

BUSINESS MEETING TO CONSIDER PENDING LEGISLATION AND NOMINATION

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 29, 2020

UNITED STATES SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Washington, D.C.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:35 a.m., in Room SR-418, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Jerry Moran, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Moran, Boozman, Cassidy, Rounds, Tillis, Sullivan, Blackburn, Cramer, Loeffler, Tester, Murray, Brown, Blumenthal, Hirono, Manchin, and Sinema.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN MORAN

Chairman MORAN. Good morning, everyone. Welcome. Thank you all for your presence today, and we will have what I hope will be a noncontentious, relatively short, but meaningful markup today in this Committee.

I am appreciative of the opportunity to now chair the Veterans' Affairs Committee. I would recognize my predecessor and our former Chairman, Johnny Isakson, and again commend and congratulate him on his tremendous service to the people of Georgia and to veterans across the country. I am—

[Applause.]

Chairman MORAN. Thank you. Thank you. And to welcome Kelly Loeffler, who has become the new United States Senator from Georgia and welcome her to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

[Applause.]

Chairman MORAN. While I am complimenting and commending Senator Isakson, I would express my gratitude for the friendship and working relationship that the Ranking Member Senator Tester and I have had on this Committee and others. Jon and I have the unusual circumstance of serving—we each serve on five committees. They happen to be the same five committees. And so I have been unable to extricate myself from Jon Tester on most everything.

Senator TESTER. Are you bragging?

Chairman MORAN. I was not bragging. I was lamenting.

[Laughter.]

Chairman MORAN. So I would express my belief that this Committee—a lot of momentous and contentious and historic things go on in the United States Senate as we have seen for the past few weeks. I hope this Committee will continue to be a haven of bipartisanship and camaraderie and working together.

I often think in the times that are challenging for me as a United States Senator, I will put on my walking shoes—maybe they are running shoes—and go down to the Lincoln Memorial. And if you make that track, we all know you pass by the World War II Memorial and by the Vietnam Wall, and you come back by the Korean War Memorial. And it is this reminder to me that while sometimes we forget what is important, those who served our country served for purposes unrelated to Democrat or Republican. And I will do everything I can to see that this Committee remains that place where we put veterans well above the partisanship. I do not expect us to always agree on everything, but I do not know any reason that this Committee cannot be an agreeable place in which we work to find consensus and common ground, a point on which we can rally on every occasion.

Senator Tester and I have had several meetings as we began this, my new chairmanship. I have set out a number of priorities for me as the Chairman. At the top of the list for policy consideration is mental health and veteran suicide prevention, and our markup today will in large part reflect that.

I would tell you that the bill that exhibits those issues is one that Senator Tester introduced and I cosponsored as his primary Republican sponsor months ago, perhaps more than that, maybe about a year ago. And so, again, this bill reflects the priority of these issues to us and reflects the desire to make certain that what we do is done in a way that can be supported by members of this Committee.

With that, I would say that an additional component of my desire in the way I chair this Committee is that every member of the Committee has—my priorities are not necessarily everybody's priorities, although I doubt that we have any disagreement about mental health and veteran suicide. But my goal is to make certain that we give everybody around this table the opportunity to present their ideas, their legislation, and, in fact, the bill that we are dealing with has now incorporated the amendments of many of you into the bill so that not only are we talking about mental health and veteran suicide, we are introducing into that bill—the bill that Senator Tester introduced a year ago—ideas from others on the Committee who wanted to make sure that their voices were heard on this topic.

So I look forward to working with all of you and trying to make certain that we do our best to make certain that those who served our country are cared for.

I had some concern that my job as a Chairman might be to fix the VA or to fix every problem, and we certainly are interested in working to make sure that the VA is improving its performance. But I think the goal that I have set for myself is that in every way we can, we take the veteran where he or she is in life and try to make their life better, allowing them to pursue their dreams the way they have allowed the rest of us in our country to pursue our dreams. And so I look forward to working with you to accomplish that goal.

I also appreciate the relationship that we have with the various veteran service organizations that are represented here today and across the country, and we look forward certainly to the input and

suggestions and advice from those who served and those who represent those who served.

So this morning let me now turn to Senator Tester for his opening statement, and then we will have a markup of about ten bills and one confirmation. And I think there is a general understanding of how this might proceed, but we will take each item as it comes. Senator Tester is recognized.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR TESTER

Senator TESTER. Well, Chairman Moran, first of all, thank you for your comments, and I want to thank you for scheduling this meeting for this markup today. I want to congratulate you for your appointment for being Chairman of this Committee. I think that if you are able to empower everybody on this Committee, as, quite frankly, Johnny did, I think we are going to have a great run. And so congratulations. I also want to welcome Senator Loeffler to the Committee.

But what is really interesting on this 29th day of January of 2020 is that this happens to also be Kansas Day, the day that Kansas entered the Union. And I am sure that is why you picked this day, as a favorite son of Kansas, to have this VA hearing.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Tester's staffer is from Kansas. He must be the one who knows that.

Senator TESTER. Well, I did my history—I did not get good grades in much, but history was good. So it is good. It is good.

Look, I have known the Chairman well for years. We have accomplished a great deal together working on a number of bills on behalf of our troops, veterans, farmers, and rural America. I have done a lot of heavy lifting for Jerry in the United States Senate, helping him get an agricultural appropriations bill across the finish line. I voted for that bill, and I even voted against my own Subcommittee's bill. And Jerry knows intimately the critical role that I played in getting a biomedical research facility, research lab in Kansas, and it was good to work with you on that also.

Chairman MORAN. It only passed after Jon Tester took a handkerchief out of his pocket that was white and conceded.

[Laughter.]

Senator TESTER. Well, that is because Jerry and I have such—

[Laughter.]

Chairman MORAN. The Committee will come to order.

Senator TESTER. So, look, moving together on this Committee, I am very confident we can get a lot of stuff done for veterans, and it is fitting on today's agenda is the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act. This is John Scott Hannon right here. It is a bill, as Jerry pointed out, that we introduced more than a year ago, named for a former Navy Seal who served our Nation honorably for 23 years.

After serving in combat, John Scott Hannon came back to Helena, Montana, but the invisible wounds of war followed him home. He was open about his journey to recovery, getting involved in the Montana chapter of the National Alliance for Mental Illness and animal therapy programs at Montana Wild. He died by suicide on February 25, 2018. This bill honors his legacy by supporting the kinds of programs that improved Commander Hannon's quality of

life and by expanding our understanding of mental health conditions and the treatments which may have made diagnosing his condition easier.

There is a ton of good provisions in this bill, which is why many of the folks sitting around this table are cosponsors, and I am very proud of this bill and the bipartisan amendment that I along with Chairman Moran and Senator Boozman will support to amend Section 201. This amendment represents a compromise. It represents a compromise, and I believe it represents everyone's priorities. It would allow the Senate to award grants to community organizations to provide suicide prevention services to veterans and their families. As a part of this grant, veterans will be able to receive necessary emergency care when they are in crisis. And if they need ongoing care, they can get the care at the VA or through VA Community Care Network, whether they are currently eligible for VA care or not. It is a comprehensive approach combining support services with evidence-based clinical care provided by the Department. It will ensure that no veteran slips through the cracks. And I want to sincerely thank you, Chairman Moran and Senator Boozman, for your leadership and your hard work on getting this bill where it is today, because it would not be here without your leadership and your hard work.

When we get there, I would encourage all members of this Committee to support including this bipartisan amendment to the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act so that we can move this bill forward. It would send an important message not only to the veterans but the American public that we can come together during political turbulent times to do what is right, in this case to provide critical support for those who have sacrificed so much on our behalf, and to connect more of them to life-saving mental health care that they need.

Again, Mr. Chairman, I look forward to working with you. I look forward to your leadership on this Committee and thank you.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Tester, thank you very much.

We will now turn to the bill. We will now turn to S.785, the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019, and the Committee is now open for debate or amendment.

Senator BROWN. Mr. Chairman?

Chairman MORAN. Senator Brown.

SENATOR SHERROD BROWN

Senator BROWN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I welcome you as Chairman, too. I have enjoyed our relationship on the Banking Committee and here, and thanks for—I know you will continue the good bipartisan leadership of this Committee and your work in the Senate, so thanks for that.

And to Ranking Member Tester, thanks for holding this important markup. I am offering and withdrawing my Veterans Debt Fairness Act as an amendment to S.785. The severity of the VA overpayment and veteran debt issue impacts veterans throughout the country. We hear that in all of our States. It adds additional stress to veterans and their families. Our veterans have dealt with enough stress moving every few deployments, every few years, and

then transitioning back to civilian life. They should not be forced to pay for a VA accounting mistake. These financial hardships have a real impact on a veteran's health, on mental health, on their families.

I would ask for your commitment, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Tester, to work toward a compromise bill to achieve relief for our veterans from these stresses that could have a real impact on their mental well-being. And I ask both the Ranking Member and the Chair if they would work with me and my office on this.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Brown, I would be willing to work with you in this regard.

Senator BROWN. Thanks. I withdraw the amendment.

Chairman MORAN. The Senator from Connecticut, Senator Blumenthal.

SENATOR RICHARD BLUMENTHAL

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thanks, Mr. Chairman, and my congratulations to you as well on your assuming yet another responsibility. I hope it will not detract from your chairmanship of the Subcommittee on Consumer Protection.

Chairman MORAN. There is no Ranking Member I prefer to work with than you—or Senator Tester.

[Laughter.]

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to offer and withdraw an amendment as well to S.785, but first, I thank you and the Ranking Member for your work on this issue. I think it unites us all. We have all seen the devastating impacts on our community from mental health, post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injuries. Just literally within days, I met with a family in Connecticut whose son, Tyler Reed, served as a sniper on various tours in the Marine Corps and took his own life in October of last year, just a heartbreaking story of basically the failure of our mental health system to deal with someone who gave his life literally for our Nation. And this bill provides many critical, potentially life-saving programs and funding for veterans who may suffer from the invisible wounds of war.

I am proud to have worked with Senator Sullivan on our bipartisan bill to help women servicemembers navigate the health services available to them within the VA, including mental health services. Women veterans, as we all know, are an increasingly important part of our veteran population, and we need to assure that we are meeting their needs as well.

So I am going to offer this amendment which would require the VA to report any less than honorable discharged veterans who have been turned away when seeking mental health care from the VA. Many veterans who suffer from these invisible wounds of war are discharged with bad paper discharge, less than honorable discharge, for all the reasons that we know. They fail to conform, they talk back, they disobey orders, they demonstrate in real time the problems that need treatment. And then when they try to get the treatment once they have been discharged, they are turned away.

So this amendment I will introduce as a bill because I think that the VA ought to be required to report any of those less than honor-

able discharged veterans who are turned away, rejected for mental health care.

Thank you.

Chairman MORAN. Let me now recognize the Ranking Member, Senator Tester, to offer his amendment.

Senator MANCHIN. Mr. Chairman?

Chairman MORAN. Senator Manchin?

Senator MANCHIN. Can I make a comment?

Chairman MORAN. You may. Senator Manchin is recognized.

SENATOR JOE MANCHIN

Senator MANCHIN. I was going to compliment you, but I know you have been getting a lot of accolades here. Let me just say this: You do have big shoes to fill. Johnny Isakson was a favorite of all of ours. But if there is anybody that can do it, Jerry, it will be you.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you.

Senator MANCHIN. And I really feel strongly about that.

Secondly, I would like to thank you for your help in passing a bill that I worked on, Improving the Safety and Security for Veterans Act of 2019. It is going to help get to the bottom of the policies of the VA that may have helped lead to the horrible murders—and I say this, horrible murders—of up to 11 veterans in our Clarksburg VA.

Gentlemen and ladies, it is unbelievable. If it was in your district right now and there were 11 murders—and it has been a year and a half, and nothing has been done. We have no one—we have a suspected person, a person of interest, and not one arrest has been made. Nothing. And I cannot get any information in the VA, in the prosecutor's office. They are working it hard. They said it is a very, very difficult trial. But if you can only imagine, if you had a loved one that died during that period of time that they have identified, thinking that they might have died of natural causes, now knowing that at least 11 did not die of natural causes, if it was hypoglycemia, and you know we have a person of interest, everything that has been leaked out in the papers, public knowledge, and we cannot get an answer? You can imagine my phones ringing and how your phones would be ringing if it was in your district.

So this is not political. It is just our veterans, and we owe the families and those people an answer. But I thank you. You have taken an interest, Mr. Chairman, and Ranking Member Tester has been very supportive of that also.

The Mental Health and Suicide Prevention bill is a bill that I am very much concerned about, and we know the opioid epidemic and the drug abuse that goes on, and people get addicted. We should be responsible. On average, one West Virginian dies by suicide every 24 hours. In a recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC, the Mountain State has experienced a 37-percent increase in suicide deaths since 1999, and there is no group that is more impacted than our military, our veterans. It is a national tragedy, and it is something that I think we all have a responsibility for, and we have got to detect this much sooner than when they are coming out of the service. We have got to get them in the service when they are coming out of theater and helping them.

So I am committed. My State is on the front line. We have had more tragedy with opiates, and let me just say to all of you, we have not even seen the tip of the iceberg on this opiate epidemic. The children that are being left behind, homeless, there is no nurturing, there is nothing. They are sleeping on couches. They are surfing back and forth. They have got nothing. That is the crisis that is going to be facing America if we do not get involved, and we can do it through the Veterans Committee starting here first.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Manchin, thank you. Let me suggest that we—I am going to turn to Senator Tester for purposes of offering an amendment, and everyone at the end of the markup will have an opportunity to make statements. But what has transpired to date is that the bill that Senator Tester and I introduced is going to be amended by Senator Tester in a moment based upon the input and changes that were suggested and approved by the members of this Committee.

So, Senator Tester, you are recognized for amendment 9.

Senator TESTER. Okay. Well, I would move amendment number 9. I covered it pretty thoroughly in the opening statement that I gave, but basically veterans deserve access to high-quality mental health care. This amendment takes a big step to make sure that is delivered.

Chairman MORAN. This is an amendment that has been approved by both majority and minority members, as I understand. Is there any debate?

[No response.]

Chairman MORAN. All those in favor, please say aye?

[A chorus of ayes.]

Chairman MORAN. Opposed, no?

[No response.]

Chairman MORAN. The ayes appear to have it. The ayes do have it. The amendment is adopted.

I now recognize Senator Cramer if he wants to say anything about an amendment. It is something that has been agreed to by the majority and the minority, and my intention is to ask unanimous consent that the Cramer amendment, which I think is number 24, Cramer amendment number 24, be added to the underlying base bill as amended by the Tester amendment.

SENATOR KEVIN CRAMER

Senator CRAMER. Given your confidence, I will avoid prolonging this.

Chairman MORAN. I would ask unanimous consent that Cramer 24 be approved as an amendment to the underlying bill, as amended by amendment 9. Without objection, so ordered.

Is there any other amendment to be offered?

[No response.]

Chairman MORAN. Seeing none, we will move to passage of this bill. A roll call vote has been requested. The clerk will now call the roll.

The CLERK. Mr. Boozman?

Senator BOOZMAN. Aye.

The CLERK. Mr. Cassidy?

Chairman MORAN. Mr. Cassidy votes aye, by proxy.
 The CLERK. Mr. Rounds?
 Senator ROUNDS. Aye.
 The CLERK. Mr. Tillis?
 Senator TILLIS. Aye.
 The CLERK. Mr. Sullivan?
 Senator SULLIVAN. Aye.
 The CLERK. Mrs. Blackburn?
 Senator BLACKBURN. Aye.
 The CLERK. Mr. Cramer?
 Senator CRAMER. Aye.
 The CLERK. Mrs. Loeffler?
 Senator LOEFFLER. Aye.
 The CLERK. Mr. Tester?
 Senator TESTER. Aye.
 The CLERK. Mrs. Murray?
 Senator MURRAY. Aye.
 The CLERK. Mr. Sanders?
 Senator TESTER. Senator Sanders votes aye, by proxy.
 The CLERK. Mr. Brown?
 Senator BROWN. Aye.
 The CLERK. Mr. Blumenthal?
 Senator BLUMENTHAL. Aye.
 The CLERK. Ms. Hirono?
 Senator TESTER. Ms. Hirono votes aye, by proxy.
 The CLERK. Mr. Manchin?
 Senator MANCHIN. Aye.
 The CLERK. Ms. Sinema?
 Senator SINEMA. Aye.
 The CLERK. Mr. Chairman?
 Chairman MORAN. Aye.
 The CLERK. On this vote the yeas are 17. The bill is agreed to.
 Chairman MORAN. The bill has been adopted by a vote of 17-0.
 The bill is approved. Thank you very much.
 We will now turn to agenda item number 2. It is a Sullivan/
 Blumenthal bill. We move to item 2 which is Helping Expand and
 Launch Transitional Health for Women Veterans Act. Is there de-
 bate or amendment to the bill? And I would recognize Senator
 Murray.

SENATOR PATTY MURRAY

Senator MURRAY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and wel-
 come to this Committee. And I have to say you do fill big footsteps,
 and we all look forward to working with you. As former Chair of
 this Committee, I can tell you it will be one of the most satisfying
 things you do in your career.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you.

Senator MURRAY. So I am delighted that you have that position,
 and, again, welcome, Senator Loeffler, as well to a Committee that
 I think you will really enjoy.

Mr. Chairman, first, I just want to say thank you for putting
 mental health care at the top of your agenda. I think that is really
 important. As the top Democrat on the Senate HELP Committee
 and a proud daughter of a World War II veteran, I know how im-

portant this is for all of the men and women who return from war. This is a deeply personal issue to me, so I really appreciate your putting that at the top.

I want to turn my attention quickly to an issue that is impacting our veterans that has not attracted as much attention but it is really important. As many of you know, under current law veterans who are expecting a child are eligible to have that care covered by the VA, and in some cases, when there is an emergency, the veteran and the newborn may need to be transferred—often by helicopter, by the way—to a hospital that can provide a higher level of care.

However, as I have explained to this Committee before, we have heard anecdotal reports from veterans that the VA is refusing to pay the cost of transporting those newborns or their parents to a more advanced facility and leaving those veterans stuck with thousands of dollars in surprise bills, all in defiance of a clearly stated law. The VA has refused to pay for these expenses even though that is not what the law says. And since I first brought this issue to the attention of this Committee, we can only assume there are other veterans who have received this kind of treatment.

So I am offering my proposal today, the VA Newborn Emergency Treatment Act, as an amendment to make very clear that it is Congress' intent in the law to make sure that veterans and their newborns are getting the care that they need, accessing the benefits that our veterans earned, and being treated with the dignity that they deserve.

So I hope all of my colleagues will join me in supporting this important and necessary fix because I firmly believe that Congress has to ensure that no veteran ever faces a surprise bill for care they earn through their sacrifice to this country, especially new moms and their babies who are dealing with an emergency situation.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Murray, thank you.

This amendment, members, would require the VA to cover the costs of emergency transport for newborns of veterans. It would allow the VA doctors to waive the 7-day limit for newborn care if medically necessary. I certainly support the intent of this amendment and believe it is something that we need to address, and Senator Murray has outlined what I think is the desired outcome.

The VA has shared some concerns with the legislative text in this amendment, and our Committee staff has a few concerns in that regard as well regarding the reimbursement for past and future billing under this language. I believe that we can address those concerns fairly quickly with the VA input, and I would like to ask Senator Murray if she would be willing to work to make those changes in this text. And if so, I certainly support the amendment.

Senator Murray.

Senator MURRAY. Okay. So, Mr. Chairman, I assume that we will adopt the amendment today and then work with the VA on any technical corrections.

Chairman MORAN. Yes, ma'am.

Senator MURRAY. I would be happy to do that.

Chairman MORAN. I appreciate Senator Murray's cooperation, and with that I am a supporter of this amendment. And I ask if there is any further debate or further amendment—further debate on the amendment?

[No response.]

Chairman MORAN. Without any debate, I call the amendment for consideration. All those in favor, please say aye?

[A chorus of ayes.]

Chairman MORAN. Opposed, no?

[No response.]

Chairman MORAN. The ayes appear to have it. The ayes do have it. The amendment is adopted.

Senator MURRAY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Further amendment or debate on this bill?

Senator SULLIVAN. Mr. Chairman?

Chairman MORAN. The Senator from Alaska, Senator Sullivan.

SENATOR DAN SULLIVAN

Senator SULLIVAN. Mr. Chairman, congratulations on your chairmanship. I think your focus on mental health and suicide is going to continue to unite this Committee and the great work that we have been doing together as Democrats and Republicans, so I am very excited about your chairmanship.

I just want to encourage all my colleagues to vote in favor of this bill that Senator Blumenthal and I put forward. I think we are all recognizing the issue of the increasing need for the VA to focus on women veterans. As a State that has more veterans per capita than any State in America, the women veterans in Alaska are also making a large increase, and we need to focus on services. This bill does that, not in a huge, comprehensive way on everything, but on some of the important issues like health care and transition training as they move out of the active-duty forces into civilian life.

So I just want to encourage all my colleagues for an aye vote on this bill, and I look forward to working with you in your new role as Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Sullivan, thank you for those comments. Thank you for introducing this legislation.

Are there any further amendments to the bill?

[No response.]

Chairman MORAN. Without any, we are now ready to consider Senate bill 3182, the Sullivan/Blumenthal bill, as amended by the Murray amendment. All those in favor, please say aye?

[A chorus of ayes.]

Chairman MORAN. Opposed, no?

[No response.]

Chairman MORAN. The ayes appear to have it. The ayes do have it. S.3182 is favorably reported.

We now turn to another bill from the Senator from Alaska, S.850. We will move to this agenda item. It is the Highly Rural Veteran Transportation Program Extension Act. I ask unanimous consent that amendment number 2 of Senator Manchin be adopted to this bill. It is an amendment that has been agreed to by both the majority and the minority. Is there objection?

[No response.]

Chairman MORAN. Without objection, so ordered.

Is there any debate or discussion on Senate bill 850, the Sullivan bill, as amended?

[No response.]

Chairman MORAN. If not, we will turn to consideration of that bill. All those in favor of S.850, as amended by the Manchin amendment number 2, please say aye?

[A chorus of ayes.]

Chairman MORAN. Opposed, please say no?

[No response.]

Chairman MORAN. The ayes appears to have it. The ayes do have it. The bill is adopted—the motion is adopted, and the bill will be reported favorably.

The remaining legislative items we have today, I want to recognize Senator Tester for his comments on Senate bill 524.

Senator TESTER. This is a Native Hawaiian bill that will work—oh, it is the Advisory Committee. I am sorry. I was not prepared to talk, which is unusual. It sets up an Advisory Committee for Native Hawaiians to make sure that Native Hawaiian veterans are included in the conversation on health care. Mazie, can I defer to you?

SENATOR MAZIE HIRONO

Senator HIRONO. Yes, thank you so much to Chairman Moran and Ranking Member Tester for focusing on this bill. And it does set up a Veterans Affairs Tribal Advisory Committee, and I would like to support the amendment to this bill that would enable Native Hawaiians to be eligible to serve on the Advisory Committee as established by this bill. And I understand that we have been working with you on the language, and it is very important that Native Hawaiians are represented because we are talking about representation on this Advisory Committee of basically Native peoples, and Native Hawaiians are definitely Native peoples because they were there long before Captain Cook ever showed his face.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Senator.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you.

Chairman MORAN. The bill we are talking about is Senate bill 524. It is the Tester/Sullivan/Sinema/Cramer bill to create within the Department of Veterans Affairs a Tribal Advisory Committee Act of 2019. While Senator Tester did not have anything to say about it, Senator Hirono did, and now Senator Sinema does as well.

SENATOR KYRSTEN SINEMA

Senator SINEMA. Thank you. First of all, Mr. Chairman, congratulations, and it is an honor to serve on this Committee with you, and I am looking forward to more bipartisan work together.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you.

Senator SINEMA. I am really grateful that we are moving forward on the Department of Veterans Affairs Tribal Advisory Committee Act. I am, as you know, a cosponsor of the bill.

Arizona is home to 22 federally recognized tribes and houses the third largest population of Native Americans in the country. So it is critical that we address the unique challenges that Native Americans face in accessing VA services.

Native Americans serve in our military at a higher rate than any other ethnic group, and our bipartisan bill strengthens the voices of Native veterans and ensures that they receive the benefits they have earned. And, of course, we must continue to support tribal communities by making sure that Native American veterans have access to the VA health care benefits they have earned.

So thank you, members, for considering this bill. And, Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Senator Sinema.

The next—

Senator SULLIVAN. Mr. Chairman?

Chairman MORAN. The Senator from Alaska.

Senator SULLIVAN. Mr. Chairman, I just want to comment on what Senator Sinema mentioned. I think it is a really, really important point that we as Senators, as Americans, recognize what I refer to back in my State as "special patriotism" of our Alaska Native or Native Hawaiian or Native American populations. Let us face it, these are communities that have not always been treated well by their own Federal Government, sometimes horribly by their own Federal Government. And yet year after year, generation after generation, war after war, they serve at higher rates in the military than any other ethnic group in the country. It is unbelievable. It is remarkable. And the more we can do to highlight that and thank the people in our Native American or Native Alaskan or Native Hawaiian communities on this special patriotism, the better, which is why I was one of the original authors of this legislation, and I think it deserves strong bipartisan support.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Senator.

We are now going to consider this and other legislation—it is Items 3 through 10; we have already dealt with S. 850—the remaining bills that are on the agenda en bloc, and I would ask if there is a motion that they be reported favorably.

Senator TILLIS. So moved.

Chairman MORAN. So moved by the Senator from North Carolina, Senator Tillis.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Second.

Chairman MORAN. Seconded by Senator Blumenthal. Is there discussion?

[No response.]

Chairman MORAN. All those in favor of the en bloc motion to report those bills favorably, please say aye?

[A chorus of ayes.]

Chairman MORAN. Opposed, no?

[No response.]

Chairman MORAN. The ayes appear to have it. The ayes do have it. The bills will be reported favorably.

I ask—Senator Boozman?

Senator BOOZMAN. No.

Chairman MORAN. Okay. Senator Sinema?

Senator SINEMA. Thanks. Mr. Chair, if I might, I wanted to speak for just a moment about the Daniel Somers bill, if I might.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Sinema is recognized.

Senator SINEMA. Thank you. I speak to Senate bill 2864, and I first want to start by thanking Senator Tillis on this—Senator

Tillis, Senator Blackburn, and Senator Gillibrand for cosponsoring this bill for me.

As you know, Mr. Chairman, I am committed to furthering suicide prevention initiatives and ensuring that veterans have access to timely and high-quality mental health support. And I want to thank you and Ranking Member Tester for your leadership.

I am very grateful for the inclusion of the Sergeant Daniel Somers Veterans Network of Support Act in this markup. Many of you know the story of Sergeant Somers. He was an Army veteran who served two tours in Iraq. He was diagnosed with traumatic brain injury and PTSD upon returning home, and in 2013, he lost his life to suicide.

His final message to his parents outlined the very painful, detailed struggle he faced as he sought to receive care from the VA and the hopelessness that he experienced as he navigated what felt like to him an endless bureaucracy.

Strides have been made to improve the VA health system since we lost Daniel, but we all know there is more work to be done. I met Daniel's parents, Howard and Jean Somers, while I was serving in the U.S. House of Representatives. They have become powerful leaders, and they bravely share Daniel's story to advocate for the many veterans who feel like they do not have a network of support guiding them as they seek the care that they have earned and that they deserve.

So our legislation fills that gap by requiring the VA to inform designated friends and family members about assistance and benefits that are available to their loved veteran, helping him or her better navigate the VA and transition to civilian life. This allows loved ones to provide a network of support so no veteran feels alone.

In this very Committee, VA Secretary Wilkie has committed that he recognizes the need for such a program, so our bill is an important step forward to ensure the VA can prioritize its implementation.

I thank everyone for their support, and I look forward to its passage.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Sinema, thank you.

I would ask unanimous consent one more time, in this case it is for in the preparing of the measures that we are reporting, that the staff be authorized to make any required technical and conforming changes. Is there objection?

[No response.]

Chairman MORAN. Without objection, so ordered.

Our final item on the agenda is a confirmation. It is the confirmation of Grant Jaquith, to be a judge for the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. Is there any debate on that nomination?

[No response.]

Chairman MORAN. If none, I would ask unanimous consent that the Committee order favorably reported the nomination of Grant Jaquith to be a judge for the United States Supreme—I am sorry, to the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. I have elevated my view of myself already.

[Laughter.]

Chairman MORAN. Is there any objection?

[No response.]

Chairman MORAN. Without objection, so ordered.

That concludes our legislative business for the morning. I thank you all for being here and for your cooperation in getting us to this point. We are already working with leadership to get these measures to the Senate floor for consideration.

I indicated earlier that I would recognize any member that wanted to make statements at the end. It seems to me all of you ignored that admonition and have already done so, except for Senator Boozman. And so we will now recognize Senator Boozman, who followed the request.

SENATOR JOHN BOOZMAN

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and congratulations. You and Senator Tester have proved to be a great team on other things, other subcommittees that I have worked with, so I look forward to serving under both of you.

I want to thank both of you in the sense also that you were kind enough to allow us to amend the bill by putting in the Improved Well-Being for Veterans Act. And what we are trying to do is just give the VA some more tools in the toolbox in dealing with veteran suicide. Myself and Senator Warner have worked hard on this, and what we are trying to do is just create a new framework for better coordination with existing veteran suicide prevention programs across the country, help the VA create a common tool to measure the effectiveness of programs that are improving mental health outlook and resiliency.

The way that we have measured this in the past regarding veteran suicide is capacity. You know, do we have programs? Let us increase more programs. But we have not really measured the effectiveness of those programs.

So despite the fact that we have had significant increase in capacity, the rate of veteran suicide remains the same. Since I have been in the Senate, 2010, we still have about 20 a day. So we have to do something a little bit different. We have to continue doing what we are doing. The problem is with our suicides, only 6 of the 20 have anything to do with the VA. So we have got to capture the others.

So over the past decade, the mental health and suicide prevention budget of the VA increased by 83 percent. During the same 10-year period, the suicide prevention outreach budget alone increased by 233 percent. Despite the sharp increase in funding, the rate of veteran suicide has remained roughly unchanged at 20 per day. Only about, as I said earlier, 6 of the 20 are receiving health care services at the VA. We prioritized suicide prevention in recent years, yet it is clear there are more steps that we must do to save lives.

Just this month in Arkansas alone, a veteran of the National Guard along with two current National Guard members and a member of the Army Reserve took their own lives. Our approach simply is not working. We all share the goal of saving the lives of veterans, and it is time to empower the VA to work through com-

munity partners to expand outreach to those 14 veterans who are desperately in need.

There are more than 50,000 organizations that provide suicide prevention services for veterans, yet they are hard to find, hard to access, apply for, and use. The VA and these organizations share the same common goal, but lack the framework and authority to coordinate their efforts. It is time that we have better coordination of existing programs, a common tool to measure the effectiveness of our programs across the board, and better information sharing, data collection, and continual feedback in order to identify what services are having the most impact.

So, again, all of us are working together to make a dent in this crisis, and I do appreciate all your hard work making it such that we could come to an agreement so that we could change things up a little bit in a real effort to identify those 14 that are not being identified not using VA services so that they will have an opportunity. And hopefully in the not-too-distant future, instead of talking about 20 a day, 20 to 22 a day, we will come back and say, you know, we have had a significant decrease in that number.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Boozman, thank you. Thank you for your efforts. This is one of the most important, one of the most significant components of S.785, and I appreciate you for your leadership and working with Senator Tester to get the correct provisions, the ones that we find most needed, into this bill.

Senator TILLIS. Senator Moran?

Chairman MORAN. The Senator from North Carolina.

SENATOR THOM TILLIS

Senator TILLIS. Just congratulations. I want to thank Senator Boozman for some of the work that our staff worked on, the Committee staff. I also just want to personally thank Tommy Norman and Blake Bourne from Veterans Bridge Home down in Charlotte on the community grant section. That was something that I really appreciated the work on, and they provided a model that I think will work for the country. So thank you all.

Chairman MORAN. If any additional Republican has comments, they are going to become the temporary Chairman of the Committee in a moment.

[Laughter.]

Chairman MORAN. The Senator from Alaska, Senator Sullivan.

Senator SULLIVAN. Mr. Chairman, I apologize, but as you know, this is a very important topic for all of us. I did want to thank you and the Ranking Member again and also Senator Boozman for his insightful, thoughtful comments.

I did want to highlight one element of S.785, which I think is an important issue. It is an issue that Senator Manchin has been talking quite a lot about. It is Senate bill 2991, which was part of it, a bill that Senator Baldwin and I introduced. It focuses on what might be a big problem on the overmedication of opioids to our veterans in the VA that I know we have had a number of hearings on and to what degree that has led—if there is a correlation between veteran suicide and the potential of overprescribing these drugs to our veterans. I think one of the most tragic things we

have heard or I have seen in my time on this Committee is young men and women serving their countries, coming back, needing help, and not on purpose but inadvertently having the VA overprescribe them, they get addicted, and I think we need to dig into that issue a lot more. This bill does that, and so I want to thank you again for including that in the broader legislation we just passed today.

Thank you.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Sullivan, thank you.

Senator Tester, thank you for your cooperation, particularly with Senator Boozman in this regard that we have been discussing. I know that you will visit with Commander John Scott Hannon's family, and if you would express the Committee's and my personal care and concern and condolences to the Commander's family. And for whatever small comfort it might be to them, let them know that we hope that this legislation named in honor of their loved one reduces the chances that other families experience what they have experienced.

Senator TESTER. Yes, and brother.

Chairman MORAN. With that, the Committee is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 10:18 a.m., the Committee was adjourned.]

