



IOWA COUNTY VETERANS NEWSLETTER

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MEMORIAL DAY FLAG ORDER

Posts and Cemetery Officials please contact the Veterans Service Office with your Memorial Day flag order by March 13th.

5 MYTHS ABOUT THE PACT ACT AND VA BENEFITS

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is beginning to provide additional health care and benefits for generations of toxic exposed veterans and their survivors. These expanded services are part of a 2022 law known as the PACT Act.

Just like any change in eligibility or benefits, there can be confusion or misinformation. Veterans shouldn't miss out on their benefits because they heard the wrong information.

Here are five myths about the PACT Act and the correct information to help veterans understand how the PACT Act impacts them, including eligibility for care and benefits.

Myth No. 1: The PACT Act Is Only for Vietnam-Era Veterans or Those on the Burn Pit Registry.

The PACT Act expands health care and benefits to many groups of veterans who were not previously eligible. Eligibility includes veterans who participated in a toxic exposure risk activity while serving on active duty, active duty for training or inactive duty training.

Veterans assigned to a duty station in certain locations (including airspace above) during specific periods of time are also presumed eligible. This includes veterans assigned to Bahrain; Iraq; Kuwait; Oman; Qatar; Saudi Arabia; Somalia; or the United Arab Emirates and the airspace above since Aug. 2, 1990. Also on the list of eligible assignments are Afghanistan; Djibouti; Egypt; Jordan; Lebanon; Syria; Uzbekistan; and Yemen (as well as other countries the VA declares relevant) since Sept. 11, 2001.

Veterans deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom; Operation Iraqi Freedom; Operation Freedom's Sentinel; Operation New Dawn; Operation Inherent Resolve; or Resolute Support Mission are eligible.

Myth No. 2: Filing for New Benefits Puts Your Old Benefits at Risk.

Veterans who already receive health care, benefits or compensation for a service-connected condition will not have their claims re-adjudicated simply because they file for new benefits under the PACT Act.

Veterans can always request to have their disability rating reevaluated, but simply filing for benefits under PACT will not trigger a reevaluation. On the other hand, if you've previously had a claim rejected and might be eligible under PACT, you should reopen that claim. Filing a claim is free, and the VA encourages veterans who need support to seek out a qualified veteran's service organization to help.

If you file a PACT Act benefits claim between now and Aug. 10, 2023, you may receive benefits paid back to Aug. 10, 2022 -- the day the bill was signed

into law. The VA is encouraging all veterans who think they might be eligible to file now.

Myth No. 3: Survivors Don't Qualify for Any PACT Act Benefits.

Surviving family members may be eligible for a variety of benefits.

The PACT Act makes receiving Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) easier for survivors. While the VA will contact survivors who were previously denied DIC and may now be eligible, survivors do not have to wait to submit a claim. They can do so now directly on the VA website.

In addition to DIC, other allowances, payments and benefits are available. That list includes a survivor's pension, burial benefits and memorial items, a burial allowance, education and training, a VA-backed home loan and health care. Additionally, a one-time accrued benefits payment may be made to a surviving family member when records show the veteran was due additional benefits before their death.

Myth No. 4: The VA Can't Handle the Backlog, so It's Not Worth Filing a Claim.

The VA is ready for the PACT Act and is encouraging all veterans and survivors to apply for their benefits now.

Overall, the VA is delivering more benefits, more quickly and to more veterans than at any time in our nation's history -- and the VA has made significant progress in speeding up the time between the application for and delivery of benefits to veterans.

Over the past year, it has hired more than 1,700 claims processors, increased claims automation and invested in proactively scanning military personnel files into its systems. The Veterans Benefits Administration broke its all-time record with 1.7 million completed claims this year, 12% more claims than in the past fiscal year, which was the previous record.

Myth No. 5: I Need to Pay Someone to Apply for PACT Act Care or Benefits.

There's been an increase in PACT Act-related scams targeting veterans to access their PACT Act benefits or submit claims on their behalf. Veterans should be

very cautious of anyone who guarantees a lucrative financial benefit or service.

There are no fees to apply, and the VA will never charge veterans for processing a claim. If you need help applying for benefits, VA-accredited representatives and veteran service officers are ready to help.

For more information on the PACT Act and eligibility for veterans health care and benefits, visit VA's PACT Act website.

MARINE VET APPOINTED TO LEAD WISCONSIN VETERANS AGENCY

Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers announced Monday, January 16, 2023, he promoted the deputy secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs to lead the agency, which has been troubled by frequent allegations of abuse and poor care.

James Bond, a disabled Marine Corps veteran who has worked at the department for years, is the first openly LGBTQ person in state history to head a Cabinet agency, according to the Legislative Audit Bureau.

“James has been a dedicated leader at DVA for over a decade and has served the department and Wisconsin veterans well as deputy secretary,” Evers said in a statement. “As a veteran himself, along with his decades of state service, I have no doubt he will bring a wealth of experience, knowledge, and expertise to this role as secretary.”

As an enlisted Marine, Bond served primarily as an administrative supply clerk, leaving at the rank of sergeant after serving from 1983 to 1988. He told The Associated Press he qualifies as a disabled veteran due to a service-connected injury to his right eye.

Bond inherits an agency that has been plagued by issues in its assisted living facilities and nursing homes. A recent Milwaukee Journal Sentinel investigation found that the Union Grove veteran's home ranked among the worst in the country for violations and fines.

His appointment fills the gap left by former Secretary Mary Kolar, who retired in early January.

VA WEIGHS LIMITING ACCESS TO OUTSIDE DOCTORS TO CURB RISING COSTS

The Department of Veterans Affairs may alter the rules for its community health care program, a system designed to help veterans see doctors outside of the VA system if they don't have easy access to a VA medical facility, to stop that program's growing spending from devouring its overall health care budget, according to VA Secretary Denis McDonough.

During a Senate hearing on the VA budget in June, 2022, McDonough said the community care program now accounts for 33% of the VA's total health care demand, up from roughly 26% last year.

McDonough warned lawmakers last year that the growth was not sustainable, but said Tuesday he would consult with his new undersecretary for health before formally proposing the move.

"[33% is] a high number, and that's the highest number yet of the three years of the Mission Act. Care overall, as you have seen in the budget, is growing. Care in the community as a portion of that is growing ... My hunch is that we should change access standards," McDonough said.

The 2018 VA Mission Act overhauled the department's private-sector health care programs for veterans, consolidating a number of civilian-care programs into a single community care program available to more veterans, with the costs covered by the department.

Under at least one of its predecessor programs, VA Choice, veterans were only eligible for community care if they lived more than 40 linear miles from a VA medical facility or were unable to get an appointment within 30 days. The Mission Act expanded the standards to include veterans who face drive times of at least 30 minutes to a primary or mental health appointment or 60 minutes for specialty care, or those who must wait 20 days or more to be seen for primary care or 28 days for specialty care.

McDonough said he would consult his new undersecretary for health, Dr. Shereef Elnahal, as to whether changes are necessary.

"I'm not going to hoist him with my views. He happens to be a health care professional so we should probably have his views on this," McDonough said.

Kansas Sen. Jerry Moran, the committee's ranking Republican, introduced a bill last July that would give Congress the authority to determine eligibility thresholds for community care.

During Elnahal's confirmation hearing, Moran asked Elnahal what he thought of the access standards, which Moran described as "reasonable" and a "concrete measure" on which veterans "can rely in terms of accessing care." "Wait time calculation, the access standard regulations I think are very clear," Moran said on April 27.

In the three years since the Mission Act has been in effect, veterans have reported that they encounter problems getting referrals to community care. The decision to refer is supposed to be determined by a veteran and their doctor, but veterans have said that their requests are often denied by VA employees who are not members of their health teams.

An investigation by *inewssource* and USA Today in November found that VA administrators have overruled doctors' referral recommendations to ensure that patients stay in the VA direct care system.

McDonough addressed the investigation during a hearing in December, saying the findings were not true. "To suggest that by design we're breaking the law is an overstatement," McDonough said.

Nonetheless, McDonough said VA must do something to ensure that the community care budget does not continue expanding at its current rate. The VA's \$301 billion fiscal 2023 budget request includes \$99.1 billion for medical services, including \$28.5 billion for community care, according to budget documents.

"What we know is demand for health care over the course of the Mission Act has increased. It has increased more intensively for care in the community," McDonough said. McDonough said the department would seek input from Congress and the public using the federal regulatory process before changing the standards.

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**Veterans
Newsletter**

IMPORTANT DATES

March 12 th	Daylight savings time begins. "Spring Ahead"
March 13 th	Flag Orders for Memorial Day are due from Posts and Cemetery Officials
April 9 th	Easter
May 14 th	Mother's Day
May 20 th	Armed Forces Day
May 29 th	Memorial Day

VETERANS SERVICE OFFICE CLOSINGS

Good Friday
Memorial Day

Friday, April 7th
Monday, May 29th