



AMVETS WEEKLY LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

OCTOBER 1, 2019

News Driving the Week

- The Pentagon is facing [a worsening suicide problem among active duty and National Guard](#) service members, and officials say finding answers will not be easy. In its first-ever “Annual Suicide Report” released Thursday, the Defense Department detailed rising suicide rates for active troops — 24.8 deaths per 100,000 — and members of the National Guard — 30.6 per 100,000 in 2018, a clear increase from the 2016 and 2017 rates. The survey found that some 541 service members took their lives in 2018. The report’s findings, described by Pentagon leaders as “disheartening and disappointing,” come on the heels of a trio of suicides within the space of a week by crewmembers assigned to the USS George H.W. Bush this month.
- [A string of suicides by sailors from the Navy](#) aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush last week has prompted an investigation by local and federal authorities—but it reflects a tragic trend in the Navy, the U.S. military more broadly and across the country. The Naval Criminal Investigative Service is currently assisting local authorities in Portsmouth and Norfolk in investigating three deaths — one that took place on Sept. 14 and two that occurred on Sept. 19, Navy officials said Tuesday. The deaths are part of a troubling trend of suicides within the Navy and U.S. military. In 2018, 325 active-duty members died by suicide —the highest number since the Pentagon began tracking suicides in 2001. In 2018, a total of 68 active-duty Navy service members died by suicide, the U.S. Navy reports. That number, as well as the rate of suicide, has been steadily increasing over the last decade. In 2017, 65 active-duty members died, followed by 52 in 2016 and 43 in 2015. Suicides have not just been rising in the military. The last time the nationwide suicide rates were this high was in World War II, according to federal data. And while veterans and military service members contribute to that total, the casualty count also includes victims of the opioid crisis and those likely affected by widespread social media use and high stress. In 2017, 14 out of 100,000 Americans died by suicide, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That’s a 33% increase since 1999.
- Families of veterans who served before the recent wars won’t be added to the [Veterans Affairs caregivers program](#) until summer 2020 at the earliest. The delay had been expected for months, as VA officials struggled to get new technology and processes in place to handle an influx of new applicants to the program. Currently, only families of troops injured after Sept. 11, 2001, are eligible for program stipends, which can total several thousand dollars a month. Under the VA Mission Act passed last year, veterans who sustained a serious military-related injury before May 7, 1975, were supposed to be able to enroll starting this fall. Now, they’ll have to wait at least June 2020 for entry, if not longer. The timeline shift also pushes back eligibility for families of veterans who served from 1975 to 2001, from fall

2021 to fall 2022 at the earliest. Lawmakers have included a phased application period for different generations of service members to ease pressure on VA systems.

- The Department of Veterans Affairs intends to [accelerate the deployment of a Cerner patient appointment scheduling solution](#) so the VA can implement the system earlier than its new EHR. The agency is putting Cerner's medical appointment scheduling solution on a faster track because of concerns about the 10-year implementation period required to deploy the \$10 billion Cerner EHR across the VA. However, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Technology Modernization—which has oversight and investigative jurisdiction over the VA's major IT projects—is not convinced that the agency's plan is the right course of action. "For almost 20 years, the VA has attempted to update its patient appointment scheduling system," said Rep. Susie Lee (D-Nev.), chair of the House subcommittee, during a hearing on Thursday. "Now, the VA plans to implement Cerner's scheduling solution but on a separate and faster deployment schedule than the rest of the electronic health record." Lee added that she has "serious reservations" about the VA's approach including the fact that agency decided to adopt the Cerner scheduling solution across the VA instead of the Medical Appointment Scheduling System (MASS), which was successfully deployed ahead of schedule last year at the Chalmers P. Wylie Ambulatory Care Center in Columbus, Ohio, as part of a pilot program.

AMVETS in the News

[Veterans Group to Revive Rolling Thunder DC Motorcycle Ride](#)

The annual Rolling Thunder motorcycle ride is set to be revived in 2020 by another organization that serves veterans. The group AMVETS (American Veterans) will host a motorcycle ride over Memorial Day weekend 2020 to honor military members who were missing in action or prisoners of war, they announced Thursday. AMVETS' three-day event will be called Rolling to Remember. "We think [the name] strikes a good balance of something new, and also honoring what had been taking place here in Washington for three decades," AMVETS National Executive Director and U.S. Marine Corps veteran Joe Chenelly said. In addition to honoring these military members, AMVETS said the 2020 ride would seek to highlight mental health issues among veterans. "We believe that mental health for our veterans is the most pressing issue to veterans today," Chenelly said.

[PenFed Credit Union Named AMVETS 'Veteran Friendly Employer of the Year'](#)

PenFed Credit Union, the nation's second-largest federal credit union, announced it was selected by AMVETS as the large company "Veteran Friendly Employer of the Year." The award recognizes companies with more than 750 employees that make great strides to employ veterans and participate in meaningful community involvement within the military community. "We are proud to be recognized by AMVETS for our contributions to the military community, and we will continue to welcome our nation's defenders as a mission-critical part of our PenFed team," said PenFed President and CEO James Schenck. "Veterans strengthen the workplace with their diverse experience, skills, leadership and determination to succeed."

[Veterans groups push VA to follow through on reforms](#)

Veterans groups and Democrats say they have lingering questions and concerns months after the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) launched rules seeking to expand veterans' ability to go to private doctors. "The implementation of the VA MISSION Act appears to be going fairly well so far," Sherman Gillums Jr., chief advocacy officer at AMVETS, said in an email. "While it has taken a while for eligible veterans to understand the new referral process for community care and how they can access urgent care without pre-authorization, we do see it happening." Gillums, at AMVETS, said he has some outstanding concerns, including that some VA facilities do not yet have the so-called Decision Support Tool that helps determine eligibility. He also said there are still questions about how a new hospital rating system will be incorporated into the eligibility process. Overall, though, he said, he welcomed the changes and hoped the administration followed through. "I'd say the VA MISSION Act has proven to be a success so far, and we hope to see that continue."

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

[H.R. 3495](#) Improve Well-Being for Veterans Act introduced by Rep. Jack Bergman of MI and Rep. Chrissy Houlahan of PA

[S. 1906](#) Improve Well-Being for Veterans Act introduced by Rep. John Boozman of AR

[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

- Disabled veterans should see [a cost of living increase to their benefits](#) next year. President Donald Trump this week signed into law the Veterans Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act introduced by Senators Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., and Jon Tester, D-Mont., chairman and ranking member of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs. The bill, co-sponsored by all members of the SVAC, increases the amount of Department of Veterans Affairs disability compensation, dependent compensation for Gold Star families and the clothing allowance for veterans. The cost-of-living adjustment for veterans matches the increases to Social Security recipients and is decided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Price Index annually. In 2019, the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for Social Security was a 2.8 percent increase. The COLA for 2020 won't be announced until October but is expected to be lower, closer to 1.6 percent. The increase goes into effect Dec. 1, 2019 and veterans should see the change in 2020.

- The chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee is demanding [a nationwide review of department sexual harassment policies](#) after one of his committee staffers was assaulted at a VA hospital last week by a fellow veteran. Andrea Goldstein, a reserve Navy intelligence officer and the lead staffer on the committee's Women Veterans Task Force, said she was groped and body checked by an unknown man while waiting in the front atrium of

the Washington DC VA Medical Center last Friday. The man also propositioned her as he made the unwanted advances. Committee Chairman Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif., said the incident sadly is part of a pattern of abuse and harassment at VA medical facilities that too often discourages women veterans from seeking the medical care they have earned. Joy Ilem, national legislative director for Disabled American Veterans, said numerous women veterans have complained about similar incidents at VA facilities in the past. She worries that many others may not be reporting their negative experiences, and simply avoiding the VA system instead.

- An Iraq combat vet says a [Department of Veterans Affairs clinician saved his life](#). The lifesaving move didn't come at an emergency room or inside an operating suite – but at a classroom at the Bronx VA. That's where Dr. Marianne Goodman leads Project Life Force, which gives veterans an opportunity to come together and talk about their problems, challenges and wanting to end their lives. Project Life Force can be found at VA sites in Kansas City, Albany, and Syracuse. It is also being tested in a VA-funded randomized clinical trial that includes 265 vets at the Bronx and Philadelphia VA medical centers.

- More [veterans are giving a thumbs up to how they are treated when seeking Department of Veterans Affairs health care](#), according to the annual "Our Care" survey released Friday by the Veterans of Foreign Wars. And they are feeling positive so far about the new Mission Act, with its private-care options, which went into effect in June, it found. The survey of nearly 7,000 VFW members showed 74% reported seeing improvements at their local VA, compared to 64% in 2018. And 91% said they would recommend VA care to other veterans, compared to 80% in 2018.

- [Opinion](#): Suicide prevention remains a top national priority for the VA

- [Opinion](#): Veterans Who've Gotten Help Have the Power to Destigmatize Mental Health Care



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