

VETERANS AFFAIRS & REHABILITATION COMMISSION
Autrey B. James, California, Chairman
Tiffany Ellett, Virginia, Director

National Convention
 August 2022
 Milwaukee, WI

Resolution Number	Title	Origin
6	Increase Cancer Screenings by the VA	MT
9	Burial Allowance Following Hospice Care	MI
11	Value of Lay Evidence	VA
31	Care in the Community Eligibility for Cancelled Appointments	MN
32	Behavioral Health Autopsy Program Updates	MN
33	Disability Rating Criteria	MN
43	Expedite Burial Eligibility Verification	TX
54	Expansion of Eligibility for Pension Benefits from the VA	OH
64	Codification of The VA Solid Start Program	IL

National Executive Committee Meeting
 October 2022
 Indianapolis, IN

Resolution Number	Title	Origin
12	Implementation of the MISSION Act	NY
13	Redefine “Child” in Title 38, Code of Federal Regulations	DE
14	Access to Care	VA&R
15	Oversight of Camp Lejeune Justice Act	VA&R
16	Furthering Research Pertaining to Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTC), and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)	VA&R
17	Improvement of the Travel Claims Process	VA&R
18	Mental Health Programs for Justice-Involved Veterans	VA&R
19	Physician-led Health-Care Teams	VA&R
20	National Standards of Practice	VA&R
21	Amend the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act	VA&R

National Executive Committee Meeting
 May 2023
 Indianapolis, IN

Resolution Number	Title	Origin
14	Electronic Health Record	VA&R
15	VA Appointment Notifications	PA
16	Eliminate Two-Year Time Limit for Applications for Nonservice-Connected Burial Allowances	PA
18	Written Informed Consent	VA&R
19	Protection of Veterans’ Disability & Compensations	VA&R
20	Veterans’ Whole Health	VA&R

Commission/Committee Meetings

VA&R Commission Meetings

Members of the VA&R Commission held three meetings during this program year. On August 27, 2022, the Commission met during the 103rd National Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. On February 26th, 2023 the Commission met in conjunction with the 63rd Annual Washington Conference. Lastly, the VA&R Commission met on May 1st, 2023.

At the first annual meeting during the 103rd National Convention, the VA&R Commission held its meeting in Milwaukee Wisconsin on Saturday, August 27, 2022. The following officials addressed the Commission: Dr. Paul R. Lawrence, Under Secretary for Benefits, Veterans Benefits Administration, U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA); Dr. Linda Torres, Health Advisor to the Under Secretary for Health, Veterans Health Administration (VHA), VA; Lee Becker, Chief of Staff, Veteran Experience Office, VA; Dr. Jennifer MacDonald, VA Mission Act Lead, VA; Dr. Kameron Matthews, Deputy Under Secretary for Health & Community Care, VA; and Randy C. Reeves, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, National Cemetery Administration.

The second annual meeting for the VA&R Commission was held during the 2023 Washington Conference at the Washington Hilton in Washington, D.C. on Saturday, February 26, 2023. The following officials addressed the Commission: The Honorable Matthew Quinn, Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs, Department of Veteran Affairs; Alfred Montoya, Acting Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Support Services, VHA, VA; The Honorable Jaime Areizaga-Soto, Chairman of the Board of Veterans' Appeals, VA; and Dr. Shereef Elnahal, Undersecretary for Health, VHA, VA. The third and final annual meeting was held virtually on May 1st, 2023 to discuss VA&R Commission business prior to the spring National Executive Committee meeting held the same month.

Health Administration Committee Meetings

Members of the Health Administration Committee met twice during this program year. The first meeting was held on August 27, 2022, during the 103rd National Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin where Dr. Linda Torres, Health Advisor the Under Secretary for Health spoke about National Standards of Practice and developments that VA is making for 50 healthcare occupations. The VA's new standards of practice sets a standard for a medical provider to practice in VA which may differ from the standard of practice permitted by state licensure.

Members met again during the 63rd Annual Washington Conference on February 26, 2023, in Washington D.C. Dr. Kenneth Kizer, MD from the American Academy of Ophthalmology, discussed the threat of patient safety for veterans who receive eye surgery in the VA from medical providers that are not trained medical doctors. Optometrists do not receive the same surgical training as ophthalmologists and only a few states allow optometrists to perform invasive procedures. Lastly, Dr. Paul Limburg from EXACT Sciences gave a presentation about new and improved ways of detecting cancer early on. There are many noninvasive ways to detect and screen for cancer and provide treatable solutions for early-stage detection.

National Cemetery Committee Meetings

Members of the National Cemetery Committee met twice during this program year. The first meeting was held on August 27, 2022, during the 103rd National Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The second meeting took place in conjunction with the 63rd Annual Washington Conference on February 26, 2023.

The first meeting was held in the Wisconsin Center, Room 102, Sections C-D, First Floor where the committee was addressed by Mr. Jay Dalrymple, Director for the National Cemetery Scheduling Office and the Deputy Director for Field Programs, National Cemetery Administration, VA. The second meeting was held at the Washington Hilton,

Lincoln West room, Terrace Level where the committee was addressed by Mr. Robert Dalessandro, Deputy Secretary, American Battle Monument Commission.

TBI/PTSD Committee Meetings

Members of the TBI/PTSD Suicide Prevention Committee met twice during this program year. The first meeting was held on Aug 26, 2022, during the 103rd National Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin where Alex Silva from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) discussed how its organization is the world's largest funding source of suicide prevention research and how it provides ongoing free education and loss supports throughout both American cities and internationally abroad overseas. Lastly, AFSP touted how its city-wide Out of-the-Darkness community walks campaign brings awareness of and addresses the stigma of seeking mental health supports.

Members met again during the 63rd Annual Washington Conference on February 26, 2023 in Washington D.C., where Mrs. Donna-Marie Drucker, of the Oregon Firearm Safety Coalition, discussed preventing military firearm suicides through voluntary community-led strategies to enhance evidence-based or practiced-based approaches to change the conversation with community stakeholders. She discussed various community grants available to curb veteran suicides and encouraged for more funding for alternative offsite storage options and the need to advocate for Safer Harbor and gun sitting policies at the state and federal levels.

Veterans Benefits Committee Meetings

Members of the Veterans Benefits Committee met twice during this program year. The first meeting was held on August 27, 2022, during the 103rd National Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The second meeting took place in conjunction with the 63rd Annual Washington Conference on February 27, 2023.

At the first annual meeting, during the 103rd National Convention, the VA&R Commission was addressed by the following officials addressed the Committee: Paul Sullivan, Director of Veteran Outreach at Bergmann and Moore, and Forrest Gibbes, Executive Director of Grace Rose Health Consultants.

The second annual meeting was held at the Washington Hilton, Lincoln East & Monroe, Concourse Level, on Monday, February 27, 2023. The following officials addressed the Commission: Barbara C. Morton, Deputy Chief Veterans Experience Officer at the VA, and Jeanine M. Gilson, Acting Senior Advisor for Strategic Initiatives at the Veterans Benefits Administration.

Awards

William F. Lenker National Service Trophy

National Executive Committee 2006, Resolution No. 2, Revised Rules Governing the Award of The William F. Lenker National Service Trophy, established the current rules governing the National Service Trophy. This award is to be presented annually to the Department of The American Legion that excelled in the welfare and rehabilitation work for war veterans and their dependents. At the 103rd National Convention, in Milwaukee WI, The Department of Oregon received the award for 2022.

VA Health-Care Provider and Physician of the Year

National Executive Committee 2017, Resolution No. 7, *VA Health-care Provider of the Year*, and Resolution No. 8, *VA Physician of the Year*, established the awards presented by The American Legion. These awards recognize the contributions VA health-care providers and physicians have to the veterans they serve. At the 2023 Washington Conference, Physician's Assistant Gobin Tarchand, Minneapolis VA Health Care System, and Dr. Patricia Dickmann, Minneapolis VA Health Care System, received the awards for 2022, respectively.

VA Voluntary Service Award

National Executive Committee 2015, Resolution No. 21, *Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS) Award*, established the award presented by National Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission. This award is presented to the outstanding volunteer hospital worker from the department of the National Commander at the Washington Conference. Due to most VA Health Care facilities still not being fully open to volunteers, no award was presented for 2022.

Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Division

Vision Statement

To ensure that all veterans have access to the complete range of services they have earned through their honorable service, and to guarantee that the services they receive is of the highest possible quality, delivered by public servants who honor and respect the veterans who have guaranteed their right to live in a free and secure society.

Mission Statement

To assist all veterans either personally, or through our network of service officers, departments, posts, stakeholders, federal partners, or any other service that is empowered to assist, and to support the VA&R Commission by following our guiding resolutions, our outline of authorizations, our bylaws, and our charter.

Who We Serve

We serve veterans and their families directly or indirectly through the VA&R Commission, its committees, and subcommittees.

Our Services

We assist veterans with:

- Access to high quality and timely healthcare through the VA
- Processing service-connected disability claims and appeals
- Certifying, training, and tracking American Legion accredited service officers
- Assisting with representation before Veteran Law Judges, Veteran Law Courts, Decision Review Officers located at VA Regional Offices
- Coordinating and organizing VA volunteer hours
- Access to debt management services when resulting from VA overpayments
- Assistance and representation before Military Evaluation Boards, Military Discharge Review Boards and Physical Evaluation Boards
- Access to combat veteran pensions for indigent veterans
- Assistance with insurance and pension programs through the VA
- Assistance with mortuary affairs provided by VA
- Onsite representation and site visits at VA Medical Centers and Regional Offices around the country and abroad

Additional Duties

While our primary duties involve direct veteran representation, the VA&R Division supports the VA&R Commission and its Committees administratively at all meetings and gatherings of The American Legion to include National Executive Committee meetings, National Convention, Washington Conference, and as required.

The Division staff also participate in congressional research and testimony; evaluation of policy in relation to veteran law; attendance at professional briefings, seminars, workgroups, and similar types of sessions at both the national and local level.

We conduct regular visits to VA medical facilities and Regional Offices to analyze their strengths and weaknesses. And we host two resident service officer training courses annually, that teach and refresh a range of advanced skills for claims processors.

The Division director oversees and manages a contractual relationship with the law firm Bergmann and Moore, LLC, the foremost authority of veterans' law in the nation. Services range from training to legal representation of our veteran claimants, to amicus and Supreme Court briefs written and submitted on behalf of The American Legion.

Core Values

- To be well informed – Assist and educate our members and the VA&R Commission on the latest and most relevant information regarding the large portfolio of services we provide.
- To be well spoken – Speak professionally by reflecting the voice and intent of our members.
- To be well mannered – Appropriately represent The American Legion from the highest levels of government to the general public.
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Personnel and Organization
National Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

Director	1
Deputy Director for Benefits & Claims Services	1
Deputy Director for Health Policy	1
Veterans Programs Manager	1
Benefits Policy Analysts	2
Health Policy Analysts	5
Claims Service Coordinator	3
Administrative Assistant	1
VA Board of Veterans Appeals, Washington D.C.	
Team Lead, BVA	1
Disability Claims Specialist	8
John H. Geiger Operations Center, Indianapolis, IN	
Team Lead, BVA	1
Veteran Service Officers	2
Disability Claims Specialist	9
VA Regional Office, St. Paul, MN	
Team Lead, PMC	1
Veteran Benefits Specialist	2
VA Regional Office, Philadelphia, PA	
Veteran Benefits Specialist	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>40</i>
<i>VA&R Division Staff</i>	<i>40</i>

Legislative Activities

The VA&R Division staff participated in a total of eleven (4) hearings:

<u>Date</u>	<u>Committee/Subcommittee</u>	<u>Testimony</u>	<u>Subject</u>
29-Sep-22	House Veterans Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Health	SFR	Veteran Suicide Prevention: Capitalizing on What Works and Increasing Innovative Approaches

29-Mar-23	House Veterans Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Health	Tiffany Ellett	Pending Legislation
19-Apr-23	House Veterans Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations	SFR	Pending Legislation
21-Jun-23	House Veterans Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Health	Tiffany Ellett	Pending Legislation

Informational Services and Distribution

The American Legion has several pamphlets and brochures available upon request to veterans and organizations in need. The VA&R Division offers the following publications:

- *2015 Report on Veterans Benefits Centers & Special Purpose Visits*
- *2017 Report on System Worth Saving*
- *2018 System Worth Saving Executive Report*
- *2019 Mental Health Survey Executive Report*
- *System Worth Savings Executive Report*
- *Gulf War Era Benefits & Programs*
- *Know your Benefits*
- *Longman-Gordon Report – VA Healthcare: A System Worth Saving*
- *Missing In America Project Brochure*
- *Post Service Officer Guide*
- *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*
- *Service Officer Code of Procedure*
- *The Road Home – Treatment of TBI and PTSD*
- *The War Within – Treatment of Traumatic Brain Injury and Post Traumatic Stress*
- *Veterans Affairs Service Brochure*
- *Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service Handbook*
- *What To Do before a Veteran Dies*
- *What you can to help prevent veteran suicide*

Claims Services

The Claims Services staff improves the quality of veterans' lives through representation of veterans seeking, or appealing, claims for disability benefits and ensuring a fair and thorough claims development through collaboration with VA Regional Offices (VARO) and the Board of Veterans' Appeals.

The VA implemented the Appeals Modernization Act (AMA) of 2017. The AMA was signed into law Aug. 23, 2017. Under the act, Veterans will now have three options for claims and appeals: (1) supplemental claim; (2) higher-level review; or (3) direct appeals to the Board of Veterans' Appeals. All decision reviews submitted after February 2019 fell under the new system. Under the AMA, VA's goal is to complete supplemental claims and higher-level reviews averaging 125 days. Decisions appealed to the Board under its direct docket will average 365 days. Under the legacy process, appeal resolutions averaged three to seven years. The new law: modernizes the current claims and appeals process, includes three review options for disagreements with decisions, requires improved notification of

VA decisions, provides earlier claim resolution, ensures you receive the earliest effective date possible, and preserves the opportunity for an in-person hearing.

On August 10, 2022, President Biden signed the Honoring Our PACT Act (PACT Act) into law. The legislation expands VA's healthcare treatment and benefits to veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances. VA&R has seen an increase in, and backlog of, PACT Act-related claim emails and phone call inquiries and request for assistance. VA&R Claims Services recognizes that the VA, Veteran Service Organizations and County Veteran Service Offices across the United States were not prepared for the volume of PACT Act-related claims and inquiries that have been generated.

Legion National Headquarters has two Veteran Service Officer (VSO) located in the Washington, D.C. and Indianapolis, Indiana offices to respond to the increasing volume of PACT Act inquiries. The National VSO's priority is to ensure veterans are referred to their local VSO for assistance with their claim and benefit support. The National VSO had determined that the Office of General Counsel (OGC) Accredited Veteran Service Officer List for the American Legion is not current and that County Veteran Service Offices (CVSO) in some areas are understaffed or have inexperienced VSOs which causes an increase in calls to the National VSO. VA&R is working with the Department Adjutants and Department Service Officers (DSO) to update the OGC list of current VSOs accredited under the American Legion accreditation process and to determine where voids have occurred.

Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA)

Veterans Disability Claims Specialists primarily represent appellants before the BVA. They review VA electronic claims files, interview veterans and surviving spouses in preparation for in-person or virtual hearings, write informal hearing presentations (IHPs), and act as counsel on behalf of appellants at their BVA hearings. In addition, claims specialists engage in the critical function of providing assistance to claimants requesting help with claim issues.

During this program year, The American Legion's Board (BVA) Unit prepared over 12,500 informal hearing presentations (IHPs) for a monthly average of about 1,046. In addition, Veterans Disability Claims Specialists assisted veterans with a total of 156 hearings before a Veterans Law Judge. For the 10,839 appeals that received BVA dispositions, over 30 percent were granted, almost 49 percent were remanded to the agency of original jurisdiction for further development, and only 16.5 percent were denied. For BVA appeals decided during the program year resulting in favorable decisions following submission of an American Legion IHP, we have documented retroactive payments of over \$66,000,000.

As of June 30, 2023, there were 270 legacy cases and 326 AMA cases assigned to the Legion's Board Unit (18 claims specialists, 2 team leaders and 2 administrative staff).

The American Legion has again found that some VAROs fail to develop veterans' claims adequately and deny them without sufficient cause. We note that at BVA lay evidence is routinely given proper consideration, often leading to a favorable decision. However, VARO Rating Veterans Service Representatives rarely rely on lay evidence in making rating decisions. The VBA's lack of proper claim development and general unwillingness to give appropriate probative value to lay evidence results in further adjudication of those claims, thus extending the time appellants must wait before final decisions are made.

Through continuous professional training and thorough knowledge of VA laws and regulations, American Legion staff achieve more favorable outcomes in their advocacy efforts. The Legion's legal and training partner, Bergmann & Moore, LLC, provides critical training to new claims specialists so they may successfully represent appellants. Additionally, Bergmann & Moore's legal team provides unit and individual training that covers significant changes to federal law or regulations, and recent Court decisions that have an effect on veterans' law as well as refresher training on key topics.

Regional Office Action Review (ROAR)

After a pandemic-induced hiatus of nearly three years, The American Legion's ROAR program resumed operations, making site visits to VA regional offices (VAROs) in Columbia, South Carolina (9-10 August 2022; New York City (6-7 December 2022); Sacramento, California (7-8 March 2023) and Montgomery, Alabama (18-19 April 2023).

Before each VARO visit, the VA&R Division requested and received the VA claim numbers for about 50 disability claims that had been recently completed by the office's claims adjudicators. These files were analyzed for proper development and adjudication by attorneys from the law firm Bergmann & Moore, LLC. Results of the analyses were submitted to the division and shared with VARO leadership.

Pre-visit questionnaires were sent to regional office directors, which were completed, returned and reviewed by the division's deputy director of benefits and claims. Topics covered in the questions included 1) numbers of VA disability claims adjudicated and still pending during FY 22, 2) top three categories of errors made by veterans service representatives (VSRs) and rating veterans service representatives (RVSRs), 3) how well staff has adjusted to the National Work Queue and how the NWQ can be improved, 4) average years of experience for VSRs and RVSRs, and how long it takes to train them properly, 5) VBA's national STAR program and its degree of success in quality review, 6) types and frequency of training for claims adjudicators, 7) how claims are reviewed internally for quality of work, 8) average number of days that claims were pending, and 9) plans to improve training and quality review.

During the one and a half days for each site visit, the ROAR team conducted interviews with about 14-15 VARO staff – from the director and Veterans Service Center manager to VSRs, RVSRs and quality review coaches. Interview questions (previously sent) covered four major areas: training, productivity, quality and morale.

Typically, the first interview with the director took place at 9 a.m. on the first day and the final interview with Veterans Service Center managers/assistant directors took place at 11 a.m. the next day. In general, about 10 interviews were conducted on Tuesday with another 4-5 completed on Wednesday.

Effects of PACT Act implementation on the VA claims process were discussed at length during staff interviews. While employees at the Columbia VARO had little to say about the issue (pre-implementation), employees at the New York, Sacramento and Montgomery VAROs provided much more input. Essentially, many new employees – as well as supervisors -- were still being trained on PACT Act claims and new requirements such as Toxic Exposure Risk Activity (TERA) memos. Some workers felt overwhelmed by the amount of training they were expected to complete with tight deadlines; some employees (and supervisors) reported increased stress levels from the additional development requirements and the number of claims being filed.

The ROAR team has written reports for each site visit, based on the directors' questionnaires and staff interviews. These reports will be made available on The American Legion's website and shared with members of Congress, White House staff and VA leadership.

Department Service Officers (DSO) School

Since 1985, The American Legion has authorized the VA&R Commission to conduct Department Service Officer (DSO) schools bi-annually for accredited representatives of The American Legion. This bi-annual school represents the organization's ongoing commitment to developing a network of highly trained and experienced service officers to effectively advocate for veterans and their families.

The purpose of the DSO school is to provide current information about changes in veterans' law and, VA regulations, and VA adjudication policies. The DSO school allows American Legion service officers to improve their advocacy skills. The program of instruction includes training suitable for new service officers and advanced training on

issues relating to claims processing, disability ratings, personal hearings, development of appeals, and the interpretation and application of precedent decisions by the U.S Court of Appeals for Veterans' Claims and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit.

The American Legion conducted six sessions of DSO Schools during this program year:

- NSO: Feb: 20-24, 2023 (Virtually)
- DSO Intro: March 6-26, 2023 (Virtually)
- NSO: April 11-24, 2023 (Virtually)
- NSO: May 11-24, 2023 (Virtually)
- NSO: June 12-24, 2023 (Virtually)
- NSO: July 12-25, 2023 (Virtually)

Health Policy

The Health Policy staff ensures the VA healthcare system remains the healthcare system of choice for veterans. The Health Policy portfolio includes: Cancer, Cannabis, Caregivers, Dental, Electronic Health Record Modernization, Geriatric and Extended Care, Infrastructure, Insurance, Mental Health, Minority Health, Military Sexual Trauma, Peer Support, Pharmacy, Post Traumatic Stress, Recruitment and Retention, Rehabilitation and Prosthetics, Rural Health, Spinal Cord Injury and Disease, Substance Use Disorder, Suicide Awareness and Prevention, Traumatic Brain Injury, Telehealth, Toxic Exposure, and Women's Health.

System Worth Saving (SWS)

In 2003, then-National Commander Ron Conley visited and assessed the delivery of health care at more than 60 VA (VA) medical facilities across the country. Commander Conley assessed the delivery of health care delivered to the nation's veterans to determine if the VA health care system was a "System Worth Saving."

The following year, The American Legion passed a resolution making System Worth Saving a permanent program under the National Commander. The American Legion's National Executive Committee later realigned the program under the VA&R Commission.

Annually, commission members and staff conduct a series of site visits to VA medical facilities and regional offices. While on site, they meet with veterans, their families, and VA administrators and employees to discuss successes, challenges, and limitations. Each site visit culminates with a report that informs the members of the American Legion and provides additional insight to the President of the United States, members of Congress, and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. After nearly two decades, The American Legion has conducted more than 150 System Worth Saving visits to VA facilities in the United States, its territories, and the Philippines.

The American Legion remains true to one of its original purposes stated in the original chartering documentation in 1919, "to consecrate the efforts of its members to mutual helpfulness and service to the country." Since then, The American Legion remains committed to mutual helpfulness by ensuring that the VA continues intact and properly funded to achieve President Abraham Lincoln's charge, "To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan." The American Legion believes in the quality of care at VA facilities, and we stand behind our mantra that it's a "System Worth Saving."

Health Policy Coordinators conduct SWS site visits in Veteran Integrated Service Networks (VISN) managed by the VA Veterans Health Administration (VHA). The purpose of SWS site visits is to understand what works best at medical centers, identify challenges and make recommendations to help overcome them. Health Policy staff selects VA/VHA sites through a ranked selection process and recommendations to the VA&R Commission. Health Policy staff ranks and recommends visits to VA/VHA health facilities based on requests from American Legion departments, reports from the VA Office of the Inspector General (VAOIG) and Government Accountability Office (GAO), VA's

Nationwide Access Reports, and the media. A site visit consists of a veteran's town hall meeting, a visit to the local VA healthcare facility, and a meeting with the executive leadership team. At the end of each SWS site visit, a report is issued that is shared with the medical center, the VA secretary and under secretary of health, congressional members and the President of the United States.

A SWS site visit covers two and a half days, beginning with a veteran's town hall meeting on the evening of the first day. The second and third days consist of a visit to the local VA healthcare facility, and meetings with the executive leadership and departmental staff to discuss challenges and best practices.

The VA&R division was able to re-launch the SWS program in 2022 and have conducted three visits to VA Medical Center's (VAMC) since the last report was submitted in 2022:

- December 2022 – James J. Peters VA Medical Center Bronx, NY
- March 2023 – Sacramento Veterans Affairs Medical Center Sacramento, CA
- June 2023 – Tuscaloosa Veterans Affairs Medical Center Tuscaloosa, AL

TBI and PTSD Suicide Prevention Programs

In 2020, The American Legion declared suicide prevention as one of its top priorities. Increasingly concerned by the number of veterans taking their own lives, The American Legion established a Suicide Prevention Program and aligned the program under the TBI/PTSD Suicide Prevention Committee. This committee reviews methods, programs, and strategies that can be used to treat TBI and PTSD. In order to reduce veterans' suicide, this committee seeks to influence legislation and operational policies that can facilitate quality healthcare for veterans -- regardless of their era of wartime service.

To stay informed on suicide prevention issues, the TBI/PTSD Suicide Prevention Programs Coordinator attended 22 partnership meetings or coalition workshops/roundtable functions and hosted experts to discuss before our members on community funding for secured firearms storage and alternative psychedelic treatments currently gaining FDA clinical trial approval.

VA Voluntary Services (VAVS)/Center for Development & Civic Engagement (CDCE)

The American Legion's VA Voluntary Service (VAVS) program continues to support VA initiatives that support the care and treatment of veteran patients in VA medical facilities. Every fiscal year, thousands of Legionnaires continue to volunteer at over 200 VA facilities, which included VA medical centers, community clinics, Vet Centers, Fisher Houses, state Veteran's Homes and national cemeteries. Their combined efforts annually total upwards of 700,000 hours volunteered, which saves the VA between \$15 and \$20 million annually.

Military Boards and Memorial Benefits

The Military Boards and Memorial Benefits (MBMB) staff assist veterans, active-duty members and their families, on issues pertaining to the memorial affairs, Department of Defense (DoD) Medical Evaluation Process, Discharge Review and Correction of Military Records; as well as the VA Debt Management Center, VA Pension Management Center, and the VA Life Insurance program.

Memorial Affairs

MBMB staff ensures veterans and their dependents are honored with final resting places in VA national cemeteries, Arlington National Cemetery, state, tribal or private cemeteries. They provide assistance on all National Cemetery Administration (NCA) benefits including headstones, marker, medallions, Presidential Memorial Certificates, military honors, burial flag, burial allowance and survivor benefits.

Discharge Review and Correction of Military Records

Title 10, United States Code, sections 1552 and 1553, provide statutory authority for the existence and operation of the Military Discharge Review Boards and the Boards for Correction of Military Records. The American Legion was instrumental in the creation of these boards shortly after World War II and has represented former servicemembers petitioning them for relief since. Assistance is provided by representing applicants before the board, educating veterans on their due process and how to apply, review and submit applications, and conducting outreach to veterans with “bad paper” discharges. These requests involved a wide variety of issues including character of service upgrades, narrative reason for discharge changes, entitlement or amendment of physical disability severance or retirement, issuance or reissuance of military awards and decorations, requests for military personnel files and service medical records, and administrative corrections to official military records.

Each of the discharge review and correction boards is under a congressional mandate to adjudicate cases within one year from the date of acceptance. We do not have current data on actual processing time for the discharge review and correction boards, but we understand that most, if not all, are not yet in compliance with the one-year mandate, due in part to delays associated with temporary suspension of operations related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Veteran Service Officers at the American Legion National Headquarters units in Washington DC and Indianapolis Indiana provided discharge upgrade or correction of records assistance or information or representation to nearly 100 veterans during the program year. The overwhelming majority of the cases, more than 75, involved veterans who sought information regarding the discharge upgrade and correction of records processes. The relevant information was provided, questions answered, and representation offered in each instance. Some veterans who received information failed to follow through and submit applications, and many chose to complete the relevant forms, assemble evidence and file applications on their own.

The American Legion’s Veteran Service Officers submitted nine applications for discharge upgrades or correction of records during the year. They also represented two veterans at in-person hearings held in the Washington metro area. Of the nine upgrade submissions, three were to the Army Board for Correction of Military Records (BCMR), The remainder were submitted to the Department of the Navy, which uses the same boards for the Navy and the Marine Corps, with three to the Naval Discharge Review Board (DRB) (two Navy and one Marine Corps). The remaining three submissions were to the Board for Correction of Naval Records (BCNR), again with two Navy and one Marine Corps. Of the two hearings, one resulted in a discharge upgrade by the Air Force Discharge Review Board and the other in a denial by the Naval Discharge Review Board.

Pension Management Center (PMC)

The VA PMC processes adjustments of benefits for individuals in receipt of non-service-connected disability pension, death pension and dependency indemnity compensation. Non-service-connected pension is a need-based benefit available for those “most at need” wartime service veterans and their dependents. The American Legion’s Veterans Benefits Specialists are located in St. Paul, MN and Philadelphia, PA. They expedite the delivery of benefits when beneficiaries meet the criteria for receipt in order to reduce a financial hardship. This is accomplished by reviewing all claims for accuracy, ensuring supporting material is included, acting as the counsel and presents verbal arguments on behalf of claimant before VA and preparing claimants for their hearing This program year, the following activities were reported: 1,915 new pension claims and 287 appeals. There were also 857 Waiver Grants during this period.

Restricted Access Claim Center (RACC)

Sensitive files belonging to current and former senior government officials, VA employees and Veteran Service Organization's representatives, are handled at the St. Paul Restricted Access Claim Center. This program year, the following was reported: 243 restricted access compensation claims.

VA Life Insurance

VA life insurance, including Service-Disabled Veterans Insurance (S-DVI), Veterans Group Life Insurance and Family SGLI, TSGLI, and Veterans Mortgage Life Insurance, are handled at the VA Insurance Center in Philadelphia, PA. The American Legion's Veterans Benefits Specialists assist surviving beneficiaries in filing for disbursement of policy at the time of need and ensure veterans are aware of the eligibility window for enrollment. This program year, the following was reported: 2,010 insurance activities.