

# Solid Start Act One-Pager

The Solid Start Act aims to amplify and expand the Solid Start program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

**Background:** The VA initiated the Solid Start program in December 2019 by committing to calling each separating service member three times within their first year after separation, regardless of separation type or characterization of service. This program is a valuable resource to veterans navigating the numerous changes that come within the first year of transition out of the military. This first year of transition results in suicide rates among veterans that are nearly two times higher than the overall veteran suicide rate.<sup>1</sup> Newly separated veterans encounter changes in job status, lifestyle, housing, health care, and location. They may encounter new obstacles that they weren't expecting when going through the mandatory transition classes offered during their last months in service. In 2017, among veterans who died by suicide, 62% had not been in contact with the Veterans Health Administration in the preceding two years,<sup>2</sup> and 40% of veterans responding to a recent survey by the American Legion were not sure whether they were eligible for VA mental health services.<sup>3</sup> The Solid Start program aims to engage veterans and provide information and access to resources that can help veterans in crisis.

**Bill Information:** This bill would codify the VA's program and provide clarity on some of its policy objectives. In particular, the bill recognizes that we need to provide up-to-date information about eligibility and access to resources that veterans have earned through their military service. It also recognizes the extreme stress of that first year of transition, and the need to support veterans during this critical time by connecting them with mental health resources faster and in a more responsive manner.

The bill ensures that the VA continues to improve upon its Solid Start program by authorizing appropriations at a level sufficient to support the program, requiring a GAO assessment of the program's efficacy, and specifying key authorizations for the program, including:

- Calling each veteran at least twice within the first year after separation, which builds in redundancy while allowing the VA flexibility to determine the best number of outreach calls
- Prioritizing outreach to veterans who accessed mental health resources prior to separation
- Ensuring that calls are tailored to the needs of each veteran by conducting quality assurance testing
- Collecting up-to-date contact information during the transition process
- Encouraging transitioning veterans to authorize alternate points of contact who can reach them in the event the veteran is unavailable for direct outreach from the VA
- Following up on missed phone calls through mailings and other outreach to ensure the veteran still receives similar information
- Including Solid Start information in VA booklets, on the website, and through other resources
- Striving to reach veterans who separated prior to the beginning of the Solid Start program, to offer them similar explanations of resources

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<sup>1</sup> "VA launches Solid Start to ensure Veterans are contacted during initial transition," VA Press Release, December 4, 2019, available at: <https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5367>.

<sup>2</sup> VA Office of Mental Health & Suicide Prevention, 2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> The American Legion, 2019 Mental Health Survey Executive Report, p. 5, available at: <https://www.legion.org/sites/legion.org/files/legion/publications/63VAR033030%20Mental%20Health%20Survey%20Report.pdf>.