



# Florida Veteran

## Vietnam and All Veterans of Florida, Inc.

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# MARCH 2019

# Volume 18 - Issue 1

## Florida's 32nd Annual Vietnam and All Veterans Reunion

Sunday, May 5th The Vietnam Traveling Memorial Wall, The Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom Tribute Panels Walls will be escorted from Eastern State College Cocoa Campus, Clearlake Road at 10 am. Be there an hour earlier for line up. We are going to need help at the Wall Escort selling T -Shirts, flags, and help with the parking lot control. If you would like to help, please contact Doc Russo at 321-652-4185 or e-mail at [RaRusso1962@gmail.com](mailto:RaRusso1962@gmail.com) or for Escort Info e-mail [vvbreunionescort@gmail.com](mailto:vvbreunionescort@gmail.com)

ESC has always been a big supporter of the Reunion and they said we could use their parking lot forever if we clean it up when we are done, so please help police it up before you pull out. There will be coffee & donuts available that morning for a donation courtesy of the USA River Rats. More than 1500 motorcycles and vehicles took part in the escort last year and several joined in along the way. We should arrive about 11am at Wickham Park. At the back pavilions the VVB will host a covered dish picnic, grilling hamburgers & hot dogs to feed the many volunteers there to help set up the memorial displays. Please bring a covered dish or snack foods to share. Anyone with large drink containers are asked to please bring them filled with iced tea, lemonade, Kool-aid or even water to share with the many hot & thirsty workers. We will have plenty of cups, plates and napkins. There is so much to do, but with everyone pitching in it is easily accomplished. The sign-up book will be at the Wall Set-up, please remember to volunteer some of your time throughout the week.

Opening Ceremony is Monday evening May 6th starting with the Wreath presentations at 6 PM with the guest speakers starting at 7:00 pm and will feature the presentation of colors, several speakers who support the Vietnam and All Veterans Reunion, a rifle salute and taps. The memorials will be open to the public 24 hours a day through May 12th. It will be a busy week and we will need lots of help this year to set up the tents, generators and light trees.

**The Tentative schedule of events is listed to the right.**

**"32 Years of Brotherhood"**

### 2019 Tentative Schedule of Events

**Sunday - May 5th**

**10:00am Wall Escort from Eastern State College, Cocoa Campus  
12:00pm Doc Holiday, Covered Dish Picnic and Wall Set-Up**

**Monday - May 6th**

**6:00pm Presentation of wreaths  
7:00pm Opening Ceremonies at the Wall**

**Thursday - May 9th**

**12:00pm Doc Holiday  
2:00-3:30pm County Road 2  
5:00-6:30pm A Touch of Gray Band  
8:00-10:00pm Absolute Blue Band**

**Friday - May 10th**

**11:00am Doc Holiday  
3:00pm K9 Demonstration Main Stage Area  
3:30-5:00pm Southern Thunder Band  
6:30-8:00pm Joe Reid and the Heartland Band (Daytona Beach)  
9:30-11:00pm Viva Rock Band (Miami)**

**Saturday - May 11th**

**11:00am Opening Ceremonies/Massing of the Colors/ LZ Helicopter Landing  
12:00-12:30pm Quilts Of Valor  
1:00-2:30pm Hypersona  
3:00pm Marines Take The Hill Main Stage Area  
3:30-5:00pm Lyrical Soul  
5:00-6:00pm Suncoast Vietnam Vets "The Last Patrol"  
6:30-8:00pm Horsepower Band  
9:30-11:00pm Caribbean Chillers Band (Jimmy Buffett Tribute Band)**

**Sunday - May 12th**

**10:00am Church Services with John Steer  
11:00am Doc Holiday  
11:30-2:00pm Challenge 22 Event  
2:00-3:30pm Roughhouse Band  
4:00pm Melbourne Municipal Band at the Wall  
5:00pm Closing Ceremony at the Wall**

**Monday - May 13th**

**9:00am Cleanup Wickham Park and Wall Take Down**

**Brought to you by the Vietnam and All Veterans of Brevard, Inc.**

**PLEASE - NO COOLERS, GLASS OR PETS IN REUNION**

By Proclamation, Governor Ron DeSantis designated April 29<sup>th</sup> 2019 being Vietnam Veterans Day and held a ceremony, day of networking and workshops at the USF campus in Tampa to commemorate this occasion; The event was called Forward March; only the top VSOs in the State were in attendance, strictly by invitation only, as well as representatives from the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs, Florida Veterans Foundation and VISN8. We are pleased to advise all that the Vietnam and All Veterans of Florida State Coalition was proud to be a part of this auspicious event. We were proudly represented by Tony Cartlidge and Mike Boucher (President of the VVA State Council and Chairman of the Florida Veterans Council). The workshops were broken down into different groups all aimed at helping vets (mental health, homeless vets, law – veterans court, etc.) to see what our State Department of Veterans Affairs can do to help the Veterans of the State of Florida. Florida currently is number three in veteran's population in the country and will soon become number two, taking the spot from Texas. Tony and Mike, on behalf of The Vietnam and All Veterans of Florida, State Coalition presented Governor DeSantis with a plaque in recognition of his commitment, dedication and devoted service to all Veterans. The event was sponsored by the Florida Veterans Foundation, Dennis Baker President.



Photos from Forward March Event at USF March 29<sup>th</sup> 2019 – Vietnam Veterans Day

The Vietnam and all Veterans of Florida State Coalition would like to recognize the following members/organizations for awards that were presented at our Annual Banquet held this past January. Florida Dustoff Association - Organization of the Year, Jason Althouse, Volusia County Service Officer – Veteran of the Year, Roberta Neitzel and Rose Diaz – Members of the Year.

In addition, our 2019 executive board members are: Van Carter President, Robert “Doc” Neitzel, 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President, Ralph Earrusso 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President, Roberta Neitzel, Secretary, Jacque Earrusso, Treasurer and Ron “Doc” Custer Sgt. of Arms.

# MESSAGE FROM THE 1<sup>ST</sup> VICE PRESIDENT

It is my honor and pleasure to announce that we, the Vietnam and All Veterans of Florida, State Coalition, were able to participate in the Forward March Event held at USF on what was proclaimed Vietnam Veterans Day in the State of Florida. And how fitting that not one, but two combat vets from Vietnam presented Governor DeSantis with a Plaque honoring him for his commitment, dedication and devoted service to all Veterans. I can only hope that the day's event was just one of many that will be held and the outcome of the workshops will in turn lead added benefits and a better understanding of what we, the veterans in the State of Florida, are in need of.

On behalf of the Vietnam and All Veterans State Coalition, I would like to take this opportunity to welcome all to the 32nd Vietnam and All Veterans Reunion. It amazes me that the VVB and all that support this reunion has brought us all together for so many years, helped to heal our brothers and sisters, reunited brothers and sisters in arms and has given of themselves all these years for us. The membership of the VVB has been hard at work all year to bring this Reunion to fruition once again and I would like to thank each and every one of them for their dedication to helping and honoring *ALL* veterans. The friendships that we have made over the years, the brothers and sisters that have been reunited over the years...not just Vietnam Veterans, but Desert Storm, OIF and OEF. The one common thread between us all is brotherhood – we understand each other, we can tell when someone needs a shoulder to lean on and we can reach out and help each other without a word being spoken. It is simply understood because we are all brothers.

I have stated this before and it is getting more and more important and urgent. A focal point for many organizations as of late is membership – we, the Vietnam Vets are not getting any younger and we need to find ways to attract our younger vets (Desert Storm, OEF, and OIF) into our ranks. We need their involvement not only to assist them in obtaining their benefits and to help them readjust to civilian life, but we will need to pass the torch to them – they will be the ones to carry on for us once we are gone. We all need to reach out to them and get them involved. The sooner the better. I believe it is our responsibility to guide them and to make sure they know from us, their peers, that they are welcomed and supported by fellow veterans. One thing that does concern me though is newly separated veteran does not know what benefits are available to them and I believe it is our responsibility to guide them to the VA and service officers.

I find that most organizations have similar goals to that of the coalition – to get information out to our fellow brothers and sisters so they can obtain assistance and to ensure that the Veteran community is not forgotten and that legislation to assist us is proposed and passed. An issue here is that most times, each organization has their own agenda and only pursues the issues that they are concerned with. If we cannot agree amongst ourselves as to the importance or priorities of these issues and direct these to our politicians, then our voices will never be heard by our State and Federal Legislators. If we as organizations cannot unite on issues pertaining to all of us, and cannot determine the best way to fund these issues, then we fail as organizations as our goals outlined in most of our charters and/or by-laws have fallen to the wayside and have been long forgotten.

I would like to invite all to discuss with their general membership joining the State Coalition, to participate in our quarterly meetings held throughout the State of Florida and to take advantage of all the information that is disseminated from our member

organizations. The Coalition is a voting member of the Florida Veterans Council and with your organization becoming a member of ours: your voice can be directed and heard where it is important. I believe you will find as I have stated, that the goals of the State Coalition are not so different from yours and we need to unite – We all served together, fought together and we are now all fighting for the rights of veterans – shouldn't this be a united front?

I ask that you keep all active duty service members in your thoughts and prayers and please pray that each and every one of them ALWAYS return home to their loved ones safely. Also, as we celebrate our 32nd Reunion, please take a moment and pause to reflect on our brothers and sisters that are no longer able to be here with us. Enjoy the Reunion and please, safe travels home.

Respectfully yours,  
Robert "Doc" Neitzel

1<sup>st</sup> Vice President, Vietnam and All Veterans  
Of Florida State Coalition

## FLORIDA DUSTOFF ASSOCIATION



Dedicated Unhesitating Service To Our  
Fighting Forces

***“So Others May Live”***

On behalf of Florida Dustoff Association I would like to take a moment to say “Welcome Home” and welcome to the 32nd Vietnam and All Veterans of Brevard Reunion. The Florida Dustoff Association is comprised of Dustoff Medics, Pilots, Corpsmen, Donut Dollies, Med-Evacs and many whom themselves have been “dusted-off” from the Vietnam, Desert Storm, OIF and OEF. Please stop by our campsite in Camp Ground B at this year's coming reunion if you are one of the above to say hello, or are interested in joining our organization. **ALL ARE WELCOMED AT DUSTOFF!!**

This past years elected officers are: Ron “Doc” Custer President, Bob “Doc” Neitzel Vice President, Nancy Church, Secretary and Roberta Neitzel, Treasurer,

Members of Florida Dustoff participate in numerous veterans related events in conjunction with other local organizations...Stand



downs, Welcome Home programs, packages to our troops, Wreaths Across America, and The Ride Home to name a few. We all strive for the same end result...taking care of our fellow brothers and sisters. I would like to Congratulate to all recipients of awards last year: Member of the Year – Robert “Doc” Neitzel, Certificate of Appreciation for Service to Dustoff – Jacque Earrusso, Ralph Earrusso, Michelle Wakefield, Rose Diaz, Bobbi Jo Dino, Anthony Mathews-Carter, Nancy Church, and John Patton to name a few. Plaques were also presented to the USA River Rats Honor Guard and State Senator Dorothy Hukill.

**Ron “Doc” Custer – President, Florida Dustoff**

***“WHEN I HAVE YOUR WOUNDED”***

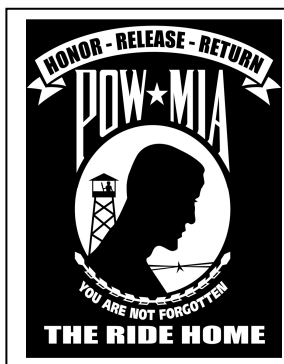


The Vietnam Brotherhood is an in-country, fraternal association of Vietnam Veterans. The Vietnam Brotherhood's organizational purpose is first social. However, the stated desire of the membership and officers are to help one another support our respective communities through charitable drives and donations as well as support Veterans' rights issues and all other legal activities common to Veterans organizations. Our goals include:

- To help each other in our separate Company's
- To help other Vietnam Veterans
- To help other Veterans
- To help our community
- To educate the public about the true Vietnam Veteran
- To teach the young, so it does not happen again
- To be **Proud** to be in a free nation, under **God**.

We invite all In-Country Veterans who still remember the brotherhood we once had to re-light the fire. The Vietnam Brotherhood was born to serve you, not for you to become a servant.

Our website address is [www.vietnambrotherhood.us](http://www.vietnambrotherhood.us) please check us out.



## **HONOR-RELEASE -RETURN, Inc.**

**3818 Litchfield Loop Lake Wales, Florida 33859**

[www.honorreleasereturn.com](http://www.honorreleasereturn.com)

### **The Mission**

Working for the repatriation of live American Prisoners of War in any form of captivity world-wide. To devote all available manpower and resources of the organization to build political support through education and attain mission favorable outcomes. To craft and pass effective legislation, gain government action and success in repatriating Prisoners of War and those still Missing in Action. To act as a catalyst for the POW/MIA community through communication, organization and coordination of efforts to foster common success of all and nurture a universal will to account for all the missing.

### **The Name**

Why the name Honor Release Return? We have come together to take action and restore **honor** to our government by stopping the dishonor and hold them accountable. Our government has abandoned young patriots in captivity and we have come together to gain the **release** of their person alive or their remains and to **return** them to their country, their home and their family. This is our mission and this is our strategy. Truth and honor are our sabers. We will wield them unrelentingly and expertly, no matter how long the fight, until they all come home.

### **The Reason**

#### **Unaccounted for American Military Personal**

<b><u>WWI</u></b>	<b><u>WWII</u></b>	<b><u>Korea</u></b>	<b><u>Cold War</u></b>	<b><u>Vietnam</u></b>	<b><u>War on Terror</u></b>
3,344	73,677	7,926	126	1,654	6

### **Our Demands**

1. U.S.G. formally request the return of all live Americans who are unaccounted for, in captivity or being detained in any foreign country
2. U.S.G. under take all measures necessary to repatriate all Americans who are unaccounted for, in captivity or being detained in any foreign country.
3. U.S.G. under take all measures necessary to obtain all information held and/or known by foreign governments, groups and individuals concerning all Americans who are now or who have been unaccounted for at any time.
4. All information, in any form regardless of when or how obtained, pertaining to Americans unaccounted for prior to 1991 be declassified and made available for public inspection.
5. Funding of all actions to account for Americans who are unaccounted for be fully funded by the U.S.G.
6. All remains recovered in association with unaccounted for Americans, past, present and future, be identified and/or confirmed using the latest scientific means and that all remains be tested and

analyzed for age at death using minimal remains to allow for a 2nd, independent DNA analysis if family members so desire.

**It is time for Americans to STAND for those who CANNOT STAND for themselves.**

CONTACT US Together we can make happen!

BOB "Bulldog" Ousley [bousle19@comcast.com](mailto:bousle19@comcast.com)

Jim "Moe" Moyer [moehog@verizon.net](mailto:moehog@verizon.net)

## **Support Florida's Veterans and Our Mission by Supporting the Walk of Honor**

The Florida Veterans Foundation's main mission is to provide emergency assistance to Florida veterans and their families who are having financial difficulties which cannot be resolved by the veteran or other veteran service organizations. Most of these situations will develop into a catastrophic situation such as homelessness, if the situation is not solved promptly. Many cases that the Foundation handles involve Service Connected Disabled Veterans. Read more about our emergency assistance program go to <http://www.floridaveteransfoundation.org>. After receiving a bona-fide application for assistance from a veteran, the Foundation responds to the emergency within 24 to 48 hours with a solution as warranted by the facts of the situation. Last year, the Foundation expended well over \$200,000.00 helping Florida's veterans and their families, and assisted over 700 Florida Veterans by providing financial support to those who fit Foundation guidelines, or by providing information on veteran resources such as; available benefits for disability claims, benefits to widows, education resources, housing, etc. Because of the vast amount of services we provide, the Foundation needs your help. You can help support our efforts to Serve, Support and Advocate for our Florida Veterans by donating, volunteering or by purchasing a brick to honor a loved one. Please help us make a difference in our Florida heroes' lives.

The Florida Veterans Walk of Honor will accommodate 25,000 engraved bricks. There are presently 1.5 million veterans residing in the State of Florida. Your engraved brick will be placed on a first come, first serve basis. Therefore, the first 25,000 engraved bricks will be the ones placed in the Florida Veterans Walk of Honor at our State Capitol. *On November 12, 2014*, Governor Scott placed the first memorialized engraved brick into the Florida Veterans Walk of Honor. The Veterans Walk of Honor measures 12 feet wide by 500 feet long, and connects both the old and new Capitol buildings, the House and Senate Buildings and the Florida Veterans Memorial. The heart of the Veterans Walk of Honor will consist of engraved bricks which are being offered to veterans, families and friends of veterans. The proceeds from the sale of the engraved bricks will go to the Florida Veterans Foundation, the Direct Support organization to the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs to help further the Foundation's mission to Serve, Support and Advocate for our Florida Veterans. To order your brick to go <http://www.floridaveteransfoundation.org>.

The Florida Veterans Foundation is composed of all volunteers, with the exception of one (1) Executive Assistant to the volunteer Chairman. The majority of the Foundation Directors are retired military disabled veterans who volunteer their time to provide aid and assistance to our Florida Veterans who are less fortunate than themselves. Most of our Directors work more than 48 hours per week on the Foundation's mission.

We urge you to help the Foundation get the word out to all of our brave Veterans and military personnel who have, and still are, putting their lives on the line each and every day to protect our citizens. These brave men and women signed a blank check, up to and including their lives. Many Florida veterans that we assist have debilitating injuries, have PTSD or other service related injuries, with some who are having difficulties re-integrating back into society. It is the Foundation's mission to ensure that none of our Florida Veterans are left behind or forgotten. We need your help.

If our office can answer any questions on the Walk of Honor program, please call (850) 488-4181 or email [ridleyr@fdva.state.fl.us](mailto:ridleyr@fdva.state.fl.us)

## **Military stores launch effort to boost their buying power — and their customers' savings**

Commissary and exchange officials will start buying more products together, with the idea that increased-volume buying could reap bigger savings for military customers at all the stores.

The effort will start with health and beauty items, and electronics, officials said. Commissaries and exchanges all sell health and beauty items; all the exchanges sell electronics.

The chief executive officers of all the military stores signed an agreement Jan. 31 that provides guidelines for a buying alliance involving retail merchandise and any other items sold by two or more of the organizations — Defense Commissary Agency, Army and Air Force Exchange Service; Coast Guard Exchange; Marine Corps Exchange and Navy Exchange Service Command.

Bulk buying has been one of the factors that has fueled the success of discount stores like Walmart.

The military exchanges have had partnerships in many areas previously, such as the private label products program offered by the exchange stores, and the Military Star card. They've also had some working agreements with the commissary agency.

There aren't yet any ballpark estimates of savings that might be passed on to customers. And while there's no timeline for when customers might see the first fruits of these efforts, "the exchanges and commissary are fully focused on immediate execution of this initiative to secure benefits as quickly as possible," said Courtney Williams, spokeswoman for the Navy Exchange Service Command.

A DoD task force has completed a business case analysis of exchange and commissary consolidation, and found their analysis supports merging the above-store functions of the exchange systems entirely, along with the above-store functions of the commissary agency, into a single organization, while keeping specific grocery functions separate.

One aspect that is to combine the functions of merchandise buyers and buy in increased volume.

"If they're selling the same products and dealing with the same vendors, it makes sense for the exchanges and commissary to join forces and make purchases together. They might be able to negotiate better prices if they're working together," said Eileen Huck, government relations deputy director at the National Military Family Association. "This is the kind of thing they've talked about, ways the exchanges and commissary can work more efficiently, and hopefully pass the savings on to military families."

"If that's the case, then we think that's a great thing."

## **Lawmakers want full military honors at Arlington for MOH recipients, POWs**

A bipartisan group of lawmakers is trying again to ensure all Medal of Honor recipients and prisoners of war are given full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery.

Legislation introduced in the House on Wednesday would grant them a military band and horse-drawn caisson — honors now reserved only for officers and service members killed in action.

"Valor knows no rank," Rep. Dan Crenshaw, R-Texas, said in a statement. "Providing full military honors is the least we can do for our prisoners of war and Medal of Honor recipients. This bill will rightfully recognize and honor their courageous service and sacrifices."

Along with Crenshaw, Reps. Jimmy Panetta, D-Calif., Van Taylor, R-Texas, and Elaine Luria, D-Va., introduced the Full Military Honors Act. Sens. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., and Maggie Hassan, D-N.H., introduced identical legislation in the Senate.

A similar bill passed the Senate last year in the final days of the 115th Congress, but it stalled in the House.

Arlington officials said last year that the cemetery could barely keep up with the current demand for burials with full military honors. At the time, there was a seven- to nine-month wait for full honors.

The 155-year-old cemetery averages about 30 burials each day. A standard burial includes a uniformed detail, the playing of taps and folding and presenting an American flag to family members.

The family of Army Pvt. 1st Class Robert Fletcher, a Buffalo Soldier and former Korean War POW, spoke out about the issue last year, after Fletcher was denied full military honors at Arlington.

"My dad fought that war and lived the POW experience until the day he died... and you're going to sit there and tell my family that my dad can't be buried with full honors because he wasn't and could never be an officer?" his daughter, Kanda Fletcher said last year. "I don't think it's right."

When the Full Military Honors Act was introduced last Congress, Kanda Fletcher said: "We cannot change my father's burial, but if I can make it easier for any still-living former POWs and their families when the time comes, I will do whatever it takes."

**And it continues to.....**

## **Arlington National Cemetery quietly changed its policy on 'full military honors' for Medal of Honor heroes**

Arlington National Cemetery is the final resting place for more than 400,000 service members, veterans and their families. The hallowed ground is a symbol of national service, and a shrine to the sacrifices made by those in uniform.

In recent years, there's been a growing push to see a change in what funeral honors are rendered for some of the country's most distinguished heroes: Medal of Honor recipients and prisoners of

war. As it turns out, the cemetery has already made some of those changes.

Earlier this week, lawmakers from both parties introduced legislation in the House and Senate to ensure that Medal of Honor recipients and prisoners of war receive full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery, Stars and Stripes reports.

"Full military honors ceremonies remind us of the service and valor demonstrated by those who have defended, protected, and sacrificed for freedom and democracy," Rep. Jimmy Panetta (D-Calif.) said in. A Navy veteran himself, Panetta introduced the legislation in the House on Feb. 6.

"This is a simple, but necessary fix that provides these selfless veterans with the honors they deserve," Rep. Dan Crenshaw (R-Texas), a Navy SEAL veteran who co-sponsored the House bill, told Task & Purpose via email.

In the case of Medal of Honor recipients, Arlington National Cemetery currently offers "full military honors," though it's a relatively new development, having gone into effect on Jan. 11, 2019. The cemetery's official website was updated "within the last seven to ten days," to reflect the change, Barbara Lewandrowski, the director of public affairs at Arlington National Cemetery told Task & Purpose on Thursday.

Every veteran interned at Arlington can receive military funeral honors which include a casket team, a firing party, a bugler, and the folding of and presentation of the American flag. Roughly 17 active duty service members are mobilized for the detail and provide services for as many as 22 funerals a day.

Funeral honors with an escort — what's typically referred to as "full military honors" and what lawmakers are calling for in the case of Medal of Honor recipients and POWs — involves all the same elements as the above, in addition to an escort, a military band, and the option of a horse-drawn caisson, or carriage. The detail involves as many as 70 personnel, and due to the manpower requirements, can only be performed eight times a day. Previously, those honors were reserved for senior enlisted (E-9), chief warrant officers (CW-4, CW-5) field grade officers (O-4) and above, and any service member, regardless of rank, who was killed in action.

Now, Medal of Honor recipients are eligible for those full honors.

The change purportedly came at the behest of Army Secretary Mark Esper, following recommendations from Arlington National Cemetery's advisory committee on how best to reduce wait times — which can range from two weeks to a month for military funeral honors, or eight to nine months for funeral honors with an escort. "Secretary of the Army [Mark Esper] said 'if we're going to make a modification to who receives honors, one of the modifications I recommend, is that Medal of Honor recipients will receive full honors with escort,'" Lewandrowski said of a report from Arlington's advisory committee submitted in July 2018.

A spokesman for the Secretary of the Army did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The policy change seems to have been quietly put in place. Given that it was changed with little fanfare, it makes sense that a pair of bills are calling for something that's already been done, at least partially.

"Today, we are providing military funeral honors with military funeral escort to Medal of Honor recipients," Army Maj. Shannon Way, a strategic planner at Arlington, told Task & Purpose. Speaking of the Full Military Honors Act of 2019, Way said "this is something that has been out there before, from the standpoint of

legislation, and it doesn't surprise me that it still looks like it did, say, six months to a year ago."

In fact, the most recent bills are similar to last year's attempt to do the same thing, notes Stars and Stripes.

The recent change for Medal of Honor recipients may make the proposed bills a little redundant, though if they pass, the policy would become permanent, and prisoners of war would be eligible for full military honors.

As well-meaning as that may be, it could bring additional challenges.

Under the cemetery's current policy, prisoners of war could expect to wait two weeks to a month for military funeral honors — which include a firing party, bugler, casket team, and flag presentation, Lewandrowski said. "Now, if POWs got put into the full honors with escort queue and we only do eight of those a day, because we don't have the resources to do any more than eight a day, those POWs could wait eight or nine months to be buried, and that would be short."

The delay, and the impact it could have on families, is one of the reasons Arlington has held off on changing the policy for prisoners of war.

"That also was part of that decision in order for that large number of prisoners of war to be buried and for families to come to closure," Lewandrowski said. "That was another reason they chose not to have POWs in that longer waiting queue."

## **Veterans Exposed to Agent Orange**

Veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange or other herbicides during military service may be eligible for a variety of VA benefits, including disability compensation for diseases associated with exposure. Your dependents and survivors also may be eligible for benefits. It is never too late to file a claim for Agent Orange. If you are a veteran who served in Vietnam or near the Korean Demilitarized Zone during Vietnam and suffer from anyone of these illnesses you need to file a claim for disability with the VA **and if you were denied in the past you need to reopen your claim.**

"Agent Orange" refers to a blend of tactical herbicides the U.S. military sprayed in the jungles of Vietnam and around the Korean demilitarized zone to remove trees and dense tropical foliage that provided enemy cover. Herbicides were also used by the U.S. military to defoliate military facilities in the U.S. and in other countries as far back as the 1950s.

In addition, VA has determined there is evidence of exposure to Agent Orange for Air Force and Air Force Reserve members who served during the period 1969 through 1986 and regularly and repeatedly operated, maintained, or served onboard C-123 aircraft (known to have been used to spray an herbicide agent during the Vietnam era). For more information about service qualifications and other eligibility criteria, visit our Agent Orange C-123 web page.

VA and federal law presumes that certain diseases are a result of exposure to these herbicides. This "presumptive policy" simplifies the process for receiving compensation for these diseases since VA foregoes the normal requirements of proving that an illness began during or was worsened by your military service.

A Veteran who believes he or she has a disease caused by Agent Orange exposure that **is not** one of the conditions listed below must show an actual connection between the disease and herbicide exposure during military service.

### **Eligibility - Service in Vietnam or Korea**

VA presumes that Veterans were exposed to Agent Orange or other herbicides if they served:

In Vietnam anytime between January 9, 1962 and May 7, 1975, including brief **visits ashore** or service aboard a ship that operated on the **inland waterways** of Vietnam

**In or near the Korean demilitarized zone anytime between April 1, 1968 and August 31, 1971**

If you fall into either category listed above, you do not have to show that you were exposed to Agent Orange to be eligible for disability compensation for diseases VA presumes are associated with it. Check the list of U.S. Navy and Coast Guard ships that operated in Vietnam to confirm whether your service aboard a ship allows VA to concede you were exposed to Agent Orange.

### **Eligibility - Service Outside of Vietnam or Korea**

Even if you did not serve in Vietnam or the Korean demilitarized zone during the specified time periods, you can still apply for disability compensation if you were exposed to an herbicide while in the military and believe it led to the onset of a disease. This includes:

Veterans who served on or near the perimeters of military bases in Thailand during the Vietnam Era.

Veterans who served where herbicides were tested and stored outside of Vietnam.

Veterans who were crew members on C-123 planes flown after the Vietnam War.

Veterans associated with Department of Defense (DoD) projects to test, dispose of, or store herbicides in the U.S.

If eligible, you must prove that you were exposed to Agent Orange or other herbicides during your military service to be eligible for service-connection for disease VA presumes are related to Agent Orange exposure.

*Exception:* Blue Water Veterans with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma may be granted service-connection without showing inland waterway service or that they set foot in Vietnam. This is because VA also recognizes non-Hodgkin's lymphoma as related to service in Vietnam or the waters offshore of Vietnam during the Vietnam Era.

### **Diseases Associated with Agent Orange**

VA currently presumes that some diseases resulted from exposure to herbicides like Agent Orange. The Veterans Health Administration's Public Health website lists these diseases VA presumes are associated with exposure to Agent Orange or other herbicides during military service:

**AL Amyloidosis**- A rare disease caused when an abnormal protein, amyloid, enters tissues or organs

**Chronic B-cell Leukemia's** - A type of cancer which affects white blood cells

**Chloracne (or similar acneform disease)** - A skin condition that occurs soon after exposure to chemicals and looks like common forms of acne seen in teenagers. Under VA's rating regulations, it must be at least 10 percent disabling within one year of exposure to herbicides.

**Diabetes Mellitus Type 2** - A disease characterized by high blood sugar levels resulting from the body's inability to respond properly to the hormone insulin

**Hodgkin's Disease** - A malignant lymphoma (cancer) characterized by progressive enlargement of the lymph nodes, liver, and spleen, and by progressive anemia

**Ischemic Heart Disease** - A disease characterized by a reduced supply of blood to the heart, that leads to chest pain

**Multiple Myeloma** - A cancer of plasma cells, a type of white blood cell in bone marrow

**Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma** - A group of cancers that affect the lymph glands and other lymphatic tissue

**Parkinson's Disease** - A progressive disorder of the nervous system that affects muscle movement

**Peripheral Neuropathy, Early-Onset** - A nervous system condition that causes numbness, tingling, and motor weakness. Under VA's rating regulations, it must be at least 10 percent disabling within one year of herbicide exposure.

**Porphyrria Cutanea Tarda** - A disorder characterized by liver dysfunction and by thinning and blistering of the skin in sun-exposed areas. Under VA's rating regulations, it must be at least 10 percent disabling within one year of exposure to herbicides.

**Prostate Cancer** - Cancer of the prostate; one of the most common cancers among men

**Respiratory Cancers (includes lung cancer)** - Cancers of the lung, larynx, trachea, and bronchus

**Soft Tissue Sarcomas (other than osteosarcoma, chondrosarcoma, Kaposi's sarcoma, or mesothelioma)** - A group of different types of cancers in body tissues such as muscle, fat, blood and lymph vessels, and connective tissues

#### **Children with birth defects**

VA presumes certain birth defects in children of Vietnam and Korea Veterans are associated with Veterans' qualifying military service.

#### **Veterans with Lou Gehrig's Disease**

VA presumes Lou Gehrig's Disease (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or ALS) diagnosed in **all** Veterans who had 90 days or more continuous active military service is related to their service, although ALS is not related to Agent Orange exposure.

#### **Evidence Needed**

If you are seeking service connection for one of the diseases VA presumes is associated with exposure to herbicides during service, VA requires the following:

A medical diagnosis of a disease which VA recognizes as being associated with Agent Orange (listed above)

Competent evidence of service in Vietnam or at or near the Korean demilitarized zone during the dates shown above, or exposure to herbicides in a location other than the Vietnam or the Korean demilitarized zone.

Competent medical evidence that the disease began within the deadline (if any). (See 38 CFR 3.307(a)(6)(ii) for more information on deadlines.)

If you believe that you have a disease caused by herbicide exposure, but that disease is not on the list of diseases associated with Agent Orange, you may still apply for service-connection. In these cases, VA requires all of the following:

Competent medical evidence of a current disability,  
Competent medical evidence of an actual connection between herbicide exposure and the current disability, **AND**

Competent evidence of:

Service in Vietnam or at or near the Korean demilitarized zone during the dates shown above, or exposure to herbicides in a location other than Vietnam or the Korean demilitarized zone.

#### **Compensation Benefit**

Monthly payment rates are based on the Veteran's combined rating for his or her service-connected disabilities. These ratings are based on the severity of the disabilities. Additional amounts are paid to certain Veterans with severe disabilities ("special monthly compensation") and certain Veterans with dependents. You can view the current Compensation Rate Tables to determine the amount you may receive.

#### **How to Apply**

Apply online using eBenefits, **OR**

Work with an accredited representative or agent (Service Officer), **OR**

Go to a VA regional office and have a VA employee assist you. You can find your regional office on our Facility Locator page

For more information on how to apply and for tips on making sure your claim is ready to be processed by VA, visit our How to Apply page.

#### **More Information**

Check VA's Guide to Agent Orange Claims to learn more about how to establish eligibility to disability compensation and how much VA pays. You can also call the Agent Orange Help Line at 1-800-749-8387 or send an e-mail to [GW/AOHelpline@vba.va.gov](mailto:GW/AOHelpline@vba.va.gov). You must provide your name, e-mail address, telephone and/or fax number, and VA file number/Social Security Number. We will do our best to respond within a reasonable amount of time (usually 3 to 10 workdays).

## **VA Blue Water Claims Update**

A federal court ruled 29 JAN that the Department of Veterans Affairs cannot deny disability benefits to thousands of Vietnam veterans who claim exposure to cancer-causing chemical defoliants simply because those vets served in the waters off the country's coastline, and not inland.

The ruling in favor of Alfred Procopio, Jr., 73, who served on the USS Intrepid during the Vietnam War, marks a major victory for so-called "blue water" Navy veterans who have fought the department for years over the denials. VA officials have said the existing scientific evidence doesn't justify the presumption of toxic exposure for the group and have strongly opposed legislative efforts to overturn their decision.

But the 9-2 decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit overturns past court opinions backing up VA, saying that Congress never intended to exclude service members in the seas around Vietnam when they awarded presumptive benefits for certain illnesses related to Agent Orange exposure.



Under current department rules, the blue water veterans can receive medical care for their illnesses through VA. But to receive disability benefits — worth up to several thousand dollars a month — they must prove that their ailments are directly connected to toxic exposure while on duty. That's not the case for other Vietnam veterans, who are presumed to have been exposed to Agent Orange and other defoliants known to cause serious and rare cancers. So while a veteran who served on the shoreline could receive disability payouts after contracting Parkinson's Disease or prostate cancer, another vet who served on a ship a few miles away would have to provide evidence of direct contact with hazardous chemicals. Advocates have said that, given the time that has passed since the war, obtaining such proof is impossible and unfair. In their ruling, the federal judges agreed. "These statutes cast no doubt on our conclusion that, by using the formal term 'Republic of Vietnam,' Congress unambiguously referred, consistent with uniform international law, to both its landmass and its 12-nautical-mile territorial sea," the ruling states. If VA officials opt not to appeal the decision to the Supreme Court in the next 90 days — or if the court decides not to hear the case — the result means that up to 90,000 blue water veterans could see disability payouts as early as this year. In a statement, VA spokesman Curt Cashour said the department is reviewing this decision and "will determine an appropriate response."

Advocates hailed the news as a major step ahead in their effort to win benefits for the aging veterans. "This is a big win," said John Wells, retired Navy commander and the executive director of Military-Veterans Advocacy, which helped file the lawsuit.

"We want to work with VA on how to implement this as painlessly as possible, but making sure these veterans get all they deserve." Bart Stichman, executive director of the National Veterans Legal Services Program, said the decision "unequivocally rights a wrong that is a terrible injustice to all veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange in the waters of Vietnam." Legislation that would have awarded presumptive status to the blue water veterans was blocked by a small group of senators at the end of last year, disappointing advocates who saw the legislative momentum as their best chance for a victory in years.

Now, instead of granting the benefits to veterans, lawmakers may be forced to scramble new bills to cover the cost of the court-ordered awards.

Congressional Budget Office officials had estimated that awarding the benefits to the blue water veterans could total about \$1.1 billion over 10 years, but VA officials have insisted the total is closer to \$5.5 billion.

Disagreements over whether to use new home loan fees to pay for the costs stalled the previous legislation. If the court order stands, VA will be forced to cover the costs regardless of whether an offset is agreed upon, a potential drain on the department's annual budget. Several new bills on the issue are already pending before Congress, and the chairmen of both the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees have promised to deal with the topic quickly this year.

In a statement, Senate chairman Johnny Isakson (R-GA) said that he was pleased with the court decision and would work closely with VA on the next steps. The full decision is available at the appeals court's web site <http://www.ca9.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/opinions-orders/17-1821.Opinion.1-29-2019.pdf>.

## **Emergency Medical Bill Claims**

Veterans who flooded the Department of Veterans Affairs with reimbursement claims for private-sector emergency care, in the

wake of their appeals court victory in the Staab case, have been getting misinformation from the VA that likely discourages them from appealing wrongly denied claims or from supplying the VA with follow-up documents to complete their claims.

That's the contention of a new lawsuit filed 1 JAN by attorneys led by the non-profit National Veterans Legal Services Program (NVLSP), which is trying to force the VA to heed the Staab decision and reimburse tens of thousands of veterans for non-VA emergency care that their own health insurance covered only in part.

As reported by Military.com in November, an initial lawsuit filed by the NVLSP, which is still pending, alleges VA wrongdoing on another issue related to Staab claimants. It contends that the VA wrote an implementing regulation for Staab last year in a way that still denies thousands of veterans non-VA emergency care reimbursements, and saves the VA billions of dollars, on precisely the type claim the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims ruled that Congress has wanted the VA to pay since 2010.

The new lawsuit charges that letters sent the past year to thousands of veterans, denying a Staab-related claim or seeking more information to reach a claim decision, have contained "an incorrect statement of law," language that contradicts what the appeals court concluded in Staab.

"It's beyond my comprehension how they could do such a clearly lawless act," said Barton F. Stichman, NVLSP's executive director and the lead attorney in both lawsuits. The NVLSP has petitioned a three-judge panel on the appeals court to consider arguments and grant relief simultaneously on the two lawsuits because the classes of veterans impacted -- by the unlawful regulation and the inaccurate VA mailings -- are nearly identical. Government attorneys are challenging that joint class petition and asking the appeals court for more time to prepare their response brief to the first lawsuit, which is due by 4 FEB.

Until then, the government's arguments are not known. The VA for decades has reimbursed for outside emergency care for VA-enrolled veterans only if they have no other health insurance.

The VA interpreted the law on non-VA emergency care as requiring it to deny claims for outside emergency care if a veteran had alternative health insurance -- through an employer or their spouse's employer or even with Medicare -- to cover part of the cost. Because this left many thousands of veterans every year with large out-of-pocket costs, Congress modified the statute nine years ago.

The VA, however, wrote implementing regulations in 2012 that continued to direct claim processors to deny reimbursement if veterans had insurance to cover part of their emergency costs. Three years ago, in Staab, the appeals court ruled that the VA was ignoring the plain meaning of the 2010 law change, which was intended to bring financial relief to veterans stuck with out-of-pocket costs for private-sector emergency care. The VA pondered an appeal of Staab to the U.S. Supreme Court but, given that the appeals court ruled unanimously and that the legislative history was clear, a reversal seemed unlikely.

In 2017, then-VA Secretary David Shulkin conceded as much and assured Congress that the VA would rewrite regulations to comply with Staab even though, he noted, it would expose the department to billions of dollars in additional medical costs, both on claims re-filed by veterans and in payment of future claims. The VA released a new interim regulation last January, and veterans seeking reimbursement for Staab-related claims began to see again they routinely were denied.

## VA Medical Marijuana Update

The NVLSP investigated and determined the regulations, which became final in March, still prohibited reimbursement for the bulk of out-of-pocket emergency medical expenses veterans paid if they had alternative health insurance plans. The 2010 law stated that veterans with other insurance are responsible for "co-payments and similar payments." The revised regulation, however, took that phrase and expanded it with devastating effect to "co-payments, deductibles, co-insurance and similar payments." The practical effect is veterans with insurance remain responsible for almost every emergency cost their insurance won't cover. Stichman called the maneuver "outrageous," adding, "That can't be what Congress intended." The phrase "co-payment and similar payments" means fixed and modest charges, he said. The VA changed that meaning to ensure veterans, and not the VA, still got stuck with almost every cost their insurance plan won't cover.

The plaintiff in that initial lawsuit is Coast Guard veteran Amanda Jane Wolfe, who needed an emergency appendectomy but the nearest VA hospital was a three-hour drive. Because of the way the VA wrote its 2018 regulation, Wolfe had to pay nearly \$2,600 in medical costs that her own health insurance didn't cover. Her lawsuit seeks to represent thousands of other veterans who also have seen Staab-related claims denied since the revised regulation took effect.

The plaintiff in the second lawsuit is disabled Navy veteran Peter Boerschinger, 79, who suffered pneumonia and congestive heart failure last April. The closest VA hospital had closed its emergency room and directed patients to seek outside care. Because Boerschinger had other health insurance, the VA refused to pay \$1,340 in charges that his own insurance also wouldn't cover. The VA letter denying his claim, which was identical to letters sent to thousands of veterans with Staab-related claims over the last year, left Boerschinger confused as to whether it was worthwhile to appeal.

The letter misled him by listing among criteria that must be met to qualify for reimbursement that the "veteran have no coverage under a health plan contract." Though the Staab ruling had directed the VA no longer to use alternative insurance "as a reason to turn people down," Stichman said, it continues to share that "incorrect statement of law ... whenever they send veterans a letter about their claim."

This practice "creates a disincentive for veterans to obtain third-party health insurance [and] runs directly counter to the Staab case ruling." The lawsuits, now combined, urges the appeals court to regard both Wolfe and Boerschinger as representing classes of similarly situated individuals. All those represented by Wolfe have been or will be harmed by an unlawful regulation. All those Boerschinger represents have been or will be harmed by correspondence with the incorrect statement that a criterion for reimbursement of non-VA emergency costs is "no coverage under a health plan contract."

The lawsuit urges the court to declare the 2018 regulation "invalid to the extent it forbids the VA from reimbursing veterans for co-insurance and deductible payments incurred while visiting non-VA hospitals for emergency treatment." Also, it asks the court to invalidate all decisions in the past year denying "reimbursement of medical expenses deemed to be part of the veteran's deductible or co-insurance," or denying expenses because the veteran was covered under a health contract.

The lawsuit further asks that the court to order the VA secretary to re-adjudicate all of these reimbursement claims, this time using a proper interpretation of the 2010 law as the court first required with its Staab decision.

Less than a month into the 116th Congress, lawmakers on both sides of the aisle in the House and Senate have introduced four bills that, if signed into law, would require the VA to conduct research on medical marijuana.

Tennessee Republican Rep. Phil Roe, a medical doctor and ranking member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, introduced legislation 24 JAN that would require VA to conduct research on medicinal cannabis, to include marijuana and cannabidiol -- a component extract of marijuana - for post-traumatic stress disorder, pain and other conditions.

The bill, H.R. 747, is similar to one introduced 23 JAN by Rep. Lou Correa (D-CA) H.R. 601. In the Senate, Sens. Jon Tester (D-MT) and Dan Sullivan (R-AK) introduced a bill, S.179, on 17 JAN, directing the VA to carry out clinical trials on the effects of medical marijuana for certain health conditions. And on 16 JAN, Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL) introduced legislation that would create a pathway for VA to obtain the marijuana needed for research. Gaetz's bill, H.R.601, would increase the number of manufacturers registered under the Controlled Substances Act to grow cannabis for research purposes. It also would authorize VA health care providers to provide information to veterans on any federally approved clinical trials.

"For too long, Congress has faced a dilemma with cannabis-related legislation: we cannot reform cannabis law without researching its safety, its efficacy, and its medical uses -- but we cannot perform this critical research without first reforming cannabis law," Gaetz said in a statement. "The VA needs to listen to the growing number of veterans who have already found success in medicinal cannabis in easing their pain and other symptoms," said Tester, ranking member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, in introducing his bill.

Lawmakers have tried for years to influence the debate on medical marijuana, offering numerous proposals on veterans' access to marijuana and its derivatives. Marijuana remains classified as a Schedule 1 drug under federal legislation, meaning they have a high potential for addiction and "no currently accepted medical use."

In 2018, bills were introduced that would have required the VA to conduct research on medical marijuana, allowed VA providers to complete the paperwork patients need to obtain medical marijuana in states where it has been legalized and decriminalized the drug for veterans regardless of where they live. None made it into law.

In August 2018, Tester, Roe, Sullivan and former Democrat Rep. Tim Walz, now governor of Minnesota, wrote VA Secretary Robert Wilkie urging him to support "rigorous clinical trials" on medical marijuana. They pointed out that VA is currently conducting two small-scale studies, adding that veterans "deserve to have full knowledge of the potential benefits and side effects of this alternative therapy." "The pervasive lack of research makes [providers'] jobs even more difficult, leaving VA clinicians flying blind without concrete recommendations to veterans," they wrote.

To date, 33 states, the District of Columbia, Guam and Puerto Rico have made marijuana legal for medical purposes. Gov. Roe said that, as a doctor, he believes medical research is needed to determine whether treatments are safe and effective. "While data remains limited, surveys have shown that some veterans already use medicinal cannabis as a means to help with PTSD. ... I would never prescribe to my patients a substance unless I was confident in its proven efficacy and safety and we need to hold medicinal cannabis to the same standards ... if research on the usage of medicinal cannabis is favorable, I am confident that it could

become another option to help improve the lives of veterans and other Americans," he said.

In 2017, the American Legion, the largest veterans organization with nearly 2 million members, urged the federal government for marijuana to be removed from the list of controlled substances. The organization also adopted a resolution urging passage of laws that would allow VA doctors to recommend medical marijuana.

## **Judicial Watch Sues Defense Department, Seeking POW and MIA Records From Vietnam Era**

Of interest to members of Rolling Thunder, veterans' groups and others who have not forgotten those soldiers who were prisoners of war or still missing in action during the Vietnam War, or through military action in Laos.

Judicial Watch has sued the Defense Department, seeking government records from 1973 to the present regarding American soldiers who were prisoners of war or missing in action.

"Judicial Watch filed the lawsuit after the Pentagon failed to respond to two Freedom of Information Act requests," the watchdog organization said in a statement. The request includes access to lists of POWs and MIAs provided to North Vietnam, as well as materials used to brief President Nixon in 1973 about those who could be remaining in that nation.

The organization is also seeking reports of "live sightings" of U.S. soldiers from Jan. 27, 1973, to the present, along with data collected from the classified program known as "PAVE SPIKE," plus electronic messages containing individual code numbers issued to U.S. airmen transmitted from the ground in Vietnam and/or Laos from Jan. 27, 1973 to the present.

In their filing, it was cited:

The Judicial Watch sued the US Department of Defense on October 2, 2018 to obtain records from 1973 to present regarding US Soldiers who were prisoners of war or missing in action in Vietnam and Laid (Judicial Watch vs. US Department of Defense (No. 1:18-cv-02276.))

Judicial Watch filed the lawsuit after the Pentagon failed to respond to two freedom of Information at (FOIA) requests.

A May 21, 2018 request sought:

. "Any and all lists of American POWs/MIAs provided to North Vietnam as part of the Paris Peace Accords process seeking their return; and

. All materials used to brief President Nixon in 1973 about remaining POWs/MIAs in North Vietnam and Laos."

A May 22, 2018 request sought:

. "All live sighting reports of American POWs in Vietnam and Laos from January 27, 1973 to the present."

. "All data and reports derived from data collected from the program known as PAVE SPIKE from January 27, 1973 to the present"

. "All satellite photographs of possible or suspected rescue symbols seen in the territories of Vietnam and/or Laos from January 27, 1973 to the present."

. "All electronic messages containing individual code numbers issued to US airmen transmitted from the ground in Vietnam and/or Laos from January 27, 1973 to the present."

The Vietnam POW-MIA Issues is a sore spot for many veterans and concerned Americans. Why is the Pentagon stonewalling our attempts to obtain information that is clearly in the public interest?" said Judicial Watch President Tom Fitton.

## **Trump Signs Executive Order Creating Task Force to Stop Vet Suicide**

President Donald Trump signed an executive order aiming to stem the number of suicides among veterans by creating a high-level task force to develop research strategies and plans to tackle the problem and provide grants for communities to help former troops who are struggling.

Calling suicide among veterans "a tragedy of staggering proportions," Trump said the problem can be solved only if the entire country works together.

"To every veteran, I want you to know an entire nation of more than 300 million people is behind you. You will never, ever be forgotten. We are with you all the way," he said.

The task force will develop a "public health road map" that will include a national research strategy for studying suicide risk factors and intervention efforts, as well as proposals for equipping states and communities with the resources needed to undertake suicide prevention and quality-of-life initiatives for former service members.

The order, known as the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide, or PREVENTS, also seeks to network national and local programs to actively engage veterans "rather than a passive system wherein the onus for engagement is placed on veterans."

According to Department of Veterans Affairs data, an average 20 veterans die each day by suicide, and vets have a suicide rate 1.5 times greater than non-veterans. About 70 percent of veterans who die by suicide are not enrolled in VA care, officials said.

During the signing ceremony, Frank Larkin, a former Navy SEAL who served as the U.S. Senate sergeant of arms from 2015 to 2016, urged that the research on suicide prevention extend beyond behavioral health and address other possible causes, such as blast injuries and traumatic brain injury.

Larkin's son, Ryan Larkin, died April 23, 2017, by suicide. He had developed chronic traumatic encephalopathy, the same disease that affects some professional football and hockey players, although he did not know it because CTE can only be detected post-mortem.

Addressing the research, Frank Larkin said that the nation needs a "Manhattan-like Project."

"We need the science to illuminate the path forward. I'm convinced we can solve this. ... We need collaboration, integration of data, unity of effort ... a holistic approach with a heightened sense of urgency to push the scientific research," Larkin said.

During past administrations and the previous Congress, lawmakers and members of the executive branch have focused on suicide prevention efforts, yet rates among veterans have remained steady or increased.

Last year, Trump signed an executive order to ensure that transitioning service members have access to counseling and mental health services during the first year after they leave service -- a period during which they face a higher risk for suicide.

At least two bills have been introduced in this Congress to improve the VA's suicide prevention and national oversight efforts, and the House Veterans Affairs Committee on Wednesday plans to hold a roundtable on suicide prevention efforts, awareness and treatment.

The suicide rate among veterans ages 18 to 34 rose more than 10 percent from 2015 to 2016; the rate of suicides among this population is roughly 45 deaths per 100,000 veterans. By contrast, the rate among civilian males ages 25 to 34 is 26 per 100,000.

At the signing ceremony, Thomas Winkle, director of the Arizona Coalition for Military Families, said that proactive outreach collective communities works. Winkle said that when Arizona faced one of the highest rates of suicide among its National Guard troops, the state's VA medical centers, the Arizona Department of Veterans Services, health care groups, the community and the National Guard came together to address the issue.

According to Winkle, the effort caused the suicide rate to drop to zero.

"It can be done. We have the ability to prevent suicides to make lives more empowered, to make lives have more meaning," he said.

VA Secretary Robert Wilkie noted that last week, two doctors and a hospital technician "risked their lives" to save a veteran with a gun at the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center. Two of the VA employees were wounded, but the veteran survived. Since 2017, he added, 243 veterans at VA facilities have been saved by employees. But, he added, and it has been reported, 19 veterans have died.

"That is what today's ceremony is about. It's about pulling together the resources of our federal government, our states, or localities, our charities, our nongovernmental organizations and coming together with a road map" to prevent suicide, Wilkie said.

Veterans service organizations have made curbing suicides a top priority. In testimony before the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees last week and this week, they have called for more funding for suicide prevention and mental health treatment.

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America has made suicide part of its "Big Six" agenda it hopes to see addressed this Congress. *If you are a veteran in crisis, the Veteran Crisis Line is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week at 1-800-273-8255, press 1. Help also is available by text, 838255 or at [veteranscrisisline.net](http://veteranscrisisline.net).*

## **Hidden VA Money**

### **VA Programs You May Be Eligible For**

Below are some programs or rules within the VA that could pay you and your surviving spouse in all matters financial. As you explore these programs, keep in mind, it may be in your best interest to see an accredited VSO or a qualified attorney familiar with VA law should you elect in pursuing any of the programs:

Any veteran who is a senior citizen or his/her surviving dependents may be eligible to receive over \$2,000 per month (\$24,000 per year) in tax free income. The payments include annual cost of living increases.

A veteran can easily qualify for a VA Pension even if his annual income exceeds the limits set by the VA. For this program, a veteran may need a highly qualified VA attorney to help.

Recurring, non-reimbursed medical expenses of a veteran and the surviving spouse are deductible from gross income. Veteran family members can be paid as caregivers, which is also a tax deductible expense.

If a veteran resides in an Assisted Living Facility the entire amount paid for the service is a deductible expense.

Veterans 65 years-old or older, are presumed to be disabled. It does not have to be proven.

There are many federal VA nursing homes, and private nursing homes with a federal VA Contract who will admit veterans for care even if the veteran does not meet the service connected disability requirements.

Veterans who are 100% service-connected IU may be eligible for an additional monthly entitlement of \$62.50/mo. for catastrophic injury.

DMAVA and the department of education jointly launched a program on October 5, 2002 to honor world war two era veterans who left school to join the military and have never received a high school diploma.

If the veteran is deceased and the surviving spouse is applying for low income pension, the spouse can be of ANY age and does NOT have to be disabled.

Reports indicate that a pension with aid and attendance is easier to obtain then Household Benefits.

A veteran who is healthy but has a spouse who is disabled, may be eligible for Improved Pension (Low Income Pension). In order to receive service-connected disability rating a veteran's disability does not have to be related to combat.

A VA rating of 70% or higher will allow a veteran-claimant to reside in a federal VA nursing home, at no charge. Other stipulations may arise resulting in minimal fees.

When a veteran is rated at 100% disability or if rated as Individual Unemployability (IU), the veteran will receive the highest rating and the highest pay. Additionally, if a veteran is in need of additional aid of another person to help with activities of daily living (walking, bathing, dressing, toileting, etc.) there is an added supplemental compensation called "aid and attendance".

Source: <http://www.veteranprograms.com/resources7.html>

## **Military and Veteran Discounts**

Military and veteran discounts lists from national brands, chain locations and online stores to local area mom and pop, single location establishments. For a complete up to date list, please visit <https://militarybenefits.info/military-and-veteran-discounts/>. There, you can locate discounts in various categories,



## **INTERESTED IN JOINING THE COALITION?**

There are many benefits to join the Vietnam and All Veterans State Coalition. A voice of many is heard above a voice of one. The coalition meets quarterly at various locations in the State of Florida and we discuss and disseminate information pertaining to veterans and their benefits. To obtain information regarding joining the coalition either as an Organization, or an individual, please visit our website at [VVOF.ORG](http://VVOF.ORG) coalition either as an Organization, or an individual, please visit our website at [VVOF.ORG](http://VVOF.ORG)

**If you, or your organization is already a member of the coalition, and there has been a change in officers, please immediately advise the coalition of these changes, including mailing addresses, e-mail addresses and telephone numbers so we may keep you up-to-date with all pertinent information**

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