

116TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

S. 4724

To improve and expand the Solid Start program of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

SEPTEMBER 24, 2020

Ms. HASSAN (for herself, Mr. CRAMER, and Mr. CASSIDY) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A BILL

To improve and expand the Solid Start program of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Solid Start Act of
5 2020”.

6 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

7 Congress finds the following:

8 (1) In 2020, veterans continue to die by suicide
9 at higher rates than civilians. Many of those vet-
10 erans have no ties to the Department of Veterans

1 Affairs, limiting the ability of the Department to
2 help in times of crisis.

3 (2) The first year after separating from the
4 military is a critical time in the transition to civilian
5 life for a member of the Armed Forces. Many
6 changes occur during that transition, from career
7 and location changes to shifts in financial cir-
8 cumstances and health care coverage.

9 **SEC. 3. SENSE OF CONGRESS.**

10 It is the sense of Congress that the United States
11 must strive to better serve members of the Armed Forces
12 and veterans who are transitioning to civilian life by—

13 (1) providing up-to-date information and access
14 to resources that such members of the Armed
15 Forces may not be aware of;

16 (2) supporting the critical time of transition by
17 ensuring that mental health needs are met in a time-
18 ly manner; and

19 (3) assisting members of the Armed Forces and
20 veterans in accessing newly available services.

21 **SEC. 4. PURPOSES.**

22 The purposes of this Act are—

23 (1) to build the capacity of the Department of
24 Veterans Affairs to efficiently and effectively re-

1 spond to the queries and needs of veterans who have
 2 recently separated from the Armed Forces; and

3 (2) to systemically integrate and coordinate ef-
 4 forts to assist veterans, including efforts—

5 (A) to proactively reach out to newly sepa-
 6 rated veterans to inform them of their eligibility
 7 for programs of and benefits provided by the
 8 Department; and

9 (B) to connect veterans in crisis to re-
 10 sources that address their immediate needs.

11 **SEC. 5. ACTIVITIES OF THE SOLID START PROGRAM OF THE**
 12 **DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS.**

13 (a) **REQUIRED ACTIVITIES.**—The Secretary of Vet-
 14 erans Affairs, in coordination with the Secretary of De-
 15 fense, shall carry out the Solid Start program of the De-
 16 partment of Veterans Affairs by—

17 (1) collecting up-to-date contact information
 18 during transition classes or separation counseling for
 19 all members of the Armed Forces who are sepa-
 20 rating from the Armed Forces, while explaining the
 21 existence and purpose of the Solid Start program;

22 (2) calling each veteran, regardless of separa-
 23 tion type or characterization of service, not less than
 24 twice within the first year after separation from the
 25 Armed Forces;

1 (3) providing information about the Solid Start
2 program on the website of the Department and in
3 materials of the Department, especially transition
4 booklets and other resources;

5 (4) ensuring calls are truly tailored to the needs
6 of each veteran's unique situation by conducting
7 quality assurance tests; and

8 (5) prioritizing outreach to veterans who have
9 accessed mental health resources prior to separation
10 from the Armed Forces.

11 (b) **AUTHORIZED ACTIVITIES.**—The Secretary of
12 Veterans Affairs, in coordination with the Secretary of De-
13 fense, may carry out the Solid Start program by—

14 (1) encouraging members of the Armed Forces
15 who are transitioning to civilian life to authorize al-
16 ternate points of contact who can be reached should
17 the member be unavailable during the first year fol-
18 lowing the separation of the member from the
19 Armed Forces;

20 (2) following up missed phone calls with tai-
21 lored mailings to ensure the veteran still receives
22 similar information; and

23 (3) striving to reach out to veterans who sepa-
24 rated prior to the initiation of the Solid Start pro-

1 gram to provide similar services to those veterans,
2 when feasible.

3 **SEC. 6. ASSESSMENT BY GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY**

4 **OFFICE OF SOLID START PROGRAM OF THE**
5 **DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS.**

6 (a) ASSESSMENT.—

7 (1) IN GENERAL.—Beginning on the date that
8 is one year after the date of the enactment of this
9 Act, the Comptroller General of the United States
10 shall carry out an assessment of the Solid Start pro-
11 gram of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

12 (2) ELEMENTS.—The assessment required by
13 paragraph (1) shall analyze the following:

14 (A) How many veterans have been con-
15 tacted through the Solid Start program since
16 the establishment of the program as compared
17 to how many veterans have not been reached.

18 (B) Whether feedback on the Solid Start
19 program indicates that the program is working.

20 (C) Whether the Solid Start program is
21 meeting the purposes described in section 4.

22 (D) Improvements that could be made to
23 the Solid Start program.

1 (b) REPORT.—Not later than 120 days after the date
2 described in subsection (a)(1), the Comptroller General
3 shall—

4 (1) complete the assessment required by such
5 subsection; and

6 (2) submit a report on the findings of the as-
7 sessment to—

8 (A) the Committee on Veterans Affairs’
9 and the Committee on Armed Services of the
10 Senate; and

11 (B) the Committee on Veterans Affairs’
12 and the Committee on Armed Services of the
13 House of Representatives.

14 **SEC. 7. AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.**

15 There are authorized to be appropriated to carry out
16 this Act the greater of—

17 (1) such sums as may be necessary for each fis-
18 cal year to carry out this Act; or

19 (2) the amount expended by the Department of
20 Veterans Affairs during fiscal year 2020 to carry
21 out activities of the Solid Start program.

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