

Veterans of Foreign Wars Legislative Priorities



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Unaddressed Toxic Exposures

The VFW's Concern:

Veterans frequently contact the VFW about toxic exposures not included in the *Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022*, commonly called the PACT Act. Examples of these exposures and conditions include but are not limited to uranium exposure at the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Air Base in Uzbekistan; water contamination at Fort McClellan, Alabama, and at the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii; and conditions related to nuclear testing and waste cleanup at various locations domestic and abroad. Veterans have reported contact with firefighting foam and other materials exposing them to per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). The VFW has had veterans report anomalous health incidents (Havana Syndrome), radiological exposures, and the use of burn pits in locations not currently covered by the PACT Act. Finally, air crews and their supporting ground crews, nuclear technicians, and personnel who work near reactors are routinely exposed to chemicals and other toxins. Overall, the military is an inherently dangerous profession, and these examples highlight the need for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to continuously review toxic exposures.

The PACT Act included an enduring framework, known as the Presumption Decision Process, to guide VA's continuous and systematic evaluation of toxic exposures. This law directs VA to announce in the Federal Register, at least annually, its selections of military environmental exposures and adverse health outcomes for formal evaluation. Congressional oversight is needed to ensure VA is being transparent with veterans about its ongoing evaluation of toxic exposures and related conditions.

The VFW Urges Congress to:

Require VA to publicly post announcements, updates, and the current status of research pertaining to presumptive conditions stemming from service-connected exposures.

Conduct oversight hearings to ensure VA's compliance with the PACT Act's Presumption Decision Process for the ongoing evaluation of conditions associated with toxic exposures.

Transition from Service

The VFW's Concern:

Leaving service is often complicated by service-related ailments, family needs, loss of identity and support networks, and the required training to enter a new career field. Sadly, the initial year following discharge also comes with increased suicide risk among veterans, heightening the need to ensure all transitioning service members are connected to post-service benefits and resources as quickly as possible.

One of the best resources to utilize during this period are the accredited representatives who can help with Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) claims. These representatives can be from the national, state, or local level. Through BDD, service members can file expedited claims and complete medical evaluations before leaving service, enabling VA to provide disability ratings upon discharge. Receiving accelerated claims decisions means BDD participants are better able to minimize gaps in essential care like mental health counseling and medication management once they officially leave service.

In early 2024, VA launched its improved curriculum of VA benefits and services covered during Transition Assistance Program (TAP) classes. TAP 6.0 includes having an accredited representative physically present to assist service members with filing their BDD claims. Data shows this initiative has been effective in increasing the number of transitioning service members receiving their benefits upon discharge. It also has the potential to positively affect factors that can contribute to the downward spiral toward suicide, thereby saving lives.

The VFW would like to see this practice codified into law and made permanent. Since this is a current VA program, we anticipate this legislative fix would be cost neutral.

The VFW Urges Congress to:

Pass legislation such as the *TAP Promotion Act* to codify VA's practice of including accredited claims representatives from national, state, and local organizations in TAP classes.

Exploring Alternative PTSD Treatments

The VFW's Concern:

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), more than 40 percent of veterans in the VA system have a service-connected disability rating for mental health. The VFW acknowledges there is a growing need for alternative treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)/mental health conditions. Currently, veterans seeking mental health care are predominantly directed to two types of medications—selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)—as well as various evidence-based therapies to reduce PTSD symptoms. Veterans have expressed to the VFW their concern that VA may be overprescribing these medications for mental health conditions. While today's standard treatments are successful for some individuals, many veterans report experiencing only temporary relief of symptoms, adverse side effects, and difficulties when going off medications.

Many veterans experience PTSD. If not properly treated, the effects can be detrimental in many ways including risk of homelessness, substance abuse, relationship problems, financial instability, difficulties in transitioning back to civilian life, or suicide. Veterans have shown a willingness to confront mental health challenges. Still, not all treatments work for all veterans, which is why the VFW is urging Congress and VA to research and provide alternative, non-conventional solutions for certain veterans. Some such treatments that have shown potential include stellate ganglion block, hyperbaric oxygen therapy, ketamine infusion, MDMA-assisted therapy, medical cannabis, and other plant-based alternative therapies.

VA has nearly 2.5 million veterans utilizing mental health care. No other health care network in America has as large a population of patients as VA. Given its resources and population size, it has the unique ability to lead from the front on mental health care and cutting-edge treatments. Congress must push VA to research and study innovative mental health solutions to not only help veterans seeking mental health care but also use this opportunity to push information to the private sector.

The VFW believes if there are additional treatments that can effectively treat PTSD, then VA should receive funding to research and deliver those treatments. Historically, VA has been a leader with other innovative treatments such as telemedicine, cardiovascular care, and prosthetics, and now has the opportunity to do the same regarding treatment of PTSD and other mental health conditions.

The VFW Urges Congress to:

Direct the Department of Defense and VA to implement innovative PTSD treatments currently used in the private sector.

Direct VA to review its current mental health treatments and prescribing practices to address the possible over reliance on pharmaceutical interventions.

Cracking Down on Predatory Claims Companies

The VFW's Concern:

The VFW is concerned that bad actors are preying on veterans by skimming their earned Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits. Claim Sharks often charge veterans the equivalent of 5-10 months of their future disability payments. This is money these veterans may not have, which could put them in debt simply for trying to access their earned benefits. This is unethical and illegal.

Many of these companies illegally use veterans' login credentials for VA websites and call centers. Some charge tens of thousands of dollars from future benefits for their services. If a veteran receives a disability percentage increase years later, often these companies return seeking more money whether they performed additional work or not. Furthermore, they routinely obtain medical opinions from affiliated medical providers, which raises ethical concerns.

Anyone who assists veterans with the preparation, presentation, or prosecution of VA claims should adhere to established fee caps or be subject to penalties. Therefore, we would support commonsense legislation to require that everyone who charges veterans for claims assistance does so under VA accreditation and follows legal precedence as would accredited agents and attorneys.

Because of the inaction here in Washington, D.C., nine states have passed anti-claim-shark laws that prohibit charging veterans for initial claims assistance: Washington, Iowa, Michigan, New York, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey, Maine, and Massachusetts.

The VFW Urges Congress to:

Pass legislation that would prohibit the exploitation of veterans and survivors by unscrupulous Claim Sharks and strengthen the accreditation system.

GI Bill Parity

The VFW's Concern:

The sacrifices of National Guard and Reserve members have continued to be overlooked for decades despite an increase in deployments since September 11, 2001. Though they have served alongside active duty service members during increasingly frequent activations both domestic and abroad, they do not always earn their Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) education benefits at the same rate. This inequity has been highlighted during the frequent activations due to natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, and border security missions as National Guard and Reserve members have stood on the front lines administering relief and services.

Currently, Post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility is based on active duty service for at least 90 days. For those in the reserve components, initial skills and training periods are deemed non-qualifying service. Also, full-time National Guard service and certain responses to national emergencies do not qualify.

This is a joint legislative priority for both the VFW and the Student Veterans of America (SVA). The 2024-2025 VFW-SVA Legislative Fellows have advocated on their college campuses around the country this academic year to bring awareness to this issue.

The VFW strongly urges Congress to pass legislation to allow National Guard and Reserve members to rightfully earn GI Bill benefits for every day served. It is long past time for parity with all the armed forces in earning VA education benefits. This inequity must end now.

The VFW Urges Congress to:

Pass the *Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act of 2025* to allow any day in uniform for which military pay is received to count toward Post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility, creating equity for National Guard and Reserve members.

Note: For cosponsorship, please email Alison.Feinswog@mail.house.gov or Kelsey_Baron@vetaff.senate.gov.

Retirement and Military Personnel

The VFW's Concern:

For more than two decades, Congress has failed to address the long-standing injustice of withholding military retirement pay from disabled veterans. Department of Defense (DOD) military retirement pay and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability compensation are separate, distinct benefits earned for different reasons, yet Congress continues to wrongly treat their concurrent receipt as “double-dipping.” The VFW believes this policy is fundamentally unfair, and it is time for Congress to act.

In 2004, Congress authorized full concurrent receipt for veterans with at least 20 years of service and a 50 percent service-connected disability rating or higher. While this was a positive step, the VFW believes the 50 percent threshold is arbitrary and unjust. Veterans rated below 50 percent still endure sacrifices, risks, and challenges, yet they are excluded from full benefits with no reasonable explanation. This exclusion has left many veterans frustrated and feeling abandoned by the very system that should be supporting them.

Additionally, veterans who are medically retired under Chapter 61, including combat-injured and ill veterans, continue to suffer due to the offset of their retirement pay and disability compensation. Over 50,000 Chapter 61 retirees, including those who need ongoing care and support, do not have full access to their vested retirement pay and service-connected disability compensation, creating financial hardship for them and their families.

It is imperative that Congress acts now to end the policy of offsetting benefits, fulfill its promises, and prevent further harm to disabled veterans. The cost of full concurrent receipt is far outweighed by the moral obligation to honor their sacrifices. The VFW calls on the 119th Congress to pass legislation that will show them their service is truly valued. Every year of delay only deepens the financial and emotional toll on these veterans who have already given so much to this country.

The VFW Urges Congress to:

Pass legislation such as the *Major Richard Star Act*, either as a standalone bill or via the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026, to enable Chapter 61 retirees who sustained combat-related injuries to receive their vested DOD retirement pay and VA disability compensation without offset.

Pass legislation to eliminate any offset of DOD military retirement pay and VA disability compensation.