

Benefits

The VFW's Concerns:

Comprehensive toxic exposure reform is the VFW's top legislative priority. Veterans from all eras have experienced an array of health conditions and illnesses associated with the toxic exposures and environmental hazards they encountered in service. The denial rate for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) claims related to toxic exposures is far too high. Many serious health conditions are not considered presumptive, health care is available to only certain veterans, and there are locations both foreign and domestic that are not yet recognized as areas of exposure. A new framework is necessary for VA to provide health care and benefits to toxic-exposed veterans from all eras, now and in the future.

The rate of Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) paid to the survivors of service members who died in the line of duty or to veterans who died from service-related injuries or illnesses has only minimally increased since the benefit was created in 1993. Currently, DIC is paid at forty-three percent of one hundred percent permanent and total disability while all other federal survivor programs are paid at fifty-five percent. The VFW supports an increase in DIC payments to survivors, reaching parity with payments made to surviving spouses of other federal employees.

According to VA, one in three women and one in fifty men report that they experienced military sexual trauma (MST) in service. VA data also show that over the last ten years, MST-related outpatient mental health care increased by more than 158 percent for women veterans and 110 percent for men. The accurate processing of VA disability claims related to MST is critical to veterans receiving their benefits. Reports from the VA Office of Inspector General indicate that VA struggles to accurately process claims for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to MST. This is unacceptable. There must be improvements to the process that ensure effective training and quality assurance so that survivors of MST receive the care and benefits they need.

The VFW urges Congress to:

- Pass H.R. 3967, *Honoring our PACT Act of 2021*, and S. 3003, *COST of War Act of 2021*. These bills would help millions of veterans by establishing a framework to address any toxic exposure, foreign or domestic, past, present, and future. This legislation would help Atomic veterans and Vietnam veterans, including those who served in Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, as well as in the Middle East, Afghanistan, K2, and beyond. They would add to VA's list of presumptive conditions and provide health care for all toxic-exposed veterans.
- Pass H.R. 3402 / S. 976, *Caring for Survivors Act of 2021*, to finally increase DIC payments to survivors, reaching parity with other federal agencies.
- Pass H.R. 5666 / S. 3025, *Servicemembers and Veterans Empowerment and Support Act of 2021*, which would require VA to modernize the MST definition to include technological abuse, codify the standard of proof for MST disability claims, review VA's MST training for claims processing, and examine barriers and challenges MST survivors experience with inpatient mental health care.