

NH STATE VETERANS ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

Meeting Date: 6 April 2021

Location: Virtual ZOOM

OFFICERS and VOTING MEMBERS in attendance (✓):

Paul Lloyd - Chair
 Diane Domenicis - Vice Chair
 Denise DeBlois - Secretary
 Armand Soucy - Chaplain
 Kelly Dobens - Treasurer
 David Kenney - Chair Emeritus

Air Force Association

✓ Kevin Grady (prim) Gavin MacAloon

Air Force Sergeants Association

Bob Heichlinger (prim) Ray Hayes (alt)

American Legion

✓ Mike Lopez (prim) Robert Blais (alt) Ollie Brooks (alt)

AUSA Col. Cross Chapter

✓ Greg d'Arbonne (prim) ✓ Ed Harrington (alt)

Camp Resilience

✓ Kurt Webber (prim) ✓ Ed Harrington (alt)

Catholic War Veterans

✓ Denise DeBlois (prim) ✓ Robert Guldner (alt) ✓ Armand Soucy (alt)

Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association

Ray Schwendeman (prim) Larry Ward (alt)

Disabled American Veterans

Andrew Patterson (prim). ✓ Robert Guldner (alt). ✓ Paul Boore (alt)

Korean War Veterans

√ Mike Lopez (prim) Conrad Perreault (alt)

Marine Corps League

Shawn Carboni (prim) Mark Lindsley (alt) √ Chris Peirce (alt)

Military Officers Association (MOAA)

√ Peter Burdett (prim) Bob Jaffin (alt) Joe DiChiaro Jr. (alt)

Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH)

Tony Fowler

National Guard Association of NH

√ Peter Duffy (prim) √ Roy Hunter (alt) √ Mike Horne (alt)

NH Army Retiree Council

√ Frank Musmanno (prim) √ Mike Rice (alt)

NH National Guard Enlisted Association

Mike Lestage (prim) √ Mike Rice (alt) Jack Howley (alt)

NH Veterans Association

√ Kelly Dobens (prim) Mike Young (alt) Doug Crooker(alt)

Reserve Officers Association of NH

√ David Kenney (prim) Mike Horne (alt) BG John Pappas (alt)

Rolling Thunder.

√ Bruce Garry (prim) Keith Hurrell (alt) √ Diane Domenicus (alt)

Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)

Russ Norris (alt) √ Paul Lloyd (alt)

Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA-41)

√ Ray Goulet (prim) Alan Grant (alt)

Legislative Members (Voting):

√ Al Baldasaro
 √ Regina Birdsell
 √ Bob Guida
 Patricia Klee

LEGISLATIVE ADVISORS: (non-voting):

Governor's Office - Jane Graham
Senator Maggie Hassan - Justin Troiano
Senator Jeanne Shaheen - Chris Scott
Congressman Chris Pappas - Patrick Carroll
Congresswoman Annie Kuster - Tom Giancola

COMMITTEE ADVISORS/AGENCIES:

Kevin Forrest, Director, VAMC Manchester, NH
Dr. Brett Rusch, Director, VAMC White River Junction, VT
BG David J. Mikolaities - Adjutant General NHNG
Warren Perry, Deputy Adjutant General- NHNG
Shawn Buck, NH State Veterans Cemetery
Margaret LaBrecque, NH Veterans Home
William Gaudreau, Director, Office of Veteran Services
Amy Cook, DHHS
John Reed, Martin's Point
Dan Marcek, VETFLIX
Barry Conway, Sage Emeritus
Jorge Dreusicke, American Legion

GUESTS:

Dr. Becky Rhoads for Dr. Brett Rusch (VAMC White River Junction, VT)
Will Goncher for Justin Troiano (Senator Maggie Hassan)
Elizabeth Malia for Chris Scott (Senator Jeanne Shaheen)
Kat Cosgrove for Patrick Carroll (Congressman Chris Pappas)

OPEN MEETING/CALL TO ORDER: Paul Loyd, Chairman, convened meeting at 1704.

Pledge of Allegiance: Chairman

Invocation: Armand Soucy

Moment of Silence:

Welcome - Remarks of the Chair: Paul welcomed everyone. He reminded he members and guests that this is an apolitical group. We are here for the veterans. We have some guests with us tonight filling in for Chris, Justin and Patrick. Will is here for Justin. Elizabeth is here for Chris. Kat is here for Patrick. Welcome.

Introduction of New Members/Guests

No guest speakers.

Secretary's Report: Meeting has a quorum.

Message from the Secretary: If you are attending the meeting by mobile phone or iPad, please let me know who you are in the chat so I can record your attendance. You can also send me an email: [**dmdeblois65@gmail.com**](mailto:dmdeblois65@gmail.com)

A motion to accept the minutes of March 2, 2021 was made by Ray Goulet, 2nd by Darwin Beeman. Unanimous. Motion carries.

Treasurer's Report: Kelly Dobens is not present. Chairman Paul Lloyd reported there is a balance of \$802.67. It is the same.

Comments from Chair Emeritus: No remarks.

Guest Speaker: None.

SUPPORTING AGENCY REPORTS:

Manchester VA Update: Kevin Forrest

Corey Beem sent slides.

A bunch of pictures in the middle of the slide deck show you how we have been doing on the construction of the Urgent Care and Mental Health building.

Clinic Update: We will be opening the Portsmouth CBOC on April 19, 2021. It has been almost a year since Covid and we have been co-located Somersworth CBOC. They (Somersworth) will be doing a soft hand-off with the Portsmouth enrolled patients. They will make calls to patients with appointments to make sure they do not end up going to Somersworth CBOC. We'll have a good month of transition. The Public Affairs Officer is getting the word out to all Portsmouth enrolled veterans. That's been a long time waiting.

We are fortunate to have Senator Hassan visit us yesterday. She walked through the vaccine clinic and spoke with veterans. Senator Hassan spoke about how her Save Lives Act has been doing.

Vaccine update: The Save Lives Act expanded the eligibility for the Covid vaccine to all veterans, whether they are enrolled in VA or not as well as spouses and caregivers. After today, we will have vaccinated 100 spouses. We're getting our battle rhythm down. We have vaccinated a number of caregivers including those in the Veteran Directed Care and other programs.

We have done some Community Partnership Awards to both the Senior Center in Portsmouth as well as other venues who have really helped us out in making big forums available for us to do our vaccine clinics. We have teamed up with the Bedford VA. They have a good supply of Pfizer vaccine. The community partners have made it all happen. We have been working with them and want to recognize them.

We have our Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) looking at some of our mental health programs as well as our integrative pain program. They started their accreditation yesterday. Things are looking good. So I am happy with the team. It's nice to know that after Covid that we still look at accreditation and quality of care. The team will finish up about noon tomorrow.

Last week, we had the Long Term Care Institute (LTCI) which comes in to look at our Community Living Center. They were in Manchester April 1st and 2nd. They did our accreditation and site survey. There were only clinical findings that were consultative in nature. We are looking into it. There were a couple of things with the facility - some HVAC related issues. Overall it was a really successful survey. It is nice to know that after having everything buttoned up for a year that both the facility and our programs are still full steam ahead. And then I know why. Andy Patterson mentioned at a session or two ago that the DAV donated two vans. We formally recognized the donations last month. That was really great. The vans are on the road and we are working with the DAV.

Personnel Updates: Deb Krinsky, our Chief of Voluntary Services, retired last Friday. We are really going to miss Deb a lot here. We have Stella, our Congressional Liaison, who is serving as Acting Chief of Voluntary Services right now.

Dr. Christopher Corcoran at the Somersworth CBOC recently retired. We are actively recruiting for that position.

Dr. Paul Haley, a psychiatrist, joined Team Manchester and he will be at the Somersworth CBOC. I met him at our new employee orientation last week.

Finally, I think we are working on the final acceptance of the Chief of Primary Care. This has been a long time in the making with Dr. Zeiga Sears. Hopefully, we will finish up with that recruit here.

Things are looking up. We have another primary care provider who has tentatively accepted for the Manchester campus. I will provide updates on those next month.

Construction Updates: We are looking for a fall opening for the Clinical Services Building with Urgent Care and Mental Health. They plan on turning the building over probably the end of May and then we'll do out activation. Slides were shown.

The Mountain Entrance will be upgraded with a new elevator in fall of this year.

The Women's Health Clinic is projected to open in 2022. We had to do some cost changes on that recently. That should not get in the way of the projected start date.

The Loop Road Project will put a road around the whole campus is under design.

Our other Specialty Care Building will be on the left side of the campus. It is under design and scheduled for 2022.

Some other upgrades: Just to make sure we have all of our sterilization for all equipment, we have Sterile Processing Water upgrades in the near future. Then a Nurse Call Replacement System is going in for the Community Living Center.

Appointments: In the future, I will show some timelines for both face to face and virtual care appointments. We are about 60 percent face to face. We will see if we can get a better breakdown for some of the specialties. We are just trying to meet the needs of veterans whether it be face to face or virtual and get them what they want.

Vaccination Data: Our data shows that 38 percent of our enrolled veterans are vaccinated. We are trying to capture many veterans who already got the vaccine in the community through the state. As we populate the records, we can get some better accuracy. When we reach out and assess whether somebody wants a vaccine, many of them already had it. So I think it is more like 50 percent of veterans that had the vaccine. We are doing Saturday clinics. We do about 500-600 vaccines between Saturday and Sunday. We have some upcoming venues for the Nashua North High School and will be using the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. We are vaccinating all authorities under the Save Lives Act. I encourage the spouses of veterans that need a

vaccine to contact the VA for an appointment. We will be at the Somersworth CBOC in the future.

Photos were shown of the Clinical Services building with a view from Smyth Road, then the lower campus, the ambulance entrance on the right, the walk in entrance for Urgent Care, the parking plan, larger waiting room area, check in desk, nurses station, isolation rooms, exam rooms, negative pressure rooms, corridors in mental health, large group therapy rooms There are 10 exam rooms in Urgent Care that can be changed to negative pressure rooms for patients with infectious diseases. We are now waiting for furniture. They are doing a great job.

Slide on Suicide Prevention: We will be on the Jack Heath Show tomorrow. In May, we are hosting the Zero Suicide Academy with 8 community partners. Our Public Affairs Officer is working with that through the community.

White River Junction VA Update: Dr. Becky Rhoads

Email: Becky.Rhoads@va.gov

She presented slides.

The White River River Junction VA is going through the same updates as the Manchester VA.

Vaccine Update: The Save Lives Act allows for all veterans to get the vaccine at the VA. The character of their discharge does not matter, Spouses and caregivers can also get a vaccine at the VA. WRJ is a site that has been working with the Department of Homeland Security. We have been vaccinating their employees since February. The VA and Homeland Security have a Memorandum of Agreement. A couple of these clinics are coming up. In Vermont, the age for the vaccine is 40 and up. In New Hampshire, the age for the vaccine is 16 and up. Many are getting the vaccine through the state or workplace.

To schedule a vaccine call: 802-296-5151. This is the dedicated Covid vaccine call center.

We have smoothed the process a little bit for folks that are coming to us through the Save Lives Act.

We have had a small percentage of employees and veterans getting the vaccine. We thought there would be thousands and it ended up being several hundred. The numbers are really nice here in terms total shots and arms that we have been able to do and broken out by first and second dose.

Recent Events: The Joint Commission showed up today to do their survey.

Ward Renovation Update: The inpatient unit has never been updated since 1974. It is the oldest in all VA New England and never has been updated. We still have rooms that could potentially take four patients with a shared bathroom. Under regular circumstances this is not consistent with modern hospitals. It is not an ideal setup in Covid. So we are really excited that it is a long term renovation. Our goal during this renovation is that the patients who experience it will experience zero disruption in their care. It is a big disruption to the rest of the hospital in terms of how things go and function. Anyone who's had the unfortunate occasion to go to the Emergency Department knows it was moved during Covid. There is construction going on right now. The ED will revert back to its regular location in May. Then we will prep for Water Renovation Project.

Question by Barry Conway: How many long term beds do you have there?

Kevin's response: We still advertise 41 beds. But we have 28 single occupancy beds. As of this morning, I think we had 19.

Trivia question by Barry Conway: Where was the first CBOC in New Hampshire?

Barry: The first CBOC in NH was at the NH Veterans Home. It moved to Tilton in 2005. They needed more space.

Kevin added that that the Dental Clinic should open by the end of the fiscal year.

DMAVS Update: Shawn Buck

NH Office of Veterans Services - Bill Gaudreau:

The VA continues to push through their appeals backlog. This office represented more than 70 clients with VA appeals. We will see more before the year ends. We are unaware of how many other appeals were held for veterans of other agencies. The agencies are looking to getting back to face to face appointments beginning May 4th.

Department of Military & Veterans Services - Amy Cook:

New Hampshire Employment Security will be hosting a virtual job fair featuring the 19 NH veteran friendly businesses and veteran and program partners. The fair will take place May 6th from 11 AM to 1 PM. A variety of businesses will be available to meet with job seekers. That's a great opportunity.

Applications for the 2021 recognition will be available on the demand website soon. Applications will be accepted this year from July 1st to August 31st. We hope to add a significant number of new businesses to the program. So spread the word on that.

An advisory panel for the program met for the first time in March. All the businesses in attendance are excited to form more effective partnerships with NH veterans, their

families and the veteran community. A lot of good work is being done by Amy and her team.

NH State Veterans Cemetery - Shawn Buck:

Memorial Day is traditionally May 30th. This year the ceremony will be at 6 PM. Because it is on a Sunday, we decided to move it to the evening hours. We're encouraging folks to do it virtually. If you choose to come to the cemetery, we ask that you bring your own lawn chairs, socially distance, wear a mask, and just be safe. After the Memorial Day service, the 100 Nights of Remembrance ceremony will begin at 7 PM. This goes from May 30th until September 11th. We'll play TAPS at the cemetery.

For those who donated and wondering, the Army Air Corps monument is done. The funds have been raised and the monument is complete and sitting at the cemetery. The only reason we have not placed it yet is because we have to rebuild the Army monument. The Army Air Corps monument is going immediately next to the Army monument. We have to get that done first. We are still accepting donations through the Cemetery Association to help defray the cost of the Army monument.

We are hiring. We have two part time jobs available the NH State Veteran's Cemetery. We're looking for folks to help us during the warm weather months with landscaping and physical labor. If you know somebody that has a kid home from college, an older high school student, or an adult, we're looking for some good help to keep our cemetery looking great.

NHVH Update: Peggy LeBrecque

It is great to see all your smiling faces. My first and exciting update is that we started walking about the home again last week. It is wonderful to see new veterans. Staff are very excited about it. One of my nurses said that we are not over staffed, we are under census.

We had a new admission today. We have adjusted our visitations to allow for a designated visitor. This visitor is able to come into the Veterans Home and be with their veteran and must wear a mask. They are allowed a hug when they come and a hug when they go. They can hold hands while visiting as long as they sanitize their hands before and after the visit.

There is lots of recreation going on and small activities around the home. Residents are taking walks down to the fish pond. They are sitting out in the sun. I overheard residents and staff talking about different planting they are going to do in the raised beds. It is nice for the residents to stick their hands in the dirt.

We do have a couple of construction projects coming up. One is for the nurse call system and another is to replace our heat pumps throughout the building.

Al Baldasaro asked: How many veterans do you have?

Response: We currently have 94 veterans. We have 8 waiting to get into the Tarrs and 16 waiting to get into the Life Enhancement Dementia unit. There are 80 active applications. People are still anxious to come into the home.

OLD BUSINESS:

#1. Spirit Award - Diane Domenicis

Last month we discussed the renaming of the Spirit Award. My comment is that the Spirit Award was created to shine a light on people in New Hampshire who volunteer time working with our New Hampshire veterans. I feel the name embodies the awards intent. So I ask you to leave it as is while remembering those who have passed in our hearts.

Dave Kenney added that he agrees with Diane. We need to leave it as is. It is all encompassing and not necessarily just put a spotlight on one person. I am not taking away anything Patti did for us. Not at all. But I think we can find other ways to honor Patti without having to do it this way. Al Baldasaro said that he agrees.

Ray Goulet initially made the motion last month to rename the Spirit Award with the family's permission and call it the Patti Fowler Spirit Award. It was seconded by Greg D'Arbonne. Ray now agrees with leaving it as is. Patti was the very first recipient of the Spirit Award. We can remember her that way as well. So he thinks we should leave it the way it is.

Chairman Paul Lloyd asked if we are all okay with leaving it as a Spirit Award. The members agreed.

#2. Military Appreciation Night and Our Community Salutes - Greg D'Arbonne

Greg wanted to take a minute and talk about May 20th - Military Appreciation Night at the Fisher Cats game. That is now a go. We will do "Our Community Salutes" prior to the game where the high school kids will be honored for joining the military. They will be sworn in and receive an award. Then the game will start at 6:30 PM. Tickets are \$9.00 for veterans.

The VFW has already donated \$1000 to Our Community Salutes. Greg challenges other veteran organizations to give a donation. We would like to pay for the tickets for the game for all the kids going in the military and their families.

A couple of years ago we had a dinner and that was great. Donations were received from the VFW, the American Legion, and the Catholic War Veterans. Greg challenges other organizations to show up and give a donation as well.

The ceremony for the kids is at 4:00 PM and the game starts at 6:30 PM. There will be a flyer available soon.

NEW BUSINESS:

#1. List of Organizations Providing Services to Veterans

Mike Lopez wants to find a complete list of organizations that provide services to veterans. He is trying to build a resource list of non profits or 501c3's. The Secretary of State did not have a list.

Send an email to Mike if you know of an organization in you community that helps raise money for veterans so they can give money to veterans for fixing their car or whatever the case may be. Include what they do. He is trying to get a handle on this especially in the Manchester, Nashua and Concord areas.

Ex. American Veterans (AmVets) and Veterans Count.

Dave Kenney suggested the Service Link on the State's website. Click on Veteran Services. Enter your zip code and city/town. It may not be a complete list but it is a start.

Other suggestions: Homeland Heroes Foundation and Rolling Thunder.

#2. Nominations in May

Chairman Paul Lloyd said that we will open nominations in the May meeting for Vice Chair and Treasurer. Diane is finishing up her second two year term as Vice Chair. She is going to have to take a break and we will have to elect somebody else as Vice Chair. Kelly is in her first term as Treasurer. So she can be renominated if she wants to be.

LEGISLATIVE BRIEFINGS: Kevin Grady - Legislative Chair

An email was send out with a brief synopsis of the LSR's being tracked. We are following five bills in the House. There is an in person meeting tomorrow so we will probably be down to two.

HB 117 - relative to the use of force at NH National Guard facilities; passed the House.

HB 317 - relative to the treatment of veterans' disability payments for purposes of determining child support. This took 2 hearings and did not sound promising.

HB 451 - New title: Allowing the New Hampshire Masons to issue decals for motor Vehicles (old title: HB 361 Gold Star Family decals).

HB 443 - relative to an extended term of imprisonment for assaulting military personnel.

HB 580 - requiring the approval of the Governor before the NH National Guard can be deployed overseas.

SB 120 - relative to physicians assistants employed at the Manchester VA Medical Center. SVAC supports it.

SB-132 - adopting omnibus legislation related to COVID-19. Senator Birdsell will give Insight on this one.

SB 143 - New title: adopting omnibus legislation relative to certain agency requests (Old title: National Guard Enlistment Incentive Program). There is no date for it.

Regarding Senate Bill 132, Senator Regina Birdsell said that anytime a bill passes, it is tabled to a budget year to save it. We look to possibly incorporate it into the budget. If the Bill goes to the House after the budget passed, then the Bill would just die. So we table it so we can pretty much save it and hopefully incorporate it into the budget if there is money there. Kevin added that the budget is in the hands of the Senate.

LEGISLATIVE ADVISORS:

Jane Graham (Governor's Office): Not present.

Chris Scott (Senator Shaheen): No written report submitted.

Report given by Elizabeth Malia for Chris Scott.

She highlighted the funding for the American Rescue Plan:

14.5 million for the VA to provide health care services and related support to eligible veterans. This includes funding to cover the impacts of delays.

272 million for the VA to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on the benefit side for the appeal backlog.

100 million in funding for investments and information technology.

400 million for up to 12 months of retraining assistance for veterans who are unemployed due to Covid-19 and do not have other education benefits. It allows the VA to recoup funds for waived co-pays for treatments provided to eligible veterans beginning April 6th (today). The VA first paused medical billing through September 30, 2021. This section also authorizes the VA to reimburse veterans who already submitted payments for care during this period.

There is also a billion dollars for State Veteran Homes.

The office is seeing things moving. The VA access to records has been restored to pre-pandemic levels. Just yesterday, Elizabeth was working on helping a family get their DD Form 214 so the veteran can apply for admission to the State Veterans Home.

Justin Troiano (Senator Hassan): Briefing attached.

Report given by Will Goncher for Justin Troiano.

Tom Giancola (Rep. Annie Kuster): Not present.

Patrick Carroll (Rep. Chris Pappas): Briefing attached.

Report given by Kat Cosgrove for Patrick Carroll.

Good of the Order:

Bill Roy: The Sweeney Post is getting 1000 cases of food every Saturday for veterans between 9 AM and 4 PM. We also deliver to senior houses in the area. Every case has milk, cheese, carrots, potatoes. It is really good stuff. We are encouraging any youth group to come down to volunteer. You can pick up as many cases as you want. You can deliver them in your communities. It is quite an effort to get a 50x20 foot box trailer every Saturday.

Mike Lopez: He is working with Andy Patterson on Memorial Day, May 31st. There is going to be a motor parade at 2 PM. There is going to be a ceremony at 3 PM at Veterans Memorial Park in Manchester for the dedication of the Vietnam monument

sponsored by the Disabled American Veterans. We will have refreshments and food at the Sweeney Post after the dedication. Everyone is welcome to attend one or both events.

Calendar of Events:

1st Wednesday- Monthly POW/MIA Vigil - 1900 at Veterans Park, Manchester, NH.

4th Tuesday - Monthly POW/MIA Vigil - 1900 at Langdon Park, Portsmouth, NH.

Every Thursday - Weekly POW/MIA Vigil - 1900 at Hesky Park, Meredith, NH.

May 6th - Virtual Job Fair.

May 20th - Military Appreciation Night and Our Community Salutes, Manchester, NH

Next meeting date: 04 May 2021 - Virtual

Adjourn Meeting: 1812

A motion was made by Ray Goulet to adjourn, second by multiple individuals. Unanimous. Motion carries.

Respectfully Submitted,

Denise M DeBlois
Secretary

On March 2nd

Senator Hassan cosponsored the Veterans Burn Pits Exposure Recognition Act, bipartisan legislation reintroduced by Senators Dan Sullivan (R-AK) and Joe Manchin (D-WV) to formally recognize that certain veterans were exposed to burn pits during their service in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other locations, which would make it easier for them to access U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care and benefits for illnesses and diseases related to exposure to burn pits.

Given the limited information that exists about exactly when and where burn pits were active, or the precise locations of individuals who served near them, it is unreasonable for a veteran to prove they were exposed to specific toxins from specific burn pits on specific days in order to access the VA benefits that they have earned. The Veterans Burn Pits Exposure Recognition Act would formally recognize that veterans who served near burn pits in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other locations were exposed to airborne hazards, toxins and particulate matters. This recognition and concession can potentially aid thousands of veterans who otherwise do not have documentation of their exposure.

On March 3rd

Senator Hassan joined with Senator Ernst in calling for a Memorial on the National Mall honoring those who served in the Global War on Terrorism. The Senators are leading a bipartisan effort to build a new memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. to honor the troops who served during the Global War on Terror.

In 2017, through bipartisan legislation, Ernst helped create the Global War on Terrorism Memorial Foundation, a private foundation, to begin the process of pursuing the construction of a memorial. The Global War on Terrorism Memorial Location Act, introduced today by Ernst and Hassan, is the next step in the process to construct the memorial in Washington, D.C.

The legislation proposes three locations for the memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.:

- Constitution Gardens – This site is located in the northwestern portion of Constitution Gardens, next to a knoll overlooking the pond. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is located directly to the west.
- West Potomac Park – This site encompasses an area that is centered on the Potomac Riverfront. The site area extends along the Potomac River shoreline to the northwest and southeast and is located approximately a half mile south of the Lincoln Memorial.

- JFK Hockey Fields – These two site alternates are situated between Ash Road and the pedestrian path located south of the Reflecting Pool.

On March 4th

Senator Hassan joined Senator Joni Ernst (R-IA) in reintroducing bipartisan legislation for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to designate one week per year as “Buddy Check Week” to organize outreach events and educate veterans on how to conduct peer wellness checks and recognize signs of suicide risk among fellow veterans.

Also on March 4th

Senator Hassan participated in a Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs hearing where she spoke with James “Bill” Oxford, National Commander of The American Legion, about the importance of conducting peer wellness checks – otherwise known as “Buddy Checks” – to connect veterans with their peers and help ensure that they are receiving the care that they need.

Oxford spoke about how the need for the Buddy Check program has grown amid the COVID-19 pandemic: “The isolationism, the separation-ism – all of those were affecting the mental health of a lot of veterans. As we continue to do our Buddy Checks it became more evident about the criticality [and] the need for that. That’s why we were supporting the Buddy Check Week bill at the VA and will continue to do that.”

On March 8th

The American Rescue Plan that the Senate passed on Saturday will close a loophole that for-profit colleges use to increase their own profits by taking advantage of veterans, service members, and their families. For-profit colleges -- which have troubling track records of misleading students and saddling them with crippling debt -- have seen an uptick in enrollment due to the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Senators Hassan and Dick Durbin have long worked to end the loophole. Currently, for-profit colleges and universities cannot derive more than 90 percent of their revenue from the U.S. Department of Education’s federal student aid programs. However, veterans’ and active duty service members’ federal education benefits – such as G.I. bill education benefits and the Department of Defense’s tuition assistance funds – do not count toward the 90 percent. This allows for-profit colleges to receive up to 100 percent of their revenue straight from federal taxpayers by enrolling large numbers of veterans and service members. It results in aggressive and, often, predatory recruitment of these students, who are too often left with substantial debt and little to nothing to show for it.

On March 11th

Senator Hassan highlighted the danger that toxic chemicals, such as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), pose to veterans, and their families, who have served on military bases during a hearing of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

"We have to recognize that unfortunately service members, veterans, and their families may have been exposed to toxic environments not only while serving overseas but also while they are right here at home," Senator Hassan said. "In my state of New Hampshire, members of the military who served at the Pease Air Force Base, their families, and people living in and the surrounding community were exposed to drinking water contaminated by high levels of PFAS, pollutants that are known as 'forever chemicals.'"

Senator Hassan expressed her support for strengthening PFAS safeguards at the federal level. She asked how previous Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) policies in response to toxic exposure on domestic military bases could inform other situations such as PFAS exposure.

On March 15th

U.S. Senator Maggie Hassan joined her colleagues in introducing bipartisan legislation to expand COVID-19 vaccine eligibility to all veterans, their spouses, and their caregivers through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). While the Manchester VA Medical Center and many other VA Medical Centers offer vaccines to veterans who receive their health care through the VA, current law restricted the VA from providing no-cost vaccine options for veterans not enrolled in VA services.

The bipartisan *SAVE LIVES Act* would allow the VA to provide no-cost COVID vaccination services to all veterans, the spouses of veterans, caregivers, and Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA) recipients to the extent that such vaccines are available. The legislation also urges the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to adjust the VA's vaccine allocation based on this increased eligibility pool, as much as the supply chain allows.

UPDATE: As many of you know, the SAVE LIVES Act was signed into law by President Biden on March 24th. Yesterday, April 5th, VISN 1 announced they would be implementing the expanded eligibility and providing COVID-19 vaccinations to anyone who served in the military, and their caregivers and spouses under the authority granted by the SAVE LIVES Act. The expanded authority depends on readily available COVID-19 vaccine supply and requires the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to continue to prioritize Veterans enrolled in VA care.

On March 17th

Senator Hassan joined her colleagues in introducing the Sergeant First Class Sean Cooley and Specialist Christopher Horton Congressional Gold Star Family Fellowship Program Act. The legislation would create a fellowship program in the Senate to offer an opportunity for Gold Star family members to participate in the system of government for which their loved one gave his or her life.

The fellowship program is funded through legislative branch appropriations, and the 12-month fellowship would be conducted in a Washington, D.C. or state office, at no cost to either the family member or the accepting Member of Congress.

On March 20th

Senator Hassan and a bipartisan group of her colleagues introduced legislation to honor the groundbreaking service of the women who served as telephone operators during World War I, and who were crucial in connecting American and French forces on the front lines. The bipartisan Hello Girls Congressional Gold Medal Act would honor the women of the U.S. Army Signal Corps, also known as the Hello Girls, which includes Chief Operator Grace Banker, whose granddaughter, Carolyn Timbie, lives in Atkinson.

The Hello Girls were recruited after male infantrymen struggled to connect calls quickly or communicate with their French counterparts. The bilingual Hello Girls were deployed to France to serve at military headquarters and command outposts in the field alongside the American Expeditionary Forces. Banker was the chief operator of the first group of Hello Girls to be sent to France during the war.

Despite their brave service, Grace Banker and many other Hello Girls were not granted veteran status until after their death.

On March 23rd

Senator Hassan joined Jeanne Shaheen in commending the announcement that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will provide \$1 billion in grants for State Veterans Homes. Congress provided the funding for these grants as part of the broader COVID-19 relief included in the American Rescue Plan and CARES Act that Senators Hassan and Shaheen worked to pass into law.

The grants being made by the VA include:

- \$500 million from the American Rescue Plan to provide grants through the current capital grant program for construction of State Veterans homes.

- \$250 million from the American Rescue Plan for grants related to operating needs based on each state's share of total Veteran residents in nursing homes and domiciliary care.
- \$150 million from the CARES Act for grants for capital needs for construction funds to modify buildings to prepare, prevent or respond in order to mitigate the risk of COVID-19.
- \$100 million designated by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, for grants for emergency payments to existing State Veterans Homes to prevent, prepare and respond to COVID-19.

Also on March 23rd

Senators Hassan and Thom Tillis introduced the Toxic Exposure in the American Military (TEAM Act), bipartisan legislation that fundamentally reforms and improves how veterans exposed to toxic substances receive health care and benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Specifically, the TEAM Act:

- Expands VA health care for veterans exposed to toxic substances. Treatment for conditions related to toxic exposures will be covered free of charge. Enrolled veterans will be eligible for treatment for unrelated conditions, but those services may be subject to a co-pay.
- Requires VA to respond to new scientific evidence regarding diseases associated with toxic exposure and establish new presumptions of service connection when supported by the science.
- Ensures VA enters into agreements with the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to review scientific studies regarding associations between diseases and exposure to toxic substances during military service.
- Establishes an independent scientific commission to assist the VA in determining the health effects of toxic exposure in veterans and report the commission's findings to VA and Congress.
- Expands training on toxic exposure issues for VA health care personnel.
- Requires VA to develop a questionnaire for primary care appointments to determine whether a veteran may have been exposed to toxic substances during service.

March 24th

Senator Hassan and Senator Braun introduced bipartisan legislation that helps the Department of Veterans Affairs actively recruit and hire separating Department of Defense medical department personnel to help fill its more than 45,000 open positions.

The Hire Veteran Health Heroes Act of 2021 directs the Department of Veterans Affairs to create a program that will help actively recruit medical personnel, who are within one year of completing their military service, to remain in federal health care in departments like Veterans Affairs.

Also on March 24th

Following continued advocacy by U.S. Senator Maggie Hassan, the U.S. Department of Education announced that 155 Granite Staters who were defrauded by predatory for-profit colleges will receive a total of more than \$2 million in borrower defense forgiveness.

“Students who have received a worthless degree from predatory for-profit colleges should not be burdened by thousands of dollars in student debt,” Senator Hassan said. *“This student loan forgiveness to Granite Staters will make an enormous difference in the lives of these students, and provide them with the financial relief to potentially pursue other educational opportunities. I am glad that the Biden administration heeded my calls to provide this critical relief to students, and I will keep working to hold for-profit colleges accountable for their deceptive practices.”*

On March 26th

Senators Hassan and Tillis, both members of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee, led 10 of their colleagues on the Committee in introducing a bipartisan resolution honoring Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) for their work supporting veterans amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The resolution discusses the immense challenges that veterans have faced during the pandemic, including the loss of more than 10,000 veterans to COVID-19, as well as more than one million veterans losing their jobs.

The resolution follows a series of hearings that the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee held to hear from VSOs about how they are serving veterans at this challenging time and ways that Congress can build on these efforts.

The resolution states, “Be it resolved, that the Senate honors and recognizes the patriotism and service to the United States provided by [VSOs] during the COVID–19 pandemic; commends efforts by VSOs to improvise and adapt to the challenges posed by COVID–19 to continue to support veterans in need, especially those left most vulnerable by the COVID–19 pandemic; and supports efforts by VSOs to enable veterans, their families, and their caregivers to receive the COVID–19 vaccine.”

April 2nd

Senator Hassan joined the rest of the NH Congressional Delegation in announcing that the New Hampshire State Veterans Home will receive \$564,287 in emergency funding to prevent, combat and mitigate COVID-19 in the facility. Specifically, the award was allocated through government funding legislation that was passed by Congress and signed into law in December and will help support efforts to protect the health and well-being of Veterans Home residents and staff.

In addition to this award allocated through the government funding legislation that passed Congress and became law in December, the delegation-backed American Rescue Plan includes additional emergency funding for state veterans homes across the country, including the New Hampshire State Veterans Home, that will be awarded at a later date.

Rep. Pappas DC Action for Vets – March 2021

Sponsored Bills

- None

Sponsored Letters

- March 2, 2021: Letter to Secretary McDonough asking for an updated plan on how VA plans to get off GAO's High-Risk List, which has been the focus of several O&I hearings
- March 16, 2021: Letter to Secretary McDonough asking for increased scrutiny over smaller VA offices to ensure that funding is being used efficiently

Co-Sponsored Bills

- **HR 1948 VA Employee Fairness Act of 2021:** Improves and secures ability of VA employees to collectively bargain and unionize
- **HR 2082 VA Supply Chain Resiliency Act:** Requires VA to partner with DOD and join their Warstopper program to ensure that we never face critical supply shortages as we did during the peak of COVID-19

Co-Signed Letters

- March 2, 2021: Letter to President Biden asking him to ensure that previously passed legislation aimed at helping veterans stationed at K2 military base in Uzbekistan are implemented quickly

Meetings

- **March 3, 2021:** Virtual meeting with NH members of the VFW
- **March 5, 2021:** Virtual meeting with the Acting Assistant Secretary of the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection, Hansel Cordeiro

Committee

- **House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Joint Legislative Presentation of Disabled American Veterans and other VSOs**
 - Wednesday, March 3, 2021
 - Asked what concrete steps Congress can take to improve presumption of toxic exposure and protections for women veterans?
- **House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Joint Legislative Presentation of The American Legion and other VSOs**
 - Thursday, March 4, 2021
 - Asked how Legion came to support the repeal of the 2001 Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF)
- **Economic Opportunity Subcommittee Roundtable on VR&E**
 - Wednesday, March 17, 2021
 - Was not able to ask questions
- **House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Joint Legislative Presentation of Veterans of Foreign Wars and other VSOs**

- Thursday, March 18, 2021
 - Was not able to ask questions
- **House Oversight and Investigation Subcommittee Hearing on “Pandemic and VA’s Medical Supply Chain: Evaluating the Year-Long Response and Modernization.”**
 - Wednesday, March 24, 2021
 - Asked why VA wasn’t a full participant in the Warstopper program before the pandemic began and if they were trying to participate now. Asked for comments on recently introduced Warstopper legislation. Asked what signs of progress we should look for in getting VA acquisition off the GAO High-Risk List. Asked if VA OIG still wanted subpoena authority.
- **Full House Veterans’ Affairs Committee Hearing on “VA’s First 100 Days with Secretary McDonough”**
 - Thursday, March 25, 2021
 - Asked if the Secretary would make whistleblower protection at VA a priority. Asked if he supported the bill to provide Burial Equity for Guards and Reservists.