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View from the Bridge

As we enter a new year, MVA is stepping up our actions focused on decreasing Veteran suicides. It is no secret that suicide claims far too many people. For military veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) they are at an even greater risk of depression, unclear thinking, and suicide.

In 2021, the most recent data available, nearly 6,400 Veterans took their lives. Of the 48,183 Americans who died from suicide in 2021, 13% were Veterans. Since Veterans make up about 6% of the U.S. Adult population, this is significant. Veterans Affairs has stepped up efforts to identify those at risk, but the truth is that 62% of Veteran who were among those who had not received VA healthcare services in the previous two years. They may not even be aware of the resources available. We want to help reach those Veterans.

One way we are doing this is with a Veterans Get Outside Day event June 9 at Fort Adams, Newport, Rhode Island. This will be a free event with access to mental health resources, adaptive sports opportunities a walk/run, tours of the historic fort and an opportunity to see, and hopefully tour, the SSV Oliver Hazard Perry, a fully-rigged ocean going ship. Keep an eye out for updates on this event which we hope will draw about 2,500 visitors from throughout New England. Veterans Get Outside Day. We will keep you updated as we move forward.

Studies have shown that individuals who spend time outdoors in natural settings, whether they are doing sports or other activities, have a better outlook on life. It is hoped that this event will encourage Veterans and others that may be struggling to find an activity or resources that will excite them about spending more time outside and enjoy life. It is hoped that events like Veteran Get Outside Day can help bridge that gap.

For other suicide prevention initiatives, we are pushing legislation to ensure the VA adopts non-opioid treatments such as Stellate Ganglion Block ([HR 3023](#)) for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the Hyperbaric Oxygen Treatment ([HR 105](#) and [HR 3649](#)) for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Severe TBI can lead to depression and other mental health disorders. These low cost-high impact programs are designed to help treat the twin scourges of PTS/TBI and mitigate our ever-increasing Veterans suicide rate. There were nearly 6,400 Veteran suicides in 2021 – many related to PTS/TBI. That was an increase of 114 over 2020. These numbers are always a year behind due to the way the information is gathered. We must reverse that trend.

Thank you all for your past support and I look forward to another successful year.

**John B. Wells, Commander (U.S. Navy, Retired)
Chairman, Military-Veterans Advocacy, Inc.**



Legislative update

Following is an overview of the legislative matters MVA is working on during our Congressional visits. Please contact your representatives to request support for these bills. Click the Bill of the Week if listed to express support.

[Correcting Guam's History in the PACT Act.](#) H.R. 1191 states that service performed in Guam or its territorial waters between August 15, 1958, and July 31, 1980, provides a veteran who has a specified disease that is associated with exposure to certain herbicide agents with eligibility for a presumption of service-connection. (Under current law, the eligible time frame for service in Guam is between January 9, 1962 and July 31, 1980.) The Bill was introduced in February 2023 and is still in committee. It has bi-partisan support with 65 co-sponsors. [Bill of the Week.](#)

[Panama Canal Zone Veterans Act of 2023.](#) H.R. 2247 provides for a presumption of service connection for illnesses associated with service in the Armed Forces in the Panama Canal Zone, and for other purposes. Request support. The Bill was introduced in April 2023 and is still in committee. It has bi-partisan support with 41 co-sponsors. [Bill of the Week.](#)

[TBI and PTSD Treatment Act.](#) H.R. 105 directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide hyperbaric oxygen therapy to Veterans with traumatic brain injury or post-traumatic stress disorder. The Bill was introduced in February 2023 and was referred to the Subcommittee on Health. It has eight co-sponsors. [Bill of the Week.](#)

[Veterans National Traumatic Brain Injury Treatment Act.](#) H.R. 3649 was introduced in the House in June 2023 and seeks to establish a pilot program to provide Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy to Veterans who have a traumatic brain injury or post-traumatic stress disorder. The Bill was referred to the Subcommittee on Health. It has eight co-sponsors. [Bill of the Week.](#)

[TREAT PTSD Act.](#) H.R. 3023, **Treatment and Relief through Emerging and Accessible Therapy for PTSD Act or the TREAT PTSD Act**, requires the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense (DOD) to furnish stellate ganglion block to certain veterans or members of the Armed Forces (including reserve components) diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Blocking the stellate ganglion (a group of nerves at the base of the neck) by injecting a local anesthetic is a treatment that may alleviate PTSD

symptoms. The Bill was introduced in May 2023 and is still in committee. It has 17 co-sponsors. [Bill of the Week.](#)

Expand herbicide benefits to Okinawa Veterans who served between January 9, 1962 and July 31, 1980. Evidence shows that the herbicide Agent Orange was shipped to, stored, and used on United States military installations on Okinawa. Agent Orange barrels were discovered on Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in August of 1981 and at a soccer pitch in Okinawa City (previously part of Kadena Air Force Base) in June of 2013. Support amending 38 U.S.C. § 1116 to include Okinawa. This legislation has been drafted by MVA, but it has not yet been introduced in the House.

Require a timeline for VA response to rulemaking requests. Request amendment to ([38 USC, Section 502](#)) to require Veterans Affairs to respond to rulemaking requests within 270 days of receipt. There is no current requirement and VA has a history of acknowledging a need for change but not making a change.

Return the Blue Water line to the theater of combat as existed prior to 2002. MVA recently lost a court case to require VA to use the coordinates for the Vietnam theater of combat to determine eligibility for Agent Orange Act presumptive benefits. We are now working on legislation to make these changes.

Cover dependents exposed to toxins. MVA has drafted legislation to ensure that dependents who resided with the service member and were exposed to toxins receive care for illnesses related to those toxins. This would be similar to the benefits provided to dependents at Camp Lejeune but would cover all military installations with exposure concerns. We are currently seeking sponsors and hope to have this legislation introduced during this session.

National Veterans Get Outside Day. MVA has drafted resolutions for the House and Senate to designate June 9, 2024 as National Veterans Get Outside Day. The resolution encourages the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Forest Service, and the National Park Service to coordinate and cooperate in promoting "Veterans Get Outside Day". The Resolutions are expected to be introduced by the end of February.



File a Supplemental to reopen denied claim

By Donna C. Stratford (MSgt. USAFR Retired)
MVA Marketing and Communication Director

Many Veterans have been denied claims for service-connected conditions. Filing a [supplemental claim](#) with both new and relevant evidence will give you a second review of your disability. This is especially important for Veterans who were previously denied, but now have a covered disability under the PACT Act.

The PACT Act added locations for Agent Orange exposure, primarily Guam, American Samoa, Thailand, Cambodia, and Johnston Atoll, as well as the new presumptive conditions of High Blood Pressure and Monoclonal Gammopathy of undetermined significance (MGUS). The complete list of Agent Orange conditions is at this [link](#).

For Gulf War and Vietnam-era Veterans with toxic exposures from burn pits or other contaminants, a number of cancers and illnesses became presumptive and can now be claimed. This [link](#) contains a list of the new PACT Act presumptive conditions.

If you were denied for a condition that is now presumptive because of the change in law, or were denied due to a lack of evidence which you now have, such as a buddy statement, NEXUS statement or found records, you can file a supplemental claim for that condition.

If you think you may have a case for a supplemental claim, you should seek the advice of a [VA accredited representative](#). They will review your information and provide advice on the best way to proceed. You can find a list of MVA's recommended accredited representatives [here](#), or you can search the Veterans Affairs list of accredited representatives at this [link](#). Never use an unaccredited claims company to pursue your claims.

For more information on supplemental claims go to this [link](#).

Donations sought for Freedom's Fund

This is the story of Freedom. A dog who started life abandoned and starved and ended it as a service dog walking the halls of Congress as an ambassador for disabled Veterans. After going through service dog training, he was partnered with retired Marine Corps Sergeant Major Jim Kuiken to assist him with getting through the difficulties of living with post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries.



During his six years on the Hill as part of the MVA delegation, Freedom is credited with helping to improve and obtain new benefits for more than 200,000 Veterans, most notably in the Blue Water Navy and PACT Acts.

Sadly, Freedom passed away last year. The Freedom's Fund campaign was established to honor Freedom's service and continue his work in Washington, D.C. To learn more about Freedom's story and send a donation click [here](#).

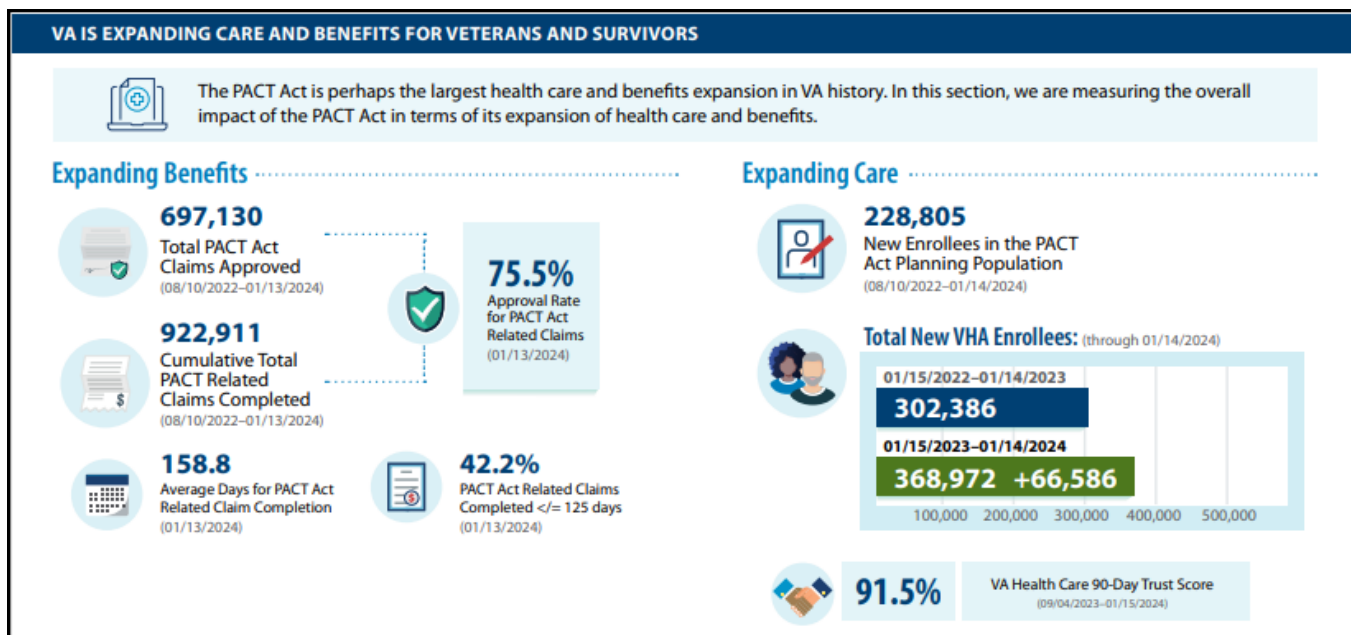
Veterans Affairs benefit updates and news

National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic set for San Diego

Registration for the National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic (NVSSC) opens on Dec. 1, 2023, and runs through March 1, 2024. The 2024 NVSSC will take place August 25-30 in San Diego, California, offering an extended opportunity for Veterans to partake in adaptive sports. Eligible Veterans can apply to attend the 2024 Summer Sports Clinic by going to www.summersportsclinic.va.gov. All accepted Veterans will be eligible to receive a free round trip airline ticket to attend through the generous support of Fisher House Foundation Hero Miles.

VA provides emergency suicide prevention care to nearly 50,000 Veterans under new policy

In the first year of VA's [new policy](#) allowing eligible Veterans and certain former service members in acute suicidal crisis to go to any VA or non-VA health care facility for no-cost emergency health care, 49,714 Veterans and former service members have used this benefit — providing them with lifesaving care and saving more than \$64 million in health care costs. The care includes emergency room care, inpatient or crisis residential care for up to 30 days, outpatient care for up to 90 days, and transportation costs. The policy has also increased access to no-cost emergent suicide care for up to 9 million Veterans, because eligible Veterans do not need to be enrolled in the VA system or go to a department facility to use this benefit.



Top 5 Most Frequent Conditions on PACT Act Related Claims (As of 01/13/2024)				
Condition	Number of Claims	Number of Issues	Percent Granted	Percent Denied
Hypertensive Vascular Disease	249,773	253,431	74%	26%
Allergic Rhinitis	163,685	166,129	80%	20%
Maxillary Sinusitis	79,736	80,352	53%	47%
Bronchial Asthma	74,654	75,979	48%	52%
Chronic Bronchitis	41,826	42,906	23%	77%

Most Frequent Denial Reasons (as of 01/13/2024)	
1	No Diagnosis
2	Not Incurred or Not Caused by Service
3	Not Established by Presumption