

Pennsylvania Service Officer Focuses on Overseas Veterans

Iraq War veteran Elizabeth Salvador has been a VFW-accredited service officer for five years, connecting expatriate vets with VA services

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Elizabeth Salvador, a service officer at the VA Pittsburgh Regional Office, recently helped a veteran living in Africa end an 11-year-long appeals process.

Salvador works on foreign claims from veterans who live outside of the United States. She said that in this particular case, the veteran initially was given a zero percent rating because he was unable to have an exam to determine the “current level of severity” for his conditions.

“He’s in a really, really rural area,” said Salvador, a member of VFW Post 914 in West Mifflin, Pa. “He has to travel about two hours just to get to a phone.”

The veteran, according to Salvador, received roughly \$70,000 for “quite a few conditions” in mid-January.

She added that part of the length of the appeals process was because he lives overseas.

Salvador has been a service officer in Pittsburgh for nearly five years. She took on the role after being laid off from a previous job.

“I needed health care because my insurance wasn’t covered anymore,” Salvador said. “And I just wasn’t sure [of] the ins and outs.”

She went to her local Post, of which she now is a member, and ultimately learned of the opening at the regional VA office.

She said the most challenging aspect of her work is the foreign cases, along with time zone

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111

Office 816.756.3390
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WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
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Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

differences. “A lot of times there’s language barriers,” Salvador said. “Even sometimes the veterans themselves — we have a lot of veterans in Panama and a lot of them don’t speak English.”

The most common case she works on is related to mental health. Salvador said when a veteran wants to file a PTSD claim, the VA requires that the original diagnosis come from a VA doctor.

“When these veterans are overseas looking for service connection for mental health, that becomes really hard,” said Salvador, who served in Iraq from 2006 to 2007 with the 886th Expeditionary Security Force Squadron.

Salvador said she guides veterans through the process, understanding that some do not know the requirements and become “discouraged” when their claim is denied.

Countries such as Germany and Italy have service officers and VA employees, but in other locations, Salvador said, making “initial contact” is harder.

Salvador’s office handles roughly 400 cases per month.

She said the most rewarding part of her job is providing “basic information” of what veterans are entitled to, such as health care and education — regardless of whether or not they have service-connected injuries.

For anyone considering becoming a VSO, Salvador said it is “a lot of work, but it’s good work.”

“It’s not a very easy job, but if they’re looking to help veterans, this is definitely a place to be,” Salvador said.

Editor’s note: This is the third in a series of feature articles on VFW’s accredited veteran service officers. In 2019, VFW is commemorating the 100th anniversary of its National Veteran Service and National Legislative Service offices in Washington, D.C.

This article was featured in the April 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Kari Williams](#), associate editor of VFW magazine.