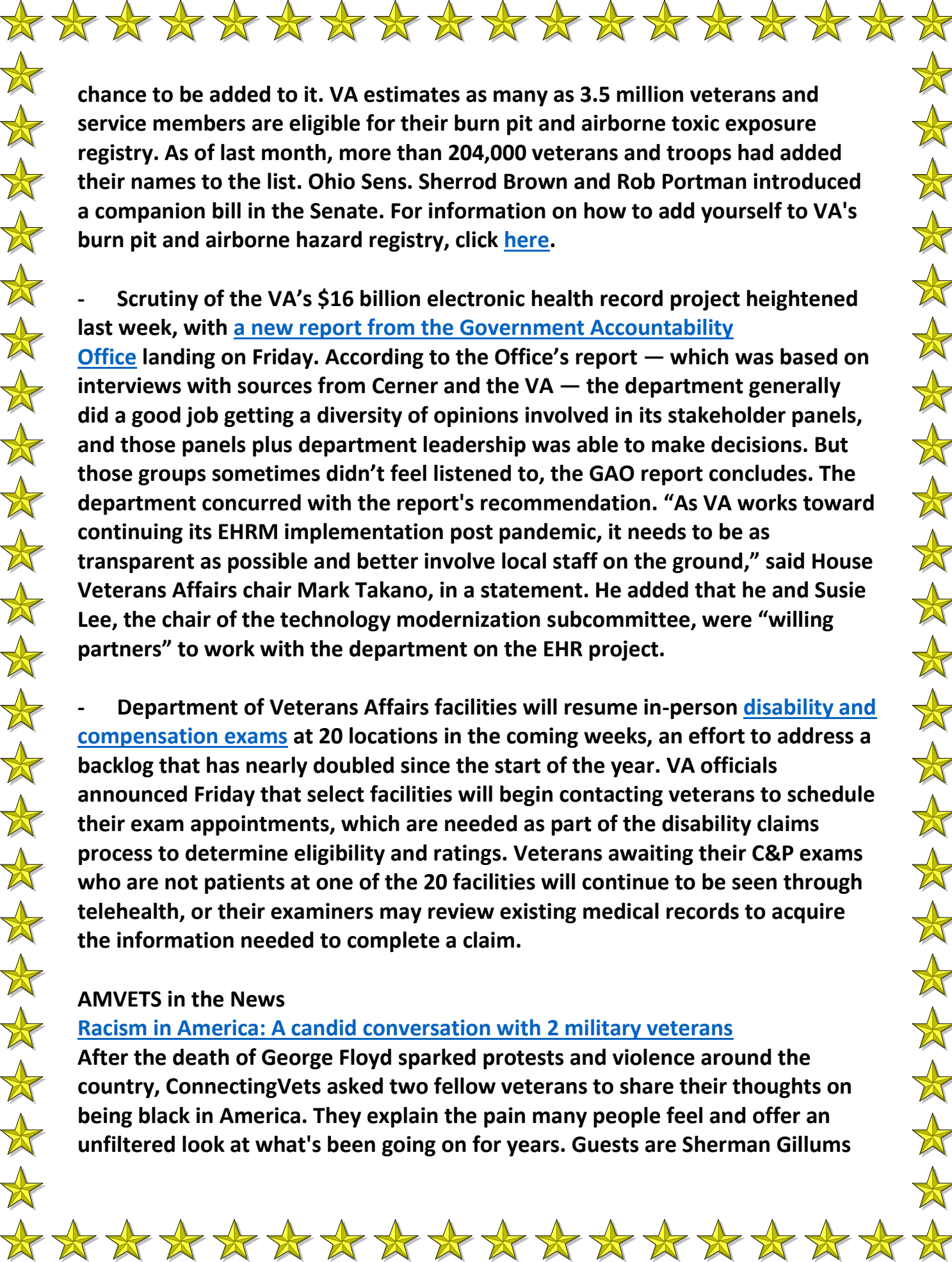
AMVETS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

JUNE 8, 2020

News Driving the Week

- Three members of President Donald [Trump's private Mar-a-Lago resort acted as advisers and organizers at the Department of Veterans Affairs](#) from 2016 to 2018, the Government Accountability Office determined after an investigation into the private citizens' involvement in the federal agency. The Mar-a-Lago members were involved in hundreds of email exchanges with VA officials, frequent phone calls and at least five in-person meetings. Three top VA officials — Secretary David Shulkin, former Chief of Staff Peter O'Rourke and former Acting Undersecretary for Health Poonam Alaigh — communicated with the men over private email accounts, records of which were unavailable to the Government Accountability Office during its investigation. The results of the investigation show the men were involved in at least five VA initiatives, from personnel decisions at department headquarters to a multibillion-dollar contract with Cerner Corp. to overhaul the agency's electronic health record system. The GAO reviewed 223 email exchanges between the men and VA officials from 2016 through 2018. The three men made recommendations to the VA in 28 of those emails. In 70 others, they provided information to VA officials about different initiatives, including their thoughts on how the VA should handle its community care program.

- Lawmakers introduced a bill that would require the Department of Veterans Affairs to document, track and notify Congress of all cases of burn pit exposure reported by veterans. Rep. Brian Mast and Rep. Tulsi Gabbard introduced the bipartisan [Sfc. Heath Robinson Burn Pit Transparency Act](#), which they say aims to help burn pit-exposed vets who often have difficulty with VA claims because records of burn pit exposure during military service are often incomplete or nonexistent. The legislation builds on a previous bill Mast and Gabbard partnered on, the Burn Pits Accountability act, which passed as part of the fiscal year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act in December. But the current VA burn pit registry is voluntary, and "many are unaware of it," the lawmakers said. The new bill aims to "close that gap" by making sure that all veterans who discuss their exposure with their doctors are aware of the registry and their



chance to be added to it. VA estimates as many as 3.5 million veterans and service members are eligible for their burn pit and airborne toxic exposure registry. As of last month, more than 204,000 veterans and troops had added their names to the list. Ohio Sens. Sherrod Brown and Rob Portman introduced a companion bill in the Senate. For information on how to add yourself to VA's burn pit and airborne hazard registry, click [here](#).

- Scrutiny of the VA's \$16 billion electronic health record project heightened last week, with [a new report from the Government Accountability Office](#) landing on Friday. According to the Office's report — which was based on interviews with sources from Cerner and the VA — the department generally did a good job getting a diversity of opinions involved in its stakeholder panels, and those panels plus department leadership was able to make decisions. But those groups sometimes didn't feel listened to, the GAO report concludes. The department concurred with the report's recommendation. "As VA works toward continuing its EHRM implementation post pandemic, it needs to be as transparent as possible and better involve local staff on the ground," said House Veterans Affairs chair Mark Takano, in a statement. He added that he and Susie Lee, the chair of the technology modernization subcommittee, were "willing partners" to work with the department on the EHR project.

- Department of Veterans Affairs facilities will resume in-person [disability and compensation exams](#) at 20 locations in the coming weeks, an effort to address a backlog that has nearly doubled since the start of the year. VA officials announced Friday that select facilities will begin contacting veterans to schedule their exam appointments, which are needed as part of the disability claims process to determine eligibility and ratings. Veterans awaiting their C&P exams who are not patients at one of the 20 facilities will continue to be seen through telehealth, or their examiners may review existing medical records to acquire the information needed to complete a claim.

AMVETS in the News

[Racism in America: A candid conversation with 2 military veterans](#)

After the death of George Floyd sparked protests and violence around the country, ConnectingVets asked two fellow veterans to share their thoughts on being black in America. They explain the pain many people feel and offer an unfiltered look at what's been going on for years. Guests are Sherman Gillums

Jr, Marine Corps veteran and Strategy Officer for AMVETS, and Navy Chief (Ret.)
Anthony Elder.

Upcoming Events

Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
Building a More Resilient VA Supply Chain
Tuesday, June 9 3:00 PM
Watch [here](#)

House Veterans Affairs Committee

Assessing VA's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: 90 Days Later
Thursday, June 11 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

- A third family has filed a lawsuit against the Department of Veterans Affairs over the death of a veteran at the [Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center in Clarksburg, West Virginia](#), as an investigation into as many as 11 suspicious deaths enters its second year. The VA's Office of Inspector General and the Justice Department have been investigating the circumstances surrounding the veterans' deaths. Investigators have told VA leadership and West Virginia lawmakers that they have been looking into a "person of interest," but no arrests have been made.

- Following President Donald Trump's [hype over Spravato](#), a derivative of ketamine he called "incredible" in combating veteran suicides, the San Diego VA began pulling veterans from Kadima Neuropsychiatry Institute to treat them in-house with the controversial nasal spray. Some of the vets had heard about Spravato but were nevertheless stunned when the VA cut off their ketamine at Kadima without giving advance notice to them or their psychiatrists at the VA. In some cases, vets were told less than 24 hours before a scheduled appointment that the treatment they'd relied on for years would no longer be an option. Though ketamine has been used for more than 50 years as an anaesthetic — and recreational drug — it has recently shown promise in derailing suicidal thoughts among patients resistant to other treatments.

- [Opinion](#): VA hospitals still an excellent choice for veteran



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