



WOUNDED WARRIOR  
PROJECT®

# PROJECT ADVOCACY NEWSLETTER

SEPTEMBER 2022

Welcome to the Volume 3, Issue 3 of Wounded Warrior Project Advocacy News, a policy update from Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP). WWP's advocacy efforts connect you and your fellow warriors with your elected officials, providing you a voice in our nation's capital, and empowering you to discuss the issues that matter most to the post-9/11 veteran community.

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After Years of Effort, Historic Toxic  
Exposure Legislation Signed into Law

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Forty-six Warriors Traveled to Washington,  
DC, to Take Part in Operation Advocacy

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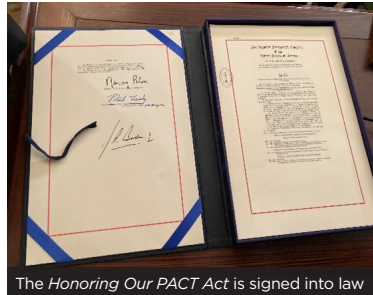
Updates to VA's Program  
of Comprehensive Assistance  
for Family Caregivers



## LETTER FROM OUR VP

Greetings, and welcome to this quarter's policy update from Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP).

These summer months have been a period of hard work and profound accomplishment for the WWP team, partners in advocacy, and veterans and their families across the country. After the tireless efforts of thousands of individuals, the *Sergeant First Class (SFC) Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act* was signed into law on Aug. 10. Veterans living with the effects of toxic exposure because of their service will now have access to the resources they need to carry on the fight. I sincerely thank everyone for their efforts and advocacy. We could not have done it without you. Going forward, WWP will work to ensure impacted veterans understand how to access the care and benefits available to them through this new legislation.



The Honoring Our PACT Act is signed into law

As WWP CEO Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Linnington noted, "By signing this historic legislation, President Biden ensured health care access to help save the lives of countless veterans affected by toxic exposure. The enactment of the *Honoring our Pact Act* caps years of work by many veterans, lawmakers, veterans service organizations, and the American public."

This summer, WWP also advocated on behalf of the post-9/11 veteran community through engagement in key events. On June 29, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Center for Women Veterans (CWV) hosted a Fireside Chat at the Military Women's Memorial with VA Chief of Staff Tanya Bradsher. [WWP Alumnae Claudia Arceo of Pasadena, Maryland, and Katuska Navarro of Nolanville, Texas](#), were asked to attend and share their perspectives on how to address some of the most pressing issues impacting underserved veterans, including homelessness, language barriers, and immigration issues.



Fireside Chat at the Military Women's Memorial with VA Chief of Staff Tanya Bradsher



In late July, I had the opportunity to participate in the 74th Annual American GI Forum (AGIF) in Colorado Springs, Colorado. AGIF, the longest serving Hispanic veterans organization in the nation, has shown tireless commitment to meeting the current and future challenges of veterans, and I appreciated the chance to discuss how best to serve veterans in their transition from the military.

As we approach the midterm elections and this session of Congress draws to a close, the WWP advocacy team will continue to push for policies that benefit veteran communities, including new efforts to provide support for women veterans and caregivers. We look forward to the work ahead, and as always, we thank you for the opportunity to be a voice for veterans.

To honor and empower,  
Jose Ramos

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## TOXIC EXPOSURE

President Biden signs the *Honoring Our PACT Act* into law

## After Years of Effort, Historic Toxic Exposure Legislation Signed into Law

### **PACT Act Will Ensure Care, Benefits for Veterans, Save Countless Lives**

On August 10, a delegation of Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) Alumni and staff witnessed President Biden sign the *Sergeant First Class (SFC) Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act* into law.

The President's signature on this historic legislation capped a four-year legislative effort to improve health care and benefits for veterans exposed to toxic substances during their service. Throughout 2022 alone, WWP executed a national grassroots-mobilization campaign that resulted in more than 3,500 messages being delivered to lawmakers from across the country.

The comprehensive legislation will ensure that every veteran who served near toxic burn pits in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other areas is eligible for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care, and for those dealing with more than 20 specific illnesses, they will be eligible for VA care and benefits on a presumptive basis. In the week following the bill's signing, WWP hosted multiple webinars educating Alumni about how the new law will work and how they can access care and benefits. Some of those materials can be accessed online here: [Toxic Exposure - PACT Act Info for Veterans | WWP \(woundedwarriorproject.org\)](#)

At the White House signing ceremony, President Biden stressed the bipartisan nature of the legislation.

**“ This is the most significant law our nation has ever passed to help millions of veterans who were exposed to toxic substances during their military services. This law is long overdue, but we finally got it done together.”**

**- President Biden**

As the President alluded, the *PACT Act's* journey to his desk was long and winding. After passing the House of Representatives on March 3 and the Senate on June 16, the bill's path to the White House seemed clear. However, it was discovered that a minor technical correction was needed and that the bill would have to be re-passed by both chambers.

While the bill easily advanced through the House again, it hit an unexpected obstacle after a failed Senate vote, throwing the bill's prospects into question. Veterans and VSOs immediately began a “Fire Watch” vigil outside the Senate 24 hours a day, for nearly a week, attracting international media attention. Finally, on August 2, the bill gained final Congressional approval and passed the Senate with a strong bipartisan vote of 86-11.

WWP is appreciative of the collaboration and hard work contributed by all the bill's supporters that led to this moment. Congressional passage certainly would not have been possible without the strong, bipartisan teamwork of the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. *The Honoring Our PACT Act* started gaining real momentum this past spring when Chairman Jon Tester (D-MT) and Ranking Member Jerry Moran (R-KS) announced a breakthrough bipartisan agreement. After the bill was signed, Sens. Tester and Moran both hailed the historic effect it will have on generations of veterans.

WWP teammates attend the White House signing ceremony for the *Honoring Our PACT Act*

TOXIC EXPOSURE (CONT.)



Veterans and VSOs conduct a "Fire Watch" vigil outside the Capitol

“ As Chairman of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee, I’m proud to have worked with Ranking Member Jerry Moran and our colleagues to champion this long-overdue victory for generations of toxic-exposed veterans and their families. Our bipartisan *Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our PACT Act* is the most comprehensive toxic exposure package Congress has delivered in this country’s history, and we got it across the finish line fighting alongside veterans, their families, veteran stakeholders, and advocates. Thanks to this joint effort, our country is on a path to providing toxic-exposed veterans the health care and benefits they have earned and finally addressing the true cost of war.”

- Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester

“ We delivered on a promise made to our veterans that if someone serves in our military, we will take care of them and provide them with the benefits they have earned through their service. From Vietnam veterans suffering from Agent Orange to the 3.5 million post-9/11 veterans exposed to burn pits during their deployments, our nation’s veterans and their families will no longer have to fear being turned away from the VA for illnesses connected to toxic exposure. The *SFC Heath Robinson Honoring Our PACT Act* will make good on our promise to take care of our veterans by delivering all generations of toxic-exposed veterans their earned health care and benefits under the Department of Veterans Affairs.”

- Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee Ranking Member Jerry Moran

The Chairman and Ranking Member of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee, Rep. Mark Takano (D-CA-41) and Rep. Mike Bost (R-IL-12), also played pivotal roles in introducing and shepherding this bill through the House, recognizing the life-changing impact it will have on a generation of veterans.

“ This bill would also not have been possible without the support of over 40 veterans service organizations, including WWP, for their input and advocacy of the *Honoring our PACT Act*. Each of these organizations understand that toxic-exposed veterans are still in the heat of battle.”

- House Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano

“ The *PACT Act* will make a difference in the lives of millions of veterans, and the survivors and families of those who have unfortunately left us. It delivers on the promise we have made to our warfighters.”

- House Veterans’ Affairs Committee Ranking Member Mike Bost

Finally, WWP is forever grateful to all of the Alumni for their dedication to this cause and whose efforts played a decisive role in bringing about the bill’s passage.

“ Thousands of veterans made their voices heard on Capitol Hill and this legislation wouldn’t have become law without them. Other warriors who have become sick because of their toxic exposure, like Scott Evans and Andrew Myatt, bravely told their stories publicly



Andrew Myatt and his wife, Mihaela, attend the White House signing ceremony for the *Honoring Our PACT Act*

and helped build awareness of - and momentum for - this movement. Thankfully, Andrew was able to attend the White House bill-signing in person on August 2, but tragically Scott passed away just days before the *PACT Act* became law. This new law is a true legacy for Scott, Andrew, and the many other American veterans who selflessly fought for changes that will come too late to help them, but will help save the lives of countless others. Thank you to all who helped make these important, lifesaving changes.”

- CEO Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Linnington

## OPERATION ADVOCACY

## Forty-six Warriors Traveled to Washington, DC, to Take Part in Operation Advocacy

During the week of September 12, Wounded Warrior Project Alumni from across the country traveled to Washington, DC, to take part in *Operation Advocacy* – WWP’s grassroots initiative that connects warriors with elected officials. Forty-six warriors from 24 states held 55 meetings with Members of Congress and their staff to discuss several of WWP’s top legislative priorities, including women veterans’ issues, mental health, and veterans’ benefits. Through these in-person engagements, warriors were able to share their experiences and perspectives, educating officials on the importance of supporting legislative solutions to these issues.

In addition to Congressional office meetings, these 46 warriors had the opportunity to take part in advocacy and communications trainings and to attend a private dinner with Representatives Seth Moulton (D-MA-06), Mariannette Miller-Meeks (R-IA-02), Kāiali’i Kahele (D-HI-02), and Mike Waltz (R-FL-06). These Representatives are members of the For Country Caucus, a bipartisan group made up of military veteran Members of Congress that work together to pass critical legislation that provides for the common defense, improves the lives of veterans, and expand national service opportunities for communities across America. Women Warriors in attendance also participated in WWP’s first Women Warriors Summit



Warriors on the steps of the U.S. Capitol

which included specialized sessions dedicated to engaging high-ranking officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Defense Health Agency, and the Congressional Women Veterans Task Force on issues specific to women veterans. Click [here](#) to watch a recap video of the week.

## Women Warriors Summit Events

### VA Chief of Staff Roundtable

On September 13, alumnae met with VA Chief of Staff Tanya Bradsher to discuss several important topics including, implementation of comprehensive toxic exposure legislation, the *Honoring Our PACT Act*; VA workforce and staffing issues; and electronic health record modernization. Much of the conversation also focused on health care and benefits, including the ongoing need for mental health care, gender-specific care, and care for military sexual trauma (MST) survivors.



Women warriors meet with VA Chief of Staff Tanya Bradsher

OPERATION ADVOCACY (CONT.)



House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Chairman Mark Takano and Rep. Nancy Mace



WWP Chief Program Officer Jen Silva presents an award to Rep. Nancy Mace

**Women Veterans Task Force Forum**

Warriors also had the opportunity to engage with members of the Women Veterans Task Force, a bipartisan Task Force, chaired by Congresswoman Julia Brownley (D-CA-26), that works to increase the visibility of the two million women who have served in the U.S. military and promote inclusivity and equitable access to comprehensive healthcare, benefits, education and

economic opportunity, and other federal resources, particularly at the Department of Veterans Affairs. Discussions were led by Chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Rep. Mark Takano (D-CA-41) and Rep. Nancy Mace (R-SC-01), and focused on the challenges and issues related to women Service members transitioning from the military, sexual assault in the military, and mental health and suicide prevention legislation.

**Operation Advocacy Congressional Meetings**



Warriors meet with Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs Chairman Jon Tester



Warriors discuss key issues in Capitol Hill meetings

On September 14, warriors conducted 55 meetings during *Operation Advocacy*, 23 of which were attended by Members of the U.S House of Representatives and U.S. Senate. These meetings focused on advocacy for several key bills, including the *VA Peer Support Enhancement for MST Survivors Act* ([S. 4441](#) / [H.R. 2724](#)); the *Servicemembers and Veterans Empowerment and Support Act* ([S. 3025](#) / [H.R. 5666](#)); the *Women Veterans*

*Transitional Residence Utilizing Support and Treatment (TRUST) Act* ([H.R. 344](#)); the *Post-9/11 Veterans' Mental Health Care Improvement Act* ([S. 3293](#)); the *Major Richard Star Act* ([S. 344](#) / [H.R. 1282](#)); and the *Brian Neuman VA Clothing Allowance Improvement Act and Mark O'Brien VA Clothing Allowance Improvement Act* ([S. 2513](#) / [H.R. 4772](#)).

OPERATION ADVOCACY (CONT.)

## Honoring Our PACT Act Reception

That evening, warriors joined fellow veterans, Veterans Service Organization (VSO) representatives, and Members of Congress for a reception celebrating the recent passage of the *Honoring Our PACT Act* – a monumental piece of legislation addressing toxic exposures.



Warrior Brent Whitten and Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs Ranking Member Jerry Moran



WWP Government Affairs Deputy Director Aleks Morosky speaks at a congressional reception for the *Honoring Our PACT Act*

Wounded Warrior Project would like to thank the following warrior-advocates for taking time away from their jobs and families to travel to Washington, DC, to participate in *Operation Advocacy* and the Inaugural Women Warriors Summit from September 12–September 14.

**Alabama**

- Dru Amos
- Joel Grace

**Alaska**

- Bonnie Dorman
- Katie Fulmer

**Arizona**

- James Anderson
- Dawn Drake
- Fernando Monarrez

**Arkansas**

- Laura Howard
- Jerome Mitchell

**California**

- Giovanni Perez

**Florida**

- Diana Calero
- Bill Geiger
- Deanna Love
- Ofelia Lucas

**Illinois**

- Liz Dykstra
- Angela Hlavacek

**Indiana**

- Scott Moehl

**Iowa**

- Scott Gilje
- John Mikelson

**Kansas**

- Brent Whitten
- Keara Torkelson

**Kentucky**

- Joshua Jordan

**Louisiana**

- Raynata Lockett
- Deron Santiny

**Maryland**

- Angela Waller
- Devora Exline

**Massachusetts**

- Sharee Farley

**Michigan**

- Michelle Riggs

**Montana**

- Anton Johnson
- Christina Baker

**New Hampshire**

- Nicole Lyon

**North Carolina**

- Jason Pratscher
- Dana Hutson
- Jonathan Conover

**Pennsylvania**

- Thomas Chimenti
- Delia Veschi

**South Carolina**

- Michael Mingle
- Caroline Fermin

**Tennessee**

- Rana Claark

**Texas**

- Juan Arredondo
- Liz Etheridge
- David Guzman
- Charles Henry
- Tim Horton

**Washington**

- Alanna Rathkopf

**West Virginia**

- Brandon Gregory

## OPERATION ADVOCACY (CONT.)

## Warrior Advocate Spotlight

### Brandon Gregory U.S. Army

Brandon Gregory served in the U.S. Army as a signal corps soldier and deployed to Baghdad, Iraq. Brandon attained the rank of sergeant and was medically retired after 10 years of service. He now resides in Morgantown, West Virginia, where he continues to serve veterans in his local community through volunteerism, non-profit leadership, and state-wide advocacy groups.



Brandon Gregory

#### Q Why did you decide to participate in Operation Advocacy?

**A:** Since leaving the military, I've felt called to continue serving my country and other veterans through advocacy aimed at improving mental health services and suicide prevention efforts. WWP's Operation Advocacy was the perfect opportunity to get a better understanding of veteran policy advocacy at the federal level and advance causes important to the veteran community.

#### Q What was the most impactful part of the experience for you?

**A:** I learned that in-person advocacy is considered the most effective form of advocacy. This was significant to me because most Americans will not get the opportunity to meet their elected representatives. WWP gave me the best possible opportunity to influence legislation that directly impacts my life and that of other veterans.



Brandon Gregory, warriors, and WWP staff meet with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell



## OPERATION ADVOCACY (CONT.)

## Warrior Advocate Spotlight

### Katie Fulmer U.S. Air Force

Katie Fulmer served 11 years in the U.S. Air Force. She first served as a computer and network specialist for eight years and then as a military intelligence specialist working with fighter pilots and leadership on threat assessments and weaponeering for three years. Katie earned the rank of Technical Sergeant/E-6 but was medically retired due to injuries before being able to pin on. Katie continues to give back and serve in her community by volunteering and working with veterans as a Social Worker at the Anchorage Department of Veteran Affairs.



Katie Fulmer

**Q** What was most eye-opening to you when meeting and interacting with Members of Congress or their staff?

**A:** What was most eye-opening was how down to Earth and genuinely caring most were! As a constituent, sometimes (for me at least) it seems like Congressional members are “on a platform” or out of reach; however, this experience showed me how much they actually care and put forth effort in meeting, listening, and advocating for us.

**Q** How has engaging in advocacy empowered you as a citizen and as a veteran?

**A:** It’s given me the confidence and motivation to do more – my motto is Be Good, Do Good – and advocacy does just that! It feels good to make ripple effects that have lasting impacts not only on veterans but also on their families and communities.



Katie Fulmer, warriors, and WWP staff meet with Sen. Lisa Murkowski

## OPERATION ADVOCACY (CONT.)

## Warrior Advocate Spotlight

### Keara Torkelson U.S. Army Reserve

Keara Torkelson served in the Army Reserves for 7 years. She was medically retired in 2013 due to her injuries from the Fort Hood Shooting in 2009. Keara attained the rank of sergeant in her time of service. Keara now lives in Baldwin City, Kansas, where she continues to serve veterans and community through local nonprofits. Keara strives to break the stigma surrounding PTSD and help veterans find more holistic approaches to their healing.



Keara Torkelson

**Q** What was something that you learned or that surprised you during the fly-in?

**A:** I was surprised that I didn't need to know everything about the government to attend this fly-in. WWP provided me with everything I needed to know and say to feel confident in advocating on The Hill. I was also surprised at some of the bills we were advocating for since I didn't know about them or know that these are things we can change!

**Q** What do you want to tell fellow veterans about the importance of grassroots advocacy?

**A:** I'd like my fellow veterans to know that you can make change just by sharing your story and showing up. It feels good to be a part of something bigger than yourself. Learning, changing, and empowering happens when you try new things. WWP does a great job at equipping you with the tools you'll need to be successful, and YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.



Keara Torkelson and a group of women warriors attend meetings on Capitol Hill

## FAMILY CAREGIVERS



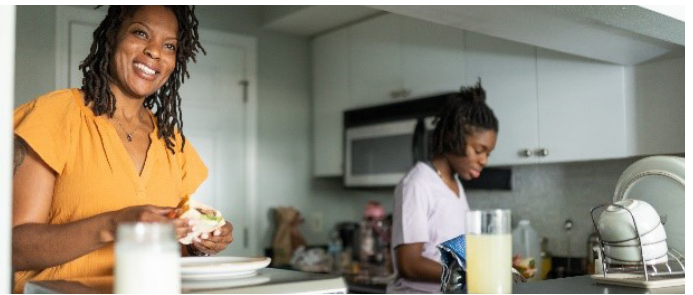
## Updates to VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers

Over the past few years, the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) has undergone several significant changes. In October 2020, program eligibility expanded to include veterans who served before May 5, 1975, and plans are in place to expand the program even further to veterans of all eras on October 1, 2022. While the program is expanding to new eras of veterans, post-9/11 veterans remain eligible as well.

Following the 2020 program updates, over 22,000 caregivers were added, more than doubling the size of the program. As the PCAFC expanded to new generations of veterans, VA began carrying out reviews to determine whether legacy participants met new eligibility requirements that had also been established.

This reassessment process revealed that the new eligibility criteria were not in alignment with the needs of veterans and their caregivers. To ensure that caregivers would not be unreasonably removed from the program or face a reduction in benefits, VA halted discharges for all caregivers of legacy participants and legacy applicants based on a reassessment. **On September 14, VA announced that it will extend PCAFC eligibility for legacy participants, legacy applicants, and caregivers for another three years through September 30, 2025.**

VA has also commenced an effort to further improve the program for all participating veterans and caregivers. One way in which VA has been working to improve the program and gain insight into needed changes is through listening sessions with veterans service organizations, military service organizations, caregivers, Caregiver Support Programs (CSP) staff and other strategic stakeholders.



On July 8 and July 15, Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) facilitated two listening sessions with Dr. Colleen Richardson, the Director of VA's Caregiver Support Program, and 10 WWP-affiliated caregivers to discuss the PCAFC. During these sessions, Dr. Richardson met with caregivers from all over the country, and spoke directly about the PCAFC's successes, challenges, and opportunities for improvement.

**“I was so thankful to have the time to talk to Dr. Richardson. She was very focused on listening to the actual needs of the caregivers in the group and looking for solutions. When I spoke about the needs of caregivers who were working from home, Dr. Richardson's team reached out to learn more. In fact, one of the changes we discussed was in place when I went to an appointment with my veteran three weeks later. I am thankful to the WWP advocacy team and to the PCAFC leadership team for allowing these types of opportunities.”**

**- Caregiver participant from North Carolina**

As VA continues actively working to improve the PCAFC, WWP has continued to advocate on behalf of veterans and their caregivers. This year, the Government Affairs team has prioritized caregiver legislation, including the following:

- ★ **The Elizabeth Dole Act of 2022 (S. 3854/H.R. 6823)**, which would improve certain VA programs for home and community-based services.
- ★ **The Long-Term Care Veterans Choice Act (S. 2852/H.R. 7158)**, which would require that VA expand veterans' access to the Medical Foster Home (MFH) program.

WWP is committed to making sure that all veterans and their caregivers receive the benefits that they have earned through their sacrifice and is standing by to provide further support for those currently enrolled or who are interested in applying for the PCAFC.

*If you or a loved one have questions or need assistance with the PCAFC **application**, do not hesitate to reach out to WWP's Resource Center team, available from 9 am - 9 pm ET Monday through Friday, at 888.WWP.ALUM (997.2586).*

## DID YOU KNOW?

## DID YOU KNOW ?

### Rollout of 9-8-8 Suicide Hotline Provides a Lifeline to Veterans in Crisis

Within the veteran community, mental health challenges are a persistent crisis that devastate individuals and families across the country. Thanks to a new federal initiative, those seeking help in their most desperate moments will have easier access to the counselling and services they need.

The new 9-8-8 National Suicide Prevention Lifeline was rolled out on July 16 to streamline and simplify access to mental health services for all Americans. Run by the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), this new hotline will build on an existing network of over 200 crisis centers nationwide staffed by counselors who are prepared to answer millions of calls each year.

Anyone experiencing a mental health emergency can call or text 9-8-8 to get connected with trained professionals who will be able to offer support and referrals to relevant treatment options. While the U.S. has had a similar mental health crisis number in place (1-800-273-8255), the shortened 9-8-8 number seeks to build off the success and easy-to-remember legacy of the 9-1-1 emergency line. For now, calls to the old lifeline will continue to go through.

For veterans in need of support, selecting option 1 after dialing 9-8-8 (or text 838255) will specifically direct them to the Veterans Crisis Line, which will provide a unique set of resources to meet their needs.

Dr. Tamara Campbell, acting executive director for the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention **highlighted** that "the new shorter number directly addresses the need for ease of access and clarity in times of crisis."

If you or someone you know is in need of help, call or text the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 9-8-8. You can also text the Crisis Text Line by messaging TALK to 741741.



### Jen Silva Appointed to the Department of Defense Advisory Committee for the Prevention of Sexual Misconduct

Wounded Warrior Project's (WWP's) Chief Program Officer Jennifer Silva is bringing her expertise and insights to a new role aimed at taking military sexual trauma (MST) head-on.

As a new member of the Department of Defense's (DoD's) Advisory Committee for the Prevention of Sexual Misconduct, which had its inaugural meeting on August 22, Silva is responsible for leading and coordinating government initiatives to address sexual assault in the armed services and providing justice and support for those who have been affected.



Jen Silva, Chief Program Officer, WWP

#### According to data from WWP's 2021 Annual Warrior Survey, 67% of female warriors and 6% of male warriors have experienced MST.

The rate of sexual assault experienced by WWP women warriors is 2.5 times higher than women in the general U.S. population. Many women warriors have reported challenges to accessing the resources they need, including a lack of sensitivity to women's issues and a lack of accessible Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities.

Silva brings extensive experience to this role, having worked on MST and other pressing issues affecting veterans' communities across the country. Over the past several years, she has overseen the creation of numerous cutting-edge programs within WWP focused on economic empowerment, education initiatives, and issues impacting women veterans.

As Silva recently noted, "Ultimately, our nation's leaders and policymakers at all levels must create the lasting reforms that can save lives and provide warriors with the care and benefits they've earned through their service and sacrifice to our nation."

## Q&amp;A



Rep. Raul Ruiz

## Rep. Raul Ruiz (D-CA-36)

**Q** Prior to winning your first term in the U.S. House of Representatives, you had a distinguished career as an emergency medicine doctor. In fact, that same year you received the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Commander's Award for Public Service. As one of only 13 physicians in the House of Representatives, how has your experience as a medical doctor shaped your approach to health care for veterans?

**A:** As an emergency physician and public health expert, I understand that in medicine and public health, if there is a high enough suspicion of a harm that causes a severe enough illness then we must act. For far too long, however, sick and dying veterans were told that there wasn't enough evidence to link the cancers, illnesses, and diseases they suffered from to their exposure to burn pits and other toxins. That is why for years, I have taken a public health approach to this crisis to end the use of burn pits, educate doctors and veterans about their health effects, and get exposed veterans the health care and benefits they have earned, deserve, and need.

With medical fellows in my office, I researched the effects of burn pits on our veterans, and I introduced several pieces of legislation to establish a presumption of service connection for veterans' exposure to burn pits. These bills - the Veterans' Right to BREATHE Act and the Presumptive Benefits for War Fighters Exposed to Burn Pits and Other Toxins Act - are the foundation of the

Honoring our PACT Act. Now that the PACT Act is law, over 23 cancers and illnesses will now receive coverage from the VA, and veterans will no longer have to bear the burden of proof.

Now, I am focused on ending the use of burn pits by our nation's military once and for all to prevent more suffering as a result of exposure to these toxic, open-air pits.

**Q** You founded the Congressional Burn Pits Caucus and helped lead the charge in Congress to address residual health effects from the military's use of toxic burn pits. What inspired you to become a leader on this issue, and now that the Honoring Our PACT Act has been signed into law, do you have a message for Service members and veterans who are suffering from illnesses related to burn pits and other dangerous chemicals?

**A:** My inspiration in this fight is the memory of my constituent, Jennifer Kepner, an Air Force medic from Cathedral City, California, who died from pancreatic cancer that was linked to her burn pit exposure overseas. When I met her five years ago, I promised her that I would fight to fulfill the vision she had for her fellow veterans, which was to protect them and their families from the pain and suffering she experienced due to her exposure to burn pits and her difficult experience navigating the VA.

She spent her final days as a leading voice for her fellow veterans exposed to burn pits - even in the midst of her own unimaginable suffering. It has been for her, her family, and veterans across the country that I have fought to fulfill her vision; and it is now because of her and her fight that millions of veterans and their families will have access to the benefits and care they earned, deserve, and need.



Jennifer Kepner and Rep. Ruiz

Q&A (CONT.)

**Q** Similar to Wounded Warrior Project, you've made a priority of passing the Major Richard Star Act. This bill would provide full concurrent receipt of both DoD retirement benefits and VA disability compensation for retirees with fewer than 20 years of service and a combat-related disability. We appreciate you sponsoring this important piece of legislation and leading the effort to get it passed. Why is this a priority for you?

**A:** Our Service members and their families sacrifice so much for our nation. Nonetheless, they often face unnecessary roadblocks in receiving their earned benefits. With the Major Richard Star Act, our veterans wouldn't have to navigate through unjust laws that deny them receiving the military retirement pay and service-connected disability compensation that they have rightfully earned.

**Q** You have supported key mental health and suicide prevention legislation for veterans. One of the initiatives that you have co-sponsored would provide sustained congressional support for state and local implementation of 9-8-8 and the continuum of crisis care services, including the hotline, mobile response, and dedicated crisis care. With the recent designation of 9-8-8 as the new suicide lifeline number, how will the 9-8-8 Implementation Act help improve suicide prevention resources for veterans?

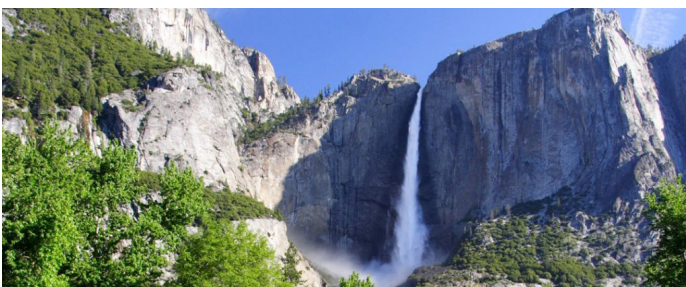
**A:** Veteran suicide is far too pervasive. We owe it to our Service members who have risked their lives and health to take care of them when they come home and that includes their mental health as much as their physical health. With this support line, we will directly help veterans struggling with depression, PTSD, and suicidal ideation access reliable, free, and relevant mental health care services whenever they need them, ultimately securing preventive and compassionate help for them and their loved ones.



Major Richard Star

**Q** In 2019, you introduced the Wounded Veterans Recreation Act, which later became law. Today, all veterans with a service-connected disability are eligible for a free, lifetime pass for entry to national parks and federal lands. Why was it important for you to champion this effort, and how have veterans in your state and district been taking advantage of it?

**A:** As a physician, I've seen firsthand the positive effect that access to nature and recreation has on my patients' mental and physical health. Thanks to this law, veterans with disabilities now have free access to over 2,000 of our nation's beautiful parks and lands, which will increase their spiritual, mental, and physical well-being. This law shows gratitude for their sacrifice and honors them with the care, benefits, and resources they need to live healthy lives when they return home.



## PARTNERSHIP SPOTLIGHT



## Wounded Warrior Project Participates in Joint Women's Leadership Symposium

Last July, Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) participated in the Sea Services Leadership Association's (SSLA) Joint Women's Leadership Symposium. Each year, the symposium invites U.S. Service members from all service branches, Department of Defense (DoD) civilians, the National Guard, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and international allies to partake in panels, presentations, networking events, and educational sessions to foster professional development. This year's symposium in Norfolk, Virginia, took place under the theme "Stronger by Helping Each Other," centering conversations around women Service members' mutual support to build stronger foundations, both professionally and personally.

During a July 10 Career and Transitioning Seminar, WWP Government Affairs Specialist Lindsey Stanford briefed attendees about WWP's veteran advocacy efforts and top legislative priorities for 2022. Stanford's presentation highlighted WWP's work regarding toxic exposure and women veterans' health care, citing statistics from WWP's latest [Annual Warrior Survey](#). Notably, survey results revealed that nearly all women warriors are enrolled with the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) for health care, but fewer than half felt that VA was able to meet their needs after they left military service.

In 2020, WWP developed the [Women Warriors Initiative \(WWI\)](#) to address disparities experienced by women Service members. WWP invites Service members and veterans at all career stages to learn more about the Women Warriors Initiative through the full WWP [Women Warriors Initiative Report](#), or [executive summary](#), which includes input from nearly 5,000 women warriors.

Since 2020, the WWI initiative and annual survey inform much of WWP's advocacy work around gender-specific health care, peer support, and military sexual trauma (MST), as well as the organization's sustained push for the passing of women-centered legislation. Current legislative priorities include the *VA Peer Support Enhancement for Military Sexual Trauma (MST) Survivors Act* ([S. 4441/H.R. 2724](#)) to establish a peer support program for MST survivors; the *Service members and Veterans Empowerment and Support Act* ([S. 3025/H.R. 5666](#)), to expand VA health care and benefits for MST survivors; and the *Women Veterans Transitional Residence Utilizing Support and Treatment (TRUST) Act* ([H.R. 344](#)) to establishing a program to help treat and rehabilitate women veterans with drug and alcohol dependency.

Women represent the fastest-growing population among military Service members and veterans. Each year, the Joint Women's Leadership Symposium allows WWP to build lasting relationships with an expanding number of women warriors to learn more about the services they need and continue advocating on their behalf.



WWP teammates participate in the Joint Women's Leadership Symposium

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA) PARTNER SPOTLIGHT



## VA Announces New Life Insurance Program for 2023

Beginning on January 1, 2023, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will launch an updated life insurance program for veterans. The new program, **Veterans Affairs Life Insurance (VALife)**, will enable all service-connected veterans who are 80 years old or younger (or fall under any disability rating) to access locked-in premium rates and whole life insurance that builds cash value.

VALife offers substantial coverage valued higher than most commercially available guaranteed acceptance insurance programs, valued at up to \$40,000 in coverage, in \$10,000 increments. There is no deadline to apply and no requirements for medical exams, ensuring that qualified applicants will have guaranteed acceptance to the program. VALife has an inherent

two-year waiting period, meaning that there will be a two-year gap in time between enrollment and the moment where the full amount of the policy is in effect.



If the enrollee passes away within this timeframe, VA will pay the veteran's beneficiaries the total value of all paid premiums plus interest. This program provides great options for veterans living with health conditions who are incompatible with commercially available options as well as for veterans who may have missed deadlines for alternative VA life insurance programs.

In conjunction with the launch of (VALife), the Service-Disabled Veterans (S-DVI) program, including Supplemental S-DVI, will close to new enrollment on December 31, 2022. Once S-DVI enrollment ends, veterans will no longer be eligible to apply for a waiver of premiums, as the VALife program does not include this benefit.

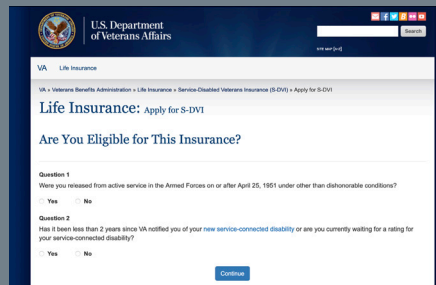
Veterans who are currently enrolled in the S-DVI program will have the option to remain in the program. Alternatively, if an S-DVI-insured veteran wants to transition coverage to VALife, he or she can apply between January 1, 2023, and December 31, 2025, and keep both S-DVI and VALife during the initial two-year enrollment period. After December 31, 2025, however, veterans may not be covered by both programs at the same time and must drop S-DVI if they want to apply for VALife.

For more information on S-DVI and VALife, visit additional resources below:



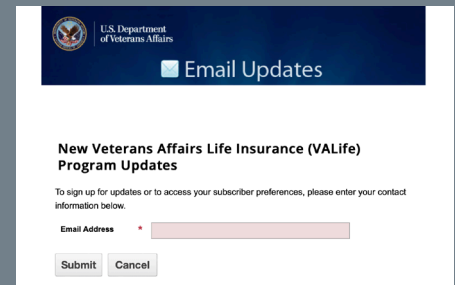
Additional information about VA Life Insurance

VISIT SITE >



Apply for S-DVI

VISIT SITE >



Register for email updates on VALife

VISIT SITE >

VA Life Insurance Call Center: **800-669-8477 (Monday-Friday 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. EST)**



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State and district engagement, constituent resources, warrior fly-in

**Coleman Brooks**

Grassroots & Constituent Affairs Deputy Director  
State and district engagement, constituent resources, warrior fly-in

**Aleks Morosky**

Government Affairs Deputy Director

**Issues:** Toxic exposure

**Jeremy Villanueva**

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**HOURS OF OPERATION**

Monday - Friday 9 am - 9 pm EST



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