

## Unaddressed Toxic Exposures

### The VFW's Concern:

Congress must vigorously monitor Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) compliance with the *Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022*, commonly called the PACT Act, to ensure the continuous review of new presumptive conditions related to toxic exposures. The law directs VA to announce in the Federal Register, at least annually, its selections of military environmental exposures and adverse health outcomes for formal evaluation, informed by the established research working group. Subsequent public comments, input from Veterans Service Organizations, and information compiled by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine should assist VA in its evaluation of new presumptive conditions for service connection.

While the PACT Act included a list of conditions associated with exposure to particulate matter and herbicides, since the law's enactment veterans have informed the VFW they have other conditions related to toxic exposures during their time in service. These include but are not limited to uranium exposure at the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Air Base in Uzbekistan; incidents of reproductive issues and other health conditions related to water contamination at Fort McClellan, Alabama; reports of higher rates of cancer among military pilots; and conditions associated with nuclear testing and waste cleanup. Veterans have reported exposure to firefighting foam and other materials exposing them to per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). There has been concern about the impact of the water contamination from the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii. The VFW has even had veterans report anomalous health incidents (Havana Syndrome), radiological exposures, and the use of burn pits in locations not currently covered by the PACT Act. These highlight the need for VA to comply with the law to ensure it has a functional and transparent presumptive process.

### The VFW urges Congress to:

Require VA to publicly post announcements, updates, and current statuses of research pertaining to presumptive conditions from service-connected exposures.

Conduct oversight hearings to ensure VA's compliance with the PACT Act for the ongoing evaluation of conditions associated with toxic exposures.

## The Elizabeth Dole Act

### The VFW's Concern:

The *Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act* would provide health care and benefits for veterans, caregivers, and survivors. Many of its provisions would improve care and benefits, and we believe some provisions would save lives. Certain components of this legislation, such as the expansions for caregivers, are long overdue.

This bill is the result of a months-long compromise between varying stakeholders, and is an example of how Washington, D.C., negotiations should work. It has bipartisan support in the Senate, but lacks the support to receive a vote in the House. This package is fully funded, and it has the backing of dozens of organizations that advocate on behalf of veterans, caregivers, and survivors. This legislation deserves bipartisan AND bicameral support.

### The VFW urges Congress to:

Pass H.R. 8371, *Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act*, so veterans, caregivers, and survivors can receive the life-altering and life-saving care and benefits they have earned and deserve.

## Exploring Alternative PTSD Treatments

### The VFW's Concern:

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), more than 40 percent of veterans in the VA system have a service-connected disability rating for mental health. The VFW acknowledges there is a growing need for alternative treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)/mental health conditions. Currently, veterans seeking mental health care are predominantly directed to two types of medications—selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)—as well as various evidence-based therapies to reduce PTSD symptoms. While today's standard treatments may help some individuals, many veterans report having only temporary relief of symptoms, or experiencing negative side effects from medication.

PTSD is more prevalent among veterans than civilians. If not properly treated, the effects can be detrimental in many ways including risk of homelessness, substance abuse, relationship problems, financial instability, difficulties in transitioning back to civilian life, or suicide. Veterans have shown willingness to confront mental health challenges, but not all treatments work for all veterans, which is why the VFW is urging Congress and VA to research and provide alternative, outside-the-box solutions for certain veterans. Some such treatments that have shown potential include stellate ganglion block, hyperbaric oxygen therapy, ketamine infusion, MDMA-assisted therapy, medical cannabis, and other plant-based alternative therapies.

VA has nearly 2.5 million veterans utilizing mental health care. No other health care network in America has as large a population of patients as VA. It has the unique ability to lead from the front on mental health care and cutting-edge treatments given its resources and population size. Congress must push VA to research and study innovative mental health solutions to not only help veterans seeking mental health care, but to use this opportunity to push information to the private sector as well.

The VFW believes if there are additional treatments that can effectively treat PTSD, then VA should receive funding to research and deliver those treatments. Historically, VA has been a leader with other innovative treatments such as telemedicine, cardiovascular care, and prosthetics, and now has the opportunity to do the same regarding treatment of PTSD and other mental health conditions.

### The VFW urges Congress to:

Provide funding to the Department of Defense and VA for innovative PTSD treatments currently used in the private sector.

Direct VA to perform studies on alternative PTSD and other mental health care treatments.

## Cracking Down on Predatory Claims Companies

### The VFW's Concern:

The VFW is concerned that bad actors are preying on veterans by skimming their earned Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, unaccredited consulting groups that the VFW calls "Claim Sharks" viewed the chaos as an exploitation opportunity. Since the passage of the PACT Act they have ramped up their efforts even more.

Many of these companies illegally use veterans' login credentials for VA websites and call centers. Some charge thousands of dollars in future benefits for their services. If a veteran receives a disability percentage increase years later, often these companies return seeking more money. Furthermore, they routinely obtain medical opinions from affiliated medical providers, which raises ethical concerns.

The VFW believes that penalties need to be reinstated to the already existing law. Anyone who assists veterans with the preparation, presentation, or prosecution of VA claims should adhere to established fee caps or be subject to penalties. Therefore, we support the *GUARD VA Benefits Act*. However, the VFW opposes the *Plus for Veterans Act of 2023* and any legislation attempting to legalize a pathway for companies to charge lucrative fees in exchange for claims assistance. No veteran should have to pay for earned benefits.

Because of the inaction here in Washington, D.C., eight states have passed anti-claim-shark laws that prohibit charging veterans for initial claims assistance: Washington, Iowa, New York, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey, Maine, and Massachusetts.

### The VFW urges Congress to:

Pass S. 740 / H.R. 1139, *GUARD VA Benefits Act*, to reinstate penalties for charging veterans and survivors unauthorized fees relating to claims for VA benefits.