



November 1, 2024

WEEKLY GRASSROOTS NEWSLETTER

This week, we are asking Legionnaires to contact Congress to request support for H.R. 7543 – *Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act!* This legislation aims to rectify GI Bill inequality for National Guard and Reserve servicemembers. *The American Legion supports this legislation, and we appreciate all the emails you have sent so far. **Go to the [Action Center](#) to quickly email a letter of support to your members of Congress.***

Have you had a recent meeting or phone call with your member of Congress? Report your contact today! Click [here](#) to register your Congressional contact and demonstrate the power of The American Legion advocacy in action.

The American Legion's legislative agenda for the 2nd Session of the 118th Congress is available online. To review our priorities, you can check out our [Advocacy Toolkit](#).

MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

February 22-26, 2025 – The American Legion's 65th Annual Washington Conference will be held at the Washington Hilton Hotel. This conference provides an opportunity for Legionnaires to meet with their respective lawmakers and hear from members of Congress and VA leadership. The National Commander will also address attendees on legislative priorities during the National Commander's Rally. More details, such as agendas and schedules, will be updated [here](#).

National Legislative Council updates coming soon!

Election Day is November 5th, and the 119th Congress will be sworn in on January 3rd at noon! This means there will be some turnover in Congress – some members are retiring, and others will be replaced due to election results. These changes will result in some adjustments to the NLC. Legislative Division staff will be working with the NLC Vice Chairs in each Department to adjust in early December to fill gaps and realign appointees. We will then have training on January 6th for all the new NLC members so that we can hit the ground running and have an increased influence on Congress! If you are on the NLC, stay tuned for further details as we work through this process. If you are a Vice Chair, expect detailed communications from D.C. soon!

K2 VETERANS WITH CERTAIN TYPES OF CANCER MAY SOON QUALIFY FOR EXPEDITED VA DISABILITY CLAIMS

This article's original publication can be found [here](#).



Veterans who were assigned to a remote installation in Uzbekistan early in the Global War on Terrorism and now have cancer in their urinary or reproductive systems may soon be eligible for fast-tracked benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

VA Secretary Denis McDonough announced Tuesday that the department will start the federal process for adding bladder, urethra and other genitourinary cancers to a list of diseases presumed to be caused by serving at Karshi Khanabad Air Base, also known as K2 or Camp Stronghold Freedom, in the Central Asia nation.

The installation, located on a former Soviet military station, was used by U.S. forces as a command-and-control and logistics support facility from 2001 to 2005.

According to media reports by McClatchy, The Associated Press and CBS, the installation was contaminated with numerous toxic substances, including solvents, fuel, lubricants, trace amounts of chemical weapons and depleted uranium, and many veterans have reported cases of brain, colon, thyroid, pancreatic and other cancers after serving there.

"Veterans often describe [it] as a toxic soup of exposures ... a place that jeopardized their immediate [and] long-term health," said McDonough, speaking at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. "[Army] Col. Gordon Peters, a doc who was deployed with those early units, vividly described what he saw, what he says was, quote, 'chemical odor so intense that it seemed as if someone could light a match [and] the entire area would ignite.'"

Any veteran who thinks they have an illness caused by their military service can file a compensation claim with the VA; filings are decided on a case-by-case basis.

However, those with a condition designated as "presumptive" don't have a requirement to prove that their illness is service-connected, a change that can expedite their claim.

According to the VA, 13,002 of the 16,000 veterans who served at K2 have enrolled in VA health care, and nearly 12,000 already have received a disability rating for a linked condition.

The move follows an announcement earlier this year that K2 veterans with chronic illnesses that aren't easily defined -- those with symptoms similar to Persian Gulf War veterans with medically unexplained conditions -- are eligible for the expedited benefits process.

In the past several years, the VA has launched its own internal process to determine whether health conditions may be presumed to be related to military service. Previously, the department relied on input from the National Academies of Sciences, Medicine and Engineering and had no way of determining on its own whether a condition was service connected.

That changed in the lead-up to passage of the PACT Act, which broadened the VA's ability to consider its own claims data, along with scientific research, to grant presumptive status. Since then, it has added a number of conditions, including several rare cancers and respiratory illnesses, to its list of diseases considered related to combat and support duties in the Persian Gulf region, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

The K2 decision is a result of that process.

Last year, the VA announced it would review whether to add certain types of blood cancer, including acute and chronic leukemias and multiple myeloma to the list covered by the PACT Act, the landmark legislation that broadened benefits for veterans exposed to burn pits and other battlefield pollution overseas.

McDonough said Tuesday that the review will be completed next week for those conditions, adding that the "preliminary findings are promising."

"In 2022, we established service connection for asthma, sinusitis, rhinitis and rare respiratory cancers; again today, with [genitourinary] cancers; and soon for multiple myeloma and blood cancers," McDonough said.

Advocates called the announcement about genitourinary cancers among K2 veterans a "clear win," noting McDonough's announcement that he also is committed to continuing research on illnesses among those who served at the base.

The Stronghold Freedom Foundation, which represents veterans who served at K2 as well as surviving families, said the group is grateful that the VA continues to acknowledge the long-term health effects caused by the installation's toxic environment.

"We look forward to continuing working with the VA to ensure all gaps are closed so all veterans and their families are ensured the care and recognition they deserve," Matt Erpelding, the group's executive director, said in a statement.

"We were very encouraged that he said VA is not only working on establishing presumptives for K2 veterans who develop bladder cancer, multiple myeloma, leukemia, and Gulf War Illness, but also laid out his intention to establish a presumption of service connection for every condition associated with deployment to K2," said Randy Reese, executive director of the Disabled American Veterans' Washington headquarters, in a statement.

The VA also announced Tuesday that it set records for providing medical care and benefits to veterans in fiscal 2024, including 127.5 million medical appointments, up 6% from fiscal 2023, and processed 2.5 million disability claims, up 27% from last year.

According to the VA, 6.7 million U.S. veterans or their families now receive benefits from the department.

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB: SECRETARY OF VA'S STATE OF VA BRIEFING

The article's original publication can be found [here](#).

Good morning. Emily Wilkins, thanks for that kind introduction, and for leading this important organization. Let me recognize the Press Club's American Legion Post and its commander, Tom Young, and all the Veterans Service Organizations represented here. Veterans Service Organizations are critical to helping us serve Vets, their family members, caregivers, and survivors.

I want to thank all the journalists who served our country in uniform. Journalists like Thomas Gibbons-Neff, a Marine combat Vet and the son of a combat Vet, who writes powerfully now about the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. I've been particularly struck by his writing on the end of America's deployments to and withdrawal from Afghanistan.

While I want to be careful here as a non-Veteran myself, it struck me that his writing brought to life the painful experiences that thousands of his fellow Afghanistan Vets wrestle with to this day. Navy Veteran Zack Baddorf, founder of the group Military Veterans in Journalism, is helping ensure more Vets go into journalism, a vocation that is so important to our democracy that Vets have sacrificed everything to protect it.

Zach's getting more Vets into newsrooms around the country—improving coverage of Veterans issues and increasing trust in the media. To Thomas and Zack, to all Veteran journalists, and to all journalists—thank you.

Veterans Day is around the corner, so now's a good time to begin preparing our hearts and minds for that celebration—remembering, recognizing, and thanking all those men and women who have fought our nation's wars and defended us during periods of restless peace. But our profound gratitude to Veterans goes beyond Veterans Day, because Vets continue serving this country long after they take off their uniforms.

They've dedicated themselves to building an America that is stronger, freer, fairer for each new generation, that more perfect Union we all seek. Anchored by their commitment to service over self, they continue serving this country, always looking out for one another, with their enduring sense of duty, valor, and love of country. Veterans set the highest example of what it means to be an American citizen. So, at VA, we strive to serve Vets every bit as well as they served—and continue to serve—all of us. Veterans Day is a time to renew that commitment, renew what President Biden calls our country's one truly sacred obligation—to prepare those we send into harm's way, and to care for them and their families when they come home.

Now, when I first spoke to the Press Club four years ago, the country was in a historic public health emergency, and VA's employees were risking their lives to save the lives of Veterans. Despite those challenges, I told you that VA public servants were breaking all-time records, providing more care and more benefits to more Vets than ever before. And each year, I've come back here with a similar report. This year is no different. By nearly every metric, VA's smashing records we set last year. That's even more care, more benefits, to more Vets. And it's not just more care. It's better, world-class care, and it's better health outcomes for Veterans than in the private sector. It's not just more benefits, it's faster, more accessible benefits we're delivering by meeting Vets where they are rather than expecting them to come to us. And it's not just more Vets, its more Vets trusting VA at rates higher than ever before. President Biden, a military family member and the surviving father of combat Veteran Major Beau Biden, has been unrelenting—and forcefully demanding—in his advocacy for Veterans and their families. He has spent his entire career fighting like hell for Vets, just as he charged me and my VA teammates to do four years ago. Under President Biden's leadership, VA has been made into something different—something new.

Nowhere has that been more evident than with President Biden's toxic exposure law—the PACT Act. Because of that law, more than 5.8 million Vets have been screened for toxic exposures. More than 740,000 have enrolled in VA care. And more than 1.1 million Veterans and 11,000 survivors are receiving benefits. The toxic exposure legislation called for a phased-in approach, getting Vets access to care and benefits as late, in some cases, as 2032. But President Biden made it clear that timeline wasn't fast enough for one simple reason—for too long, too many Vets were exposed to harmful substances and waited decades for help. So, he directed us to accelerate implementation so all eligible Vets and their survivors got the care and benefits they deserve—as quickly as possible.

And that has been life-changing for so many families.

We can measure President Biden's record-breaking work on behalf of Veterans—on ending Veteran homelessness, on removing barriers to mental health care, on getting Vets in crisis the support they need when they need it, and more. In fact, you probably saw the press release we put out this morning detailing all of VA's record-breaking accomplishments over the course of the past year. But we can never put a value on the countless miracles that have improved and made Veterans lives better. Numbers and statistics can't adequately describe the impact. Dollars and data can't ever really begin to capture and communicate the values, the personalities, the humanity of the Veterans we have the honor of serving. So, as I prepared for today's speech, I thought, maybe those are the very things we need to talk about. Let me tell you three stories that demonstrate the impact and importance of the work we do, together.

I'll start with Angela Bell. I met Angela in Hampton, Virginia last month. Angela is one of the most generous and courageous people I've ever met. She lost her son, Sean, and has turned her grief into action. Let me tell you a little bit about Sean. Sean knew he wanted to join the military since he was a kid. He was so determined to enlist after graduating high school that at 17 years old he got his dad to sign the parental consent paperwork. And Sean served all over America—Georgia, North Carolina, California—served all over the world, Korea, Afghanistan, Iraq. He married and had a son, Giovanni.

He earned his Bachelor's degree. He earned a Master's. He earned a second Master's and was working on his Ph.D.—he liked to tease his mom, telling her she'd have to start calling him Dr. Bell. Sean was the kind of guy who'd invite other Soldiers over to Angela's house for Thanksgiving because they had nowhere else to go. He'd ask his mom to send him extra care packages while he was on deployment, not for himself, but to share with his brothers- and sisters-in-arms who didn't get anything from back home. He's an example of the selfless Vet I was talking about a few minutes ago.

Well, after Sean came back from his second deployment to Central Command, Angela started noticing some changes. Every time firecrackers went off, he'd jump. Being in

traffic was overwhelming, anxious about other vehicles around him. He was enduring some personal problems, family health issues and more. When Angela tried to get Sean help, he refused, worried about losing his clearance. Sean had served in the Army for 20 years. And just a few weeks before his retirement in 2021, he died by suicide.

Now, I've spoken at many events focused on VA's and our partners' work to end Veteran suicide. I've explained that ending Veteran suicide is our number one clinical priority at VA. I've talked about resourcing and about people and organizations singularly devoted to end Veteran suicide. I've talked about data and processes and what we're doing to try to make a real, substantial difference—promising initiatives. And I've shared story after story about Veterans not just surviving, but getting the mental health care they need and thriving. Yet, none of that will bring Sean back or heal his family's heartbreak. None of that gets to the enormous tragedy of Veteran suicide or gets to the powerful, painful emotions.

So, here's why I'm telling Sean's story, Angela's story. Angela's doing everything she can do so other families don't suffer the same devastation when she lost Sean, when this country lost Sean. "I try to be the face of [those] who [were] left behind," Angela says. "I'm so passionate about telling his story because if it helps one person, whether I know it or not, then I'm doing what I'm supposed to do." She said, "People tell me I'm so strong. I'm not. I'm a mom, advocating and fighting for my kid." Angela's the President of the Hampton Roads Chapter of American Gold Star Mothers, and she often speaks on our work to end Veteran suicide. Thanksgiving was Sean and Angela's favorite holiday. And in his memory, Angela hosts an annual Thanksgiving meal and invites servicemembers, Veterans, and their families to join her. The gathering quickly outgrew her dinner table, and then got too big for her home. This year, Angela's renting a dining hall to host dozens of families from the military community to share a warm Thanksgiving meal together. The community she's built has helped Angela heal. And she heals by helping others, so they're not alone, and so they know there is always, always hope. Those are the kind of people we have the incredible privilege and honor to serve at VA.

But we have so much work to do to keep our promise to Vets. That leads me to my next story. It was almost exactly 23 years ago—October 5th, 2001—when the first US forces arrived at the Karshi-Khanabad air base in Uzbekistan, a former Soviet base known as "K2." K2 Veterans were among the first to deploy after the September 11th terrorist attacks, bravely conducting and supporting combat missions against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. They went to a place at K2 that Veterans often describe as a "toxic soup" of exposures, a place unlike other operating bases occupied by American forces. A place that jeopardized their immediate and long-term health. Colonel Gordon Peters vividly describes what he says was a "chemical odor so intense that it seemed as if someone could light a match and the entire area would ignite." Some K2 Vets returned home and developed disabling illnesses and conditions. Their service is heroic.

Mindful of the passage of time since their heroic service, we've moved aggressively to care for K2 Vets since the PACT Act was passed in 2022.

First, we eliminated the PACT Act phase-in period for presumptive benefits—making all K2 Vets immediately eligible for more than 300 presumptive conditions.

Second, earlier this year, we made all K2 Veterans eligible for VA health care, whether or not they've filed a benefits claim with VA.

Third, after consulting with K2 Vets this summer, we've begun rulemaking to make chronic multi-symptom illness—also known as Gulf War Illness—a presumptive condition for K2 Veterans, fixing a gap in the PACT Act.

Fourth, for every K2 claim, we've made sure the unique toxic exposures at K2—that toxic soup—is taken into account, and each new K2 claim gets reviewed a second time before VA reaches a final decision.

And fifth, we've reached out to every known living K2 Veteran to encourage them to come to us for the care and benefits they deserve.

All of that work has been driven by Veteran and survivor advocates, reporters like you, and a tireless VA team working on toxic exposures, some of the best toxic exposure researchers, scientists, and epidemiologists in the world. Because of that hard work,

13,000 of the 16,000 K2 Vets are enrolled in VA healthcare, nearly 12,000 are service-connected for at least one condition, receiving an average of \$30,000 a year in earned benefits. All told, K2 Vets now have higher claim and approval rates than any other cohort of Veterans.

But we have more work to do to get this right. Some K2 Vets still understandably feel overlooked, because they've waited for 23 long years to see their uniquely dangerous service recognized. We still have to do better and be better, for those K2 Vets. That's why, today, I'm proud to announce that VA will begin rulemaking to add bladder, ureter, and other genitourinary—or GU cancers—as new presumptive conditions for K2 Vets and all eligible toxic-exposed Vets. And we aren't stopping there.

Next week, we will complete the scientific review of multiple myeloma and leukemias. The preliminary findings are promising and suggest that VA will be able to make those conditions presumptive for K2 Veterans and all eligible Veterans. And once the final results are in, VA will look to extend that presumption to all biologically linked blood cancers. This may include polycythemia vera—or P. Vera—a condition identified by K2 Vets. We will do so based on biological science and on the results of a PACT Act

presumptive process, without requiring Vets to wait for VA to complete additional studies. And moving forward, I am committed to establishing service connection for any rare condition found in K2 Vets which has a plausible biological link to the toxic soup we know and acknowledge was present at K2.

Because we are a new VA. One that works with Veterans for Veterans. And one that delivers outcomes for Veterans. We will no longer take decades to consider new presumptive conditions, but will instead use the tools provided by the PACT Act as quickly as possible to proactively establish service connections whenever the evidence supports it. We put that promise into action in 2021 when the President directed us to work on a Central Command burn pit presumption, nearly two years before passage of the PACT Act. We put it into action in 2022 when we established service connection for asthma, sinusitis, rhinitis, and rare respiratory cancers—again today with GU cancers and soon for multiple myeloma and blood cancers. We'll continue proving that we're a new VA by using the expedited PACT Act process to look further into that toxic soup at K2. The President considers this unfinished business—and expects VA to establish a presumption of service connection for every condition associated with deployment to K2 – and we're committed to doing so.

We have to keep listening to K2 Vets and all Vets. We have to keep fighting like hell for them. So, thank you to the Vets, advocates, and journalists who have been instrumental in highlighting the heroes who served at K2. You make us better by holding us accountable. We are proud of our accomplishments, these outcomes for Veterans. But we are candid when we come up short—candid with ourselves, with you, with Vets, with Congress, and with the American people. America's Vets deserve our very best, and we'll never settle for anything less. Hold us to it.

Third and finally—let me talk about VA's people—your public servants—who are keeping our country's sacred obligation to Vets. They are the best, most compassionate, highest-performing, and most dedicated workforce in the federal government—in the entire country—folks who want to make real differences in the lives of Veterans. I'm proud and I'm privileged to be on their team.

I'm reminded of that every single day, but it was driven home most profoundly when I was surveying Hurricane Helene's destruction in Asheville, North Carolina. For over a month now, the Asheville VA, the VISN 6 leadership team, and their incident command team have been working around the clock, tirelessly, to support Vets and staff impacted by the storm. Asheville VA's food service employees and the Veterans Canteen Service disaster response team loaded up two tons of food and served 17,000 meals in the first week of recovery efforts, a source of great comfort in the aftermath of the crisis.

Their Volunteer Services have collected thousands of donations from fellow VA employees. And our chaplains have been holding candlelight vigils, a space for

Veterans and VA staff to be together ... supporting and comforting one another during this tragedy.

In the hardest hit areas across Western North Carolina, we identified over 2,600 at-risk Vets, Vets undergoing chemotherapy, with spinal cord injuries, requiring oxygen, and other support. We couldn't call many of them because phones were out—cell phones and landlines—so right after the hurricane, VA teams went out to check on unaccounted Vets in-person. They achieved 100% accountability for all at-risk Vets in their care. Given the devastation in those communities, that is an amazing accomplishment. And they continue reaching out to Veterans in the area to make sure they have everything they need.

For VA nurses Melissa Mehaffey and Lisa Sellers, taking care of Vets in this crisis is their duty and it's also about holding tight to hope. Lisa and Melissa have been a pair since starting at VA on the same day ten years ago. They're Haywood County natives and came to work at VA because they have family members who are Vets. "Here," Melissa says, "it's all about the Veteran. The heart of our system is with our patients."

"When we got a name, we knew—those are our people," Melissa said. "We're going to find them, figure out what they need, and help them. We're going to make sure they are ok." She says, "Going out there and taking care of our people ... this was our tiny piece of hope." One of the Vets they checked on had been without power, and no one could reach him by phone. He wrote us a letter. "No one but VA," he said, "No one but VA would do something like that ... in that moment there was a human connection that no other healthcare system would have even thought of."

Army Veteran and VA employee Corey Anderson feels the same way. Corey was deployed to Kuwait and Iraq from 2005 to 2007, and the devastation he saw in Asheville reminded him of war zones. Corey went to check on one rural Veteran, drove until the road was gone, washed away. So what did Corey do? He parked his car in the middle of the road and hiked the rest of the way. He climbed up the mountainside with a pack full of supplies for the Veterans' upcoming medical procedure. Corey says, "Doing this work means the world to me. I'm a Veteran. My dad, mom, sister, and so much of my family is made up of Veterans. It just means the world to me to do my part." Veterans helping Veterans, there is nothing better. VA's employees across the Southeast and Appalachia—people like Melissa, like Lisa and Corey—worked long hours through two devastating hurricanes, some working multiple shifts or staying overnight at the hospital. They risked their own lives to serve Veterans. Because whether we're in times of calm or chaos, VA's public servants always mobilize around one core mission—saving and improving Veterans' lives. And right now there are Veterans at home, with their families—happy, safe, and healthy—because of them. I am incredibly grateful to each and every one of them.

Now, our mission at VA is far from over. There are huge challenges ahead. And as we look to the future, we're going to continue to do better for Vets. We're going to continue to be better for Vets. This future at VA isn't because of me. In fact, I had asked that this new VA be represented here today at the Press Club by the best face of this new VA: our Deputy Secretary, a combat Veteran, the daughter and granddaughter of combat Veterans, someone who gets her care at VA, and someone who is part of the fastest growing cadre of Veterans at VA: women. The VA is new and more effective because of the Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors we are so blessed to serve—and because of Veterans like Tanya Bradsher who serve their fellow Veterans.

This future is because of the 450,000 VA employees in your communities and neighborhoods across the country who keep Vets at the heart of their care. And it's because of partners like you, too.

I'll close with a final word to the Vets watching today. Your honorable service in uniform sets the example for the rest of the country. You're the keepers of our national ethos—that deep and abiding sense of purpose you learned in serving, your camaraderie and your care for each other, your sense of teamwork that made you stronger, together—in combat and, now, in your communities. That's exactly what we need, what this country needs. Your examples are something that all of us can learn from. So, again, to all Veterans—those of you here today and those watching, thank you for everything. And to the Press Club, my thanks for all that you do holding us accountable to Vets, and telling their stories in the powerful ways that you do. God bless you all. And God bless our nation's servicemembers, our Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

To recognize the weekly accomplishments of our Legionnaires, we will spotlight an individual every week. These individuals demonstrate exceptional grassroots activism by meeting with/contacting their Congressional Representative/Senator to advocate for veterans. Efforts like these truly make a difference and give veterans a voice in Congress.

Sarah Tobin, Colorado

Sarah, for your steadfast advocacy of Legion priorities, we are honored to name you Legionnaire of the Week!

This week, Sarah hosted a "Meet the Candidate" forum at American Legion Post 5 (Colorado Springs) with all 3 candidates that are running for Colorado's 5th District. These candidates were each given 7 veteran-related questions to prepare answers for ahead of time. These questions related to topics such as rural veteran care, mental health care for veterans, transitioning veterans, and veteran homelessness. They were also asked 5 additional questions from Legionnaires/audience members.

Thank you, Sarah, for your report and the time you have dedicated to the Legion's legislative priorities.

If you have made a Grassroots effort and would like to be considered for next week's "Legionnaire of the Week," please fill out the Congressional Contact Report Form [here](#). You can also email us at grassroots@legion.org with the details.

GRASSROOTS INFORMATION

Interested in what the Legion is advocating for in Congress on ***The Veteran's Role in Supporting the Military?*** Check out our [information papers](#) in the [Legislative Toolkit](#). This is a great starting point for a conversation with your elected officials!

As part of our ongoing Grassroots efforts, LegDiv staff is available to provide **Grassroots Training** tailored to the hosting Department's needs. If you are interested in hosting a Grassroots training event, please contact grassroots@legion.org or ejohnson@legion.org.

You can find relevant legislation and the Legion's stance on them in the [key legislation section of VoterVoice](#).

Register for Action Alerts today at
<https://www.votervoice.net/AmericanLegion/Register>



UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

As of 9:00 am on Friday, November 1, there are NO hearings scheduled. Congress is in recess until November 12.

HVAC hearings can be viewed at: [Calendar Home | House Committee on Veterans Affairs](#)

SVAC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings - U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs](#)

HASC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings – House Armed Services Committee](#)

SASC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings – U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services](#)

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