Veterans mental health bill signed into law

President Donald Trump signed the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act—Public Law 116-171—into law in October 2020. The bipartisan legislation—introduced by Senators Jon Tester and Jerry Moran in 2019—is a comprehensive and aggressive approach to connect more veterans with the mental health care they need and earned. DAV has fought hard to see this legislation signed into law before the start of the new Congress in 2021.

The law amends a number of Department of Veterans Affairs authorities related to helping veterans transition from military to civilian life, suicide prevention, mental health care research and oversight, mental health care staffing and health care for women veterans.

“We are extremely pleased to see this comprehensive mental health legislation become law after years of advocating on its behalf,” said National Legislative Director Joy Ilem. “This law allows VA to take a new approach to fighting the veteran suicide crisis.”

The law also includes new policies to increase the number of mental health professionals in VA facilities, bolster telehealth programs for rural and remote veterans, and promote innovative treatment options.

“This legislation moves America closer to a goal that all citizens can support: increasing the local resources available to our men and women who answered the call to defend this nation,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Wilkie. “This law will expand mental health care services at VA facilities and at the same time provide grants to make it easier for veterans to access non-VA resources in their
This comprehensive bill, in line with DAV Resolution Number 370, will help increase outreach and services to veterans at risk for suicide and improve VA mental health services by:

- Strengthening VA’s mental health workforce to serve more veterans by offering scholarships to mental health professionals to work at Vet Centers, and placing at least one Suicide Prevention Coordinator in every VA hospital;
- Directing the department to develop a staffing plan for increasing the number of mental health counselors and region-specific incentives needed to hire them;
- Improving rural veterans’ access to mental health care by increasing the number of locations at which veterans can access VA telehealth services;
- Implementing a pilot program to expand veterans access to complementary and integrative health programs through animal therapy, agriculture therapy, sports and recreation therapy, art therapy and post-traumatic growth programs;
- Studying the health benefits of providing integrative health treatments such as yoga, meditation, acupuncture, chiropractic care;
- Establishing a grant program that allows the VA to better collaborate with community organizations already serving veterans with a goal of early identification and supportive prevention services for veterans at risk of suicide; and
- Studying the impact of living at high altitude and associated suicide risk factors for veterans and implementing a precision medicine initiative to identify and validate brain and mental health biomarkers among veterans to better identify and treat depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.

“The COVID-19 pandemic required us to adapt quickly in order
to continue our advocacy on behalf of America’s veterans,” said Ilem. “We still have a lot of work to do in the new year, but we are pleased this comprehensive mental health bill made it through before the end of the 116th Congress.”

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