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VETERANS

MONTHLY INFORMATION PACKAGE

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Feel free to make copies and distribute throughout your organization.

VAU.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

News Release

Office of Public Affairs
Media RelationsWashington, DC 20420
(202) 461-7600
www.va.govFOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Nov. 3, 2022

New data shows 11% decline in Veteran homelessness since 2020 — the biggest drop in more than 5 years

WASHINGTON — Today, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness announced preliminary results of the 2022 [Point-in-Time Count](#) showing an 11% decline in Veteran homelessness since early 2020, the last time a full count was conducted. This is the biggest drop in Veteran homelessness in more than five years.

The data show on a single night in January 2022, there were 33,136 Veterans who were experiencing homelessness in the United States — down from 37,252 in 2020. Overall, this represents a 55.3% reduction in Veterans experiencing homelessness since 2010.

“One Veteran experiencing homelessness will *always* be one too many, but the 2022 PIT Count shows that we are making real progress in the fight to end Veteran homelessness,” said **VA Secretary Denis McDonough**. “There is still a long way to go, but under President Biden’s leadership, we at VA, HUD and USICH will not stop until every Veteran has a good, safe, stable home in this country they fought to defend.”

“All Veterans deserve to have what they need to lead healthy, safe and successful lives — that starts with a place to call home,” said **HUD Secretary Marcia Fudge**. “The data released today shows we are closer than ever in ensuring that every Veteran in America has a home and challenges us to ensure that every Veteran — and every person in America — has a home.”

“Not only did we lower the number of Veterans experiencing homelessness, but we made this progress during a global pandemic and economic crisis,” said **USICH Executive Director Jeff Olivet**. “This proves that, even under the most difficult circumstances, we can take care of each other and address homelessness.”

The 2022 PIT Count is the first full PIT Count since 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic began. In 2021, many communities did not conduct unsheltered counts in order to stop or slow the spread of COVID-19, resulting in an incomplete picture of Veteran homelessness in America.

Notably, the results from the PIT Count do not reflect the additional efforts launched by VA, HUD and USICH in 2022, including [VA’s goal to re-house 38,000 Veterans](#) in this calendar year. Through September, VA has placed nearly 31,000 homeless Veterans into permanent housing — putting VA on track to meet, or even exceed its goal.

VA, USICH and HUD are making progress using the [evidence-based “Housing First”](#) approach, which prioritizes getting a Veteran into housing, then provides the Veteran with the wraparound support they need to stay housed — including health care, job training, legal and education assistance and more.

This progress has been made possible by the leadership of President Biden and the resources provided by Congress during the pandemic. With the passage of the American Rescue Plan, VA’s homeless programs received \$481 million in additional funding to support Veterans — including funding to expand the [Shallow Subsidy Initiative](#), expand the [Supportive Services for Veteran Families Program](#) to address legal barriers to housing and [transform congregate transitional housing](#) spaces into individual rooms with bathrooms and more. Overall, the American Rescue Plan provided more than [\\$5 billion](#) to assist individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness, as well as more than [\\$40 billion for housing provisions nationwide](#).

If you are a Veteran who is experiencing homelessness or at risk for homelessness, call the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at **877-4AID-VET (877-424-3838)**. Visit the [VA Homeless Programs website](#) to learn about housing initiatives and other programs for Veterans exiting homelessness.

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VAU.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

News Release

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Media RelationsWashington, DC 20420
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Oct. 27, 2022

VA announces funding opportunities to help Veterans experiencing homelessness

WASHINGTON — This week, as a part of ongoing efforts to end Veteran homelessness, the Department of Veterans Affairs published three grant opportunities for Fiscal Year 2024 that will help Veterans who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

The first grant opportunity is for VA's [Supportive Services for Veteran Families program](#), which provides supportive services to rapidly rehouse Veterans and their families, prevent the imminent loss of a Veteran's home, or identify new, more suitable housing situations for Veterans and their families. VA anticipates awarding funding to eligible organizations located in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam and Virgin Islands.

The two other grant opportunities are for VA's [Grant and Per Diem program](#), which provides Veterans-in-need with transitional housing beds and case management —connecting them to VA benefits, community-based services and permanent housing. VA anticipates awarding nearly 390 total grants through this program, which will provide beds for approximately 11,000 Veterans nationwide.

“These grants will provide critical resources to help Veterans and their families climb out of homelessness or prevent them from falling into homelessness in the first place,” said **VA Secretary Denis McDonough**. “Every Veteran deserves a good, stable, safe home in this country they fought to defend — and these grants are a key part of making that goal a reality.”

More information about each of these opportunities is below:

Supportive Services for Veteran Families Grants: The first grant opportunity is through VA's [SSVF program](#) and will support both new and renewal grant awards to community-based nonprofit agencies and consumer collaboratives. The grant money will fund operations for fiscal year 2024, beginning Oct. 1, 2023. In addition to providing services to prevent Veterans from becoming homeless or to rapidly rehouse Veterans who are currently homeless, these funds also [provide additional authorities and flexibilities](#) to assist Veterans in remaining in and obtaining permanent housing.

SSVF grant applications must be received by the SSVF Program Office by 4 p.m. ET, Feb. 10, 2023. View the [SSVF Notice of Funding availability](#), [learn more about SSVF](#) or email SSVF@va.gov.

Grant and Per Diem Grants: The second and third grant opportunities are available through VA's [Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem](#) program and will support two kinds of grants for FY24: 1) Per Diem Only grants will fund transitional supportive housing beds or service centers, and 2) Transition in Place grants will provide Veterans with apartment-style housing that allows Veterans to remain in their homes when they complete the GPD program. VA anticipates awarding 350 Per Diem Only grants to support approximately 10,500 transitional housing beds and 15 service centers nationwide. The department also anticipates awarding approximately 40 Transition in Place grants to support 600 TIP beds nationwide.

PDO grant applications must be received by 4 p.m., ET, Feb. 6, 2023, and TIP grant applications must be received by the GPD program office by 4 p.m., ET, Jan. 30, 2023. View the GPD [PDO Notice of Funding Opportunity](#), the [GPD TIP Notice of Funding Opportunity](#), [learn more about GPD](#) or email GPDGrants@va.gov.

In this calendar year, VA has already placed nearly 31,000 homeless Veterans into permanent housing — putting VA on track to meet and even exceed its goal of [38,000 permanent housing placements for homeless Veterans in 2022](#).

###

VA to Move Veterans with Cancer to Front of the PACT Act Line



7 Nov 2022

Military.com | By [Rebecca Kheel](#)

Veterans with cancer will get priority when the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) begins processing benefits claims under the sweeping toxic exposure law enacted earlier this year, officials said Monday.

"I'm proud to announce for the first time today, on National Cancer Awareness Day, that we're expediting benefits delivery for veterans with cancer conditions covered in this law," VA Secretary Denis McDonough said during a speech at the National Press Club.

McDonough also vowed the department "will not rest" until "every veteran gets the care they need and the benefits they deserve."

Read Next: [VA Staff Providing Abortions May Not Be Protected in Some States, Democratic Lawmakers Warn](#)

The VA is set to begin processing claims for benefits filed under the toxic exposure bill, known as the Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics, or PACT, Act, on Jan. 1.

The law designated 23 diseases as presumed to be linked to burn pits used during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and other airborne pollutants and environmental

hazards from earlier conflicts, meaning veterans with those ailments will now have a streamlined process for claiming health care and disability benefits.

Of the 23 presumptive diseases, about half are different types of cancer: melanoma, brain cancer, neck cancer, pancreatic cancer, kidney cancer, glioblastoma, head cancer of any type, respiratory cancer of any type, reproductive cancer of any type, gastrointestinal cancer of any type, lymphoma of any type and lymphomatic cancer of any type.

The decision to prioritize benefits claims for cancer over the other presumptive diseases in the PACT Act is part of the Biden administration's Cancer Moonshot, the effort to find new treatments and slash the death rate for cancer, the VA said. President Joe Biden first launched the Cancer Moonshot initiative when he was vice president and revived it earlier this year.

Biden's attention on cancer came after his son Beau died of glioblastoma in 2015. Biden has said he suspects his son's fatal cancer was caused by the burn pits he was exposed to while serving in Iraq and Kosovo with the Delaware [National Guard](#).

The announcement on prioritizing claims from veterans with cancer is one of a flurry of moves the VA is making as it begins to implement the PACT Act and prepare to process claims.

Also Monday, the department formally unveiled the PACT Act-mandated toxic exposure screening it will [provide to veterans starting this week](#).

Since the PACT Act was signed into law in August, nearly 137,000 veterans have filed claims for benefits, McDonough said Monday. That's up from the 113,000 claims he cited [just a couple weeks ago](#).

The gap between accepting claims as soon as the bill was signed and waiting to process them until January was built into the law to give the VA time to hire more claims processors. The department has met a goal it set earlier this year to hire 2,000 new processors, McDonough said, though he acknowledged more will be needed.

"That's not enough," he said. "We need at least that many more, if not more than that to implement the PACT Act."

-- Rebecca Kheel can be reached at rebecca.kheel@military.com. Follow her on Twitter @reporterkheel.

VA will launch new life insurance program in January, making life insurance available to more Veterans than ever before

WASHINGTON — On Jan. 1, 2023, the Department of Veterans Affairs will open enrollment for Veterans Affairs Life Insurance — the first new VA life insurance program for Veterans in more than 50 years — extending VALife access to millions of Veterans.

VALife will provide up to \$40,000 of whole life insurance for all Veterans, age 80 or under, with service-connected disabilities rated from 0-100%. Acceptance in the program is guaranteed, and no medical underwriting is required.

It will also allow Veterans to complete their application online, receive instant decisions, and perform self-service functions — including electronic payments and beneficiary updates.

“All Veterans deserve to know that their families will have financial support when they pass away,” said **VA Secretary Denis McDonough**. “VALife is a critical step toward making that goal a reality, helping VA provide more life insurance to more Veterans than ever before in our nation’s history.”

VALife will increase Veteran access to life insurance in several ways:

- **There is no time limit to apply:** VA’s existing life insurance program for service-disabled Veterans, [Service-Disabled Veterans Insurance](#), required most Veterans to apply for insurance within 2 years of receiving their disability rating. VALife has no such time constraint for Veterans aged 80 and under.
-
- **There is no health requirement to apply:** Under S-DVI, Veterans had to be in good health except for service-connected conditions. VALife has no medical evaluation tied to it.

- **Veterans are eligible for more coverage than before:** Under S-DVI, most Veterans could only receive up to \$10,000 of coverage. Under VALife, all Veterans are eligible for up to \$40,000 of coverage.

VALife premium rates are competitive with, or better than, similar coverage available in the private sector, and \$40,000 of coverage is more coverage than other like products offered. The policy will build cash value after the first two years of coverage when the face value goes into effect. If a Veteran passes away during this two-year waiting period, the named beneficiary will receive all premiums paid plus interest. Unlike S-DVI, Veterans will *not* be able to get a waiver for their premiums.

VA currently serves nearly 6 million Veterans, service members and their families with more than \$1.2 trillion of insurance. Veterans currently enrolled in S-DVI will have the option to keep their current coverage or switch to VALife. These Veterans can apply for VALife at any time after Jan. 1, 2023; however, if they apply between Jan. 1, 2023, and Dec. 31, 2025, they can also retain coverage under S-DVI during the two-year waiting period for the VALife death benefit to go into effect.

Veterans will no longer be able to apply for S-DVI after VALife launches Jan. 1, 2023. However, eligible Veterans still have the opportunity to [apply](#) for the program between now and Dec. 31, 2022.

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VA creates scholarship program to help aspiring VA mental health professionals

WASHINGTON — Today, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced that it will establish a Vet Center (Readjustment Counseling Service) Scholarship Program to assist individuals pursuing graduate degrees in psychology, social work, marriage and family therapy, or mental health counseling.

VA expects to award scholarships in the summer of 2023, providing funding to cover up to two years of graduate studies for individuals pursuing these degrees. Upon completion of their degrees, these mental health professionals will then serve full time for a period of six years at one of VA's 300 [Vet Centers](#) across the country, specifically, in underserved areas that need additional mental health professionals and in states with a per-capita population of more than 5% Veterans.

"In 300 communities across the country, Vet Centers provide Veterans, service members, and their families with quick and easy access to the mental health care they need and deserve," said **VA Secretary Denis McDonough**. "These scholarships will help VA ensure all Veterans and service members — including those in historically underserved areas — have access to Vet Centers with highly-qualified, trained and compassionate staff."

Vet Centers are community-based counseling centers that provide a wide range of social and psychological services, including professional counseling to eligible Veterans, service members, including National Guard and Reserve components and their families. Vet Center counselors and outreach staff, many of whom are Veterans themselves, are experienced and prepared to discuss the tragedies of war, loss, grief and transition after trauma. In Fiscal Year 2022, 286,907 Veterans, service members (including members of the National Guard and Reserves) and their families received counseling at VA's 300 Vet Centers, totaling nearly 1.34 million visits and outreach contacts.

Today, VA posted a final rule for public inspection in the Federal Register [86 FR 81094](#) to create this scholarship program. The rule originates from the [Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019](#) which created the scholarship program as an incentive to train more individuals in psychology, social work, marriage and family therapy or mental health counseling. It is also a part of the Biden-Harris administration's broader efforts to support Veterans and improve mental health care access for all.

-Learn more about [Vet Centers](#).

###

Veterans File Record Number of Disability Claims, Putting Pressure on Backlog



27 Oct 2022

Military.com | By [Patricia Kime](#)

The [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) has received nearly 113,000 new disability compensation claims for benefits created by the landmark toxic exposure law signed in August, pushing the VA to aggressively search for new hires to handle the influx of veterans into the system.

VA Secretary Denis McDonough said Tuesday that claims applications this month were 19% higher than October 2021, with the VA receiving 1,000 more claims a day than it usually does, requiring the department to take steps to recruit additional health and benefits personnel and offer incentives to retain current employees.

"With the promise of so many more veterans coming to VA for care under these provisions, we need aggressively to hire the people who will deliver the benefits," McDonough said during a press conference in Washington, D.C.

The department began accepting claims for illnesses deemed as linked to military service by the Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics, or PACT, Act in August after the legislation was signed by President Joe Biden.

The illnesses include 23 respiratory illnesses and cancer tied to exposure to burn pits and other air pollution from the Persian Gulf War and post-9/11 conflicts; radiation-related illnesses for veterans who participated in certain cleanup

operations in the 1960s and 1970s; and hypertension and monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance, or MGUS, for Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange.

Under VA policy, veterans with one of these illnesses must submit evidence they served in an area and are eligible for benefits, but they don't have to send medical evidence that their condition was service-related, effectively speeding up processing times.

While the VA is accepting PACT Act-related claims now, it will not begin processing them until January -- a provision in the law that gave the department time to hire additional personnel to review the claims.

According to McDonough, the VA is now processing roughly 7,500 claims a day and has reached as many as 7,900 in a single day, a figure he described as a "new normal."

The VA launched an effort earlier this year to hire 2,000 new claims processors, and it instituted an automated system to handle some claims to shorten the time it takes to provide a decision.

A pilot run of the VA Automated Benefits Delivery System, launched last year, reduced the amount of time by 98 days for hypertension claims. The VA plans to use the system to process claims for other common conditions in veterans such as asthma, sleep apnea and prostate cancer.

The number of backlogged claims, defined as those older than 125 days, at the VA is 144,021 -- more than twice the number at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic but down from a recent high of more than 211,000. The 144,000 claims represent 22% of all the VA's current claims workload of 429,000, according to McDonough.

VA officials said they aim to continue chipping away at the backlog but expect the overall number of new claims to rise in the coming months, namely because of the PACT Act provisions.

"Backlog[s] coming down, thanks to [VA Office of Human Capital Services Executive Director Aaron Lee] and those great claims reviewers ... but overall inventory continuing to increase because, finally, those who have served throughout Southwest Asia since the first Gulf War are finally getting access to claims," McDonough said.

Veterans who file PACT Act-related claims before Aug. 9, 2023, will have their claims backdated to Aug. 10, 2022. Claims filed on or after Aug. 9, 2023, will be dated on the date of filing.

McDonough added that veterans who want more information on the PACT Act or to apply for disability benefits should go to the VA's [website](#) or call 1-800-MY-VA-411 (1-800-698-2411).

More than 200,000 Veterans and beneficiaries have switched to safer, more secure payments through VA's Banking Program

WASHINGTON — Today, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced that its Veterans Benefits Banking Program has converted more than 200,000 Veterans and beneficiaries from paper checks to direct deposit for receiving their VA benefits payments.

Switching from paper checks to direct deposit helps protect Veterans and beneficiaries from fraud and ensure that they receive their earned benefits in a timely manner.

Research has shown paper checks are 16-times more likely to be lost, stolen, or manipulated than a payment made through direct deposit. Paper checks are also 22-times more likely to have a “non-receipt” or “delayed receipt” claim, meaning the Veteran or beneficiary did not receive their payment or the payment was running late.

Since VA began helping Veterans enroll in direct deposit in 2019, fraud has decreased by 93%.

“We at VA are heartened that so many Veterans and VA beneficiaries have made the switch from paper checks to direct deposit, but we won't rest until every Veteran has safe and timely access to their hard-earned benefits,” said **VA Secretary Denis McDonough**. “I encourage all Veterans to work with us to connect with trustworthy financial institutions and make the switch to direct deposit.”

Recognizing the need to help Veterans and their families access financial products and services, VA partnered with the Association of Military Banks of America to create the Veterans Benefits Banking Program in 2019. Through VBBP, Veterans have access to 43 participating financial institutions to provide low to no-cost checking and savings accounts.

VBBP also provides Veterans a free session with either an Accredited Financial Counselor® through the Association for Financial Counseling and Planning Education® or a credit counselor through the National Foundation for Credit Counseling.

Participating banks and credit unions can be found at VeteransBenefitsBanking.org.

Additional financial resources for Veterans include VetCents, a financial education program specifically designed for Veterans and their families that covers topics like budgeting, and Veteran Saves, an initiative that helps Veterans build financial resilience. Veterans who already have a bank account and want to use direct deposit for their VA benefits may call 800-827-1000 or change their VA direct deposit information online.

How We Breathe Is the Key to an Effective New Treatment for Anxiety and PTSD



Military.com | By [Blake Stilwell](#)

The [Department of Veterans Affairs estimates](#) that up to 20% of those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder. The same data show 12% of Gulf War veterans and as high as 30% of Vietnam veterans have experienced symptoms in their lifetime.

While treatments for PTSD have improved since the start of the Global War On Terrorism, incidences of PTSD and anxiety disorder have risen dramatically, [as high as 327%](#) between 2000 and 2012. Incidences of trauma can lead to major depressive disorders, substance abuse, poor social function and suicide.

[Freespira](#), a new digital treatment, may offer an effective treatment for panic disorder, anxiety disorders and PTSD. Freespira is a 28-day treatment that retrains patients with certain disorders to build a kind of muscle memory that normalizes how they breathe.

The treatment was developed by Freespira's chief clinical officer, Robert Cuyler, along with Michael Telch, professor of psychology and director of the Laboratory for the Study of Anxiety Disorders at the University of Texas at Austin.

"Many individuals with conditions related to panic have what's called dysregulated breathing," Cuyler tells Military.com. "It's not like a lung disease. They breathe in a dysfunctional way all the time. They can yawn, sigh and breathe as much sitting in a chair as if they were jogging. They hold their breath. This is a factor in the respiratory physiology and the brain network associated with these conditions."

Cuyler cites a Stanford University study that sought to find out what effect fixing dysregulated breathing might have in people who suffer from panic, anxiety and PTSD. What the Stanford research found was that it wasn't just breathing rates; it was also how much carbon dioxide the participants exhaled that mattered.

"There are thousands of breathing apps out there. You've also got yoga and meditative breathing," says Cuyler. "But this group saw a distinct aspect of these conditions, and that is people's carbon dioxide levels are really out of sync with their oxygen levels, and that sets the stage in body physiology for symptom surges."

This led to a laboratory technique to give people breath-by-breath feedback of their respiration rate and their exhaled CO₂ level.

"As a treatment, what the client or patient does is pretty simple. They learn how to synchronize their breathing to a rising and falling audio tone, while trying to stabilize their respiratory rate while they see a readout of their exhaled CO₂ levels," Cuyler explains. "They adjust their air intake, their breath volume to normalize their CO₂."

Using an app to provide that real-time feedback on respiratory rates and carbon dioxide levels, the Freespira treatment monitors a patient's respiration rates, which allows them to adjust how often they breathe and how fast they exhale.



Over the course of about four weeks, the app is designed to manage breathing rates, through two 17-minute sessions per day and a meeting with a certified behavioral health coach once per week. By the end of the course, the system retrains users to breathe at a normal rate. The learning has stayed with users for a full year.

"So we're really doing two things," says Cuyler. "One is, we're retraining the brain to breathe in a normal fashion, but at the same time, we're teaching people a self-management skill that they can use when they feel stressed or triggered."

To measure its efficacy, Freespira compares results using [the PCL-5 scale](#), the VA's self-reporting measurement of PTSD symptoms. A change of 10 points is considered clinically significant in this metric. The average drop on the scale for Freespira users is 19.5 points.

A company-funded study of more than 1,500 patients with PTSD or panic disorder who were treated with Freespira was [published in the digital health journal Frontiers](#) on Nov. 17, 2022. It found 75% of users adhered to the treatment, where [previous studies](#) have found adherence rates among veterans in medication treatments can be as low as 39.5%.

In the Freespira study, 65% of 1,395 patients with panic disorder showed improvement. The 174 patients with PTSD showed a higher improvement rate of 72%.



"I think there's three reasons why this product works so well," Joe Perekupka, Freespira's CEO, says. "The first and most important piece is, we're taking patients from a passive participant in their treatment to being an active one. Then we then bring in a visualization piece so patients can see their measurements, and that creates a higher engagement rate. There's something very powerful when a patient can visualize what's wrong.

"The third piece is, we're pairing each patient with a care coach, who works with them one per week. They guide the patient through the process with weekly touchpoints. Within seven to 10 days, they start seeing improvement."

Perekupka says Freespira uses third-party validated surveys to measure patient progress. Based on this data, greater than 80% of patients have achieved significant reduction or elimination of symptoms. The same surveys find that after 12 months post-treatment, 73% of patients are still free of panic attacks.

Freespira is available only by prescription and it is available through the VA. It is the only FDA-cleared digital therapeutic proven to significantly reduce or eliminate symptoms of panic attacks, panic disorder and PTSD. The FDA does not approve (either positively or negatively) apps like this, however. For more information, [visit Freespira](#) online.

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Service Restored to National 988 Suicide Hotline; Military and Veterans, Press 1



2 Dec 2022

Military.com | By [Patricia Kime](#)

Service was restored late Thursday to the national suicide and mental health hotline following an outage that affected its phone services for several hours.

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline provides counseling and emergency response to people experiencing a mental health emergency. Those trying to reach the line via phone on Thursday were greeted with a message saying the line is "experiencing a service outage," although the line's 988 text message function and website chat remained operable.

Around midnight Thursday, Sarah Lovenheim, a spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Human Services, tweeted that the issue, which stemmed from a problem at the firm contracted to provide the service, "had been addressed."

The problem affected not only the Lifeline, but the Substance Abuse and [Mental Health](#) Services Administration's Disaster Distress Helpline and the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) Crisis Line, which connects military personnel and former service members to the VA by pressing 1 after dialing 988.

After learning of the outage, the VA immediately provided alternative numbers through social media channels. During a press conference Thursday, VA Secretary Denis McDonough [announced the outage](#) and said veterans needing immediate

help could call alternate numbers or reach the Crisis Line by texting 838255 or accessing the Crisis Line via its website.

Lovenheim said with the restoration late Thursday, the VA's 988, Press 1 function was back in service.

The cause of the outage has yet to be determined. Lovenheim said the Department of Health and Human Services is conducting an investigation.

"While HHS and VA immediately acted to provide support to 988 callers via text, chat, and alternate numbers, the disruption of phone service was unacceptable," Lovenheim said in a tweeted statement.

The three-digit 988 number for mental health crisis response was adopted in July after years of lobbying by advocates and medical providers, who hoped the abbreviated phone number would make it easier for people to remember and access the service.

The 988 initiative was signed into law in 2020 and developed by HHS, SAMHSA and the VA.

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Veterans Groups Press for Long-Shot Expansion of GI Bill Eligibility for Guard and Reserves



2 Dec 2022

Military.com | By [Rebecca Kheel](#)

Leading veterans organizations are pushing senators to take up legislation to expand GI Bill eligibility for National Guardsmen and reservists before the end of this congressional session, after which their efforts would have to go back to square one.

At issue is the fact that many National Guard deployments don't allow troops to accrue GI Bill benefits, nor does the time Guardsmen and reservists spend on active duty for training -- something advocates for part-time service members say is unjust as those troops are increasingly relied upon for domestic missions, ranging from guarding the southern border to helping with pandemic response.

The House passed a bill in January to fix the disparity. But the Senate has yet to take it up, and any bill that hasn't cleared Congress by the time a new session starts at the beginning of the year has to be reintroduced and repassed.

"Given the shared focus on supporting our National Guard and Reserve service members, we implore you to come to a bipartisan agreement that passes GI Bill parity before the end of the 117th Congress," 15 veterans service organizations, led by the American Legion, wrote in a letter sent Thursday to Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester, D-Mont., and committee ranking member Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kan. "Our service members have earned it."

To be eligible for at least some GI Bill benefits, a service member has to serve for at least 90 days, not including basic training. To get a full scholarship, the time commitment increases to 36 months. Someone discharged for a service-connected injury is eligible for the full benefit if they served at least 30 days.

For the National Guard, so-called Title 32 orders do not count toward GI Bill benefits accrual unless they are in support of a presidentially declared national emergency. Title 32 orders are considered federal active-duty orders and are paid for by the federal government, but state governors remain in actual command of their National Guard forces.

The time that Army National Guardsmen spent on Title 32 orders or other domestic missions increased more than 1,000% from 2016 to 2021, from 818,496 man-days to 9.5 million man-days, according to data shared by the American Legion.

Some high-profile Title 32 deployments in recent years were for national emergencies, such as the COVID-19 response, and so counted toward GI Bill eligibility. But others, such as the mobilizations during the racial justice protests of summer 2020, were not declared national emergencies and so didn't earn the education benefits.

In their letter, the veterans groups argued that reforming GI Bill eligibility could help with retention issues facing reserve components.

"Ensuring these servicemembers have the same education benefits as their active-duty counterparts is a logical first step towards parity in recruitment and retention," they wrote.

The House-passed bill, called the Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act, would allow any day a Guardsmen or reservist is paid and in uniform on federal orders, including for training, to count toward GI Bill eligibility.

While the full Senate has not taken up the bill, the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee advanced a similar but slightly different bill late last year dubbed the Guard, Reserve and Active-Duty, or GRAD, Department of Veterans Affairs Educational Assistance Parity. The main difference from the House bill is that the GRAD Act would not count monthly weekend drills, nor reservists' annual drills, toward GI Bill eligibility, though some other Guard exercises, such as the annual two-week training, would count.

Republicans, while acknowledging the inequality Guardsmen and reservists face in becoming eligible for the education benefits, mostly opposed the House bill over cost concerns. House Republicans do not want any Guard or reserve training to count toward GI Bill eligibility.

The Congressional Budget Office estimated that the expansion of benefits in the House bill would cost \$1.9 billion over the next decade.

With Republicans poised to take control of the House in January, veterans service organizations see the remainder of this congressional session as their best chance to get a bill passed.

But time is already running out. The Senate has just 13 legislative days left in its schedule this year and has several must-pass items on its to-do list, including the annual defense policy bill and a bill to keep the government open when current funding expires Dec. 16. That makes it unlikely senators will take up a GI Bill parity proposal unless it gets attached to one of the larger bills. An American Legion official did not immediately respond to a question on whether the organizations are pushing for it to get on a larger bill.

While the veterans service organizations favor the House bill, they are open to the GRAD Act if it means a bill would pass this session.

"The responsibilities of maintaining an operational Guard and Reserve have led to critical manpower shortfalls that require immediate action," they wrote. "Providing GI Bill parity is an immediate step that the Senate can take to address these shortfalls and acknowledge their service."

-- Rebecca Kheel can be reached at rebecca.kheel@military.com. Follow her on Twitter @reporterkheel.



* The next edition will be on Monday, December 5, 2022. We wish you a Happy Thanksgiving! *

November 21, 2022



Senate Hearing on PACT Act Implementation:

VFW National Legislative Assistant Director Kristina Keenan provided a statement for the record for a Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing on VA's implementation of the *Honoring our PACT Act of 2022*. She included observations made by VFW Service Officers who have been assisting veterans with their VA disability claims for toxic exposure conditions. "About one-third reported that they have already seen PACT-Act-related claims adjudicated and some being granted by VA, primarily for Vietnam War veterans with hypertension and for those who served in Thailand," said Keenan. She added that while VA has reported a large increase in claims since the passage of the PACT Act, VA is also processing claims faster at nearly the same rate as the increase. She stated that the VFW recommends that VA maintains its overtime staffing in order to continue managing the increased claims workload. [Watch the hearing](#), which begins at the 17:03 mark, or [read the testimony](#).



Women Veterans Task Force Holds Roundtable:

Members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Women Veterans Task Force, VA, women veterans, and veteran organizations discussed child care, sexual harassment and assault, and intimate partner violence, which are included in Title V - Deborah Sampson of the *Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020*. VFW National Legislative Deputy Director Tammy Barlet discussed VA's briefing on the Intimate Partner Violence Assistance Program launch. VFW National Legislative Assistant Director Kristina Keenan noted the importance of VA

helping veterans obtain childcare so they are able to schedule Compensation and Pension examinations and other VA benefit appointments.



New Toxic Exposure Screening for Veterans: If you are a veteran enrolled in VA health care, you can now receive the toxic exposure screening at VA medical centers and clinics across the country. If you are not enrolled in VA health care, you will be eligible for the screening once you complete the enrollment process. These screenings will become a regular part of your medical appointments and, if you believe that you experienced toxic exposure during your military service, you will be connected to support and resources. [Read more.](#)



Holiday Overseas Mail Deadlines Approaching: The U.S. Postal Service is preparing for the holiday season as many families spend holidays apart due to military service. In order to ensure overseas packages are delivered before Dec. 25, it has provided the following deadlines: **Dec. 9** for all Air/Army Post Office (APO), Fleet Post Office (FPO) and Diplomatic Post Office (DPO) addresses with AE zip codes using Priority Mail and First-Class Mail; and **Dec. 16** for APO/FPO/DPO addresses using USPS Priority Mail Express (excluding zip 093). The Postal Service offers a free "military care kit," which consists of the items most often requested by military families. [Read more](#) details on holiday shipping deadlines.



Men's Health Awareness Month: According to VA, male veterans die five years earlier than most female veterans. Detection and proper attention to conditions such as [prostate](#) or testicular cancer, [mental health](#) issues, and [suicide prevention](#) factors may help to avert premature deaths. VA created a [recommendation chart](#) for preventive care that lists recommended screenings and immunizations. Veterans who are overdue for preventive care are encouraged to schedule appointments as soon as possible.



Bring Christmas Joy Through Toys for Tots: Since 1947, Marine Toys for Tots has been bringing the joy of Christmas to America's less-fortunate children and fostering community engagement. Every holiday season, new, unwrapped toys are distributed to children in need. Donated items may be dropped off at designated locations, or you may make a virtual donation. [Learn more.](#)



MIA Update: The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced four burial updates for service members who have been missing and unaccounted-for from World War II and Korea. Returning home for burial with full military honors are:

-- **Army Cpl. Tommie T. Hanks, 27**, of Fort Worth, Texas, was assigned to Company E, 2nd Battalion, 24th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division. On Nov. 26, 1950, he was reported missing in action while his unit was attempting to withdraw from east Ch'ongch'on River near Anju, North Korea. Following the war, his remains could not be recovered and there is no evidence that he was a prisoner of war. Hanks will be buried in Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia, on a date yet to be determined. [Read about Hanks.](#)

-- **Army Pfc. Francis P. Martin, 25**, of Scranton, Pennsylvania, was assigned to Company D, 1st Battalion, 157th Infantry Regiment, 45th Infantry Division. His unit was engaged in battle with German forces near Lichtenberg, France, when he was wounded and reported missing. With no body recovered and the Germans never reporting him as a prisoner of war, on Jan. 17, 1946, the War Department issued a finding of death. Martin will be buried in Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia, on a date yet to be determined. [Read about Martin.](#)

-- **Army Staff Sgt. James Rotunno, 27**, of Brooklyn, New York, was assigned to Company K, 3rd Battalion, 157th Infantry Regiment, 45th Infantry Division. His unit was engaged in the Battle of Reipertswiller in France when it was surrounded by German forces. On Jan. 20, 1945, his unit and four other companies attempted a break-out through German lines. Rotunno was among those killed the following day and his body could not be recovered. He will be buried in Rutherford, New Jersey, on a date yet to be determined. [Read about Rotunno.](#)

-- **Army Air Forces Staff Sgt. Walter Nies, 23**, of Eureka, South Dakota, was assigned to 96th Bombardment Squadron, 2nd Bombardment Group, 15th Air Force. On Jan. 24, 1944, the B-17F Flying Fortress bomber on which he was serving as a tail gunner was shot down by enemy fighters. The crew was captured by Germans, and Nies was among those sent to Stalag Luft 6 prisoner of war camp. Nies died on May 28, 1944, after being shot. He will be buried in Eureka, South Dakota, on a date yet to be determined. [Read about Nies.](#)

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As always, we want to hear your advocacy stories. To share your stories or photos with us, simply email them directly to vfwac@vfw.org.

THE AMERICAN LEGION FLAGLER POST 115



2nd ANNUAL CHARITY GOLF TOURNAMENT

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REMEMBER the Fallen. . . HONOR those who Serve. . .
TEACH our children the value of Freedom.

On December 17 at 12:00 pm, 2022, American Legion Post 115 (FL0824) will be helping Espanola Cemetery to Remember and Honor our veterans by laying Remembrance wreaths on the graves of our country's fallen heroes.

We will follow the Espanola ceremony with laying of remembrance wreaths at The Masonic Cemetery at 2:30 pm.

Please help us honor and remember as many fallen heroes as possible by sponsoring remembrance wreaths, volunteering on Wreaths Day, or inviting your family and friends to attend with you.

Thank you so much for supporting the American Legion Post 115 (FL0824) and Wreaths Across America!

<http://www.wreathscrossamerica.org/fl0824>