

VFW Continues Advocacy for Unaddressed Toxic Exposure

VFW's work related to military toxic exposures is not over as many health conditions still need to be covered by the Department of Veterans Affairs

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The Honoring Our PACT Act, passed in August 2022, provides veterans who served in countries such as Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq with expanded access to VA health care and earned disability benefits due to exposure to burn pits and other toxic substances. Some consider the PACT Act to be the most significant piece of veteran legislation in history.

But VFW's work on military toxic exposures is not over. The PACT Act was originally intended to address not only health conditions due to burn pit exposure but also it called for VA to continuously research and review conditions related to any toxic exposures from the past, present and future.

However, lawmakers instead included a process that is internal to VA, and advocates have found it to lack transparency, timelines, and input from veteran stakeholders.

VFW National Veterans Service Director Michael Figlioli said that VFW wants more health conditions related to toxic exposures to be recognized by VA. One of these includes suspected uranium exposure at Karshi-Khanabad Air Base (K2 or Camp Stronghold Freedom) in Uzbekistan. There also was water contamination at Alabama's Fort McClellan and at the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii.

"Despite the abundance of conditions already covered under the PACT Act, veterans continue to report many unaddressed issues tied to toxic exposure," Figlioli said. "The VFW will continue to demand that VA continually updates the presumptive conditions evaluation process."

VFW IS HERE TO HELP

In August 2024, VA reported that 333,767 veterans with PACT Act-related symptoms

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enrolled in VA health care thanks to the law. About 1 million veterans are receiving PACT Act-related disability compensation, according to the department.

VFW urges veterans to visit <https://pactactinfo.org/questionnaire> and answer a few questions to determine eligibility and connect with one of VFW's VA-accredited service officers. Also, services that VFW service officers provide are free to all veterans (members and nonmembers) and families, no matter what. VFW also wants veterans and their families to be aware of predatory companies, known as "claim sharks," that target veterans' earned VA benefits. These companies promise veterans increased disability ratings and expedited claims decisions. Charging fees for initial claims assistance is illegal, and veterans should be aware that they put themselves at risk of committing fraud by working with any unaccredited consultants. Learn more at <https://dontfeedthesharks.org>.

MORE TOXIC REFORM IS NEEDED

The Disabled American Veterans and the Military Officers Association of America in September 2024 released a report titled Ending the Wait, that found on average, veterans who were exposed to toxins while in the military wait an average of 34.1 years to receive expanded access to VA health care and earned benefits.

VFW National Legislative Service Deputy Director Kristina Keenan, who was a consultant for Ending the Wait, said this only highlights the need to establish a more efficient presumptive process for toxic exposure-related health conditions.

"The PACT Act was an historic piece of legislation that primarily addressed dozens of serious illnesses associated with burn pit exposure for Persian Gulf War and Post 9/11 veterans," Keenan said. "The presumptive process established in that legislation is not the robust and transparent model we originally wanted. We will work with VA, Congress, and our partner veteran service organizations to find solutions that will ensure there is a continuous review of toxic exposure conditions for all eras of veterans."

This article is featured in the January/February 2025 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.