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Sarah Feldman | 202.604.5521

Roy Loewenstein | 202.913.0188

Tester: On Memorial Day, Serving Our Nation's Veterans As They Served Us

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By U.S. Senator Jon Tester

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There is no better way to honor those who died in service to our country than to ensure we provide benefits and services earned by their brothers and sisters in arms. This has never mattered more than this Memorial Day—unlike any other in our nation's history. Nearly 100,000 Americans have died due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including hundreds of veterans who returned from wars abroad only to face another battle here at home.

With most of the world still in the grips of the outbreak, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the largest integrated health care system in the nation, has been focused on saving as many veterans' lives as possible—treating nearly 11,000 veterans with COVID-19. And while many are recovered or convalescing, the virus has claimed the lives of more than 1,100 veterans, including those who fought on the beaches of Normandy and in the jungles of Vietnam. Today, we honor their memory and extend our deepest sympathies to the families grappling with their loss.

For our remaining heroes, we've got our work cut out for us: we've got to make sure VA is there for them. Throughout this pandemic, I've fought tooth and nail to ensure VA has the funding for medical services, personal protective equipment (PPE) and test kits to tackle the coronavirus head-on. And when VA has fallen short of its responsibility to our veterans, or to the dedicated staff who provide their life-saving care, I've held the Administration accountable.

While the focus has been on health care, we must ensure that VA doesn't leave its other missions on the backburner. In the early days of this crisis, when VA was ready to pull housing payments from student veterans amid school closures, I drafted a bipartisan bill to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on these veterans and their families—which the President signed into law. When

Congress passed a law giving folks stimulus payments, I worked to ensure that VA beneficiaries would receive these funds with as little red tape as possible. And I helped pass a law to allow veterans with pending appeals to teleconference into their hearing so they didn't have to leave their homes in the midst of the pandemic.

As this crisis bore down on us, Montanans—as they always do—rose to the challenge. Among those who stepped up are the men and women of the Montana National Guard, who mobilized to fight COVID-19 by distributing PPE to communities in need, manning emergency operation centers, and serving in our State Veterans Homes. Even though they were serving on the front lines, these men and women weren't getting federal benefits. So my colleagues and I went to work—and got the Defense Department to extend benefits to state Guardsmen serving alongside their active duty counterparts.

This Memorial Day, as Montanans pause to honor those who died in service to this country, we recommit ourselves to improving benefits, services, and care for those left behind. Whether the crisis is halfway around the world or right here at home, our veterans served and sacrificed to keep us free. Now more than ever, they're counting on us—and we've got to deliver for them as they did for us.

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