



# VETERANS VOICE

Winnebago County Department of Veterans Services Newsletter

October 2024

## VA Leads the Way in Exposure-Informed Care

For years, Veterans have returned home with invisible scars - illnesses and conditions caused by exposure to toxic substances. The passage of the PACT Act (Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics) marked a transformative step in addressing care gaps Veterans were facing after returning home from combat. The PACT Act ensures that Veterans receive the comprehensive, tailored care they have earned. Since August 2022, 5.6 million Veterans have been screened for toxic exposures, and more than 740,000 Veterans have enrolled in VA health care.

### VA clinicians understand military exposure

Some health care systems may not be equipped to recognize the toxic exposures Veterans faced during service, leading to misdiagnosis or inadequate treatment. Providers at VA are trained in exposure-informed care and have the field knowledge to link your service to certain conditions, while also recognizing symptoms that may indicate a larger issue. Additionally, VA providers have state-of-the-art tools to help them spot and diagnose conditions related to toxic exposure. One such tool is an app that allows your provider to receive information about your military-related exposures. If you may have been exposed to a range of chemical, physical and environmental hazards during

Continued on Page 2

**“In order to succeed, your desire for success should be greater than your fear of failure.”**

**- Bill Cosby**

### The PACT Act and your VA benefits

The PACT Act is a law that expands VA health care and benefits for Veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic substances. This law helps us provide generations of Veterans—and their [survivors](#)—with the care and benefits they’ve earned and deserve. And starting **March 5, 2024**, we’re expanding VA health care to millions of Veterans—years earlier than called for by the PACT Act.

This page will help answer your questions about what the PACT Act means for you or your loved ones. You can also call us at [800-698-2411](tel:800-698-2411) (TTY: 711). And you can file a claim for PACT Act-related disability

**VA.gov/PACT**

**1-800-698-2411**

### In This Issue

- VA Leads the Way in Exposure-Informed Care
- National Depression and Mental Health Awareness and Screening Month
- VA Amends Character of Discharge Barriers
- Upcoming Events

## Continued...

service, providers can use this tool to have an informed discussion with you about your individual exposure-related concerns and potential impacts on your health. VA providers can also access information on exposure-related programs like research registries.

### **PACT Act accelerates research**

Veterans who participate in the PACT Act and enroll in its exposure registries help contribute to research into the long-term health effects of environmental exposures. Over time, the knowledge gained through this research will be used to fuel advancements in treatments, inform policies related to establishing presumptive conditions, ensure more precise predictive medicine, and deliver targeted proactive and preventative care.

If you believe you are at risk of toxic exposure, consider participating in one of the Environmental Health Registries listed below. The data these registries collect helps VA to understand how environmental exposures can impact your health and the wellbeing of fellow Veterans. You may be eligible to participate in one or more of the following six Environmental Health Registries, which can give VA the data tools it needs to improve nationwide health care and benefits options into the future.

[Agent Orange Registry](#)

[Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry](#)

[Gulf War Registry](#) (includes Operations Iraqi Freedom and New Dawn)

[Ionizing Radiation Registry](#)

[Depleted Uranium Follow-Up Program](#)

[Toxic Embedded Fragment Surveillance Center](#)

Contact your local [VA Environmental Health Coordinator](#) about getting a registry evaluation. Please note that adding your information to these registries does not create a disability compensation claim; please go to [www.va.gov/PACT](http://www.va.gov/PACT) to see if you are eligible for benefits.

### **Get enrolled today**

If you are a Veteran (or a survivor of a Veteran) who has exposure-related health concerns from your time in service, the PACT Act provides avenues for you to access the care and benefits options you deserve. Visit [www.va.gov/PACT](http://www.va.gov/PACT) or call the Winnebago County Veterans Service Office at 920-232-3400 to schedule an appointment to see if you are eligible for PACT Act benefits and services.



NATIONAL  
**DEPRESSION  
AND MENTAL  
HEALTH**  
SCREENING MONTH  
OCTOBER

### **National Depression and Mental Health Awareness and Screening Month**

October is National Depression and Mental Health Awareness and Screening Month - a crucial time for promoting understanding, reducing stigma, and encouraging individuals to seek help for mental health challenges. Depression is one of the most prevalent mental health disorders that is more than just feeling sad; it is a serious mental health condition that affects millions of people. It can manifest in numerous ways, including persistent sadness, loss of interest in activities, changes in appetite, and difficulty concentrating. Left unaddressed, depression can lead to significant impairment in daily functioning, impacting relationships, work, and overall quality of life.

Screening for mental health conditions is a vital step in ensuring that individuals receive the care they need. Early identification and intervention can significantly improve outcomes for those experiencing depression and other mental health issues. Remember, mental health is just as important as physical health, and everyone deserves access to the support they need to thrive.

If you're wondering if you are experiencing depression, take this brief, anonymous [screening](#). It will help you determine if you should see a professional or seek further assessment.

## VA Amends Character of Discharge Barriers

VA is implementing a new regulation regarding character of discharge determinations, allowing more former service members to become eligible for VA benefits, regardless of their military discharge. Generally, to receive VA benefits and services, a former service member's character of discharge must be under other than dishonorable conditions (honorable, under honorable conditions, or general). However, while VA cannot change the discharge status provided by the Department of Defense, VA is required to make a determination on eligibility for VA benefits for all individuals who receive a dishonorable discharge.

### Understanding VA benefits and Character of Discharge

When VA receives a claim from a former service member, it reviews their character of discharge to determine if they meet basic requirements to be eligible for VA benefits. Any discharge under honorable conditions satisfies the character of discharge requirement for basic eligibility; however, certain types of discharges - and certain circumstances - may prevent an individual from receiving benefits. These claims require an additional review to determine eligibility for benefits.

### What are the new changes?

The new regulation expands access to care and benefits for certain former service members by:

- Eliminating the regulatory bar for "homosexual acts involving aggravating circumstances or other factors affecting the performance of duty";
- Defining the circumstances under which the willful and persistent misconduct bar will apply;
- Creating "compelling circumstances exceptions" for the statutory bar of absent without leave (AWOL) of 180 days or more, and regulatory bars of moral turpitude and willful and persistent misconduct.

These changes make the character of discharge process more objective, and lead to more consistent adjudication of claims. These modifications are the first of its kind in over four decades and will increase the number of former service members found eligible for certain VA benefits based on determinations of honorable service for VA purposes.

### What do these changes mean for me?

This VA character of discharge determination does not change the Armed Forces' characterization of service and has no effect on the former service member's military discharge status. VA's determination is for VA benefits and services eligibility purposes only.

VA claims processors are now processing character of discharge determinations with a more objective review. If you believe your discharge falls under any of the updated criteria, or a compelling circumstance may affect your discharge, we encourage you to apply for VA care and benefits today.

VA also invites all former service members who previously received a negative character of discharge determination from VA to submit a [VA Form 0995, Decision Review Request: Supplemental Claim](#). Once received, claims processors will reevaluate the claimant's record using the new guidance.

VA encourages former service members who received an unfavorable discharge to apply for VA care and benefits today. Contact the Winnebago County Veterans Service Office at 920-232-3400 to get help filing a claim for disability compensation. For more about applying for benefits and character of discharge determinations, please [visit the character of Discharge webpage](#).



# Upcoming Events



Sons of the American Legion  
Squadron 70—Oshkosh

## Tribute to Vietnam Veterans

500 E. County Road Y, Oshkosh

October 10 @ Noon until October 13 @ Noon

Open to the public 24 hrs per day starting October 10 @ 3PM until October 13 @ Noon!

## CONTACT US

Winnebago County  
Veterans Service Office

Oshkosh Location  
220 Washington Ave.  
Oshkosh, WI 54901  
(920) 232-3400

Neenah Location  
211 N. Commercial  
Neenah, WI 54956  
(920) 729-4820

Stay informed about benefits; join our e-mail list.  
Send a request to:

[CVSO@winnebagoountywi.gov](mailto:CVSO@winnebagoountywi.gov)

Visit us on the web at:

[www.winnebagoountywi.gov/veterans](http://www.winnebagoountywi.gov/veterans)



[www.facebook.com/WinnebagoCVSO](https://www.facebook.com/WinnebagoCVSO)

For a list of more events, check out our [calendar](#) !

# MEDICARE

HOW DOES IT WORK?



VA  
HEALTH  
CARE | Defining  
EXCELLENCE  
in the 21st Century



October 10th, 2024  
9:30 am

625 E County Rd Y, Oshkosh, WI 54901  
Room A