REGIONAL LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

Leader Hakeem Jeffries —— Chair Steny H. Hoyer

How Veterans and Their Families in Illinois's Seventeenth District Are Benefiting from the PACT Act

Executive Summary

In August 2022, President Biden, along with House and Senate Democrats, enacted the Sergeant First Class (SFC) Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act – the most significant expansion of benefits and services for toxic-exposed Veterans in more than 30 years. This law expands and extends eligibility for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care and disability compensation for Veterans with toxic exposures and Veterans of the Vietnam, Gulf War, and post-9/11 eras; adds more presumptive exposure locations for Agent Orange and nuclear radiation; requires VA to provide a toxic exposure screening to every Veteran enrolled in VA health care; and helps improve the VA's research, staff education, and treatment related to toxic exposures.

Since the PACT Act's enactment, **2,368,500** claims have been submitted by Veterans. Nationally, **87.0%** of the claims have been processed, **74.4%** of the processed claims have been approved, and more than **$6.8 billion** of earned benefits have been awarded to Veterans and their survivors.

Veterans in **Illinois's Seventeenth District** are already benefiting from the law:

- There are approximately **42,788 veterans** in the district.[1]
- The VA has received **4,299 claims** under the PACT Act in the district as of February 15, 2025.

Background

[1] Department of Veterans Affairs, *VA PACT Act Dashboard Congressional District Supplement, Issue 46,* (February 15, 2025). https://department.va.gov/pactdata/#current

For decades, millions of Veterans have unknowingly been exposed to toxic substances and radiation during their military service.

As a result of the exposures, Veterans have had to face a range of serious health complications, including many types of cancers, cardiovascular, respiratory, and neurological disorders, and other chronic illnesses.[2] Although the severity of the health issues can vary, many Veterans have faced debilitating conditions that require ongoing medical care and support and can cause disability, reduced quality of life, and premature death.[3]

Current estimates suggest that more than 5 million Veterans were exposed to toxic substances or radiation during their military service.[4]

The type and extent of exposures vary significantly, depending on the time and location of a Veterans' military service:

- During World War II, service members involved in construction projects and serving on ships were exposed to asbestos.[5]
- In the 1950s and 1960s, Veterans involved in nuclear testing and handling nuclear weapons risked exposure to radioactive materials.[6]
- During the Vietnam War Veterans faced exposure to Agent Orange, a toxic herbicide containing dioxin.[7]
- Veterans from the Gulf War and post-9/11 conflicts were exposed to burn pits and additional hazards such as chemical weapons and depleted uranium ammunition.[8]

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[2] Department of Veterans Affairs, *Public Health: Publications List by Title*. https://www.publichealth.va.gov/epidemiology/publications-author.asp.

[3] The War Horse, Burn Pits – The Military's Next Agent Orange (October 23, 2019). https://thewarhorse.org/the-militarys-next-agent-orange/. New York Times, Agent Orange's Long Legacy, for Vietnam and Veterans (May 11, 2014). https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/12/us/agent-oranges-long-legacy-for-vietnam-and-Veterans.html. New York Times, Troops Who Cleaned Up Radioactive Islands Can't Get Medical Care (January 28, 2017). https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/28/us/troops-radioactive-islands-medical-care.html. Wall Street Journal, Camp Lejeune Water Strongly Linked to Parkinson's Disease (May 15, 2023). https://www.wsj.com/articles/camp-lejeune-water-strongly-linked-to-parkinsons-disease-8b4c0517. Washington Post, Tainted Water in the Land of Semper Fi (January 28, 2004). https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2004/01/28/tainted-water-in-the-land-of-semper-fi/7aece962-26b6-44b2-96ec-8d58126435b4/

[4] White House, FACT SHEET: President Biden Signs PACT Act and Delivers on His Promise to America's Veterans (August 10, 2022). https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/08/10/fact-sheet-president-biden-signs-the-pact-act-and-delivers-on-his-promise-to-americas-veterans/

[5] Hedley-White, A. J. and Milamed, D., "Asbestos and Ship-Building: Fatal Consequences," *Ulster Medical Journal* (September 2008). https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2604477/

[6] Department of Veterans Affairs, *Public Health: Diseases Associated with Ionizing Radiation Exposure*. https://publichealth.va.gov/exposures/radiation/diseases.asp

[7] Department of Veterans Affairs, *Public Health: Agent Orange*. https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/

[8] Department of Veterans Affairs, *Public Health: Iraq War Veterans Health Issues* (October 12, 2022). https://www.va.gov/health-care/health-needs-conditions/health-issues-related-to-service-era/iraq-war/

Before passage of the PACT Act, Veterans with toxic exposures had to prove a direct connection between their medical conditions and a specific toxic exposure that they faced during their military service. Because of the difficulty connecting a condition to an exposure, the VA denied nearly 80% of disability claims related to burn pit exposures before the passage of the PACT Act.[9] Many Veterans from earlier conflicts also faced challenges establishing a connection between their medical conditions and their service-related exposures. As a result, many Veterans experienced frustrating delays or rejections in receiving the vital medical care they required and earned.

The PACT Act addresses these problems in several ways.

New Presumptive Conditions and Exposure Locations: The PACT Act requires that the VA automatically presume that Veterans with specified medical conditions who served in areas with high risks of toxic exposure are eligible for VA medical care and disability benefits.[10] As a result, these Veterans will no longer have to prove that their current illnesses were the result of a toxic exposure during their military service.

Expanding Eligibility: The PACT Act expands eligibility for VA health care for multiple groups of Veterans:

- Gulf War and post-9/11 conflicts are now eligible for hospital care, nursing home services, and medical services for any medical condition over the next decade.
- The PACT Act extends the period that post-9/11 Veterans are eligible to enroll in VA health care from five years to ten years.[11]

Instituting Mandatory Toxic Exposure Screening: The VA must provide a toxic exposure screening to every veteran enrolled in VA health care. To date, the VA has administered screenings to over 5.6 million Veterans, 2 million of whom have been identified as having at least one potential exposure.[12]

Improving Research and Treatment: The PACT Act makes improvements in research, staff education, and treatment related to toxic exposures.[13]

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[9] Stars and Stripes, VA Has Denied About 78% of Disability Claims from Burn Pits (September 23, 2020). https://www.stripes.com/veterans/va-has-denied-about-78-of-disability-claims-from-burn-pits-1.646181
[10] Department of Veterans Affairs, The PACT Act and Your VA Benefits (June 7, 2023). https://www.va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits/
[11] Department of Veterans Affairs, The PACT Act and Your VA Benefits (June 7, 2023). https://www.va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits/
[12] Department of Veterans Affairs, VA PACT Act Performance Dashboard (February 15, 2025). https://department.va.gov/pactdata/#current.
[13] Department of Veterans Affairs, *The PACT Act and Your VA Benefits* (June 7, 2023). https://www.va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits/

As of February 15, 2025, the VA has received **2,368,500** benefit claims under the PACT Act and has completed processing **2,061,712** of the claims (**87.0%**). Of the processed claims, **74.4%** have been approved, and **$6.8 billion** in benefits have been awarded.[14]

How the PACT Act Is Benefitting Illinois's Seventeenth District

Illinois's Seventeenth District is home to an estimated **42,788** Veterans. From August 10, 2022, to February 15, 2025, these Veterans submitted **4,299** PACT Act-related benefit claims for disability payments.

The PACT Act makes Veterans with qualifying toxic exposures eligible for VA disability and medical benefits. The amount they receive will depend on their medical conditions and how disabling they are. For example:

- If a Veteran in the district with no dependents served in Afghanistan, was exposed to burn pit fumes during his service, has been diagnosed with cancer, and is unable to work, the Veteran would now be presumptively eligible for free medical care at a local VA medical center and to receive **$43,460** in annual disability benefits.[15]
- If a married Veteran with one child and dependent elderly parents in the district served in Operation Iraqi Freedom, is suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and other respiratory disorders, and is unable to work, the Veteran would now be able to receive free medical care through the VA and could potentially receive annual disability benefits up to **$51,550**.[16]

Survivors of Veterans are now eligible to reapply for benefits that may have been unavailable to them, including retroactive payments. For example:

- If a widow in the district who was married to a Vietnam Veteran who died from lung cancer was previously denied survivor benefits, the widow could now reapply and receive retroactive benefits as well as a minimum monthly survivor benefit payment of **$1,612.75.**[17]

Conclusion

[14] Department of Veterans Affairs, *VA PACT Act Dashboard Congressional District Supplement, Issue 46 - February 15, 2025,* (February 15, 2025). https://department.va.gov/pactdata/#current.
[15] Amounts rounded to nearest $10. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023 Veterans Disability Compensation Rates (November 29, 2022). https://www.va.gov/disability/compensation-rates/veteran-rates/
[16] Amounts rounded to nearest $10. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023 Veterans Disability Compensation Rates (November 29, 2022). https://www.va.gov/disability/compensation-rates/veteran-rates/
[17] Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023 VA DIC Rates for Spouses and Dependents (May 3, 2024). https://www.va.gov/disability/survivor-dic-rates/

For too long, our service members have put their lives at risk to defend our nation and returned home with a greater risk of cancer, respiratory diseases, and other harmful conditions because of these toxins. The PACT Act ensures that these courageous men and women won't have to navigate a web of red tape to receive treatment and other benefits. Just as our Veterans made a commitment to serve our nation, our nation has a responsibility to serve them long after they take off the uniform. Now, thanks to Democrats and President Joe Biden, the PACT Act is ensuring our veterans have access to the lifesaving care they have earned. Veterans should visit VA.Gov/PACT to take advantage of all that the PACT Act has to offer.

This report was last updated on March 12, 2025[18]

[18] "Regional Leadership Council, *"Methodology For Regional Leadership Council Briefings"* (August, 2024). (https://rlc.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/regionalleadershipcouncil.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/RLC%20Methodology%20-%20UPDATED%20August%202024.pdf).