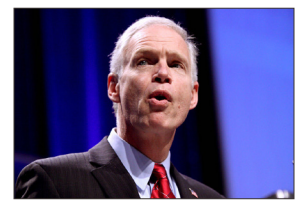




Aerospace Committee, p.5



Major Richard Star Act, p.11

HOUSE PASSES BILL TO RAISE VA BENEFITS FOR GOLD STAR FAMILIES AND SEVERELY DISABLED VETERANS

By Rikki Almanza
Staff Writer

The U.S. House has passed a bill that would increase certain VA benefits for surviving families and severely Disabled Veterans. The measure was sent to the Senate for further consideration.

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A Gold Star spouse sits on a park bench holding a picture of her husband. (Photo: Staff Sgt. Tristan Peete)

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs said the legislation—officially the Sharri Briley and Eric Edmundson Veterans Benefits Expansion Act—focuses on benefit areas that have not seen a major increase in decades. One is Dependency and Indemnity Compensation, commonly known as DIC, which is paid to eligible surviving spouses, children, and parents. The other is Special Monthly Compensation, or SMC-related payments,

which provide additional benefits to Veterans with severe service-connected disabilities who need a higher level of care.

Per the Congressional Budget Office, H.R. 6047 would provide cost-of-living adjustments for DIC and create a new monthly benefit for certain Disabled Veterans who receive aid and attendance benefits. The bill also includes changes tied to VA home loan guarantees and eligibility for some members of the military reserve.

The bill is named after Sharri Briley and Army Sgt. Eric Edmundson. Briley is the surviving spouse of Chief Warrant Officer 3 Donovan "Bull" Briley, who was killed during the Battle of Mogadishu in 1993. Edmundson was severely wounded in Iraq in 2005 after his vehicle was struck by an improvised explosive device.

Supporters say the increase is meant to help close long-standing benefit gaps

for surviving families and Veterans who need intensive daily care because of service-connected injuries or illnesses. They also say current benefit levels have not kept pace with the needs of recipients.

The American Legion has supported H.R. 6047 with amendments, saying the legislation seeks to provide an overdue increase in financial benefits for survivors and severely disabled Veterans receiving care through VA.

The bill is not yet law. It must clear the Senate and be signed by the president before any benefit changes can take effect.

If enacted, the legislation would create a separate path from other survivor-benefit proposals discussed earlier this year. While other bills have focused on expanding eligibility or changing survivor benefit rules, H.R. 6047 would increase payments under existing VA benefit programs for surviving families and severely disabled Veterans.

Gypsum Canyon Veterans Cemetery Moves Forward After CalVet Study Finds Lower Cost Path

By Rikki Almanza
Staff Writer

A long-planned Southern California Veterans Cemetery at Gypsum Canyon in Anaheim is moving forward after CalVet determined that the project can be built at a lower cost while increasing burial capacity in the

first phase.

The department announced May 8 that it has completed a study update for the proposed cemetery. According to CalVet, the revised estimate places development costs at about \$86 million, or nearly \$45 million less than earlier 2023

projections when adjusted for inflation.

The reduction comes from an updated land-use and site design plan. The department said the new design uses a more efficient approach to grading, which lowers overall costs while preserving the cemetery's full scope and

long-term value.

The updated plan also increases Phase One burial capacity by 50 percent, with the site now projected to support up to 30,000 placements during its initial rollout.

See GYPSUM CANYON VETERANS CEMETERY page 6

**THE AMERICAN LEGION
DEPARTMENT OF CALIFORNIA**

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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)
 - Submissions to the Department website can be made at any time by visiting [caLegion.org/ugc](#) (please email the editor to let them know you've submitted online)
 - Photos should be sent at the highest resolution possible
 - Do not embed photos in a Word.doc. Send photos as email attachments with photo captions either typed in a word document or in the email body. Images that are pulled off of websites will not reproduce well, if at all. PDFs must be saved as high resolution from their original document
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This year the American Legion Department of California, the Sons of the American Legion, and the American Legion Auxiliary come together again as one for our annual convention!

In addition to business matters, this year's convention will also be filled with many fun events, helpful training courses, and more.

LOCATION

Visalia Convention Center
303 E Acequia Ave
Visalia, CA 93291

MANDATORY FORMS: DUE JUNE 1

Mandatory Post and District forms are due June 1. Any post who does not submit the required forms will be placed on probation. Posts placed on probation will not be granted a vote at the Department Convention.

For more information on mandatory forms and their due dates, visit [calegion.org/online-forms/](#) or see page 9.

RESOLUTION SUBMISSIONS: DUE JUNE 5

All resolutions for consideration at the Convention are due June 5. Please email all questions and submissions to resolutions@caLegion.org

ATTENDANCE

All Legionnaires and guests are invited to attend. If you have any questions, please contact us at (559) 875-8387

For all Department Convention information, visit [calegion.org/2026-department-convention/](#)

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International Drone Soccer Stars Shine at 2026 PALM SPRINGS DRONE FESTIVAL

By Amado Salinas II
Foreign Relations
& National Security
Commission Chair,
Aerospace Commissioner

TEAMS FROM 11 COUNTRIES AND ACROSS THE USA COMPETED IN HIGH-STAKES 2026 INTERNATIONAL DRONESOCCER EVENT AT PALM SPRINGS HIGH SCHOOL



PALM SPRINGS, CA – May 1-2, 2026 – The American Legion Area 5 District 21 Aerospace Commission along with the U.S. NAVY LEAGUE Palm Springs Council co-Sponsored the 2026 Palm Springs Drone Festival which included a spectacular two-day competition on May 1-2, bringing together over 2,500 student participants, spectators, and industry experts for the 2026 International DroneSoccer event. Held at Palm Springs High School, the festival highlighted the rapid growth of drone sports, featuring intense competition from teams representing 11 countries, including the USA, Canada, Kazakhstan, Korea, Mexico, and Jamaica.

The event featured prestigious guest speaker LtCDR Evangelo (van) Morris, (U.S NAVY SOCOM, RET) to open the event on Friday night and kicked off FIDA USA Grand Nationals Drone Soccer Tournament matches, with special participation from California student teams, including the Fullerton MARINE JROTC, Air Force JROTC, NAVY JROTC, California Cadets, and students from the Palm Springs Unified and Greater Palm Springs School Districts.

A Global Stage for Student Innovation, The festival brought together teams from across the nation, including students from New York

and Florida, to compete alongside international contenders, setting the stage for the next generation of aerospace engineers and drone pilots.

“The Palm Springs Drone Fest opening ceremony brought all the energy! An Olympic-style procession featuring our PSUSD drone soccer teams alongside teams from across the country and around the world,” according to event organizers.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2026 COMPETITION

- **International Champions:** Team Jamaica Drone Soccer captured the gold medal in the Class 40 International

Competition.

- **Middle School Champions:** Thomas Jefferson Middle School Drone Soccer Team (DSUSD) won the gold medal in the championship match.
- **Secondary School Winners:** Painted Hills Middle School (Team California Girls) took 1st Place in the Secondary Tournament, followed by Painted Hills Middle School (Team Sky Panthers) in 2nd, and Palm Desert High School in 3rd.
- **Class 40 Action:** Teams competed for a chance to represent the USA at the 2026 FIDA World Cup in Seoul,

South Korea.

Beyond the Cage, The festival, sponsored by UVIFY and Electric Sky Drone Shows, featured more than just competition. The event showcased the future of drone technology with a spectacular Drone Light Show on Friday night, a Drone & Robotics Trade Show, and a “Robot Olympics” presented by California Robotics.

“It’s not just about the racing; it’s about showing these kids that there are massive career opportunities in agriculture, public safety, and film through drone technology,” said Tim Ingram, President of FIDA USA.

The event emphasized STEM education, with participants developing real-world skills in flight control, robotics, teamwork, and AI.

About the Palm Springs Drone Festival: The [Palm Springs Drone Festival](#) is a premier event promoting drone sports, education, and career pathways in the unmanned systems industry, held annually at Palm Springs High School, California.

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NEW EFFORT EXPANDS TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS FOR RURAL VETERANS

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

For many Veterans living in rural communities like northern or inland California, getting to a medical appointment can require hours of travel with few, if any, reliable transportation options. A growing federal push is working to close that gap by expanding transportation programs and strengthening partnerships with states and local organizations.

Access to care remains a persistent challenge for rural Veterans, who often live far from VA facilities. Limited public transit and long travel distances have contributed to missed appointments and delays in treatment. This has brought attention to transportation and the role it plays in access to care for Veterans.

Supporting that effort is the VA's Highly Rural Transportation Grants program, which provides funding to organizations that transport Veterans

to VA or VA-authorized health care facilities. The program is focused on Veterans living in highly rural counties, defined as areas with fewer than seven people per square mile, and allows eligible groups to build or expand transportation services tailored to their communities.

The VA recently set aside \$7 million in total funding for this effort, with grants distributed to qualifying Veterans service organizations and state agencies. These funds are used to expand free transportation options for Veterans traveling to medical appointments. According to Newsweek, Applications are open now, with awards expected to be finalized later this year. Veterans themselves do not need to apply, as transportation services are provided at no cost to those living in qualifying areas.

Grants are awarded competitively, typically providing up to \$50,000 per service area. Funding

can be used for vehicles, staffing, and day-to-day operations, helping local providers establish consistent and reliable transportation networks.

Alongside those grants, the VA's Veterans Transportation Service continues to operate as a larger support system, coordinating rides for Veterans who may be elderly, disabled, or otherwise unable to travel independently. The service works with community partners to create flexible options, especially in areas where traditional transit systems are limited or nonexistent.

Federal officials have increasingly pointed to collaboration as a necessary part of expanding access. By working with states and local organizations, transportation programs can better align with regional infrastructure while addressing the specific needs of rural Veterans. These partnerships often lead to solutions such as volunteer driver programs, shuttle services, and

community-based transit systems.

Lawmakers have also revisited the issue in recent months, introducing legislation designed to reauthorize and strengthen rural transportation grant programs. The proposals focus on expanding funding and improving coordination between agencies to reach more veterans who currently face barriers to care.

At the state level, additional grant programs and funding streams are being used to support transportation initiatives tied to

Veterans' services. These efforts complement federal programs by backing local organizations that can deliver targeted solutions, particularly in areas where geographic isolation makes access more difficult.

Nearly a quarter of Veterans live in rural areas, according to federal data. Expanding transportation networks is an important step in improving health outcomes and helping Veterans reach care more consistently without added financial or logistical strain.



At the Omaha VA Medical Center, multiple Veterans Transportation Service vehicles are prepared to transport Veterans to their appointments, 2018. (Photo: Jennifer Scales)



2-2026

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17-19 July 2026

- The course starts at 8:00 am on Friday, 17 July, and will conclude with graduation at 1:00 pm on Sunday, 19 July
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- Applicants will receive mileage reimbursement for travel to and from their home Post @ .40 per mile, along with a \$50.00 per diem per day to cover expenses during the event
- Please send questions to CALC@calegion.org

Topics include - Legion Charities, Be The One/Buddy Checks, Community Engagement, Corporate Responsibility, Legislative Advocacy, Tax Exempt status, Post Charters, Marketing/Public Relations, Parliamentary Procedures, Post Operations, Post VSO, Flag Code, Resolutions, Strategic Planning, & Trademarks



U.S. intelligence officials and defense experts widely agree that China engaged in extensive cyber espionage to steal F-35 design data, which was then incorporated into its own stealth fighter programs like the J-31 and J-35. These planes are now sold by China to countries that are adversarial to the U.S.

WHY WE NEED THE AEROSPACE COMMITTEE

By **Kevin Burns**
Aerospace Commission
Technical Advisor

When aerospace was the first committee formed in the American Legion (along with the committees to determine the official name, headquarters, etc.), Legionnaires were very concerned about how unprepared the United States was for aviation in World War I, and the important role airpower played in winning the war. Over the following decades, the American Legion played a major role in promoting airpower in the military and in building a civilian infrastructure to support it, as European countries had far surpassed the technology of American aviation. With a strong and difficult push by the American Legion to develop American airpower, the United States entered World War II prepared to defend the skies over America, our troops landing in Europe, and in defending the Pacific war zone.

For most of the past century, every Department in the American Legion had a commission or committee for Aeronautics, with representatives

at every administrative level of the Legion, right down to the Post level. Over the last few decades, the Aerospace Committee seems to have lost its appeal, and today, California seems to be the last Department with an active Aerospace Commission, and the National Aerospace Committee has not even held a meeting in many years.

This is an alarming situation, as even during the years from 1927 to 1930 when there was no National Aerospace Committee due to the lack of a Chair, the grassroots work of aviation was continued enthusiastically by Legionnaires at the Department and other levels right down to the Post.

According to the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, space is now a contested warfighting domain. As global competition accelerates and adversaries expand their counter-space capabilities, the United States faces an urgent challenge: strengthen the national security space ecosystem while accelerating innovation across the

industrial base.

The Secretary of Defense issued a directive stressing that space is a priority domain for the U.S. military underpinning our national security. Space is fundamental to establishing, maintaining, and projecting military superiority across all other domains. U.S. and allied forces rely on satellites to deliver critical capabilities enabling the military to communicate, move, surveil, and engage the enemy. Dependence on space-based technology will only increase in the joint all-domain connected battlespace of the future.

Currently, the war in Iran is an all-air war, with no ground battles taking place; again, demonstrating the importance of air power. However, we would not fare so well if the threat was from an adversary that was on an equal technological echelon; which is why it is important that the American Legion maintain its work in Aerospace through the National Security Commission, with support and participation from every Department.

Gypsum Canyon Veterans Cemetery

GYPSUM CANYON VETERANS CEMETERY
page 1

Across all eight planned phases, the cemetery aims to support approximately 157,000 total placements.

For Orange County Veterans and their families, the study is another step in a decades-long effort to establish a Veterans cemetery closer to home. The Gypsum Canyon site has drawn support from Veterans advocates, community leaders and elected officials who have pushed for a cemetery that can serve one of California's largest Veteran communities.

VALOR, a Veterans advocacy organization that has been instrumental in pushing for the cemetery's development, praised the announcement. The group highlighted major savings for the state while thanking those who have continued working to move the cemetery forward, particularly Assemblymember Sharon Quirk Silva (D-67), who has championed the development in the California legislature.

Quirk-Silva welcomed the

announcement, saying years of work by Veterans, advocates and public partners are helping move the cemetery closer to reality. Assemblymember Avelino Valencia (D-68) said Orange County has long deserved a place where Veterans can be honored with dignity.

CalVet Secretary Lindsey Sin said the study gives the state greater clarity and a more responsible path forward. She added that knowing the project can be delivered at a lower cost strengthens the ability to move ahead efficiently.

Supporters say the cemetery would give local Veterans a dedicated place of honor while helping families avoid long travel distances to visit loved ones buried at existing state and national cemeteries.

With the study now complete, CalVet said it will continue working with local, state, federal and community partners to move the Southern California Veterans Cemetery project into its next phase.



CalVet Secretary Lindsey Sin appears with Assemblywoman Sharon Quirk-Silva and Veterans advocates at the proposed Southern California Veterans Cemetery at Gypsum Canyon. (Photo: California Department of Veterans Affairs)



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The West Los Angeles VA Medical Center campus (Photo: VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System)

WEST LA VA CAMPUS PLAN UNDER SCRUTINY AS HOUSING FUNDING FALLS SHORT

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

The Los Angeles Times reported that nearly a year after President Donald Trump signed an executive order to turn the West Los Angeles VA campus into the nation's largest center for Homeless Veteran housing, the VA's plan is facing growing criticism over how it is being carried out.

The latest congressional budget proposal does not request funding for new housing units, despite earlier goals of housing up to 6,000 Veterans on the 388-acre campus by the end of Trump's term. Instead, the proposal focuses on infrastructure, including \$500 million for renovating aging buildings, constructing a parking structure, and upgrading utilities—at the expense of over 300 Veterans who actively live on the property, and likely

delaying future housing units.

Veteran advocates who initially supported the plan now say the lack of direct investment in housing is difficult to understand. Anthony Allman of Vets Advocacy, a group that monitors development at the site, told the LA Times the plan does not prioritize the well-being of Veterans.

The executive order, signed in May 2025, directed the VA to establish the National Center for Warrior Independence at the West Los Angeles campus. The goal was to provide housing, treatment, and support services for thousands of Homeless Veterans by 2028.

At the time, the announcement was seen as a major step toward addressing Veteran homelessness, which the VA has estimated affects more than

32,000 Veterans nationwide. The order also followed a federal court ruling that found parts of the campus had been improperly leased to private organizations instead of being used for Veterans. Those leases have since been terminated.

Now, the focus on renovations instead of housing has raised concerns that progress may be stalling. The proposal would also require relocating about 330 Veterans currently in treatment programs while buildings are being upgraded, without clear details on where they would go during that period.

The plan could delay urgently needed housing; however, the VA has claims the funding is intended to prepare the campus for future housing expansion. The department also indicated that a separate

request is expected to establish between 500 and 1,000 housing units—far short of the promised 6,000 total—though details on timing and funding remain unclear.

Over the past year, the agency has sent mixed signals about its plans. Earlier statements suggested that hundreds of temporary housing units could be installed quickly, but no formal construction bids have been issued.

Lawmakers are expected to review the proposal as part of the federal budget process, where it will compete with other VA priorities. Some have already questioned why none of the requested funding is directed toward building housing, even in smaller phases.

For Veterans and advocates who saw the executive order as a turning point,

the latest update has left uncertainty about how quickly the campus will begin providing the housing it was meant to deliver.



Tell Your Story

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***Don't forget photos!**



Tibor Rubin VA Medical Center (Photo: Jim Dwyer)

NEW VA POLICY ALLOWS GUARDIANSHIP FOR SOME AT-RISK VETERANS

By Rikki Almanza
Staff Writer

The U.S. VA and Justice departments announced a new agreement that allows federal attorneys to seek court-appointed guardians for certain Veterans who are unable to make their own medical decisions and do not have family members or legal representatives to assist them.

Under the arrangement, some VA attorneys will be designated as special U.S. assistant attorneys and will take part in guardianship or conservatorship cases filed in state courts. These legal proceedings could apply to Veterans who have been medically evaluated and determined to lack the capacity to manage important health care decisions on their own.

Federal officials said the process will be used when

a Veteran has no legal decision-maker available to help coordinate care or approve medical transitions. In those cases, the government may ask a state court to appoint an independent guardian who would make certain decisions on the Veteran's behalf.

"Our new partnership with the Justice Department reflects our ongoing commitment to ensuring that every Veteran receives timely, appropriate care, even in complex cases," VA Secretary Doug Collins said in a prepared statement.

VA officials indicated that the first cases will likely involve a relatively small group of Veterans currently living in VA medical facilities. According to the agency, roughly 700 Veterans remain in those facilities because they do

not have family members or legal representatives able to authorize transfers to other living arrangements or care settings.

When courts approve guardianship, a third-party guardian is typically assigned to help manage personal decisions such as medical treatment, housing arrangements, or financial matters. These court orders are overseen by state judicial systems and can be reviewed periodically.

Veterans who could fall under the policy are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of losing housing. Federal housing data estimates that about 33,000 Veterans across the United States are currently homeless. Many live in Southern California, particularly Los Angeles.

Advocacy organizations

say that while guardianship can sometimes help individuals receive necessary care, it also removes important personal rights and must be handled carefully.

"Guardianship and other forms of involuntary intervention are serious legal actions that remove significant personal autonomy. They must be used sparingly, with strong safeguards, and always with the best interests and rights of the veteran at the center of the process," the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans said.

The organization also stated that homelessness among Veterans is often connected to mental health conditions, substance addiction, or difficulties adjusting after leaving military service.

The policy has raised

questions among some lawmakers. Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), the ranking Democrat on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, said his office is reviewing the agreement between the agencies and what it could mean for Veterans.

Veterans advocacy groups, such as Disabled American Veterans, said they recently learned about the policy and are reviewing the details before determining whether to support or oppose it.

Support organizations say oversight and legal protections will be important as the policy develops, especially for Veterans facing mental health challenges, homelessness, or complex medical needs.



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department officer CANDIDATES



Officer selections will be made at the 107th Department Convention in Visalia, CA on June 25-28, 2026. For more candidate info, visit calegion.org/officer-candidates-26-27/



JANICE SOMERS
DEPT COMMANDER
CANDIDATE

**Driven by Honor,
United by Duty.**

**MISSION ORIENTED
- RESULTS DRIVEN**

I joined the American Legion in 2002 and served in leadership roles at the Post, District, Area, and Department levels. As Post 66 Commander, I helped organize a Riders Chapter, Sons Squadron, and secured a grant for major Post improvements. As District Commander, I achieved over 104 percent membership, help build a top-ranked informational

website, and fostered friendly competition to keep members engaged.

At the Department level, I have been deeply involved in Ways and Means, by promoting fundraising strategies, and programs that directly benefit veterans. My work with the CA Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Foundation has brought in tens of thousands of dollars for veteran services and equipment to improve the work of our Veteran Service Officers.

As Department Vice Commander representing Area 6, I focused on communication, education, and best practices, resulting in high compliance and membership success across nearly every Post in the Area. I believe training, teamwork, communication, and transparency are the keys to success.

I am running for Department Commander for 2026-2027 because I have the experience, the passion, and the proven record to lead our Department forward. Together,

we can strengthen our programs, grow our membership, continue the strategic plan, and ensure that every California Veteran receives the respect, resources, and support they deserve.

LEADERSHIP

- Post 66 Commander 2012-2013
- District 16 Commander 2015-2016 and 2018-2019
- Department Vice Commander Representing Area 6 2024-2025
- Ways and Means Commission 2016 – Present
- Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Foundation 2017 – Present

EDUCATION

- American Legion College Graduate 2018
- Basic Training 2018 and 2024
- Be the One Training 2024
- Southern Ohio University Graduate Associate Degree 1979
- US Navy Dental

Technician School 1969

BACKGROUND

- US Navy Vietnam Era Veteran: 1968-1971 as a Dental Technician
- Married to her partner Greg for over 51 years
- They have three sons, three daughter in laws, and seven grandchildren
- **Since July 2001:** American Legion member of San Luis Obispo Post 66

AMERICAN LEGION POSITIONS TODAY

- Appointed to National Media & Communications Commission
- Department Ways & Means Commission Chair
- Department Finance Committee Representing Area 6
- District 16 Judge Advocate
- Twenty and Four Womens Legionnaire Honor Society Director
- Past Commanders Club Outpost 16

President

SEVERAL VISIONS, MISSIONS, AND GOALS FOR THE COMING YEAR

1. Work with our Vice Commanders, District 1st Vice Commanders, and the Department Membership Team to create a plan to gain and retain membership.
2. Promote a better image of the American Legion throughout the state.
3. Serve as an active liaison between the entire Legion Family, focusing on unity and as a team.
4. The Vice Commanders will be tasked to work with their Area District Commanders on a regular basis and report back.
5. Put more emphasis on the importance of communication and transparency of the Department's business to the Department Executive Committee.



JR DUARTE
DEPT COMMANDER
CANDIDATE

**Mentoring Leaders,
Building Legacies.**

ABOUT THE CANDIDATE

Jr Duarte is a 17-year American Legion member and a proud Paid Up for Life (PUFL) Legionnaire. He proudly serves with Post 10, District 18, Area 6, which he helped establish in South El Monte. A veteran of the U.S. Army National Guard (1990–1996), Jr served as a Cobra Armament Crew Chief, where he learned the value of precision, teamwork, and leadership under pressure.

PURPOSE

Jr is running for Department Commander to ensure the California American Legion continues to grow stronger for generations to come. Guided by his motto, "Mentoring Leaders, Building Legacies," his mission is to invest in new leaders, strengthen Posts, honor the proud traditions of the Legion, and expand programs that directly impact veterans and their communities.

LEGION ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Helped start Post 10 in South El Monte, building a hub for veterans and their families.
- Founded the District 18 Blood Drive Program, which has helped over 6,000 people in need.
- Ran the chairs at the Post level, serving in every major role including Commander.
- Served as District Chaplain, Executive Board Member, Second Vice, First Vice, and Commander.

- At the Department level: 6th Area Vice Commander, Department Sergeant-at-Arms (2 years), and Department Membership Director (2 years).
- Strong supporter of youth programs, veteran outreach, and mentorship pipelines.
- Proud member of ANAVICUS.

Your vote in June of 2026 at the Department Convention for Jr Duarte, Nick Rosa, Jeff Jewell and for Neil La Sala would be immeasurably appreciated!



CHRIS YATES
NATL EXECUTIVE
COMMITTEEMAN
CANDIDATE

The American Legion must modernize to remain relevant and effective for the next century. With fewer than 8% of veterans nationwide, and fewer than 4% in California, as members, we must act decisively. As your National Executive Committee (NEC) representative, I will fulfill

my fiduciary duties of care, loyalty, and obedience while advocating for more strategic planning, improved program oversight, risk management, resilience, talent, culture, and transparency for a more welcoming, responsive organization for veterans of all ages and backgrounds.

IMMEDIATE AREAS OF FOCUS

Some immediate areas of focus are:

Officer Orientation Training: Advocate for officer orientation training for all NEC, DEC, and Post Executive Committees at the start of each term to ensure members understand their roles, fiduciary responsibilities, and governance expectations.

Resolution Tracking

& Implementation: Strengthen accountability by tracking California's nationally approved resolutions and prioritizing their execution. I will advocate for Resolution 9-2024 to protect honorably discharged immigrant veterans from unjust deportation.

Sustainable VSO Services: Address the unsustainable \$723,000 annual cost of California's Veteran Service Officers by advocating for alternative funding, an accredited volunteer VSO program, and expanding training for Post Service Officers.

Transparent Representation: Ensure "call-in" positions for national meetings and training are awarded based on operational needs and relevant skills, not personal contributions or favoritism.

Approach Every Meeting with Strategic Thinking, Thorough Planning, Critical Questioning, Active Support, and Decisive Execution.

QUALIFICATIONS

Post: 33-year member of Post 365 (Vista); Commander 2003–2006 and 2010–2013. Worked with an awesome team of Legionnaires and city officials to secure a million-dollar land swap to preserve the Post's charter.

District: 22nd District Commander (2017–2019); achieved 100% membership in three of four years as the Department's largest district.

Department: Judge Advocate (2020–2022); Personnel Committee Chair (2022–2025);

Facilitator for California American Legion College (CALC) since 2017, current Co-Dean for CALC, and Training Committee Chair.

National: Serviced on the Americanism Council, Legislative Council, Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Commission, and Council.

Military: Retired U.S. Marine Chief Warrant Officer (1982–2002); Mustang Marine; combat veteran of Operations Desert Shield/Storm with extensive embassy and overseas service.

I respectfully ask for your vote on June 28, 2026, to serve as California's National Executive Committee member.



JEFF JEWELL
ALTERNATE NEC
CANDIDATE

I feel the breadth of experience I have garnered throughout my years in the American Legion has prepared me to take this next step in service to my brother and sister veterans. I come from a family with a great sense of service and love of Country. My Father was a U.S. Navy WWII Veteran, my grandfather on my father's side was a U.S Army Veteran of

the Mexican Border Campaign and WWI and my grandfather on my mother's side was a U.S. Navy WWI Veteran. Being a member of the Legion allows me to continue to serve my community, state, and nation.

ABOUT THE CANDIDATE

Jeff Jewell is a seven 1/2-year veteran of the United States Air Force (1973-1981) and has been a member of Rago Christopher American Legion Post 165, Vacaville, CA for the past 37 years.

His Legion service includes Post Commander, Post Adjutant, Service Officer and Treasurer. He is a Past Department Sgt At Arms, Past Adjutant/Treasurer for Area 1, and past 5th District Service Officer and past 5th District Commander. He has served on the Department California Personnel Committee

since 2021, is the Past Chairman of the Department CA Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Committee and currently serves on the National Education and Employment Commission for the American Legion since 2019.

EDUCATION

- AA Business Management
- BA Human Relations
- MPA Human Resource Management
- MA Psychology
- National American College 2021
- CA American Legion College 2022

FAMILY

Jeff is married to Lynn Jewell who is a member of the American Legion Auxiliary and the current 5th District President.

SUPPORT

Jeff Jewell is supported unanimously by American

Legion Rago Christopher Post 165 and The Mighty 5th District

REPRESENTING VETERANS



At the National Convention in New Orleans with National Commander Daniel Seehafer "BE THE ONE"



In Washington, DC discussing veterans' legislative issues with Rep., Mike Thompson and Gary Leach, National Vice Commander, Western Region

ABOUT THE NEC

The National Executive Committee (NEC) has the Legion's administrative power, responsible for drafting an annual budget, approving contracts and signing off on Legion spending. NEC members are delegates with full voting power during the Legion's Fall and Spring meetings in Indianapolis and during the national convention. In short, the NEC serves as the organization's board of directors.

Should the National Executive Committeeman become unable to fulfill the duties of the NEC, it then falls to the Alternate NEC to fill in. Therefore, the Alternate NEC must work closely with the NEC to represent the membership of California to the National Organization and conversely keep the membership informed on the issues the National Organization is working.

department officer CANDIDATES



Officer selections will be made at the 107th Department Convention in Visalia, CA on June 25-28, 2026. For more candidate info, visit calegion.org/officer-candidates-26-27/



MIKE SMITH
SERGEANT-AT-ARMS CANDIDATE

ABOUT THE CANDIDATE

Michael is in his 13th

year as a Legionnaire and served in the United States Marine Corps from 1986 to 1990. He worked for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation from 1996 to his retirement in 2020 as a Correctional Lieutenant. Michael's range of experience during his career included institutional training manager, tactical team squad leader, oversight the transportation department and implementation of an institutional Peer Support Team, which he served as the team leader.

Within the American

Legion Family, Michael has served at the local level as Post Commander, Post First Vice Commander, Judge Advocate, Sons of the American Legion Sergeant-at-Arms, Riders Chapter President, Vice President, Sergeant-at-Arms and Road Captain. He has served The American Legion, Department of California on the Convention Committee as a Technical Advisor. Constitution and Bylaws Commission, Resolutions Committee, Training Committee and a new facilitator for the California American Legion College.

As the Director for the American Legion Riders, Department of California, Michael has spearheaded a call to action for the fire victims of the Paradise Fires. Most recently he spearheaded a statewide call to action within the Riders Program in which donations were collected and delivered to the Post 43 acceptance point in Culver City for the fire victims in the Los Angeles area.

Michael is a graduate of Basic Training, the California American Legion College and the National

American Legion College. During his time as an American Legion Family member, he has put his training into action and encouraged all he meets to further their growth within the American Legion Family.

As the Department Sergeant-at-Arms, Michael will use his experience he gained to teach and conduct rituals, welcome and guide guests, maintain order on the floor and in a timely manner have speakers and guests prepared to be escorted to the podium.



NEIL LA SALA
SERGEANT-AT-ARMS CANDIDATE

Diversity is the cornerstone of our Legion's strength.

ABOUT THE CANDIDATE

Now in his 14th year as a Legion PUFL member, Neil is a 31-year veteran of the United States Marine Corps and retired from the reserve component in July of 2020. He served two combat tours in Iraq (2003 and 2005) and has been classified as 100% disabled by the Veterans Administration. He retired from the Los Angeles

Unified School District after 39-years of service at two urban high schools. His positions included that of classroom teacher, dean, coach and athletic director. As a Legion leader in District 18, he has a solid reputation for chairing well-run meetings that emphasize each of the Legion's Four Pillars as a paramount concern.

At the Post level, Neil has served as Chaplain, Finance Officer, Adjutant (2025 District 18 Adjutant of the Year) and Commander. For District 18, his roles included, Chaplain, 2nd Vice Commander, 1st Vice Commander and two terms as Commander. Currently, he is the Commander of the American Legion Los Angeles County Council for Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation. At the Department level, he has served on the Executive Committee and as a member of the Personnel Committee.

Born in Pasadena,

California, Neil is a proud alumnus of the California American Legion Boys State program held at California State University, Sacramento in June of 1979. He and his wife Carol (Unit 280 Auxiliary) live in Pasadena with their Basset Hound Maximilian and Beagle Apple.

PURPOSE

As the Department of California Sergeant-at-Arms, Neil will leverage his experience to keep members focused on the topic at hand, as he works diligently with the Department Commander, Area Vice Commanders, Adjutant and all Department Officers to ensure ritual compliance, productive meetings and to facilitate worthwhile site visits for the benefit of every Blue Cap Legionnaire.

EDUCATION

- California State University Los Angeles, BA, Physical Education, 1984 (Dean's List)
- California State

- University Los Angeles, MA, Health Science, 1993
- Concordia University Irvine, MA, Education Administration, 2008
- United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 2013 (Distinguished Graduate)

LEGION ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Led and oversaw Post 280 in revitalization and filing of six years of past due 990s for the purpose of regaining 501(c)19 status (2020-2024)
- Led and oversaw distribution of supplies and money donated by Posts and Auxiliary units from Northern California, Arizona and New Hampshire consisting of 25 boxes of supplies and a box truck load of clothing. All distribution helped the 2025 Eaton Fire victims
- Facilitated the distribution of \$1500 to each of the following

- to help with the aftermath of the Eaton Fire, John Muir High School, Mater Delarosa Catholic Retreat and the Altadena Musicians Fund. Additionally, three Legion Family members affected by the fire were each given \$200
- Led and oversaw District 18 camaraderie building events, Christmas morning backpack distribution to West Los Angeles homeless veterans and the \$10,000 fundraising campaign for the District's support of the Legion's Four Pillars (2023-2025)
- Led and oversaw District 18 membership goal increase from 28th in Department (2024) to 5th in Department (2025)

Your vote in June of 2026 at the Department Convention for Jr Duarte, Nick Rosa, Jeff Jewell and for Neil La Sala would be immeasurably appreciated!



NICK ROSA
NATL EXECUTIVE
COMMITTEEMAN
CANDIDATE

Mentoring Future Leaders.

I am honored to seek your support as I run for the National Executive Committeeman position for the American Legion Department of California for the 2026 to 2028 term. Leadership and dedication are at the heart of this role,

and I am committed to serving our members with integrity and passion.

Serving as NEC is an honor that reflects a deep commitment to the ideals of the American Legion and its mission. The NEC exercises full voting rights on resolutions and policy matters during the Fall and Spring NEC meetings at our National Headquarters in Indianapolis, as well as at the National Convention. Additionally, the NEC advocates on behalf of our veterans during the Washington Conference in Washington D.C.

AMERICAN LEGION

Department Commander 2024-2025.
21 year member of the American Legion.

BACKGROUND

promise is to be that vital link.

I have watched how this organization works at the highest levels, where our legislative priorities are fiercely advocated in Washington. Still, I know that our true power lies on the ground, in the passion of our local members.

As your alternate NEC, I will work to ensure our Department's voice is heard loudly at the National level, supporting our NEC and the Commander to help create a unified Legion family.

My experience with this organization began 10 years ago at Post 99 in Campbell, California, serving as Sergeant at Arms, Adjutant, and for five years as the Post Commander. Also served the Thirteenth District as Second Vice, First Vice, Finance Officer, and District Commander. Served six years in the Department of California as the Oratorical Vice

Nick Rosa is a veteran of the Marine Corps and served during the Vietnam era.

Assigned to 32nd Street Naval Station "Marine Detachment" and Stationed at Miramar Naval Air Station "Marine barracks" San Diego, Ca. as a Military Police 1974 - 1976.
"That's where Top Gun pilots practiced"

EMPLOYMENT

Retired after 25 years working at "I.E.E". Industrial Electronic Engineering in the city of Van Nuys, Calif. which Designs, manufactures ruggedized displays for military application. Protecting Our Military!

FAMILY

My daughter Cassandra is a member of American

Legion Auxiliary Unit 272. My son Nicholas is a former SAL member of Star Post 309. Four grandchildren, 3 boys 1 girl: Samuel, Catalina, Anthony & Michael. My better half Cindy Padilla is a member of Auxiliary Unit 272, Montebello, Ca.

DEPARTMENT

Commander 2024-2025.
Area 4 Vice Commander 2021-2022.
Membership South Chairman 2022-2023.
Department Assistant Sgt at Arms 2018-2019.
Membership Area 4 Chairman 2016-2019.
Legislative: assign to congresswoman Judy Chu & Senator Bob Archuleta.
Los Angeles County Council: Vice Commander 2018-2019.

DISTRICT

Americanism.

As your Alternate NEC member, my job is to be your voice and the link between our organization and you. It is also about providing service and keeping our promise to those who wore the uniform.

The National Executive Committee ensures our organization remains a beacon of service, but the connection between our Department and National must remain strong. If elected, I pledge to:

- Be a Bridge: to ensure the concerns and initiatives of the Department of California are heard clearly in Indianapolis, and to attend all NEC, DEC, and Convention meetings.
- Be Prepared: to stand ready to step into the role of National Executive Committeeman with full knowledge of the issues, ensuring

District 19 Commander 2016-2017.
District 19 1st Vice Commander 2015-2016.
District 19 2nd Vice Commander 2014-2015.

POST

Post 804 Commander 2013-2015.
Post 804 1st Vice Commander 2010-2013.
Post 804 2nd Vice Commander 2006-2009.

ASSOCIATIONS

Past Commanders Club outpost #19: 2014-present.
Marine Corps League Detachment 1347 2011-present.
Commandant 2013-2015.
40 et 8 Voiture # 1450: 2017-present.
"Directeur Ritual."

VOTE NICK FOR N.E.C.

continuity and stability.

- Be a Servant Leader: to focus on the Four Pillars: Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation, National Security, Americanism, and Children & Youth.

The American Legion Motto is "Veterans Strengthening America". To do that effectively, we need unity in effort. I am committed to supporting our National Commander's theme of "Be the One" mission while ensuring our local members have the tools they need to succeed.

I am not just asking for your vote; I am asking for your partnership. I am asking for the opportunity to serve you, our veterans, and our God and Country.

I respectfully ask for your vote to be your next Alternate National Executive Committee member for the great Department of California.



LARRY MAGGIO
ALTERNATE NEC
CANDIDATE

My name is Larry Maggio, and I'm honored to be your 2026-2028 (ANEC) Alternate National Executive Committee candidate for the great Department of California.

We often talk about the importance of the NEC, the governing body that guides our organization, but the NEC is only as strong as its connection to the membership, the department, and all the individual Posts. If elected as your Alternate NEC, my

Chairperson and the Area 2 Oratorical Commissioner, and currently serving on the Department's Review Board. Last year, served as the Department Vice Commander for Area 2.

Graduated from the National American Legion College, Class of 2022, and have served on subcommittees for National Security, including the National Guard and Armed Forces Reserve subcommittee, the Constitution and Bylaws committee, and for the last three years as the National Commanders' Advisor on the Conventional Armed Forces Committee.

Throughout my journey, I've witnessed the incredible strength of our local Post, our districts, and the Department of California, with the vital importance of our national missions, seeing how we strengthen America by supporting our Veterans, mentoring our Youth, and championing

MAY UPDATE: THE LATEST ON THE MAJOR RICHARD STAR ACT

By **Christian Southards**
Digital Editor

An effort to force a House vote on the [Major Richard Star Act](#) appears uncertain.

Ranking House Committee on Veterans' Affairs member Rep. Mark Takano (D-Calif.) and Rep. Raul Ruiz (D-Calif.) launched a discharge petition on April 30 to force a vote on the House floor. As of late May, however, the effort has fallen short of the needed 218 signatures despite seeming bipartisan support.

While the Major Richard Star Act has garnered most Democrats and the signatures of dozens of Republicans—330 co-sponsors—GOP leaders have thus far blocked the bill, citing its estimated \$1 billion annual price tag. The stalled effort appears to echo gaps between party leadership and rank-and-file Republicans in Congress.

The bill was originally introduced by Rep. Gus M. Bilirakis (R-Fla.). Likewise, a companion bill in the Senate has yet to advance out of committee.

REMOVING A PENALTY ON DISABLED VETERANS

If passed, the Major Richard Star Act would eliminate what proponents contend is an unfair penalty on Disabled Veterans.

Current policy prevents Veterans who medically

retired from service-connected injuries before serving 20 years and have received less than a 50 percent disability rating from collecting full retirement pay if they are actively receiving disability benefits. Critically, these Veterans—estimated to number around 54,000 by Wounded Warrior Project—lose out on as much as \$1,200 of earned benefits per month.

THE MAJOR RICHARD STAR ACT IS A PRIORITY FOR THE AMERICAN LEGION AND OTHER VSOs

The bill has near universal support from Veterans groups, including The American Legion, VFW, and DAV.

Earlier this year, American Legion National Commander [Dan K. Wiley](#) spoke before the House and Senate committees on Veterans' Affairs. He highlighted an existing federal policy that prohibits so-called "double dipping," or receiving dual federal benefits for one purpose.

"This is wrong...Collecting both benefits is not

double-dipping," Wiley contended. "Retirement is for time served; disability compensation is for harm caused during service."

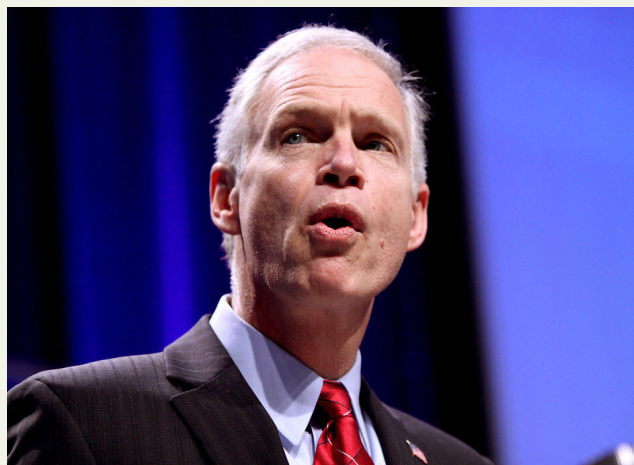
Many VSO leaders have voiced similar statements.

GRIDLOCK IN CONGRESS

The GOP holds both chambers of Congress, but infighting between Republicans and a slim majority over Democrats in the House has stalled progress on many bills. Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) has prioritized funding for the Department of Homeland Security with little success thus far into 2026.

President Donald Trump has not publicly commented on the Major Richard Star Act, but his administration has signaled its support. This, coupled with seeming bipartisan backing, suggests that the bill will survive even if the current discharge petition eventually fails.

As of May 26, the Major Richard Star Act remains in committee.



Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) previously blocked the Major Richard Star Act from a Senate vote earlier this spring. (Photo: Gage Skidmore)

Post, District, and Area Forms are Due June 1

We are approaching the June 1st due date for many **mandatory** Post, District, and Area Forms.

All of the following forms are due June 1st, unless otherwise stated.

Posts failing to submit forms on time will be placed on probation until the submission has been received and verified. **Please submit as soon as possible.**

To check the compliance status of a post, visit our [Department Reports](#) page (updated every Friday).

POST REPORT FORMS

- [Post Data Report](#) - Past Due (April 15)
- [Consolidated Post Report](#)
- [Certification of Post Delegates](#)
- [Certification of Post](#)

Officers

DISTRICT REPORT FORMS

- [District Standing Committees](#)
- [District Secretary](#)
- [District Officer Certification](#)
- [District Meeting Schedule](#)
- [National Convention Delegates](#)

AREA REPORT FORMS

- [Area Officer Certification](#)
- [Area Commissioner Recommendations](#)
- [Area Meeting Schedule](#)

QUESTIONS?

Email forms@caLegion.org or call Department Headquarters at (559) 875-8387 with any questions or concerns.



DEPARTMENT EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The Department Executive Committee has two in-person meetings scheduled for the upcoming year.

SPRING DEC:
March 12-14, 2027

Santa Maria Post 56
501 N Pine St, Santa Maria,
CA 93458

FALL DEC:
July 30 - Aug. 2, 2026

Merced Post 83
939 W Main St, Merced,
CA 95340-4518

MORE INFORMATION

For more meeting and hotel reservation information, visit our [Department Events](#) webpage.

Hotel: El Capital Hotel
609 W Main St, Merced,
CA 95340

VETERANS WITH FIDUCIARIES NO LONGER REPORTED IN FEDERAL GUN BACKGROUND DATABASE

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

The VA is removing Veterans from a federal background check database that restricted their ability to purchase or possess firearms, following a February decision to end the long-standing policy.

The change stops the VA from reporting Veterans assigned fiduciaries, or money managers, to the FBI's National Instant Criminal Background Check System. That database is used to identify individuals classified as prohibited from legally buying firearms.

Under the previous policy, Veterans who needed help managing their finances due to injury, illness, or disability were automatically reported to the system, even if they had no criminal record or history of violence. Critics have argued for years that the practice treated financial incapacity as grounds for restricting constitutional



(Photo: Bryce Carithers)

rights.

Recent reporting indicates the VA, working with the FBI, has started removing affected veterans from the database. The National Rifle Association's Institute for Legislative Action said both agencies are taking steps to delete those records and notify impacted individuals.

According to the group, letters are being mailed to

fiduciaries of affected beneficiaries to formally notify them of the change and outline the next steps. The organization has described the prior policy as unfair to Veterans who were never found by a court to be a danger to themselves or others.

The decision follows pressure from lawmakers, Veterans' advocacy groups, and legal experts who raised due process

concerns. Opponents argued that Veterans were added to the database without a judicial ruling or a clear path to challenge the designation before losing their firearm rights.

Supporters of the change say it separates financial assistance from determinations about a person's ability to safely own a firearm. They argue those decisions should be based on legal

findings, not administrative classifications.

At the same time, some gun control advocates have raised concerns about public safety, stressing the need for safeguards to ensure individuals who may pose a risk are still properly evaluated through established legal processes.

The VA has not indicated it will step away from oversight in cases involving serious mental health concerns. Instead, firearm restrictions are expected to follow existing legal standards that involve court findings or formal adjudication.

For many Veterans, the decision brings an end to a long-disputed practice and begins the process of restoring rights for those previously flagged under the system. As the VA and FBI continue removing names and sending notifications, the issue remains part of an ongoing national debate over Veterans' rights and due process.

CALC is coming to SoCal

Redlands American Legion Post 106
814 West Colton Avenue, Redlands, California 92374

16-18 October 2026

- The course starts at 8:00 am on Friday, 16 October, and will conclude with graduation at 1:00 pm on Sunday, 18 October
- Registration closes at midnight on 30 September 2026
- Applicants have until 30 September to submit a completion certificate from The American Legion's online **Basic Training Course** and a **resolution** on a topic of their choice
- Applicants will receive mileage reimbursement for travel to and from their home Post @ .40 per mile, along with a \$50.00 per diem per day to cover expenses during the event
- Please send questions to CALC@calegion.org

Topics include - Legion Charities, Be The One/Buddy Checks, Community Engagement, Corporate Responsibility, Legislative Advocacy, Tax Exempt status, Post Charters, Marketing/Public Relations, Parliamentary Procedures, Post Operations, Post VSO, Flag Code, Resolutions, Strategic Planning, & Trademarks



3-2026

Registration Period
Between 8/1/2026 and 9/30/2026

CALIFORNIA AMERICAN LEGION COLLEGE MINDSET MONDAY

YOUR JOURNEY TO GROWTH AND LEADERSHIP CONTINUES HERE!

Join our inspiring online training sessions designed to elevate your American Legion Experience. On the second Monday of each month, unlock new strategies, boost your confidence, and cultivate a winning mindset to make a lasting impact in your community.

Don't miss out—your journey to growth and leadership continues here!

Each class will start at 6 PM and is approximately 60 minutes with an added 30 minutes for Q&A.

#MindsetMonday

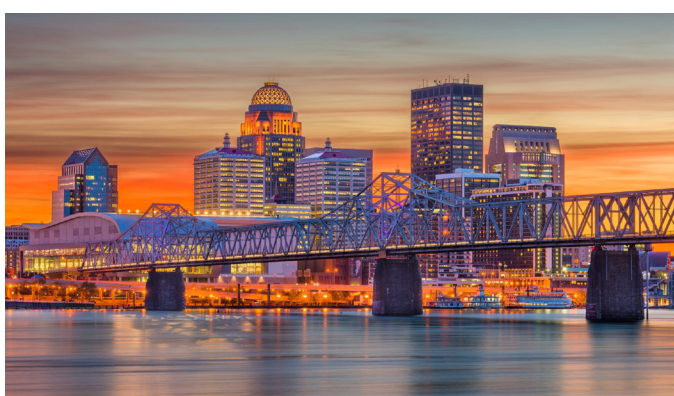
COURSES:

June 8, 2026
Military Family 101 Cultural Competency Training | Cory Vigil

July 13, 2026
Running a Post Meeting | John Hudson

August 10, 2026
Parliamentary Procedures: Tactical Motions | Diane DeVries

[Register for your virtual seat today.](#)



NATIONAL CONVENTION

AUG 28 - SEPT 3 | LOUISVILLE, KY

The 107th National Convention is approaching!

DELEGATES

[National Convention Delegate Forms](#) are due June 1.

CONVENTION LOCATION

Kentucky International Convention Center
221 S 4th St
Louisville, KY 40202

HOTEL INFORMATION

The Seelbach Hilton
500 Fourth Street,
Louisville, KY 40202

To book a hotel room, please use the Hotel Reservation Form found at the page linked below.

Deadline: July 25

TOURISM

[Explore Louisville](#)

For all National Convention information, including Schedules, Events, Discounts, Tourism, & More, visit cal legion.org/107th-national-convention/



MANY DISABLED VETERANS UNWARE THEY NOW QUALIFY FOR TAX-FREE ABLE ACCOUNTS

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

Since Jan. 1, a major change in federal law has expanded access to tax-advantaged savings accounts for people with disabilities, yet many Veterans may not realize they are now eligible. The update comes through the ABLÉ Age Adjustment Act, which allows more individuals to open and use ABLÉ accounts without risking essential benefits.

ABLE accounts were created under the Achieving a Better Life Experience Act of 2014 to help individuals with disabilities save money while maintaining access to programs like Supplemental Security Income and Medicaid. These accounts allow funds to grow tax-free and be used for qualified expenses such as housing, transportation, education, and healthcare.

The most important change involves the age requirement tied to when a disability begins. Previously, individuals only qualified if their disability started before age 26. Under the updated law, that threshold has been raised to age 46, expanding

access to millions. According to Military.com, nearly one million Veterans may now qualify under the updated rules.

The change works by adding a 20-year window to the eligibility requirement, bringing in people who were previously excluded. A huge number of disabilities happen later in life, not in childhood or early adulthood. This includes Veterans who develop PTSD, chronic pain, or injuries after service, as well as individuals diagnosed with conditions like multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's, or cancer in their 30s or 40s. It also includes workers injured on the job in their 30s and people dealing with long-term conditions that take time to fully develop. Under the previous rules, these individuals did not qualify because their disability began after age 26. With the updated age limit, many now meet the requirements.

For many Veterans, this removes a long-standing barrier. Service-related disabilities do not always appear early and can develop over time due to physical strain, exposure, or long-term health

conditions. Under the previous rules, those individuals were often excluded from using ABLÉ accounts. Now, many qualify.

The expansion also addresses a financial challenge tied to federal assistance programs, which often have strict asset limits. Saving even modest amounts could put benefits at risk. ABLÉ accounts provide a way to build savings without those funds being counted against eligibility limits, giving Veterans more flexibility and control.

To qualify, Veterans must still meet Social Security's definition of disability, meaning the condition must result in significant functional limitations and last at least 12 months. Income and employment status do not affect eligibility.

With the new age limit now in place, those who were previously excluded may now have access to a valuable financial tool. California Veterans and residents can visit the state's dedicated portal, [CalABLE](#), for more information.



A soldier burns waste outside a U.S. military base near Musa Qala, Afghanistan, during operations in 2006. (Photo: Rodrigo Abd/AP)

VA RESEARCH FINDS HIGHER SUICIDE RISK AMONG VETERANS WITH REPEATED TOXIC EXPOSURE

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

A new VA study found that Veterans who reported multiple toxic exposures during military service were more likely to experience suicidal thoughts and behaviors than Veterans who did not report exposures.

The study, titled *Toxic Exposure and Rates of Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors Among U.S. Military Veterans*, was published April 15 in *Psychiatry Research*. Researchers reviewed data from 248,926 Veterans enrolled in VA's Million Veteran Program, a national research program that studies how military service, lifestyle, and genetics may affect Veterans' health.

Researchers looked at nine types of self-reported toxic exposure. Those included Agent Orange, chemical and biological weapons, the anthrax vaccine, solvents and fuels, petroleum combustion products, lead, other metals, pesticides, and open-air burn pits.

Stars and Stripes reported that the study found Veterans with more reported toxic exposures had 17% higher odds of suicidal thoughts and behaviors. It also found that each additional exposure was linked to a 7.2% increase in risk. That pattern was seen across different service eras, including pre-Vietnam, Vietnam, post-Vietnam, Gulf War, and post-9/11 Veterans.

The findings do not mean toxic exposure directly causes suicidal thoughts

or behaviors. Instead, researchers found that Veterans who reported more toxic exposures also had higher rates of PTSD and depression. Those conditions appeared to explain much of the link between toxic exposure and suicide risk.

The study also did not conclude that toxic exposure causes genetic changes. Researchers said more work is needed to understand whether toxic exposure may interact with a Veteran's genetic vulnerability. They also said more research is needed to explain how exposure could lead to higher risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors over time.

The research adds to the ongoing discussion about the long-term effects of military toxic exposure.

Veterans across every generation have reported health problems after contact with burn pits, chemicals, fuels, solvents, pesticides, herbicides, metals, and other hazardous substances during service.

Toxic exposure has often been linked to cancers, breathing problems, and other physical medical conditions. But this is one of the first major studies that focused on mental health outcomes, with early findings suggesting exposure history may also matter when providers assess suicide risk.

The authors said the findings could help medical providers offer better support and treatment for Veterans who report toxic exposures. Exposure history may be one part of a

larger picture that includes PTSD, depression, and other mental health concerns. Screening for these issues could help identify Veterans who need support earlier.

Currently, the VA provides toxic exposure screenings for enrolled Veterans, and Gulf War Veterans may also qualify for a Gulf War Registry health exam and other VA benefits connected to medically unexplained illnesses linked to military service. Researchers suggest future screenings also include mental health checks.

Veterans in crisis can call 988 (and press 1) or text 838255 to reach the Veterans Crisis Line.



The Contract Our Vets Act was introduced by Rep. Randy Fine (R-Fla.) in early February. (Photo: Elijah Mears)

EXTENDING VETERANS FIRST THE CASE FOR GOVERNMENT-WIDE VOSB CONTRACTING PRIORITY

Shared by Ken Shoemake
U.S. Army Veteran and
Newport Harbor Post 291
Legionnaire

The Contract Our Veterans Act (S. 3964 / H.R. 7534) extends the VA's proven Veterans First contracting model to every federal agency. It gives Veteran-owned small businesses (VOSBs) a first look at federal contracting opportunities, with no mandates, quotas, or additional taxpayer cost. The policy rests on five pillars: domestic manufacturing and supply chain security, defense readiness, Veteran economic opportunity and suicide prevention, military recruiting, and procurement integrity.

THE PROBLEM: An Eroding Veteran Industrial Base

America's small business defense contracting base is in structural decline. Over 50% of small business federal contractors have exited the market in the last decade; new entrants are down 63%. At the same time, 75% of existing

SDVOSB owners are over age 55. The Veteran entrepreneur base is aging out without a successor generation, leaving a shrinking domestic supplier network increasingly dependent on foreign and adversarial supply chains for critical defense inputs.

The DoD Inspector General has identified roughly \$500 million in contracts awarded to fraudulent SDVOSB claimants who bypassed SBA verification. That is both a fiscal integrity failure and a national security vulnerability.

THE SOLUTION: Veterans First, Government-Wide

The VA's Veterans First program has operated since 2006. Ricky Lemmon, a 32-year VA procurement official who implemented and administered the program at the SES level, documented the following outcomes:

- VOSB and SDVOSB participation expanded across all contracting categories at VA.

- The entire small business market at VA grew, including 8(a) and other set-asides, contrary to concerns the program would displace existing programs.
- Passthrough abuse was eliminated through SBA verification and authorized distributor requirements.
- Fair and reasonable pricing was maintained throughout. Contracting officers awarded at market-competitive rates.
- No new bureaucracy, no quotas, and no changes to acquisition integrity or oversight were required.

Lemmon also noted that Veteran-owned businesses are more mission-focused, less likely to seek excessive change orders, and faster to respond when performance issues arise.

WORKFORCE, MENTAL HEALTH, AND RECRUITING

VA and DoD mental health

data identify lack of gainful employment as a leading driver of Veteran suicide. Expanded VOSB contracting creates economic pathways for transitioning Service Members, providing purpose and income proven to reduce suicide risk. The legislation is projected to create 50,000 new Veteran-owned small businesses and 250,000 new Veteran jobs.

VETS First also functions as a military recruiting tool. Service Members who know that enlistment can lead directly to post-service business opportunities in the federal marketplace are more likely to enlist, building both military readiness and long-term economic strength.

SUPPLY CHAIN AND NATIONAL SECURITY

Veteran-owned small businesses are American-owned and American-controlled by statute. They cannot be acquired or redirected by foreign adversaries. Prioritizing them in federal contracting reshores domestic manufacturing capacity, closes supply chain vulnerabilities, and strengthens the defense industrial base without new mandates or departure from established procurement standards.

LEGISLATIVE DESIGN: No New Cost or Bureaucracy

The Contract Our Veterans Act creates no new agencies, establishes no quotas, and requires no new appropriations. It uses existing contracting authorities and the SBA's verification database. Contracting officers retain full discretion to award on merit, past performance, and price reasonableness. The bill provides a first-look priority, not a guarantee, and preserves all existing small business set-aside programs.

CONCLUSION AND REQUEST

Veterans First at the VA is a proven, 20-year success story. S. 3964 and H.R. 7534 extend that model government-wide, delivering benefits for national security, the veteran workforce, domestic manufacturing, and procurement integrity at no additional cost.

About Ken Shoemake

Newport Harbor Post 291 Legionnaire Ken Shoemake served with the U.S. Army, 3rd Infantry Division during the Vietnam Era. He currently owns [Stay Safe Solutions, Inc.](#), a service-disabled veteran business bidding, fulfilling and servicing government contracts.



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