

116TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

H. R. 8819

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

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

NOVEMBER 24, 2020

Ms. SLOTKIN (for herself and Mr. JOYCE of Ohio) introduced the following bill; which was 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—

7 (i) inform them of their eligibility for
8 programs of and benefits provided by the
9 Department; and

10 (ii) provide them information relating
11 to the programs of, and benefits provided
12 by, an appropriate veterans agency of a
13 State; and

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

16 **SEC. 5. ACTIVITIES OF THE SOLID START PROGRAM OF THE**
17 **DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS.**

18 (a) **REQUIRED ACTIVITIES.**—The Secretary of Vet-
19 erans Affairs, in coordination with the Secretary of De-
20 fense, shall carry out the Solid Start program of the De-
21 partment of Veterans Affairs by—

22 (1) collecting up-to-date contact information
23 during transition classes or separation counseling for
24 all members of the Armed Forces who are sepa-

1 rating from the Armed Forces, while explaining the
2 existence and purpose of the Solid Start program;

3 (2) calling each veteran, regardless of separa-
4 tion type or characterization of service, not less than
5 twice within the first year after separation from the
6 Armed Forces;

7 (3) providing information about the Solid Start
8 program on the website of the Department and in
9 materials of the Department, especially transition
10 booklets and other resources;

11 (4) providing information described in section
12 4(2) and ensuring calls are truly tailored to the
13 needs of each veteran's unique situation by con-
14 ducting quality assurance tests; and

15 (5) prioritizing outreach to veterans who have
16 accessed mental health resources prior to separation
17 from the Armed Forces.

18 (b) AUTHORIZED ACTIVITIES.—The Secretary of
19 Veterans Affairs, in coordination with the Secretary of De-
20 fense, may carry out the Solid Start program by—

21 (1) encouraging members of the Armed Forces
22 who are transitioning to civilian life to authorize al-
23 ternate points of contact who can be reached should
24 the member be unavailable during the first year fol-

1 lowing the separation of the member from the
2 Armed Forces;

3 (2) following up missed phone calls with tai-
4 lored mailings to ensure the veteran still receives
5 similar information; and

6 (3) striving to reach out to veterans who sepa-
7 rated prior to the initiation of the Solid Start pro-
8 gram to provide similar services to those veterans,
9 when feasible.

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

11 **OFFICE OF SOLID START PROGRAM OF THE**

12 **DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS.**

13 (a) ASSESSMENT.—

14 (1) IN GENERAL.—Beginning on the date that
15 is one year after the date of the enactment of this
16 Act, the Comptroller General of the United States
17 shall carry out an assessment of the Solid Start pro-
18 gram of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

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

21 (A) How many veterans have been con-
22 tacted through the Solid Start program since
23 the establishment of the program as compared
24 to how many veterans have not been reached.

1 (B) Whether feedback on the Solid Start
2 program indicates that the program is working.

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

5 (D) Improvements that could be made to
6 the Solid Start program.

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

10 (1) complete the assessment required by such
11 subsection; and

12 (2) submit a report on the findings of the as-
13 sessment to—

14 (A) the Committee on Veterans' Affairs
15 and the Committee on Armed Services of the
16 Senate; and

17 (B) the Committee on Veterans' Affairs
18 and the Committee on Armed Services of the
19 House of Representatives.

20 **SEC. 7. AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.**

21 There are authorized to be appropriated to carry out
22 this Act the greater of—

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

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

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