



Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America

JWV Priorities for the 118th Congress

Supporting America's Veterans, Servicemembers, Their Families, Caregivers, and Survivors

JWV works to support veterans and servicemembers and believes that obligation extends to their families, including caregivers and survivors. JWV was at the forefront as a voice for not only those of the Jewish faith but for **all** veterans. In the 117th Congress, 25 bipartisan bills were signed into law that address some of the most important issues facing veterans today, including the landmark PACT Act to address toxic exposures. On education, housing, and health care, JWV worked with Congress to connect veterans and their families to much-needed resources. As we look to the 118th Congress, JWV honors all those who are wearing or have worn the uniform of the United States, *JWV is continuing to support them by:*

Delivering timely, high-quality benefits and services. JWV is pleased to report the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is delivering more benefits and health care, more quickly, to more veterans than ever before. In 2022, VA processed a record 1.7 million veteran claims. *We will continue to hold VA accountable and urge them to continue to be innovative and serve and be timely to more veterans.*

In addition, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Veterans Benefit Administration's (VBA) halting of Compensation and Pension (C&P) exams across the country, the implementation of PL-115-55, The Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017, has become ever more critical.

JWV Position: Continue engaging with VA in the implementation of the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017 (P.L. 115-55) to improve the claims and appeals process. Support investment in software and hardware upgrades for claims management. Preclude 'unlicensed' individuals from taking fees for representing veterans' claims.

Addressing toxic exposures. In November, VA began screening all veterans enrolled in VA health care for toxic exposures. The PACT Act, signed on August 10, 2022, marks the biggest expansion of VA health care in nearly 30 years. *JWV, like, many VSOs, made toxic exposure a top priority.* The PACT Act extends health care and disability benefits to approximately 3.5 million veterans from all eras from Vietnam to present day. The PACT Act also adds more than 20 presumptive conditions with an effective date of August 10, 2022, if filed before August 10, 2023.

JWV Position:

- Monitor VA's implementation of the Honoring Our PACT Act to include expanded healthcare eligibility and recently established presumptive conditions.
- Support VA staffing needs to effectively implement the Honoring Our PACT Act.
- Support the addition of illnesses as new presumptive conditions when the scientific burden has been met.

Suicide Prevention and Mental Health -- Reducing veteran suicide. This year, DoD and VA reported declines in suicide deaths, marking progress in federal efforts to prevent suicide. In July 2022, the 988 Veterans Crisis Line went live to provide veterans and their loved ones an easy to remember number for veterans in crisis. *JWV was a vocal and strong advocate of the change to 988.*

The suicide rate among veterans is much higher compared to civilians, and even higher for female veterans. For younger veterans, the rates are even more disproportionate, and climbing even higher. For example, while

the overall veteran suicide rate rose 30% from 2005 to 2017, the 18-34-year-old veteran suicide rate rose by 2.5 times. While 18-34-year-old veterans make up only 10% of the veteran population, they represent 94% of the increase in veteran deaths. In addition, the suicide rate for active duty servicemembers is at an all-time high, with the U.S. Army experiencing its highest rate since before World War II.

JWV Position: *Expand research into core causes, risk factors, and protective factors for service members, veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors:*

- Expand government and non-government funding around service members, veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors suicide rates, their possible causes, and the most significant risk and protective factors for each of these populations.
- Ensure the VA and DoD release the underlying raw data from their annual suicide reports (properly redacted to protect individual identities).
- Ensure DoD resumes reporting veteran combat deployment data to VA and for VA to resume reporting on combat deployment data for suicides.
- Explore the expansion of alternative therapies including complimentary treatment modalities such as highly trained service dogs, equine therapy, outdoor and sports-related programs, and other innovative treatments.

Expanding services for veteran caregivers. More than 5.5 million caregivers provide support to our nation's wounded, ill, and injured servicemembers and veterans, many of whom require close care and supervision. Ensuring caregivers receive the support, training, and compensation they deserve is a critical priority for JWV. *JWV will continue to work with Congress and VA to ensure these veterans and their caregivers are fairly evaluated to enter the program and that those in the program receive the proper clinical review.*

VA implemented its final expansion of the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) to eligible veterans of all eras on October 1, 2022. JWV commends VA for collaborating with various stakeholder groups to make essential improvements to the program to streamline the program and make it easier for caregivers and veterans to navigate. *We do urge the VA and Congress to resolve eligibility and system issues as early as possible in this Congress.*

JWV Position: Expand access to caregiving, palliative, geriatric, and extended care programs and services for veterans and wounded warriors and their caregivers.

- Assure VA and Congress are actively providing oversight and guidance to address existing PCAFC eligibility and program issues. Continue to assist the VA and Congress to identify and implement program improvements either through policy, regulatory, or legislative means.
- Establish organization-wide guidance on caregiver assessments and reassessments.

Supporting women and underserved veterans. Women are the fastest growing group of veterans who use VA services. JWV is committed to addressing and providing resources for the specialized health care needs of women veterans including increasing cancer screenings, improving mental health care and access, addressing infertility, and reducing intimate partner violence. *JWV supports the provisions of the Deborah Sampson Act and remains committed to improving maternal health, and placing a Women's Mental Health Champion Coordinator at every VA Medical Center to ensure women feel welcome and receive equitable treatment and care.*

Women, minority, and other underserved veterans transitioning out of uniform face unique challenges because of their experiences in service or other barriers. Women veterans are also the fastest growing population of veteran patients, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). VA expects women health care enrollees to grow from the current 10% to as high as 19% by 2025. Additionally, according to GAO, VA has taken steps to reduce disparities in health care outcomes linked to race and ethnicity but lacks the mechanisms to measure progress and ensure accountability.

Despite recognizing weaknesses related to the quality of race and ethnicity data, VA has not implemented corrective actions to address them. COVID-19 has placed a spotlight on the barriers and disparities facing underserved veterans when seeking access to health care and services through VA. JWV urges VA to expand its collaborative efforts with its federal partners and expedite efforts to remove these and other barriers to ensure all veterans receive the same care, services, and benefits they earned through service.

JWV Position:

- Eliminate health disparities for underserved veterans to ensure health equity in accessing timely, sensitive, and quality benefits through VA.
- Lessons learned during the COVID-19 national pandemic should be identified and applied to accelerate VA's efforts to eliminate disparities and achieve health equity to meet the unique needs of high-risk veteran groups.
- Secure additional funding for research, treatment, data management, medical care, and staffing to provide gender-specific and culturally competent care.
- Redesign VHA delivery system and facilities to remove barriers to ensure privacy and a safe and inclusive environment for, including veterans with special needs such as: those living in rural areas; homebound; aging; amputee; cognitively and physically impaired, and veterans with cultural and language differences.
- Expand VA sexual assault/harassment prevention efforts to eliminate problems enterprise wide.

Protecting servicemember and veteran education benefits. For too long, service members and veterans have been targeted by predatory marketing practices from for-profit educational institutions. In October, the Department of Education closed the 90/10 loophole in the Higher Education Act that allowed for-profit colleges to aggressively recruit veterans and service members. *JWV has long advocated for this important change and will continue to hold the Department of Education accountable in implementing the law.*

Student veterans tend to be older, are more likely to have children, and have a disability. Since its inception, the GI Bill has been a vital tool for recruitment and retention by the uniformed services and essential for helping make the transition to civilian life. Research shows education benefits continue to be one of the top reasons for joining the military.

JWV Position:

- Urge proportional upgrades to the Title 10 Montgomery GI Bill program to keep pace with the cost of education, and to transfer 10 USC 1606 into Title 38 as sub-chapter of Forever GI Bill to finalize sunseting the Montgomery GI Bill.
- Ensure sufficient funding and oversight to modernize VA's GI Bill information technology system.
- Increase VA flexibility for out-of-cycle housing allowance adjustments.

Ending veteran homelessness. Thanks to efforts by the Department of Housing and Urban Development HUD), the US Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), and VA, the number of veterans experiencing homelessness declined by 11% between 2020 and 2022 – the largest decline in the last five years. JWV looks forward to continuing to support efforts to permanently reduce homelessness by housing veterans.

Fixing VA's electronic health record system. JWV remains concerned that VA continues to experience issues with deploying its electronic health record system. The combination of cost overruns and lack of proper training for clinicians and staff jeopardized patients' safety in the Pacific Northwest. VA must improve training for its staff and hold Oracle/Cerner accountable for the system's failures. JWV insists VA learn from and take corrective actions to prevent similar issues in future deployments. JWV urges Congress to hold VA accountable and even withhold funding before any future deployments are considered.

If you have questions or seek additional information, contact JWV National Executive Director Ken Greenberg, at kgreenberg@jwv.org.