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LEGION TESTIFIES ON SUICIDE PREVENTION LEGISLATION

In a very personal and emotional testimony before a House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) subcommittee on Health, Tiffany Ellett shared her own experiences losing friends and loved ones to suicide, why it's so critical to stem this tide in the veteran community and beyond, and how The American Legion is working toward that goal.

Addressing HVAC's Subcommittee on Health on June 21, The American Legion's Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Division director named four people close to her who have taken their own lives in the past three years, including two veterans. "Mental health and suicide do not just affect one community in one way," Ellett said as she teared up. "This is a complex problem that needs a multifaceted solution. We, as a society, need to do better."

Ellett shared 2021 statistics from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration that show an estimated 12.3 million adults in the U.S. seriously considered suicide, 3.5 million planned an attempt and 1.7 million attempted. "(The) Veterans Health Administration is the largest integrated health care network in the United States," she said. "If any organization has the ability to pull together the means to create a multifaceted solution to the mental health epidemic plaguing the United States and its veteran population, it is VA."

Ellett expressed support for both the [VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Act of 2023](#) and the [PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program Act](#), noting the Legion's efforts on both fronts.

"In 2021, The American Legion started its Be The One movement to destigmatize and encourage the discussion of mental health, suicide and seeking help," Ellett said. "This movement, in combination with our Buddy Check Program created in 2019 and adopted by VA through 2023 legislation, are examples of The American Legion's constant vigorous support of peer-to-peer solutions for veterans' mental health complexities."

The transition from the military to the civilian workforce can also be a stressor for mental health, said Ellett, noting "a veteran's perceived loss of identity or mission. One of the solutions for this empty space is to immediately provide a new mission to the veteran. This is just one of the reasons we support the Veterans Serving Veterans Act of 2023, which assists in building a direct path for a corpsman or medic to become an Intermediate Care Technician (ICT), augmenting the VA medical workforce. That being said, we would like to see the Department of Homeland Security included in this legislation so that the Coast Guard Health Services Technicians may be included in the recruitment database. We think the VA ICT program is one that with increased use could not only assist in amplifying personnel for our veterans, but could also provide much-needed transition assistance to those exiting the service by giving them a mission to move directly into.

Ellett closed by discussing legislation being considered to expand care for veterans through improving long-term care, home services and living conditions, and community care.

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“The American Legion believes that veterans, and their families, are best served when their long-term care needs are promptly met while also honoring their self-autonomy and giving them the choice to remain within their local communities,” she said. “We support the introduced legislation that not only calls for an increase in funding to support housing improvements for disabled veterans so they may retain self-autonomy in the comfort of their own home, but also that which calls for codifying community care access standards to ensure veterans will receive timely, quality health care.”

Ellett also stressed the importance of caring for those who care for others. “Often the caregivers of veterans, be they spouses, siblings, even children, carry a burden that many of us don’t see,” she said. “They do such a good job of holding up the veteran that no one sees the cracks in the foundation. As a disabled veteran, the spouse of a disabled veteran, and an advocate for our veterans and their families, I have witnessed the demons that lay in wait in the dark for each of us. The American Legion calls on Congress to pass legislation such as those discussed today to assist in evolving care and support for our nation’s veterans and their families.

Read Ellett’s submitted testimony [here](#). Watch Ellett’s oral testimony beginning at the 1:05:28 mark [here](#).

CONGRESS



Rep. Escobar (D-TX)

As both the House and the Senate prepare to take a two-week break, authorizers and appropriators on both sides of the Hill were busy this week.

The House Armed Services Committee (HASC) marked up its FY24 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) on Wednesday. The committee sped through consideration of about 800 amendments (of which around 50 received some level of debate) and still managed to end shortly after midnight, which is almost a record for them. This was enabled, in part, to the committee’s adoption of electronic voting, which proved to be much, much faster than the old process of calling the roll.

An amendment by Rep. Escobar (D-TX) was adopted to remove copayments under TRICARE for contraception. This places the military community on par with civilians in terms of insurance coverage. Although HASC chair Rep. Rogers (R-AL) opposed the amendment, it was adopted on a bipartisan 35-24 vote.

Another amendment, introduced by Rep. Courtney (D-CT), will have the Department of Defense (DoD) conduct a study to investigate ways to help Ukraine develop centers of excellence (CoEs) for treating

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traumatic brain and extremity injuries. This was the most bipartisan amendment of the day that received a roll call vote, receiving 49 ayes and 10 nays.

At the end of the day, the full bill was reported out of the committee on an almost bipartisan 58-1 vote.

In a sign that many lawmakers are frustrated by the role played by pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs) in drug pricing, Rep. Scott (R-GA) tried to amend the NDAA to prohibit the Pentagon from contracting with any of the three largest ones, which control upwards of 80% of the market. He withdrew the amendment because the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) scored it as costing more money than is currently spent. However, he promised that some version of this amendment will again appear when the bill hits the House floor.

Below are provisions supported by The American Legion that were included in the HASC markup:

- Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) removed from calculating a service member's Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) needs. [sec. 601]
- Extending the period of eligibility for TRICARE Reserve Select for survivors of a member of the selected reserve from six months to three years. [sec. 7xx by Rep. Courtney (D-CT)]
- Creation of a grant program to increase collaboration between DoD and Israel on PTSD research. [sec. xxx by Rep. Waltz (R-FL)]

The SASC is expected to finish its work this week.

On Wednesday, the House voted to approve two veterans-related bills:

- S. 30, FY23 Veterans Affairs Major Medical Facility Authorization Act; and
- HR 3672, designating the VA clinic in Indian River, Michigan, as the Pfc. Justin T. Paton VA Clinic.

Having passed the Senate on March 21, S. 30 now goes to the President for his signature.

HOUSE COMMITTEE OKS BILL THAT BOOSTS DISABILITY PAY FOR MANY MEDICALLY RETIRED VETERANS

Some 50,000 medically retired veterans would receive increased service-related payments under a bill advanced Wednesday for a House vote by the chamber's Armed Services Committee.

The Major Richard Star Act would allow veterans medically retired from the military for combat-related injuries before serving 20 years to receive full retirement pay and disability compensation from the Department of Veterans Affairs. The measure was passed by the House Armed Services Committee by unanimous voice vote just before the committee took up the [Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act](#), the annual bill that sets Congress' policy and spending priorities for the Pentagon.

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Under current law, veterans who are medically retired for service-related injuries before 20 years and received a less than 50% disability rating from the VA are forced to forfeit a portion of their benefits. The Wounded Warrior Project, a nonprofit advocacy group, estimated those dollar-for-dollar offsets between military retirement pay and VA disability payments could cost a veteran at least “hundreds of dollars” every month.

The Major Richard Star Act would allow all medically retired service members who receive Combat Related Special Compensation — VA benefits for those specifically injured in combat — to collect their full disability benefits and retirement pay.

But lawmakers warned new budget caps passed as part of a debt limit deal enacted this month could keep the bill from being passed. Because of the spending caps imposed by the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023, some \$8 billion must be removed from spending plans for the Star Act to be approved, said Rep. Adam Smith of Washington, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee.

Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Ala., chairman of the committee, said he would work with the other committee members on finding such a spending offset.

Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Fla., said the bill’s advancement was a step closer to rectifying “an injustice that keeps combat disabled veterans from receiving full military benefits.” Bilirakis earlier this year introduced the bill, which he said had 324 co-sponsors.

“The brave men and women who return from serving our country should be able to receive the benefits promised to them,” Bilirakis said. “Military retirement pay and service-connected disability compensation are two completely different benefits. One does not diminish the merits of the other.”

The bill is named for Maj. Richard Star, an Army veteran, father and husband who was medically retired after suffering combat injuries, according to Bilirakis’ office. Star died in 2021 of cancer linked to toxic exposure from burn pits on deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Wounded Warrior Project and other veterans organizations have championed the bill for more than two years. The bill also has been introduced in the Senate, where it has 66 co-sponsors. It was not clear Wednesday, however, when or if the bill would be considered by the upper chamber.

Wounded Warrior Project “strongly believes that collecting both benefits should never be considered ‘double dipping,’ and no retiree should be subject to the offset,” according to the organization’s fact sheet on the bill. “For this reason, WWP will continue to support legislation to eliminate the offset for all retirees and considers the Major Richard Star Act one step towards achieving that goal.”

The American Legion supports the Major Richard Star Act and has encouraged its members [to contact Congress](#) in support of the legislation.

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APPROPRIATIONS PROCESS

The House Appropriations Committee (HAC) met Thursday morning to mark up the Defense spending bill. The Senate Appropriations Committee (SAC) kicked off its spending bill markups on Thursday, with the Military Construction/Veterans Affairs bill.

SAC chair Sen. Murray (D-WA) emphasized the importance of returning to “normal order” to get the appropriations bills passed on time. She questioned the inclusion of policy riders on the House side that have nothing to do with the bills themselves. These riders are being included on all of the HAC bills, and are unlikely to be included in the final compromise versions passed by the full Congress. During the HAC markups, Democrats also questioned the Republicans’ policy riders.

LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

In an effort to recognize the weekly accomplishments of our Legionnaires, we will spotlight an individual every week. These individuals demonstrate exceptional grassroots activism by meeting with/contacting their Congressional Representative/Senator to advocate for veterans. Efforts like these truly make a difference and give veterans a voice in Congress.

Tynetta Runnels, Texas

This week, we are excited to recognize Tynetta Runnels from the Department of Texas meeting with the office of Rep. Crockett (D-TX) to discuss veterans’ legislation. Specifically, Rep. Crockett is working on expanding national cemeteries, which The American Legion supports.

Thank you, Ms. Runnels!



Tynetta Runnels and Legionnaires meet with Rep. Crockett's (D-TX) staff.

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If you have made a grassroots effort and would like to be considered for next week's "Legionnaire of the Week," please fill out the Congressional Contact Report Form [here](#). You can also email me at kisaacson@legion.org.

UPCOMING HEARINGS

There are no hearings next week.