

“Honor the Dead by Helping the Living”



**Department of Pennsylvania
Veterans of Foreign Wars
of the United States**

Veterans Service Division
4002 Fenton Avenue
Harrisburg, PA 17109-5943
717-234-7927

Department Veterans Service Committee

David W. “Spike” Gyger, Commander
Barbara Loncar, Sr. Vice Commander
William Roland, Jr. Vice Commander
John B. Getz, Jr. Adjutant/Quartermaster
Charles “Chuck” Beattie, Chairman
Jessica King, Committee Member



Service Officer Bulletin Spring 2024 Issue

STATE COMMANDER'S SPRING MESSAGE

As we prepare for this spring season, let's look at the beauty of nature - the trees are budding, dandelions are starting to sprout and the grass is getting green. Hopefully, winter has ended, and we all are looking forward to getting out and enjoying the better weather. As we end one season and enter another I wanted to bring everyone up-to-date on the happenings with the VFW Service Officers.

The VFW Department of Pennsylvania has approximately thirty-three accredited service officers who have been given the honor of assisting our veterans and their families. Did you know that Pennsylvania holds the distinction of having the most accredited service officers and claims consultants in all the VFW Departments.

Let me bring you up to date with another development - "Claim Sharks." When the VFW was in Washington DC on Capitol Hill, our Commander In Chief gave testimony which addressed several legislative priorities and also requested Congress to penalize those Claim Sharks who are taking advantage of our veterans. It is our responsibility to stop this from happening.

If you are considering filing a claim, please consult with an accredited service officer or claims consultant. And remember their services will cost you nothing.

Spike

David W. "Spike" Gyger
State Commander



VA Health Care Expands to Millions of Veterans

Beginning March 5, millions of Veterans are eligible for VA health care years earlier than called for by the PACT Act. Specifically, all Veterans who meet basic [service and discharge requirements](#) and who were exposed to toxins and other hazards while serving our country—at home or abroad—are now eligible to enroll directly in VA health care without first applying for VA benefits.

Who is eligible?

In one of the largest-ever expansions of Veteran health care, 3 new groups of Veterans are now eligible to enroll directly in VA health care. You are eligible if you meet basic service and discharge requirements and if any of the following applies to you:

- You served in the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan, or any other combat zone after 9/11.
- You were deployed in support of the Global War on Terror.
- You were exposed to toxins or hazards while training or on active duty. This includes working with chemicals, pesticides, lead, asbestos, certain paints, nuclear weapons, x-rays and more.

You don't need to be sick or file a claim to become eligible. All you have to do is show that you served in a location or operation—or participated in an activity—that could have exposed you to hazards. You can view more military exposure categories on [VA's Public Health website](#).

Even if none of these descriptions match your service, you may be eligible based on your income. Bottom line: it's now quicker and easier than ever for you to enroll.

VFW has processed Veterans benefit claims for VA

The Department of Pennsylvania VFW has announced that it has processed over \$34,619,604.10 Veteran [benefits](#) claim in 2023.

Need Internet or a Tablet for Appointments?

Access VA care wherever you are:

VA Telehealth brings you the care you need, wherever you are. With video [telehealth](#) visits, you can save time and still talk face-to-face with your doctor. It can be difficult to use telehealth if you don't have internet or a video-capable device at home. VA is working to bridge this digital divide. Here are ways that VA can help you get connected.

How to get connected

If you don't have internet access or a video-capable device, your VA care team can help through the [Digital Divide Consult](#). All you have to do is talk to your VA provider. They'll refer you to a VA social worker to determine if you qualify for these programs:

- VA's Connected Devices Program: Provides eligible Veterans with internet-connected tablets at no cost. VA helps with device setup and provides 24/7 tech support for VA-loaned devices.
- Federal Communications Commission's (FCC's) [Lifeline program](#): Helps cover the cost of broadband and phone services. Benefits are available to Veterans with low incomes or who participate in Medicaid, VA pension, VA Survivors Pension, and other federal programs.
- FCC's [Affordable Connectivity Program](#): Provides eligible households with discounts on home internet service. Households can also receive a one-time discount to buy a computer or tablet.
- [Everyone On program](#): Connects people living in the U.S. with low-cost home internet service, affordable computers and tablets, and digital literacy training.
 - After your video telehealth visit, you can view your doctor's [notes](#) in My HealtheVet. If you have questions, send your health care team a [Secure Message](#). They'll respond within three business days. Remember, a video telehealth visit shouldn't be used for emergencies. If you need help immediately, call 911.

VA proposes rule to extend presumed areas of exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides, making it easier for exposed Veterans to receive their earned benefits

The Department of Veterans Affairs issued a proposed rule outlining plans to expand the locations and time frames for which VA presumes exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides. If this proposed rule becomes final, VA will implement a new presumption of exposure to locations where herbicides were tested, used, or stored outside of Vietnam. Specifically, this proposed rule would add locations in the United States ([full list of US locations where Agent Orange was tested or stored](#)), [Canada](#), and [India](#) to the existing presumptives for Agent Orange in Vietnam, Cambodia, Johnson Atoll, Guam, American Samoa, Korea, Laos, and Thailand.

A presumption of exposure means that VA automatically assumes that Veterans who served in certain locations were exposed to certain toxins. Presumptives lower the burden of proof required to receive disability benefits, helping Veterans get the benefits they deserve as quickly as possible. This expansion of presumptives will help Veterans who served in the specified locations receive health care and benefits for [certain cancers and chronic conditions](#). To be eligible, a Veteran must have served in the identified location(s) during a specific time period and currently have a condition(s) presumptively associated with herbicide exposure.

Delivering world-class health care and benefits to toxic-exposed Veterans is a top priority for VA and the Biden-Harris Administration. As a part of President Biden's pledge to serve Veterans with military toxic exposures, over the past few years, VA has expanded presumptive service connection for more than [hundreds of health conditions](#) related to toxic exposures under the [PACT Act](#) – the [largest expansion of Veteran care and benefits in generations](#). Thanks to this historic action, VA is delivering [more care and more benefits to more Veterans](#) than ever before in U.S. history.

“This proposed change would make it easier for Veterans exposed to herbicides who served outside Vietnam to access the benefits they so rightly deserve,” said **VA Secretary Denis McDonough**. “Our goal is to provide every Veteran – of every era – with the VA health care and benefits they deserve, and this is another step in the right direction.”

Veterans who want to file an initial claim for a herbicide-related disability can visit [VA's website](#), use [VA Form 21-526EZ, Application for Disability Compensation and Related Compensation Benefits](#), or work with a VA-recognized [Veterans Service Organization](#) to assist with the application process. Veterans may also contact their [state Veterans Affairs Office](#). [Survivors](#) can file claims for benefits based on the Veteran's

service if the Veteran died from at least one of the recognized presumptive herbicide diseases.

This proposed rule also codifies provisions in the [PACT Act](#), the [Blue Water Navy Act of 2019](#), and the [National Defense Authorization Act for 2021](#).

For more information about the changes, visit [The Federal Register](#)

**Statement of
Duane Sarmiento
Commander-in-Chief
Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States
Before the
Joint Hearing
Committees on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate and United States House of Representatives**

Crack Down on Unaccredited Claims Consultants Known as Claim Sharks

Over the past year, the VFW has ramped up its advocacy against bad actors who seek to build a lucrative business model on the backs of veterans and their families who are eligible for service-connected disability compensation and pensions. With the passage of the PACT Act, the VFW has observed an increase in online advertisements from predatory claims consultants we call “Claim Sharks” who target the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits earned by veterans. These groups promise to increase veterans’ VA disability ratings. They argue that the high fees they charge make them more effective in assisting veterans than the free services offered by VA-accredited Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs). Under VA regulations, fees charged for claims assistance are capped and usually apply only to a percentage of retroactive benefits. However, many of these unaccredited consultants use contracts that include a commitment by the veteran to pay them all or a significant portion of their increased benefits. This practice of assigning benefits to Claim Sharks is illegal. If a veteran receives a disability percentage increase years later, these companies often return seeking more money.

The VFW believes that unaccredited claims consultants should be subject to penalties in the same way as accredited representatives. We strongly support H.R. 1139 / S. 740, *Governing Unaccredited Representatives Defrauding VA Benefits Act*, known as the *GUARD VA Benefits Act*, which would reinstate penalties for charging veterans and survivors unauthorized fees related to claims for VA benefits