

## Veterans' legislation roundup

**C**COVID-19 has affected virtually every element of legislating during the second session of the 116th Congress. Despite the inaction on most major legislation, a few noteworthy pieces of veterans' legislation successfully made it across the finish line prior to the election.

### Bills signed into law

#### **H.R. 1812—Veteran Center Eligibility Expansion Act (became law Oct. 20, 2020)**

This bill provides mental health services such as counseling for National Guard, Reserve or Coast Guard members who responded to national disasters, emergencies or drug interdictions, all high-stress situations that often have an impact on mental health.

#### **H.R. 2372—Veterans' Care Quality Transparency Act (became law Oct. 20, 2020)**

This bill requires the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to evaluate various aspects of mental health and suicide prevention services of non-VA entities who partner through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

#### **S. 785—Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 (became law on Oct. 17, 2020)**

This bill seeks to strengthen outreach to veterans and provide expanded options for mental health, with the goal of reducing veteran suicide. It includes increasing the VA mental health workforce at veteran centers; increasing rural access for veterans through telehealth; creating a pilot program to provide free access to different types of holistic therapies such

as animal, art, agricultural, sports and post-traumatic growth (PTG); creating a grant program to collaborate with veterans community organizations to help identify at-risk veterans and provide services aimed at prevention; and studying suicide risks based on environmental factors such as high altitude. The legislation also requires a study of VA suicide prevention resources.

### House activity

**Prior to the November election, the** House of Representatives unanimously passed several veterans-related measures, which now await Senate action. Most notably, two are aimed at the issues of mental health and suicide prevention.

#### **H.R. 8247—Veterans' Comprehensive Prevention, Access to Care, and Treatment (COMPACT) Act of 2020**

This bill seeks to reduce suicide by providing symptom-based emergency crisis, creating a pilot program for information sharing between the VA and designated friends and family of veterans, tracking and reporting on transition from active service to veteran status, establishing a program to educate caregivers of veterans with mental health disorders, establishing an inter-agency outdoor recreation task force for veterans, contacting out-of-touch veterans for comprehensive medical exams in order to keep coverage eligibility, requiring crisis intervention and training annually for VA police to assist in the de-escalation of high-stress situations, identifying gaps in care for homeless female veterans, and ascertaining the locations where female veterans are receiving their VA health care to ensure that care there meets their needs.



**In addition to the bills above, the** House also passed measures aimed at supporting veterans through the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing VA debt collection and contraception for female veterans.

#### **H.R. 7105—Dependable Employment and Living Improvements for Veterans' Economic Recovery (DELIVER) Act**

This bill took six separate bipartisan measures and folded them into one bill that would expand services such as food, shelter, education, training, legal services and access to telehealth services for homeless and unemployed veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **H.R. 5245—Stopping Harm and Implementing Enhanced Lead-time for Debts for Veterans (SHIELD for Veterans) Act**

This bill prevents the VA from collecting benefit overpayments resulting from a delay in processing and extends to 90 days' notice of intent to recollect payment before collecting, gives veterans the right to dispute an overpayment or ask for a waiver of debt. The VA must also report to Con-

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gress within 180 days of enactment on its plan to improve its communications with regard to overpayments.

## H.R. 3798—Equal Access to Contraception for Veterans Act

This bill extends female veterans' access through the VA to the same no-cost, basic contraceptives available to civilians through the Affordable Care Act.

## Senate activity

In addition to the bills that recently became law, the Senate Armed Services Committee has taken an interest in the Postal Service to ensure that delivery of medications to veterans during the pandemic are prioritized. The Committee also saw the introduction of a few measures.

## S. 4579—Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) Act

This bill would increase COLA benefits for wartime disability compensation, dependent compensation, clothing allowance, dependency and indemnity compensation for spouses and children.

## S. 4393—Toxic Exposure in the American Military (TEAM) Act of 2020

This bill changes the evaluation and care by the VA of veterans who are exposed to toxic substances during their military service.

## S. 4511—Veterans Benefits Enhancement Act

This bill would expand education,

legal and burial benefits for survivors and members of the National Guard or Reserve.

With the lame-duck session coming to a close, it is unclear whether the bills listed under House and Senate activity will make it to the finish line, or if other bills can be expected. Either way, the 117th Congress is expected to once again see a myriad of veterans-related legislation.

### Join the NALC Veterans Group

If you are interested in joining the group, complete the sign-up card at [nalc.org/veterans](http://nalc.org/veterans).

## In Memoriam

### NALC offers deepest sympathies to the families and friends of departed brothers and sisters

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