

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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## Historic military reforms pass U.S. House

Bill driven by Guillén's death would yank commanders' power in rape, murder cases

By Benjamin Wermund  
WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — Congress is on the verge of passing sweeping reforms to how the military handles claims of crimes including sexual assault, rape and murder — changes spurred by the killing of Army Spc. Vanessa Guillén in Texas — including removing decisions on whether to prosecute

service members from the military's chain of command.

The historic reforms, at least a decade in the making, are included in a \$768 billion defense authorization bill that passed the House late Tuesday night with overwhelming bipartisan support — a major victory for the Guillén family, which has spent more than a year calling for changes to address the scourge of



**Vanessa Guillén, a Fort Hood soldier and Houston native, was killed by a fellow soldier.**

sexual assault in the military, where some 20,000 assaults are estimated to occur each year.

The bill now heads to the Senate, where Majority Leader Chuck Schumer on Wednesday predicted it would "earn bipartisan support in the coming days."

President Joe Biden is expected to sign the bill after it passes the Senate.

"This is transformative," said U.S. Rep. Sylvia Garcia, a Houston Democrat who represents the district where the Guillén family lives. "But for the death of Vanessa Guillén and the movement that mushroomed after that, I'm convinced this would not have happened."

It was unclear until Tuesday whether the final version of the bill — hammered out behind closed doors by members of the

House and Senate Armed Services Committees — would include the reforms that advocates have pushed since Guillén was killed last year.

A Houston native serving at Fort Hood, Guillén was missing for months before her body was discovered. Her family began telling the public that she had been attacked after she reported a supervisor sexually harassed her, even as the Army denied it, and the Guilléns began advocating for changes in Washington, D.C., last

*Guillén continues on A6*

## Small-town lifeline



Photos by Elizabeth Conley / Staff photographer

Staffers hold a hallway meeting at Bayside Community Hospital, the only hospital for more than 25 miles in any direction.

By Nora Mishanec  
STAFF WRITER

ANAHUAC — In a few short paces, William Kiefer can traverse the entirety of Anahuac's sole hospital, where he serves as chief executive and chief nurse. That's exactly how he likes it.

With its tiled walls and buzzing intercom system, Bayside Community Hospital was built for a bygone era. But the rural facility remains a lifeline for the thousands of residents who travel from all over Chambers County for everything from stitches to childbirth to critical care. Flanked by the Anahuac Channel on one side and hayfields on the

In Anahuac, a nurse discovers his calling in rural medicine



William Kiefer, 43, was named chief executive and chief nurse of Chambers Health during the pandemic.

other, it is the only hospital for more than 25 miles in any direction.

Kiefer, a longtime nurse and health care administrator, was hired last year to oversee Chambers Health, which includes the hospital, two primary care clinics and one dental clinic. He was lured to Anahuac from El Paso by the unique challenges — and joys — of running a rural health care system. While just 50 miles east of doctor-dense Houston, the hospital is a federally designated "critical access" point, reflecting the paucity of providers from the edges of Lake Anahuac to the peninsula's southernmost tip at

*Anahuac continues on A6*

## Biden sets greener goals for fed entities

By Lisa Friedman  
NEW YORK TIMES

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Wednesday set in motion a plan to make the federal government carbon neutral by 2050, ordering federal agencies to buy electric vehicles, to power facilities with wind, solar and nuclear energy, and to use sustainable building materials.

In a series of executive orders, Biden directed the government to transform its 300,000 buildings, 600,000 cars and trucks, and use its annual purchases of \$650 billion in goods and services to meet

his goal of a federal government that stops adding carbon dioxide into the atmosphere within the next three decades.

From his earliest days in office, Biden said he intended to use the federal government as a model and to help spur the markets for green energy. The executive orders signed Wednesday set a timetable for the transition.

By 2030, Biden wants the federal government to buy electricity produced only from sources that don't emit carbon dioxide, the most plentiful of the human-caused greenhouse gases that are warming the planet. By 2032, the Biden administration wants to see the emissions from building operations, such as heating, cut in half. And by 2035, all new federal car and truck purchases also would be zero-emissions.

The move comes as Biden is struggling to turn many of his climate goals into reality. He has promised to cut America's emissions from fossil fuels roughly in half by the end of this decade. But Congress hasn't approved a \$1.7 trillion spending bill that

*Biden continues on A9*

## Inmate labeled 'danger' unattended before he allegedly raped jail guard

By Nicole Hensley and St. John Barned-Smith  
STAFF WRITERS

The defendant accused of raping a Harris County Sheriff's Office guard required an escort at all times — but jail surveillance footage showed Jeremiah Williams unattended and entering the guard's office after Bible study, according to court records.

He then closed the door behind him. During the next 13 minutes, he raped the guard and left

her seriously injured, according to the sheriff's investigation.

The Monday sexual assault on the Harris County Jail's fifth floor has brought attention to months of mounting woes ranging from rising violent crime, court delays and deteriorating conditions in the crowded lockup. State inspectors last month saw a lack of staffing at the 1200 Baker Street facility and a "heightened level of tension and inmate hostility."

The attack has left the sheriff's office to explain how Williams came to be unattended and how

to prevent future incidents.

"My client was supposed to be supervised because of his issues and he was not properly supervised," said Gary Polland, Williams' defense attorney. And if he had been, Polland continued, "this would have never happened."

He requested in October that an independent mental health expert evaluate the 27-year-old man. The order went unapproved until Wednesday. Authorities jailed him in September 2020 in

*Jail continues on A9*



Godofredo A. Vásquez / Staff photographer

Jeremiah Williams, who is accused of sexually assaulting a county jail guard, is being held on a combined \$3.5 million bond.

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## FROM THE COVER

## GUILLÉN

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year.

The Army in April acknowledged that Guillén was sexually harassed by a superior who suggested they have sex with another person, and that no one in her chain of command took action when she reported it. An investigation into the chain of command's actions concluded that the encounter profoundly impacted her morale.

They are the most significant changes ever made to the military justice system, over which commanders have had complete control since the days of George Washington, said Col. Don Christensen, the former chief prosecutor of the United States Air Force and president of Protect Our Defenders, a group that has advocated for such reforms for a decade.

Now an independent prosecutor will make the call on whether to bring charges in cases involving 11 different crimes, including manslaughter, kidnapping, stalking and domestic violence.

Christensen's group and others have argued that the system in place allows crimes to go unpunished. The Guillén case is the latest in a string of high-profile examples dating back to at least the 1990s, when U.S. Navy and Marine Corps officers were alleged to have assaulted 83 women and 7 men during a 1991 symposium in Las Vegas. The case came to be known as the Tailhook scandal and led to the resignation of the secretary of the Navy.

Lawmakers including U.S. Rep. Jackie Speier, a California Democrat, have pushed for reform for at least a decade, gaining little traction. The Guillén killing and movement that followed reinvigorated the effort.

"I really think Vanessa Guillén's murder evaporated the last real resistance, effective resis-



Marie D. De Jesús / Staff photographer

**Amanda Gonzales pays her respects at the the memorial mural of Army Spc. Vanessa Guillén in July 2020, just weeks after the soldier's body was found in Leon County after she went missing in April.**

tance on the Hill to this kind of reform.," Christensen said. "Her murder was the final driving factor."

Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III in June said he supported the move and would work with Congress to make it happen. His support marked a significant shift as the military long objected to such changes, claiming that commanders alone should have the responsibility for their subordinates' actions to effectively lead them. Sen. Jack Reed, a Rhode Island Democrat who chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee, and a key negotiator on the defense bill, had also opposed removing crimes from the chain of command.

"The efforts we made were historic," Natalie Khawam, the Guillén family's attorney, said in a text

***"This is transformative. But for the death of Vanessa Guillén and the movement that mushroomed after that, I'm convinced (these reforms) would not have happened."***

U.S. Rep. Sylvia Garcia

message. "This is the FIRST time in the history of our country, that victims of sexual misconduct will be able to report abuse outside their chain of command. This change in the military system is monumental."

The bill would criminalize sexual harassment and establish an independent process for those

claims to be investigated outside the chain of command, though decisions on how to handle those cases would still fall on military commanders.

It also allows survivors of sexual assault to call a help line to report an assault, rather than having to do so in person. It includes provisions giving victims the right to know about administrative actions taken against offenders. It would require the Pentagon to track retaliation against service members who report harassment or assault and it calls for an assessment of racial disparities in military justice and discipline, among other things.

"We will never forget what happened to Vanessa, but with this new legislation we know that what happened to Vanessa will never happen again," Khawam

said. "With the passing of this legislation, our country, and more importantly our soldiers, are in a better, safer place."

Still, some say the reforms fall short.

**'Missed opportunity'**

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, a New York Democrat who has led the effort to reform the military justice system since 2013, said the bill still gives commanders too much power.

"This bill does not reform the military justice system in a way that will truly help survivors get justice," Gillibrand said at a press conference Wednesday. "Commanders can still pick the jury, select the witnesses, grant or deny witness immunity requests, order depositions and approve the hiring of expert witnesses and consultants. And they can continue to allow service members accused of crimes the option of separation from service, instead of facing court martial – a total denial of justice."

"When the commander is so deeply involved in a case, there's no independence for the prosecutor and there's no perception of independence for the accused or the accuser," she said.

Christensen, of the Protect Our Defenders group, also called it a "missed opportunity."

"It's just disappointing," he said. "Vanessa's murder galvanized this and we really could have gotten complete reform."

Gillibrand vowed to continue pushing through separate legislation that has the backing of a bipartisan group of senators including Texas Sen. Ted Cruz. She said both Schumer and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi have voiced support for that legislation and she is optimistic it could get a vote in both chambers.

"There is a path forward and we will keep taking it," she said.

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## ANAHUAC

From page A1

Smith Point.

One recent afternoon, the inpatient ward was quiet. But it wasn't always this way.

At the height of summer's COVID-19 peak, cars and ambulances delivered a steady stream of patients. The hospital, which has 14 beds, didn't have enough space, so nurses squeezed overflow patients into operating rooms that hadn't been used in decades.

On particularly hectic nights, Kiefer would set aside his administrative duties and don scrubs to treat COVID patients. One night in July, a man arrived gasping for air. Normally, nurses would have transferred him to a Houston intensive care unit – but Kiefer knew the man would likely die before they found him an empty bed.

There was only one option.

Kiefer called the man's daughter and told her the plan: He and his team would intubate her father, a risky move without trained ICU staff to provide round-the-clock care afterward. "Do whatever you have to do," the daughter told him.

Recalling his training as an ICU nurse, Kiefer slid the breathing tube down the patient's throat, not knowing whether it would be enough to save his life.

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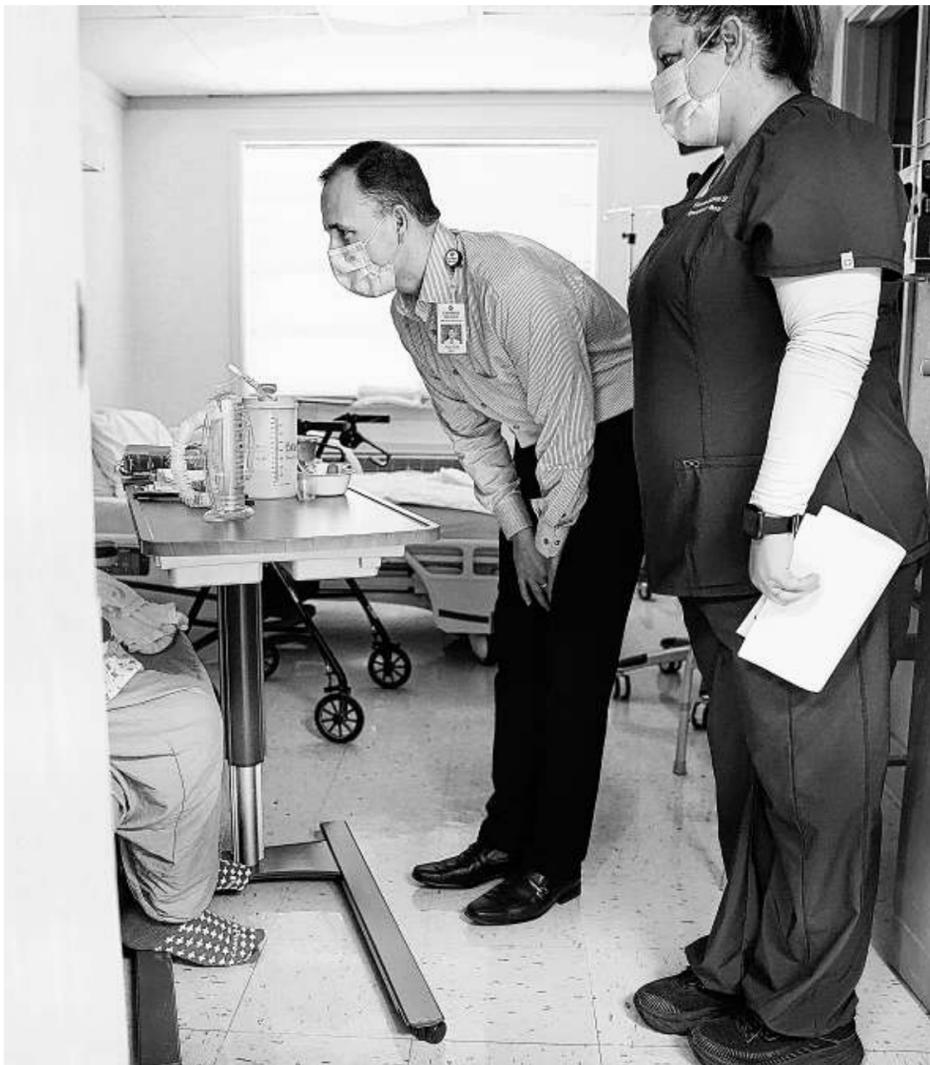
For as long as he has been a nurse, Kiefer has chased the adrenaline of small-town medicine.

The 43-year-old grew up west of Odessa in Toyah, population 90. He left to study at the University of Texas at El Paso and later received a nursing degree from Texas Tech University. He met his wife, Jasmine, and they had three kids while living in El Paso. But he longed for the intimacy of his small-town childhood and wanted his kids to experience it, too. So he took the job in Anahuac one year ago.

For Kiefer, the term "rural medicine" isn't just a buzzy phrase. It's about recognizing that people who live far from hospital-rich urban centers deserve quality health care.

"The work we do is for a smaller segment of the population," he said. "It doesn't make those lives less important."

But the pandemic has deepened the chasm between urban and rural medicine. More than half of Texas' 146 rural hospitals are at risk of closing due to lack of funding, according to a July assessment by a nonprofit health



Photos by Elizabeth Conley / Staff photographer

**William Kiefer checks on a patient with nurse Sarina Nickel at Bayside Community Hospital last month, which marked his year stint with Chambers Health, where he wears many hats – and scrubs.**

care agency. The state ranks among the lowest in the nation for the number of active physicians per capita.

And the sheer size of Texas means it can be difficult to reach rural patients during what Kiefer calls "the golden period of time" when care is most critical.

For many patients – like the pregnant woman who traveled 30 miles to Anahuac when she went into labor at her home in Smith Point, or the driver who suffered severe trauma after colliding with a trucker in Liberty, 25 miles north – the speed of treatment is often more important than state-of-the-art equipment, Kiefer said.

In a county with no public transportation, Chambers Health is hoping to expand its fleet of mobile vans to ferry residents to routine appointments and in emergencies. The system, which in January will rebrand as Omni-Point Health, has one existing van that has been used during the pandemic as a traveling vaccine



**The X-ray room is a crucial one at the small, 14-bed hospital in Anahuac that serves as a lifeline for thousands of patients.**

clinic.

The organization is also expanding north into Liberty County. In September, it opened a new 10-room clinic in Dayton. The expansion, which includes a nurse practitioner to offer women's health services for the first time,

is a point of pride for Kiefer at a time when the number of rural health care facilities is shrinking nationwide.

It is this small-town mentality – problem-solving with limited resources – that excites Kiefer.

"Our threshold of care is the

same" as larger hospital systems, he said, "but we do it with a much smaller staff. The high-paced, challenging environment invigorates me. I love it."

His passion has rarely been more necessary, and the inequities of the American health care system have rarely been more apparent, than right now. The pandemic is killing rural Americans at nearly twice the rate of their urban counterparts.

Experts say the reasons for the stark disparity are myriad: Rural dwellers tend to be older, with higher rates of chronic disease. They are also less likely to be vaccinated against COVID. At the center of this matrix of factors is access – or lack thereof – to a trusted health care provider, according to a recent article published in the New England Journal of Medicine.

Throughout the pandemic, the authors write, "the emphasis on large centers" has led to the "sidelining of primary care clinicians and the health systems that people trust." Even strong vaccine hesitancy can be overcome, they write, if patients receive a "nudge" from a trusted clinician.

As many as one-third of Texans do not have a primary care doctor overseeing their day-to-day health. But Kiefer sees an opportunity to reverse that trend in Anahuac and surrounding areas. He said building trust with community members is a "core value" of his organization; his nurses treat their old school teachers, or recognize members of their church in the emergency room.

It makes a difference, he said, "when people come through the doors, you know them."

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The patient Kiefer intubated that chaotic night in July survived.

Despite lacking the technology or staffing of a metropolitan ICU, the hospital's nurses tended to the man around the clock for two weeks until he recovered.

"That was our COVID miracle," Kiefer said.

On the afternoon the patient was discharged, nurses cheered as he exited the back door toward the bayou to his daughter's waiting car.

November marked one year since Kiefer arrived in Anahuac. As he reflects on the milestone, he said that midsummer moment of success represents his purpose here – and his hopes for the future.

"When the call comes, you put on your smile, put on your scrubs and go to work," he said.

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