



# IOWA COUNTY VETERANS NEWSLETTER

Compiled by the Iowa County Veterans Service Office: 303 W. Chapel Street, Suite 1300, Dodgeville, WI 53533  
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Jeffrey T. Lindeman, County Veterans Service Officer

## FALL, 2022

### The PACT Act

The PACT Act is a new law that expands VA health care and benefits for Veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances. This law provide generations of Veterans—and their survivors—with the care and benefits they’ve earned and deserve.

#### **What’s the PACT Act and how will it affect my VA benefits and care?**

The PACT Act is perhaps the largest health care and benefit expansion in VA history. The full name of the law is The Sergeant First Class (SFC) Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act.

#### **The PACT Act will bring these changes:**

- Expands and extends eligibility for VA health care for Veterans with toxic exposures and Veterans of the Vietnam, Gulf War, and post-9/11 eras
- Adds more than 20 new presumptive conditions for burn pits and other toxic exposures
- Adds more presumptive-exposure locations for Agent Orange and radiation
- Requires VA to provide a toxic exposure screening to every Veteran enrolled in VA health care
- Helps improve research, staff education, and treatment related to toxic exposures

#### **What does it mean to have a presumptive condition for toxic exposure?**

To get a VA disability rating, your disability must connect to your military service. For many health conditions, you need to prove that your service caused your condition.

A condition is considered presumptive when it's established by law or regulation.

If you have a presumptive condition, you don’t need to prove that your service caused the condition. You only need to meet the service requirements for the presumption.

The PACT Act adds more than 20 burn pit and other toxic exposure presumptive conditions for Gulf War era and post-9/11 Veterans.

#### **These cancers are now presumptive:**

- Brain cancer
- Gastrointestinal cancer of any type
- Glioblastoma
- Head cancer of any type
- Kidney cancer
- Lymphatic cancer of any type
- Lymphoma of any type
- Melanoma
- Neck cancer
- Pancreatic cancer
- Reproductive cancer of any type
- Respiratory (breathing-related) cancer of any type

### **These illnesses are now presumptive:**

- Asthma that was diagnosed after service
- Chronic bronchitis
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- Chronic rhinitis
- Chronic sinusitis
- Constrictive bronchiolitis or obliterative bronchiolitis
- Emphysema
- Granulomatous disease
- Interstitial lung disease (ILD)
- Pleuritis
- Pulmonary fibrosis
- Sarcoidosis

If you're a Veteran or survivor, you can file claims now to apply for PACT Act-related benefits.

### **VA DEBT**

Good news for veterans who owe money to the VA: It's become much less likely those debts will damage your credit rating. A new debt-reporting rule announced 2 FEB means "a 99% reduction in unfavorable debt reported to consumer reporting agencies, thus reducing financial distress for veterans," VA Secretary Denis McDonough said in a press release announcing the change. About 60,000 VA debts had been reported to credit reporting agencies each year, per the release. According to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), the new rule allows the VA to report debts to such agencies only if:

1. The debt is more than \$25.
2. All other collection efforts are exhausted.
3. The VA determines the debtor is not "catastrophically disabled" and is not entitled to free medical care from the VA.

The head of the CFPB said he hoped the VA's decision would set "an important new standard" for other providers. "I expect that many in the health care industry will seek to follow Secretary McDonough's

lead to end the practice of forcing patients to pay up through aggressive credit report coercion," CFPB Director Rohit Chopra said. The VA restarted its debt collection efforts on Oct. 1, 2021, after pausing them in April 2020 as part of COVID-19 pandemic relief. The new rules will not prevent the VA from reporting debts due to "fraud, misrepresentation, or bad faith," according to the news release. Some veterans facing financial obligations may be eligible for relief programs, including payment plans or waivers; visit this VA website <https://www.va.gov/manage-va-deb> for details. Veterans with copayment debt questions can call the VA's Health Resource Center at (866) 400-1238, and those with questions about debts stemming from benefit overpayments can call (800) 827-0648. [Source: MOAA Newsletter | Kevin Lilley | March 10, 2022 ++]

### **ADRC AND SUN VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES**

Interested in volunteering to help your community but not sure where to start?

The ADRC and SUN Program are recruiting for volunteers. These opportunities are very rewarding and can be flexible to accommodate your schedule.

- **Driver Escort:** Drive adults over 60 or adults with disabilities to their medical appointments. Mileage reimbursement offered.
- **Health Promotion:** Lead 7-10 adults through an evidence based health promotion program. Structured training and support is provided to our Health Promotion Leaders.
- **Guardian:** Make health or financial decisions for adults who have been determined by the court as incapable of making decisions for themselves.
- **SUN Program:** Deliver meals or help in the kitchen at a SUN Dining site in your community. Mileage reimbursement offered.

Contact the ADRC at 608-930-9835.

### **VA CLAIMS BACKLOG**

The Veterans Affairs disability claims backlog has dropped by almost 25% in the last four months, indicating that hiring and overtime efforts are

making a significant dent in the pending workload, department officials said. As of June 21, the total number of backlogged files - claims that have been pending for more than four months - was at 187,540. The figure had been as low as 70,000 claims before the start of the American coronavirus pandemic in early 2020. Since then, partial closures of benefits offices slowed processing of the disability claims. At the same time, the volume of new claims (particularly ones in recent years tied to the expansion of illnesses related to Agent Orange exposure during the Vietnam War) increased, putting additional pressure on the system. The backlog reached as high as 264,000 last October. Last week's totals are 29% lower than that mark. Despite the rapid progress, officials have said it may take until mid-2024 to get the figure below the 100,000 case level again. VA officials credited new hiring's and employee overtime with much of the recent improvement. Last fall, VA Secretary Denis McDonough said the Veterans Benefits Administration would hire and train 2,000 employees to assist with the increasing volume of disability benefits claims processing. As of mid-June, about 82% of those new workers have started working. Officials said they have paid for about \$100 million worth of overtime for existing employees through American Rescue Plan funds awarded by Congress in early 2021.

In a statement, department leaders also credited new automated claims processing systems with helping streamline the work, leading to additional decreases in the backlog. "Through these efforts, the claims development and decision making portion of the claims process is more efficient and improves decision accuracy," the statement said. "VBA continues to improve and expand this automated decision support process." The claims backlog has been a source of frustration and concern in past years, particularly before the department's processing systems were shifted to fully electronic files. It peaked in spring 2013 at more than 610,000 cases, prompting calls from lawmakers and advocates for wholesale changes in how the claims are handled. From late 2015 to early 2020, the backlog hovered around 75,000 cases, a figure that department officials said was realistically the lowest level possible without forcing complex claims through the system too quickly, and risking mistakes. Sweeping toxic exposure legislation, the

recently passed PACT Act, could add hundreds of thousands of new claims to the benefits system, potentially driving the backlog even higher.

**WISCONSIN VETERAN'S MUSEUM**  
**EXHIBIT:**  
**SOUVENIRS OF SERVICE: THE THINGS**  
**THEY KEPT**

Wisconsin service members have been collecting souvenirs since the Civil War. Learn the stories of the things they kept. The items, collected from the Civil War era to modern-day, range from artillery shells to Zippo lighters and everything in between. Each item is presented along with its captivating backstory.

There are also one-of-a-kind items on display. For example, a WWI radio operator from Racine brought home a treasured handmade mandolin, crafted for him by a local French woman and designed with the insignia of his division, the famed 32nd "Red Arrow" Division. An Eau Claire native who served in World War II sent his wife the nylon parachute that saved his life with instructions to make it into an evening gown for herself - she did and it is stunning. A WWII fighter pilot from Janesville credits his never being shot down during his 67 combat missions to a good luck doll a woman gave him while they sheltered during an air raid on London. He kept that doll in his sock drawer until he donated it to the Museum in 2007. These are just three of many fascinating items and stories the exhibit showcases.

The exhibit will be on view through 2022. The Wisconsin Veteran's Museum is located at 30 W Mifflin St., Madison, WI. (608)267-1799

**2022 HEALTH and WELLNESS EXPO**

The Health and Wellness Expo will be a drive through event on 30 September from 10 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. at the Ley Pavilion at Harris Park on the east edge of Dodgeville. Participants will receive a resource bag containing various information pamphlets. There will be a meditation and chair exercise demonstration at 10:30 a.m., door prizes, and boxed lunches. All items are first come first served, while supplies last.

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**NOTABLE DATES**

September 5<sup>th</sup> – Labor Day

November 6<sup>th</sup> – Daylight Saving Time ends

November 24<sup>th</sup> – Thanksgiving Day

October 31<sup>st</sup> – Halloween

November 11<sup>th</sup> – Veterans Day

Veterans Service Officer Training Conference

(CVSO available via e-mail or telephone only)

October 17-21, 2022

**VETERANS SERVICE OFFICE CLOSINGS IN 2022**

Labor Day

Thanksgiving Holiday

Christmas Holiday

Monday, September 5<sup>th</sup>

Thursday/Friday, November 24<sup>th</sup> & 25<sup>th</sup>

Friday/Monday, December 23<sup>rd</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup>