

'The Most Significant Piece of Veterans Legislation in History'

After years of advocacy by VFW, the Honoring Our PACT Act became law last August, VFW Commander-in-Chief Timothy Borland represented the organization at the White House when President Joe Biden signed the PACT Act into law

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With the Honoring Our PACT Act now law, VFW's VA-accredited veterans service officers around the world are helping veterans harmed by burn pit fumes or other toxins.

The legislation, considered by VFW to be the most significant piece of veterans legislation in history, focuses on providing veterans who served in countries such as Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq expanded access to VA health care and earned disability benefits.

Kenneth Deist, one of VFW's more than 2,000 VA-accredited service officers, is now actively working PACT Act claims. As the VFW Department Service Officer for Arizona since 2018, Deist sees between 15 and 20 veterans in person each week. The commander of VFW Post 7401 in Chandler, Arizona, splits his time between his offices at the VA Regional Office in Phoenix and the VFW Department Headquarters in Tempe.

Deist says that as soon as the PACT Act passed, his office was inundated with communication from veterans, particularly Vietnam War veterans.

"They were calling all day, every day," said Deist, who served in 2005 with the Air Force's 586th Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron in the Iraq War. "Vietnam War veterans with hypertension [related to Agent Orange exposure] have waited a long time for this."

Deist's wife, Cristina, also is a member of Post 7401 in Chandler. The pair met while serving at Guantanamo Bay. Cristina is a VA service officer as well and is a veteran of both the Marine Corps and Army.

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Deist, who also served in the Afghanistan War, said claims for respiratory issues also are on the rise.

“We see a lot of sleep apnea problems,” Deist said. “The VA has not acknowledged sleep apnea as a presumptive condition, even though studies have shown a connection.”

‘FREE OF CHARGE — NO MATTER WHAT’

VFW Commander-in-Chief Timothy Borland said one of the best services that the VFW offers is helping veterans file disability claims through VFW’s network of accredited service officers.

“We’ll guarantee service is done the right way,” Borland said. “This ensures that we help veterans and family members of veterans.”

VFW National Veterans Service Director Ryan Gallucci said that, overall, Vietnam War veterans have been the most active in filing PACT Act claims with VFW service officers. He said most of those claims are being filed for hypertension.

“One of the challenges VFW is having is making some veterans, especially Post-9/11 veterans, aware that the PACT Act applies to them, too,” Gallucci said. “The simplest thing these veterans can do is talk to a VA-accredited veterans service officer about the PACT Act.”

To make it easy to find help with a military service-related disability claim, VFW has a website, www.PACTActInfo.org, which creates a simple way for veterans to file claims. It is a simple screening that only requires a veteran to state his or her:

- Name
- Email address
- State of residence
- Location of military service
- Time of military service
- Suspected or diagnosed conditions

“A VFW VA-accredited service officer should contact these veterans within a week to have a conversation about what each needs to do,” Gallucci said.

Gallucci added that veterans should trust VFW’s accredited service officers because they are recognized by VA to represent veterans in the claims process.

“Being recognized by VA means that our veterans service officers need to meet certain standards and provide services to veterans free of charge — no matter what,” Gallucci said. “By law, VFW is not entitled to any money the veteran may receive.”

VFW service officers undergo up to 80 hours of training per year to maintain qualification to represent veterans who file disability claims. The VA requires veterans service officers to attend only 40 hours of training each year.

“In addition, VA authorizes our veterans service officers to have access to their veterans claim file,” Gallucci said. “This access allows us to fix a veteran’s claim before VA decides on the veteran’s benefits. It allows our service officers to advocate for veterans, which goes far deeper than what non-accredited companies claim to provide.”

‘EVERY VETERAN COUNTS’

The PACT Act was signed into law by President Joe Biden on Aug. 10, 2022. Borland was at the White House when the PACT Act was signed into law.

“As your Commander-in-Chief, I am proud that I was the one who represented all of us on stage with the President on Aug. 10 when he signed the Honoring Our PACT Act into law,” Borland said. “This shows that every veteran counts, because no one does more for veterans.”

VFW’s formal push to get help for veterans exposed to toxic substances was highlighted in 2021 when past VFW Commander-in-Chief Hal Roesch II testified before the House and Senate VA committees. He gave lawmakers an idea that would change the way veterans receive disability benefits from VA.

Roesch, who served in VFW’s top position from August 2020 to July 2021, told congressional members that they needed to address toxic exposure to save the lives of veterans who served from the Vietnam War to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Roesch added that through this past century, troops have returned home from war with unexplained health conditions and illnesses linked to toxic exposures and environmental hazards.

“Today is no different,” Roesch said. “Toxic exposure is synonymous with military service. For this reason, it is time for Congress to change the framework through which VA benefits are granted for individuals with conditions associated with toxic exposures and environmental hazards.”

This is when VFW’s work began to help create the PACT Act.

‘VFW TOOK THE LEAD’

VFW National Legislative Service Director Patrick Murray said VFW was the leader in lobbying efforts for the PACT Act. He said that because VFW’s Washington Office is on Capitol Hill, advocates from other organizations would attend meetings and planning sessions at VFW’s buildings.

“Through the years, there have been dozens of different types of toxic exposure bills cover a

variety of different things,” Murray said. “But, in 2021, we started working toward getting legislation approved that would take care of all of it at once. The VFW took the lead when it came to the PACT Act’s advocacy efforts.”

Murray added that while getting the PACT Act approved only took about a year and a half, the law covers reforms that have been advocated for a generation.

“Things such as recognizing that troops were exposed to Agent Orange in Thailand, as well as reform for veterans suffering from Gulf War Illness and atomic veterans, have been worked on for decades,” Murray said. “This has all been in the works for a long time.”

Murray said representatives from VFW worked alongside congressional staff members to review drafts of the bill and add items that were crucial to the bill being a success.

“We had our hand in the bill the entire way through the end,” Murray said. “We were there to make sure there were no gaps in the bill that could have changed it entirely without it being fixed.”

MAKING THE PACT ACT ‘A REALITY’

Past-VFW Commander-in-Chief Matthew “Fritz” Mihelcic, who served in that position from August 2021 until July 2022, used his time as VFW’s Chief to advocate for the PACT Act. He stood side-by-side with the likes of comedian and activist Jon Stewart, leaders of many other veterans service organizations and Congress members to champion the bill.

During the final days of advocating for the PACT Act, even with the uncertainty that the PACT Act would not be approved by the Senate, Mihelcic and Stewart, via broadcast, asked VFW members at the 123rd VFW National Convention in Kansas City, Missouri, to send messages to their representatives in Congress in support of the PACT Act. About 6,000 messages were sent during the convention.

Murray said that without VFW’s Action Corps and its grassroots advocacy network of VFW members, the PACT Act would not have been passed.

“Action Corps members through the past two years sent about 130,000 messages to Congress about toxic exposure reform alone,” Murray said. (Learn more about the Action Corps and its newsletter at <https://www.vfw.org/actioncorps>.)

After the conclusion of the 123rd VFW National Convention, Borland worked to make the signing of the PACT Act a reality.

IMPROVING VETERANS’ ‘QUALITY OF LIFE’

Borland said that every member of the organization counts when it comes to advocating for veterans in Washington. He added that members should use the news of the PACT Act to

their advantage when recruiting new members.

Borland stressed that adding new members to VFW's ranks is the "lifeblood" of the organization.

"Veterans are very excited about the PACT Act's passage," Borland said. "And, when they hear that we passed it last year, they want to become part of our membership base so that they can be a part of helping veterans in the future."

Deist said that it is his and other accredited veterans service officers' goal to do their best to "improve the quality of life" of veterans through educating them about their earned VA benefits.

"It does not matter whether you are a part of the VFW. We just want to take care of veterans," Deist said. "If VFW did not exist, it would be a bad thing."

This article is featured in the 2023 February issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.