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USMC VETERANS AND WILDLAND FIREFIGHTERS PAY TRIBUTE TO WWII VETERAN JOE HARRIS

By Rikki Almanza
Staff Writer

While first responders worked to combat the Los Angeles Fires, a group of wildland firefighters and Marine Corps Veterans made a special stop to visit 108-year-old Joe Harris, a World War II Veteran and one of the last surviving

members of the historic 555th Parachute Infantry Regiment. Known as the “Triple Nickles,” the unit was the first all-Black parachute infantry battalion in U.S. history and played a significant role in combating wildfires during the war.

During the visit, the group presented Mr. Harris with a Pulaski, a firefighting tool still in use today, and a paratrooper patch. For Harris, who made 72 parachute jumps during his service, the gesture was deeply meaningful, symbolizing a bridge between his legacy and the ongoing work of today’s wildland firefighters. Neil Gallagher, a former wildland firefighter and founder of Preserving the Stories, organized the visit with members of his old firefighting crew, all of whom are Marine Corps Veterans.

The 555th Parachute Infantry Regiment was



Firefighters with Joe Harris and family (Photo: Neil Gallagher)

created during World War II in response to a recommendation to establish an all-Black airborne unit. Formed in 1943 and nicknamed the “Triple Nickles” after their numerical designation and insignia of three buffalo nickels, the unit faced significant

racial prejudice but rose to become one of the most skilled airborne teams of the era. Although they did not see overseas combat, they were deployed in 1945 to the West Coast for a classified mission known as Operation Firefly. Their mission was to

combat wildfires caused by Japanese balloon bombs— incendiary devices launched across the Pacific to ignite forest fires in the United States.

See **TRIPLE NICKLES** page 5

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OVER 300,000 VA HEALTH CARE JOBS EXEMPTED FROM FEDERAL HIRING FREEZE

By Rikki Almanza
Staff Writer

VA officials announced Thursday, January 23, that over 300,000 health care positions within the department are exempt from President Donald Trump’s federal hiring freeze, designating them as critical to public health and VA operations. The move follows widespread concerns from lawmakers, Veterans’ groups, and advocates about the potential harm the freeze could cause to Veteran



Torrey Pines, San Diego VA Medical Center (Photo: Roman Eugeniusz)

care.

Acting VA Secretary Todd Hunter’s memo outlined 39 exempted roles,

including nurses, mental health providers, physical therapists, and medical records administrators. These roles account for

about two-thirds of the VA’s workforce. The memo also ensures that employees set to begin before February 8 can start as planned, while job offers beyond that date remain temporarily revoked. Positions related to Veterans’ benefits processing could also be exempted if properly justified. Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Jerry Moran praised the exemption of health care jobs, saying it ensures Veterans continue to receive necessary care.

See **FEDERAL HIRING FREEZE** page 10

**THE AMERICAN LEGION
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PUBLICATION POLICY

The California Legionnaire (PP 167) is published 4 times a year in February, May, August, and November by:

Mid Valley Publishing Inc.
740 N. St., Sanger CA 93657-3114

POSTMASTER:

Send address changes to:

The California Legionnaire
1601 7th St., Sanger, CA 93657-2801
559-875-8387

ISSN 2575-0976

SUBMISSIONS:

- Submissions can be made via email, online and mail
- Email print articles to: **editor@caLegion.org** with the words "California Legionnaire" in the subject line of your email so that it will not be overlooked
 - Submissions to The California Legionnaire must be made by the 6th of the month prior to the issue month (Example: To submit material for the February issue, submissions must be received by Jan. 6)
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AEROSPACE WORKFORCE

By Kevin Burns
Aerospace Commission
Chair

The United States entered into World War I with only around 26 pilots. In American Legion Memorandum Number 47, published in April 1922, Eddie Rick-enbacker implored the American Legion to help recruit for pilot training stating that we needed to have pilots trained during peacetime, as it “is much more efficient than a man who is trained in time of war, with the haste and hysteria of that which goes with it.” The American Legion’s call to action by the Aerospace Commission fell upon deaf ears, as the government refused to act until 15-years later, when the Army Air Corp asked the American Legion for help in recruiting and training pilots.

needed to recruit a minimum of 240 into the flying schools per month just for the Fifth Army Corps area alone; which covered the four states of Indiana, Ohio, West Virginia, and Kentucky; and that there was no maximum limit on the number of recruits.



American Legion Posts across the nation sponsored flying schools and Post facilities were used to teach ground school.



(Photo: San Diego Air and Space Museum)

By 1940, Milo Warner, National Commander of the American Legion, made a national appeal for American youth to enroll in the Army’s Flying Cadet pilot training program. The American Legion made it their mission to funnel youth into these programs as the agenda of expanding America’s airpower had finally been funded. This was also true of the Civilian Pilot Training Program started by the Civil Aeronautics Administration in 1938. The government used the American Legion as its manpower recruiter.

In September 1940, the American Legion was informed by the Army Commander that they

Many Legionnaires who were pilots were recruited as instructors. Draft boards often furnished the names and addresses of those men classified 1-A which possessed the educational qualifications for Air Corps training. The men were then approached by the aeronautics committee and advised of the advantages of enlisting in the Air Corps for cadet training.

By the end of the war, the US Army Air Forces had nearly 200,000 pilots; whereas by the end of the war, both Germany and Japan had ran out of pilots and were resorting to volunteers who were quickly trained how to take-off and fly on suicide missions.

The American Legion had led the recruitment in the expansion of the Army Air Forces from 21,000 in 1938 to a war strength of 2.4 million in 1944.

Not only did the American Legion recruit pilots, but thousands of navigators and bombardiers, and many thousands of gunners and other specialists; with numerous others, mostly mechanics and specialists to keep aircraft airworthy.

The first two chairs of the Aeronautics Commission, Reed Landis and Gill Wilson, teamed up to organize the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) in 1941. Landis was the aviation consultant to the Director of the Office of Civil Defense, and Wilson was the Executive Director of the new CAP organization. Working together they took the association that only existed on paper, and made it into a national working

refer to that of helping the discharged soldier resume his place in civilian life. We are not putting off this problem till Johnny comes marching home. Johnny is here.” The Legion did not disappoint Hap Arnold, as the American Legion led the effort in the work to pass legislation and other efforts to transition these trained service members into the aviation workforce.



We are facing another time of critical shortages in the aerospace profession. Not only in pilots, both civilian and military, but also in all areas of the aerospace civilian and military workforce. Former Marine pilot

– Brig. Gen. Lightfoot gave Legionnaires glimpses into a changing force structure, a redesign that emphasizes joint operations, and the need to meet the needs of a changing geopolitical landscape, recruitment, talent management, training, and education of personnel are high priorities in today’s Marine Corps.

Currently, the US Air Force is trying to field next-generation aircraft in sufficient quantities to help deter aggression and achieve victory if deterrence fails. The problem is that the service consistently struggles to retain enough aviators to fly those aircraft. In fact, the Total Air Force (Active, Guard, and Reserve) was short 1,650 pilots in 2021, and the shortfall will likely only get worse. It’s a crisis that must be addressed head-on by training more pilots.

The aerospace industry stated that the North America region faced a shortfall of 8,000 pilots in 2022, about 11% of the total. That gap will grow to more than 29,000 by the end of the decade. Over the next 20 years, Boeing estimates, the industry will need 612,000 new pilots. The same is true of all the other areas of the aerospace workforce; engineers, technicians, assembly people, welders, etc.

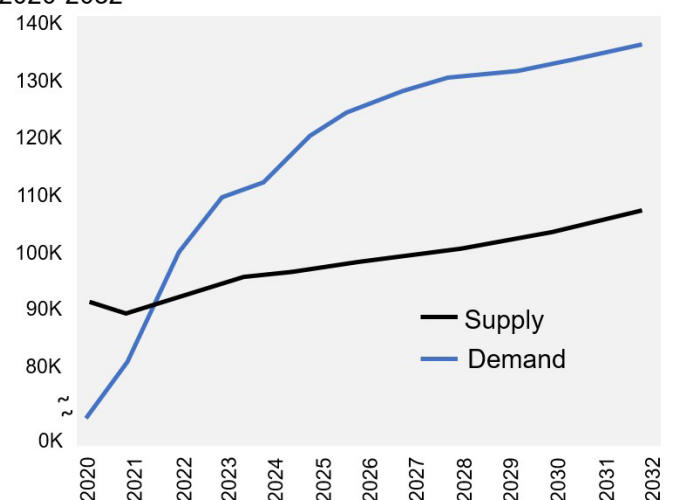


Brig. Gen. Regena Aye accepted the award for the CAP at The American Legion National Convention in Charlotte, NC (2023).

organization to continue the process that has endured to today. In 2023, the CAP Cadet Programs were recognized with the American Legion National Education Award.

Towards the end of the war, Hap Arnold thanked convention delegates for the Legion’s support of air power. During his speech he said to the Legionnaires, “Now we are all facing another problem, I

Pilot demand versus supply in North America 2020-2032





Members of the Malmstrom LGBTQ+ Initiative Team pose for a photo with a Progress Pride Flag, Malmstrom Air Force Base, 2022. (Photo: Heather Heiney / U.S. Air Force)

PENTAGON SETTLEMENT COULD RESTORE BENEFITS TO LGBTQ+ VETERANS DISCHARGED UNDER “DON’T ASK, DON’T TELL”

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

A proposed legal settlement with DoD could pave the way for tens of thousands of LGBTQ+ Veterans to reclaim benefits and recognition denied to them under discriminatory policies, including the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy.

The settlement stems from a 2024 class-action lawsuit challenging the discharge practices that disproportionately targeted LGBTQ+ Service Members. Between 1980 and 2011, more than 35,000 Service Members were discharged due to their sexual orientation or perceived orientation, often with less-than-honorable discharges. These discharges disqualified them from critical Veterans’ benefits, such as

healthcare, education assistance, VA loans, and certain job opportunities.

“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” which was in effect from 1994 to its repeal in 2010, prohibited LGBTQ+ Service Members from openly acknowledging their sexual orientation. Those who were discovered to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual were discharged, sometimes dishonorably. Earlier policies dating back to World War II enforced similar discriminatory practices.

The settlement would allow Veterans who received less-than-honorable discharges to request immediate reviews to upgrade their status to honorable. This would grant them access to benefits they were previously denied. Veterans whose

discharge paperwork references their sexual orientation as the reason for separation will also be able to obtain updated documents with those mentions removed. The agreement is particularly significant for LGBTQ+ Veterans who have been burdened by their discharge characterization, often facing stigma during background checks for jobs, reenlistment attempts, or when seeking benefits. By simplifying and expediting the process for reviewing and updating discharge records, the settlement will provide relief for thousands of affected Veterans.

This proposed settlement builds on previous actions by the federal government to address the harm caused by DADT and other anti-LGBTQ+ policies. In 2023,

the Pentagon proactively reviewed the discharge records of 851 Veterans who were administratively separated under DADT, upgrading 96.8% of those cases to honorable discharges. Similarly, in June 2023, President Joe Biden issued pardons for thousands of Veterans who had been convicted under the military’s ban on same-sex relationships between 1950 and 2013.

Despite these efforts, many Veterans have struggled to receive relief, especially those discharged prior to the implementation of DADT in 1994. The proposed settlement will bridge this gap and provide a pathway for tens of thousands of Veterans to access benefits and restore their honor.

The settlement, which has yet to be approved by a federal judge, could take effect as early as the summer of 2025. Once finalized, Veterans will be able to opt into a streamlined process to upgrade their discharge statuses, remove discriminatory references from their paperwork, and regain access to benefits.

For the more than 35,000 Veterans affected by these policies, the agreement is a significant step in addressing the long-term impacts of discrimination. It also reinforces the military’s ongoing efforts to rectify the injustices of the past and ensure equal treatment for all who have served.



Citrus Heights
Veterans Memorial Project

Hello Fellow Legionnaires,

My name is Paul Reyes and I am the Jr. Past Commander of Post 637 in Citrus Heights, CA. I am a retired Marine Corps Gunnery Sgt and a two tour veteran of a tiny little skirmish called Vietnam.

In mid 2022 I was watching a program on the History Channel about the March on Washington back in 1962. This was where the late great Dr. Martin Luther King recited his "I Have a Dream" speech. As he finished his speech the program ended and I felt a bit sad as the great man never got to see his dream come to fruition.

As I channel surfed I came across the military channel that was showing a documentary on the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, DC. About 5 minutes into the program I, all of a sudden, had a dream. The dream was to bring, "The Wall That Heals", the traveling Wall to Citrus Heights! With the help of a GREAT committee and the City of Citrus Heights The Wall was here the week of March 29th, 2023. The week of Vietnam War Veterans Day! We had some 10,000 people come to see The Wall that week!

During the week The Wall was here I got the

idea of having a copy of The Wall built here in Citrus Heights, my adopted home town! I went straight to a dear friend and fellow Vietnam Vet and asked if he would help me. His answer was, "It's gonna take a lot of work and money but I'll be right there with you!"

We now have a full-time committee, we have organized a non-profit, we have partnered with Calvary Catholic Cemetery where the structure will be built and we already have received funds from the local ROTARY, the City of Citrus Heights, and several private donations on our web site, CHVMP.ORG.

We look to start building in the Spring of 2025 with hopes of completion by late 2025 or early 2026.

What we need is the support of the Department of California and all of it's members with donations of any size as all will go towards creating the ONLY structure of its kind on the West Coast and will be a destination point for ALL Veterans near and far!

I know that we have numerous Vietnam Veterans within our ranks and I am hoping that each and every one of you decides to help us out. This project is not for me, not for my Post, but rather for the 58,281 whose names are on that

Wall as they sacrificed it all!

I have included a copy of our flier (see calegion.org/citrus-heights-veterans-memorial-project) that includes our web site address, EI# for tax purposes, it also includes our mailing address should you prefer to send a check rather than donate online, as the service we use does charge us a percentage to process any donations made through the website.

I thank you in advance for any help you can give us and I look forward to experiencing the Legion's help in putting together this very important project!



For more information or to donate online, visit CHVMP.org

Checks can be mailed to:
CHVMP
7889 Lichen Dr, #113
Citrus Heights, CA 95621

Best,

Paul Reyes
Jr. Past Commander
American Legion Post 637

The Triple Nickles

TRIPLE NICKLES page 1

The Triple Nickles made history as the first airborne military firefighters, parachuting into rugged terrain to suppress fires and dismantle undetonated bombs. Over six months, they completed 36 fire missions, paving the way for modern smokejumping techniques. Despite their achievements, their contributions remained largely unrecognized for decades. Following the war, the 555th was integrated into the 82nd Airborne Division, becoming part of the first integrated division in the U.S. Army.

Joe Harris's story reflects the courage and determination of the Triple Nickles. After his service, Harris worked for the U.S. Border Patrol and has lived in Compton, California, for over 60 years. As one of the few remaining World War II Veterans—and possibly the

last living member of the 555th—Harris represents a vital link to a chapter of military history that is too often overlooked. Of the 16 million Americans who served during the war, fewer than 100,000 are alive today, making it all the more important to preserve their stories.

Gallagher founded Preserving the Stories in 2008 to ensure that the personal histories of Veterans from World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War are not lost. The organization has since conducted interviews with over 150 Veterans across three continents. While Gallagher initially hoped to interview Harris for the nonprofit, the Veteran's health prevented it. Gallagher stresses the urgency of capturing these narratives, particularly as time runs out for many Veterans. As Harris approaches his 109th birthday in June, his story continues to inspire.



DEPARTMENT EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING

The next in person Department Executive Committee Meeting will be March 21-23, 2025.

LOCATION:
Santa Maria Post 56
501 N Pine
Santa Maria, CA 93458

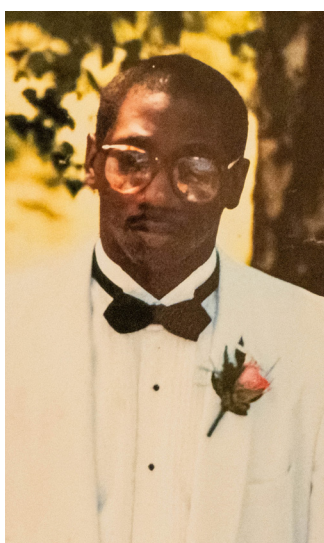
HOTEL:
The Historic Santa Maria Inn
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RESERVATION INFORMATION:
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The deadline to reserve a room is February 27.



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Money from the LIT has also helped fund Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation. With about 23 million U.S. veterans who are alive today, the LIT is proud to have been able to give support to those who served

– and continue to serve – our country.

Due to various federal budget cuts, our veterans aren't always getting the help they need, especially when it comes to healthcare. Hundreds of thousands of men and women who recently served in tours to Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as older veterans, now rely on the VA health system for health care services.

Your funds to LIT help support the healthcare and rehabilitative needs of veterans like you.

But that's not all... Since 2007, over \$20 million has helped create scholarships like the Legacy Scholarship Fund, outreach programs, the National Emergency Fund and Child Welfare Foundation. These funds also help support the Boy and Girl Scouts, Operation Comfort Warriors, Soldier's Wish and Camp American Legion.

Funding these programs and activities gives us the opportunity to honor the past and help give purpose to Legion families and future generations. Help continue these programs and inspire others to do the same for years to come.

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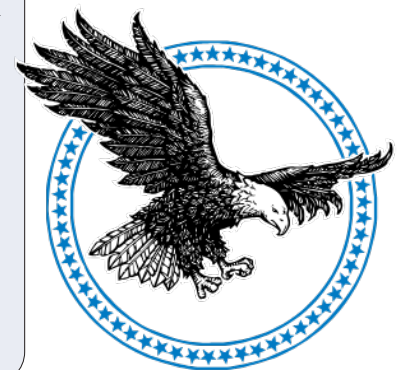
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PALISADES FIRE RESOURCES: A MONTH LATER

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

Los Angeles battled some of the most devastating wildfires in its history last month, with tens of thousands of residents, including dozens of Legionnaires, displaced amid widespread destruction across the region. The fires claimed at least 29 lives and destroyed thousands of structures.

While the fires continued to blaze across Los Angeles, American Legion Palisades Post 283 launched an online Palisades Fire Resource Hub (alpost283.com/fire) to provide critical support and information to those affected in the area. Post 283 continues to invite residents, organizations, and businesses to assist in recovery efforts. For more information, updates, or

questions, contact Post 283 at HQ@Post283.com.

The VA also stepped in to assist Los Angeles County's Veteran population.

"We're reaching out to all impacted Veterans in the

area to ensure they know we're here for them," said then VA Secretary Denis McDonough. "For those needing assistance, please call 1-800-MyVA411 or visit va.gov/resources/disaster-help."

The VA is offering housing assistance to Veterans who may face homelessness due to the fires. Additionally, organizations like Disabled American Veterans are providing disaster relief grants to Veterans in need. As the fires continue

to rage, state agencies are working tirelessly to protect communities, with particular attention to the needs of Veterans and other vulnerable populations.

Individuals and business owners in Los Angeles County affected by the wildfires can also apply for disaster assistance online at DisasterAssistance.gov or by calling 800-621-3362. California Veterans can also visit CA.gov/LAfires for information and resources from state, local, and federal agencies.

To assist Legionnaires impacted by the ongoing fires, visit the California Legion Family Emergency Assistance Fund webpage to donate at pages.donately.com/americanlegiondeptofcalifornia/campaign/emergency-assistance-fund



Palisades Fire, January 8 (Photo: CAL FIRE_Official – Palisades Fire, Public Domain)

LAWMAKERS PUSH FOR EASIER ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE FOR VETERANS

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

Congress is reviewing legislation that will make it easier for Veterans to access health care outside the VA. The Veterans Health Care Freedom Act, introduced by Rep. Andy Biggs (R-Ariz.) in December, would remove pre-approval requirements for non-VA medical services, giving Veterans more options when selecting health care providers.

Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.) introduced a companion bill in the Senate, which has received support from several Republican lawmakers. If passed, the legislation would enable Veterans to schedule appointments with private clinicians without first needing the VA to determine whether the service is available at a

VA facility nearby.

Interest in easing access to non-VA health care has grown among lawmakers as more Veterans seek treatment outside the VA system. Currently, approximately 40% of Veteran medical care is provided through community care programs. Demand for these services continues to rise each year, prompting legislators to push for reforms that would reduce bureaucratic hurdles.

The Senate bill, co-sponsored by Sens. Tommy Tuberville (R-Ala.), Roger Wicker (R-Miss.), Tim Sheehy (R-Mont.), and Ted Cruz (R-Texas), is intended to give Veterans more autonomy over their health care decisions.

"The VA community care program must increase access to care and cut

through red tape," Tuberville said.

Under the current system, Veterans seeking care outside the VA must meet specific eligibility criteria and receive pre-approval from the agency. This process can lead to long wait times, making it difficult for Veterans to access timely treatment. Lawmakers supporting the Veterans Health Care Freedom Act argue that these delays are unnecessary and discourage Veterans from seeking timely medical attention.

The proposed legislation includes a three-year pilot program to allow Veterans to visit private providers without prior VA authorization. The program would be implemented in at least four Veteran Integrated Service Networks, VISN, with plans to expand

nationwide if successful. The VA would be required to provide Veterans with detailed information on eligibility, cost-sharing, and provider options to facilitate informed decision-making.

Funding for the pilot program would come from the existing VA budget, which stands at \$369 billion for fiscal year 2025. Lawmakers anticipate that the program will ultimately become a permanent nationwide program, granting Veterans broader access to private-sector health care.

While previous efforts to pass similar legislation stalled, the growing demand for community care has strengthened bipartisan interest in reforming the VA's referral process. Supporters argue that the changes will

provide Veterans with the freedom to seek care more efficiently while reducing transportation burdens, particularly for those in rural areas.

"Veterans must have access to community health care facilities. This legislation gives them more choices for medical care and helps avoid long wait times at VA facilities," Wicker said.

With increasing frustration over VA bureaucracy and lengthy delays, lawmakers believe the Veterans Health Care Freedom Act is a necessary step toward ensuring Veterans receive the care they have earned. The bill now awaits further deliberation in Congress, with advocates hopeful that it will lead to lasting improvements in Veterans' health care access.

Federal Hiring Freeze

FEDERAL HIRING FREEZE page 1

The hiring freeze, one of Trump's first executive orders, reduces the size of the federal workforce by halting new hires. While exceptions were made for military, immigration enforcement, and public safety roles, concerns grew about its impact on VA operations, particularly at medical facilities already struggling with staffing shortages. The freeze prompted many federal agencies to rescind job offers, disrupting operations at VA facilities like the soon-to-open Fredericksburg VA Health Care Center, which faces delays in becoming fully operational.

The more extensive hiring freeze, implemented to make the federal government more efficient, has drawn intense criticism from lawmakers and Veterans' advocates. Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) called it a "betrayal of our Veterans," while others warned it risks delaying care and increasing the burden on already strained VA resources.

In addition to the federal hiring freeze, the VA has closed multiple diversity, equity, and inclusion, DEI, offices across the department, following White House guidance. This decision placed at least 60 employees on administrative leave.

Hunter defended the closures, stating that these programs "divided Americans by race, wasted taxpayer dollars, and resulted in shameful discrimination."

However, the move has left many VA employees on edge, with critics warning it could harm morale and inclusivity within the agency. Union groups and Democratic lawmakers remain critical, arguing that the hiring freeze and DEI office closures weaken the department's ability to attract and retain qualified employees.

At his Senate confirmation hearing, VA Secretary nominee Doug Collins acknowledged the department was still working to determine which positions are impacted by the freeze. While Collins expressed confidence that White House efficiency measures would not reduce Veterans' benefits, lawmakers pressed him to fight for additional exemptions to protect critical VA roles.

As the VA navigates the freeze and its implications, the department faces growing pressure to ensure its policies align with its mission to serve Veterans effectively.

Update 1: it is currently unclear if and how the Trump administration's separate offer to all federal employees to resign in exchange for eight months' severance will impact the VA.

Update 2: All VA grant, loan, and financial assistance programs have been reviewed by the Office of Management and Budget and have been cleared to continue.

Update 3: The VA has issued a memo noting that roles that affect Veterans benefits and services are also exempt from the hiring freeze.

ADDITIONAL GI BILL BENEFITS GRANTED TO VETERANS WITH MULTIPLE SERVICE PERIODS FOLLOWING DECISION OF THE SUPREME COURT

By Rikki Almanza
Staff Writer

On January 3, the VA announced an update to its G.I. Bill benefits policy, granting Veterans with multiple periods of service access to an additional 12 months of education benefits. This change, prompted by a 2024 Supreme Court decision, removes the previous 36-month cap on combined benefits under the Montgomery G.I. Bill and the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, potentially impacting over one million Veterans and their families.

Expanded Eligibility for Veterans

Under the prior policy, Veterans who qualified for both the Montgomery G.I. Bill and the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill were limited to a total of 36 months of education benefits. The updated policy now allows eligible Veterans with at least two qualifying periods of service to receive up to 48 months of combined G.I. Bill benefits. This includes retroactive benefits for those who have already used their G.I. Bill entitlements.

Veterans who reenlisted or served multiple periods of service—one qualifying under the Montgomery G.I. Bill and another under the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill—may now apply for the additional 12 months of

benefits. Of the 1.04 million Veterans potentially eligible, approximately 660,000 claims will be automatically processed by the VA. Remaining Veterans will be contacted directly and encouraged to file claims to ensure they receive the benefits they have earned.

Extended Expiration Dates

The policy also reinstates and extends the expiration dates for G.I. Bill benefits for Veterans who chose the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill over the Montgomery G.I. Bill. These Veterans will regain the time they had left under the Montgomery G.I. Bill at the time of their election, plus an additional 90 days. Applications for benefit extensions must be submitted by October 1, 2030.

Supreme Court's Role in the Decision

The Supreme Court's April 2024 decision stemmed from a case, *Rudisill v. McDonough*, involving Army Veteran Jim Rudisill, who had been denied access to full education benefits for his service before and after September 11, 2001. The Court ruled that Veterans with multiple enlistments qualifying them for both G.I. Bill programs are entitled to use up to 48 months of benefits in any order, as long as the benefits are not used

simultaneously.

Impact on Veterans' Education

Since its inception, the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill has provided over \$143 billion to more than 2.7 million beneficiaries, significantly reducing out-of-pocket education costs for Veterans and their dependents. In 2024 alone, the VA supported over 900,000 Veterans and their families in pursuing educational and vocational training opportunities.

"This policy will not only help Veterans applying for G.I. Bill benefits in the future but also provide additional support to those who used their benefits in the past," said Joshua Jacobs, VA Under Secretary for Benefits. "Every Veteran deserves access to a quality, affordable education, and this expansion ensures many will receive the support they need."

For more information on eligibility and how to apply, visit the VA's official G.I. Bill benefits webpage (va.gov/education/about-gi-bill-benefits/post-9-11/)

To read the full VA update, visit news.va.gov/press-room/va-expands-access-to-gi-bill-benefits-for-veterans-who-served-multiple-periods-of-service/



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U.S. soldiers from Alpha Company burn expired munitions that can no longer be used, 2013 (Photo: U.S. Army Spc. Ryan Hallgarth)

VA EXPANDS LIST OF CANCERS FOR VETERANS EXPOSED TO TOXIC SUBSTANCES

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

Effective today, January 2, the VA has expanded the list of cancers presumed to be service-connected for Veterans exposed to toxic substances in specific locations during the Gulf War and subsequent conflicts to include genitourinary cancers. This decision will benefit those who served in regions such as Southwest Asia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Djibouti, and several others where burn pits and airborne pollutants posed significant health risks.

This update, approved by VA Secretary Denis McDonough on December 20, introduces presumptive service connections for bladder, ureter, and related

genitourinary, GU, cancers under the 2022 federal PACT Act. The PACT Act established a framework to simplify the claims process for illnesses linked to toxic exposures, significantly reducing the burden of proof for affected Veterans.

Locations and Conditions Covered

Veterans who served in the Southwest Asia theater of operations during the Gulf War, beginning August 2, 1990, and in Afghanistan, Iraq, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Uzbekistan after September 11, 2001, are covered under the new rules.

The VA based its decision on extensive scientific

evidence linking fine particulate matter, PM2.5, exposure to these cancers. Burn pits, which emitted hazardous pollutants from the incineration of materials like oil, chemicals, and plastics, were found to contribute to elevated PM2.5 levels in the air. Studies demonstrated that prolonged exposure to such pollutants increased the risk of bladder and ureter cancers, prompting the VA to act.

Medical Evidence

Scientific research spanning two decades showed the connection between PM2.5 and GU cancers. For instance, long-term exposure to diesel-related PM2.5 was found to significantly raise bladder

cancer risks. Occupational exposure to PM2.5 has been associated with up to 19% of bladder cancer cases. Similarly, studies revealed that ureter cancer, though rare, shares developmental and functional pathways with other cancers of the genitourinary system.

Simplified Access to Benefits

The new regulation recognizes toxic exposure for Veterans who served in specified locations, providing quicker access to health care and compensation, and acknowledging the link between GU system cancers and toxic exposure.

Delaying these changes,

according to the VA, would further harm affected Veterans by depriving them of timely benefits and exacerbating health risks. In 2022 alone, over 17,000 deaths were attributed to bladder cancer, demonstrating the urgent need for these presumptions.

Moving Forward

Veterans diagnosed with GU cancers related to PM2.5 exposure are encouraged to file claims under the expanded presumptive conditions. For additional information, Veterans can consult the VA's official website (va.gov) or contact their local Veterans Service Organization, like an American Legion post, for assistance.



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