

Calendar No. 478

117TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

S. 1198

To amend title 38, United States Code, 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

APRIL 15, 2021

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

AUGUST 4, 2022

Reported by Mr. TESTER, with an amendment

[Strike out all after the enacting clause and insert the part printed in *italic*]

A BILL

To amend title 38, United States Code, 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 ~~2021~~”.

1 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

2 Congress finds the following:

3 (1) In 2021, veterans continue to die by suicide
4 at higher rates than civilians. Many of those vet-
5 erans have no ties to the Department of Veterans
6 Affairs, limiting the ability of the Department to
7 help in times of crisis.

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

14 **SEC. 3. SENSE OF CONGRESS.**

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

18 (1) providing up-to-date information and access
19 to resources that such members of the Armed
20 Forces and veterans may not be aware of;

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

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

1 **SEC. 4. SOLID START PROGRAM OF THE DEPARTMENT OF**
 2 **VETERANS AFFAIRS.**

3 (a) **IN GENERAL.**—Chapter 63 of title 38, United
 4 States Code, is amended by adding at the end the fol-
 5 lowing new subchapter:

6 **“Subchapter II—Other Outreach Programs**
 7 **and Activities**

8 **“§ 6320. Solid Start program**

9 “(a) **PURPOSES.**—The purposes of this section are—

10 “(1) to build the capacity of the Department to
 11 efficiently and effectively respond to the queries and
 12 needs of veterans who have recently separated from
 13 the Armed Forces; and

14 “(2) to systemically integrate and coordinate ef-
 15 forts to assist veterans, including efforts—

16 “(A) to proactively reach out to newly sep-
 17 arated veterans to inform them of their eligi-
 18 bility for programs of and benefits provided by
 19 the Department; and

20 “(B) to connect veterans in crisis to re-
 21 sources that address their immediate needs.

22 “(b) **ACTIVITIES OF THE SOLID START PROGRAM.**—

23 (1) The Secretary, in coordination with the Secretary of
 24 Defense, shall carry out the Solid Start program of the
 25 Department by—

1 “(A) collecting up-to-date contact information
2 during transition classes or separation counseling for
3 all members of the Armed Forces who are sepa-
4 rating from the Armed Forces, while explaining the
5 existence and purpose of the Solid Start program;

6 “(B) calling each veteran, regardless of separa-
7 tion type or characterization of service, three times
8 within the first year after separation of the veteran
9 from the Armed Forces;

10 “(C) providing information about the Solid
11 Start program on the website of the Department
12 and in materials of the Department, especially tran-
13 sition booklets and other resources;

14 “(D) ensuring calls are truly tailored to the
15 needs of each veteran’s unique situation by con-
16 ducting quality assurance tests;

17 “(E) prioritizing outreach to veterans who have
18 accessed mental health resources prior to separation
19 from the Armed Forces;

20 “(F) providing women veterans with informa-
21 tion that is tailored to their specific health care and
22 benefit needs;

23 “(G) as feasible, providing information on ac-
24 cess to State and local resources, including Vet Cen-
25 ters and veterans service organizations; and

1 ~~“(H) gathering and analyzing data assessing~~
2 ~~the effectiveness of the Solid Start program.~~

3 ~~“(2) The Secretary, in coordination with the Sec-~~
4 ~~retary of Defense, may carry out the Solid Start program~~
5 ~~by—~~

6 ~~“(A) encouraging members of the Armed~~
7 ~~Forces who are transitioning to civilian life to au-~~
8 ~~thorize alternate points of contact who can be~~
9 ~~reached should the member be unavailable during~~
10 ~~the first year following the separation of the member~~
11 ~~from the Armed Forces;~~

12 ~~“(B) following up missed phone calls with tai-~~
13 ~~lored mailings to ensure the veteran still receives~~
14 ~~similar information; and~~

15 ~~“(C) striving to reach out to veterans who sepa-~~
16 ~~rated prior to the initiation of the Solid Start pro-~~
17 ~~gram to provide similar services to those veterans, as~~
18 ~~feasible.~~

19 ~~“(3) In this subsection:~~

20 ~~“(A) The term ‘Vet Center’ has the meaning~~
21 ~~given that term in section 1712A(h) of this title.~~

22 ~~“(B) The term ‘veterans service organization’~~
23 ~~means an organization recognized by the Secretary~~
24 ~~for the representation of veterans under section~~
25 ~~5902 of this title.~~

1 “(c) OBLIGATIONS OF AMOUNTS.—Subject to the
2 availability of appropriations, the Secretary may not, in
3 a fiscal year, obligate an amount to carry out the Solid
4 Start program that is less than the total amount obligated
5 in the previous fiscal year to carry out the program, unless
6 the Secretary determines that increased efficiencies of the
7 program warrant the obligation of a lesser amount.”.

8 (b) CONFORMING AMENDMENTS.—Chapter 63 of
9 such title, as amended by subsection (a), is further amend-
10 ed—

11 (1) by inserting before section 6301 the fol-
12 lowing:

13 **“Subchapter I—Outreach Services Program”;**

14 and

15 (2) in sections 6301, 6303, 6304, 6305, 6306,
16 and 6307, by striking “this chapter” each place it
17 appears and inserting “this subchapter”.

18 (c) CLERICAL AMENDMENTS.—The table of contents
19 at the beginning of chapter 63 of such title is amended—

20 (1) by inserting before the item relating to sec-
21 tion 6301 the following new item:

 “SUBCHAPTER I—OUTREACH SERVICES PROGRAM”;

22 and

23 (2) by adding at the end the following new
24 items:

“6320. Solid Start program.”.

1 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

2 *This Act may be cited as the “Solid Start Act of 2021”.*

3 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

4 *Congress finds the following:*

5 *(1) In 2021, veterans continue to die by suicide*
6 *at higher rates than civilians. Many of those veterans*
7 *have no ties to the Department of Veterans Affairs,*
8 *limiting the ability of the Department to help in*
9 *times of crisis.*

10 *(2) The first year after separating from the mili-*
11 *tary is a critical time in the transition to civilian life*
12 *for a member of the Armed Forces. Many changes*
13 *occur during that transition, from career and location*
14 *changes to shifts in financial circumstances and*
15 *health care coverage.*

16 **SEC. 3. SENSE OF CONGRESS.**

17 *It is the sense of Congress that the United States must*
18 *strive to better serve members of the Armed Forces and vet-*
19 *erans who are transitioning to civilian life by—*

20 *(1) providing up-to-date information and access*
21 *to resources that such members of the Armed Forces*
22 *and veterans may not be aware of;*

1 (2) *supporting the critical time of transition by*
 2 *ensuring that mental health needs are met in a timely*
 3 *manner; and*

4 (3) *assisting members of the Armed Forces and*
 5 *veterans in accessing newly available services.*

6 **SEC. 4. SOLID START PROGRAM OF THE DEPARTMENT OF**
 7 **VETERANS AFFAIRS.**

8 (a) *IN GENERAL.*—Chapter 63 of title 38, United
 9 States Code, is amended by adding at the end the following
 10 new subchapter:

11 **“Subchapter II—Other Outreach Programs**
 12 **and Activities**

13 **“§ 6320. Solid Start program**

14 “(a) *PURPOSES.*—The purposes of this section are—

15 “(1) *to build the capacity of the Department to*
 16 *efficiently and effectively respond to the queries and*
 17 *needs of veterans who have recently separated from*
 18 *the Armed Forces; and*

19 “(2) *to systemically integrate and coordinate ef-*
 20 *forts to assist veterans, including efforts—*

21 “(A) *to proactively reach out to newly sepa-*
 22 *rated veterans to inform them of their eligibility*
 23 *for programs of and benefits provided by the De-*
 24 *partment; and*

1 “(B) to connect veterans in crisis to re-
2 sources that address their immediate needs.

3 “(b) *ACTIVITIES OF THE SOLID START PROGRAM.*—

4 (1) *The Secretary, in coordination with the Secretary of*
5 *Defense, shall carry out the Solid Start program of the De-*
6 *partment by—*

7 “(A) *collecting up-to-date contact information*
8 *during transition classes or separation counseling for*
9 *all members of the Armed Forces who are separating*
10 *from the Armed Forces, while explaining the existence*
11 *and purpose of the Solid Start program;*

12 “(B) *calling each veteran, regardless of separa-*
13 *tion type or characterization of service, three times*
14 *within the first year after separation of the veteran*
15 *from the Armed Forces;*

16 “(C) *providing information about the Solid*
17 *Start program on the website of the Department and*
18 *in materials of the Department, especially transition*
19 *booklets and other resources;*

20 “(D) *ensuring calls are truly tailored to the*
21 *needs of each veteran’s unique situation by con-*
22 *ducting quality assurance tests;*

23 “(E) *prioritizing outreach to veterans who have*
24 *accessed mental health resources prior to separation*
25 *from the Armed Forces;*

1 “(F) *providing women veterans with informa-*
2 *tion that is tailored to their specific health care and*
3 *benefit needs;*

4 “(G) *as feasible, providing information on access*
5 *to State and local resources, including Vet Centers*
6 *and veterans service organizations; and*

7 “(H) *gathering and analyzing data assessing the*
8 *effectiveness of the Solid Start program.*

9 “(2) *The Secretary, in coordination with the Secretary*
10 *of Defense, may carry out the Solid Start program by—*

11 “(A) *encouraging members of the Armed Forces*
12 *who are transitioning to civilian life to authorize al-*
13 *ternate points of contact who can be reached should*
14 *the member be unavailable during the first year fol-*
15 *lowing the separation of the member from the Armed*
16 *Forces; and*

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18 *lored mailings to ensure the veteran still receives*
19 *similar information.*

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22 *given that term in section 1712A(h) of this title.*

23 “(B) *The term ‘veterans service organization’*
24 *means an organization recognized by the Secretary*

1 for the representation of veterans under section 5902
2 of this title.

3 “(c) *OBLIGATIONS OF AMOUNTS.*—Subject to the avail-
4 ability of appropriations, the Secretary may not, in a fiscal
5 year, obligate an amount to carry out the Solid Start pro-
6 gram that is less than the total amount obligated in the
7 previous fiscal year to carry out the program, unless the
8 Secretary determines that increased efficiencies of the pro-
9 gram warrant the obligation of a lesser amount.”.

10 (b) *CONFORMING AMENDMENTS.*—Chapter 63 of such
11 title, as amended by subsection (a), is further amended—

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19 the beginning of chapter 63 of such title is amended—

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21 tion 6301 the following new item:

 “SUBCHAPTER I—OUTREACH SERVICES PROGRAM”;

22 and

23 (2) by adding at the end the following new items:

 “SUBCHAPTER II—OTHER OUTREACH PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES

“6320. Solid Start program.”.

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