

# Key veterans legislation passes Senate committee

The Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs passed several pieces of legislation that address DAV's critical policy goals at an Aug. 5, legislative markup. After returning from summer recess, Congress has a limited window on getting these bills on the Senate calendar and passed by the end of the year, which marks the end of the 116th Congress.

"We've lost a lot of ground this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic and we have an upcoming presidential election, but we still have time—albeit limited—to get these important bills over the finish line," said National Legislative Director Joy Ilem. "We have lots of work to do and a limited number of legislative days remaining in 2020. DAV will continue the fight with hopes of seeing this key legislation passed into law in order to improve the lives of the men and women who have served our country."

## **S. 514—The Deborah Sampson Act**

The Deborah Sampson Act is a comprehensive omnibus bill intended to improve women veterans' health care and to remove barriers many women face to accessing care. The House version of the bill—H.R. 3224—passed late last year. In August, the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs took up and passed its version of the bill (S. 514) and marked up the legislation adding a number of key provisions from H.R. 3224. Now, it heads to the Senate floor for consideration.

If enacted, this legislation would increase the number of women's health providers in the VA; provide additional funding for the women veterans health care mini-residency training program for primary and emergency care clinicians; permanently

authorize women veterans' counseling retreats; and examine the effect of intimate partner violence on women veterans.

Notably, S. 514 includes a number crucial provisions DAV pushed for such as:

- Establishing a VA Office of Women's Health;
- Creating policy and procedures to ensure veterans can safely and easily report incidents of sexual harassment or assault in VA facilities;
- Ensuring women veterans' program managers and coordinators have adequate time and training to fulfill their duties;
- Surveying women about access to customized prosthetic items; and
- Assessing the needs of women experiencing intimate partner violence.

### **S. 2950—The Veterans Burn Pit Exposure Recognition Act of 2019**

The Veterans Burn Pit Exposure Act of 2019—a bill based on an original DAV concept—would help veterans cut through red tape in the VA disability claims process by conceding exposure to burn pits for certain locations.

Currently, the VA does not provide a presumption of service connection for diseases related to burn pit exposure. Because there is no current presumptive service connection, veterans must file claims for direct service connection for diseases and illnesses related to burn pit exposure. This requires veterans to provide sufficient evidence of burn pit exposure, the list of toxins emitted from the burn pit and a statement of nexus between the exposure to toxins and their current disability.

This bill would concede exposure to burn pits to any veteran who served in the locations recognized by the VA Airborne

Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry. It would also concede exposure to specific toxins, as currently accepted by the VA in their adjudication manual. If the evidence is not sufficient for the VA to grant the claim, the bill requires the VA to request a medical opinion to address the association of the veteran's claimed disease to the known toxins.

This would remove obstacles for veterans establishing claims based on burn pits exposure and ensure the VA conducts a medical exam and provides an opinion as to the association of the toxic exposures and the claimed disease.

The Veterans Burn Pit Exposure Act of 2019 now heads to the Senate for a vote.

### **S. 785—The Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019**

The Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act is a piece of comprehensive bi-partisan legislation that aims to expand eligibility and improve access to mental health services for transitioning service members and veterans in order to reduce suicide rates and improve mental health among veterans.

The VA mental health program experienced tremendous increased demand for services over the last decade. Troops returning from deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan required mental health care readjustment services including treatment for PTSD, substance use disorders, depression and anxiety. Despite VA efforts and increased resources for mental health care and specialized services, suicide rates among veterans have not declined.

S. 785 seeks to improve VA mental health programs and increase partnerships with community providers by:

- Developing a strategic plan and report for expansion of health care services to transitioning service members;
- Updating clinical practice guidelines for assessment and management of service members and veterans at risk for suicide;
- Providing grants to local organizations working to help veterans who are at high risk for suicide but not using the VA;
- Evaluating complementary and alternative care options such as, yoga, meditation, acupuncture and tai chi;
- Creating a pilot program to provide veterans access to non-clinical integrative health services such as animal therapy, sports and recreational therapy;
- Studying the effectiveness of VA suicide prevention efforts, staffing levels for mental health providers; and
- Hiring more suicide prevention coordinators for each VA facility.

## **Strong Finish**

“It’s important that our members and supporters understand the urgency of getting these bills passed before the 116th Congress comes to an end at the end of 2020,” added Ilem. “We’ve made tremendous strides on our critical legislative goals over the last two years, but we need your help getting pending legislation through the final stages and on to the president’s desk for his signature before the clock runs out.”

We urge DAV members and supporters to contact your Senators and ask them to pass these vital veterans bills—S. 514, S. 2950 and S. 785. You can follow along with legislative updates by joining DAV CAN (Commander’s Action Network) at [davcan.org](http://davcan.org).