



Georgia Department of Veterans Service

Cultivating community connections – empowering Georgia’s veterans and their families to flourish.

February 2023

NOW PROCESSING: PACT ACT CLAIMS



PACT ACT

The PACT Act is the largest expansion of VA benefits for veterans and their survivors in decades. It expands eligibility to VA benefits and services for veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic substances.

VIETNAM WAR

- Two new presumptive conditions:
 - High blood pressure
 - Monoclonal gammopathy
- Expands potential exposure areas to include Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Guam, American Samoa, and Johnson Atoll

GULF WAR AND POST-9/11

- Brain cancer
- Gastrointestinal cancer
- Head cancer
- Kidney cancer
- Lymphoma
- Skin cancer
- Neck cancer
- Pancreatic cancer
- Reproductive cancer
- Respiratory cancer
- Asthma
- Chronic bronchitis
- Chronic rhinitis/sinusitis
- Constrictive bronchiolitis
- Obstructive bronchiolitis
- Emphysema
- Interstitial lung disease (ILD)
- Pleuritis
- Pulmonary fibrosis and more.

IMPACTS ON GEORGIA

- 500,000 Georgians potentially eligible for new or increased VA benefits
- Improved health outcomes for Georgians exposed to toxic substances
- Provides income and medical care for qualified veterans
- Provides income to surviving spouses or family members
- Faster decision making process to connect veterans with benefits more efficiently

LETS MEET



The Georgia Department of Veterans Service has 55 field offices around the state. Find your local office, speak with an accredited veteran service officer, and schedule an appointment: veterans.ga.gov/field-offices

The VA began processing PACT ACT claims for veterans impacted by toxic exposure while serving our country on January 1, 2023. The Georgia Department of Veterans Service is working diligently to assist veterans and their families gain access to these vital benefits.

Veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors are encouraged to seek help in filing for these benefits, whether it is in-person, emailing, or calling their local GDVS office or by meeting with representatives at various workshops, like American Legion Post 45’s PACT Act Rally held January 19 in Canton.

GDVS staff, representatives from the Atlanta VA Medical Center, as well as American Legion Service Officers, assisted more than 200 veterans with their claims. Both GDVS and VA representatives were able to begin processing claims for benefits and VA healthcare on site at the event. Many veterans who attended had follow-up C&P exams scheduled within the next two weeks, as well as being scheduled for toxic exposure screenings.

The GDVS continued their momentum and participated in VETLANTA’s Q1 Summit at the Battery Atlanta on February 22. North Georgia Regional Director Ken Childre and several GDVS VSOs were able to meet with over 600 veterans looking for additional information, as well as starting the claims process.

Additional PACT Act rallies will be scheduled throughout the year and across the state.

The PACT ACT, named after Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson, was signed into law on August 10, 2022. Nationwide under the PACT Act, an estimated 3.5 million veterans will be newly eligible for VA benefits. In Georgia, nearly 500,000 veterans are potentially eligible for new or increased VA benefits. Find your local GDVS field office at <https://veterans.georgia.gov/field-offices> to speak with one of our VA-accredited veteran service officers and start working on your claim.



GDVS AUGUSTA WAR VETERANS NURSING HOME RECEIVES TOP AWARD

The Georgia War Veterans Nursing Home in Augusta recently received Pinnacle Quality Insight’s Customer Experience Awards in several different categories.

Out of 16 categories, Georgia War Veterans Nursing Home received awards for overall satisfaction, cleanliness, response from the facility, and safety and security. Their outstanding performance has put the facility in the top 15 percent of the nation for customer satisfaction.

It is the seventh time in nine years the Georgia War Veterans Nursing Home has received this award.

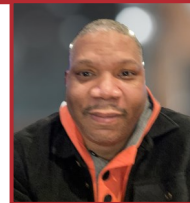
“We are honored that Pinnacle recognizes our staff for their excellent work in multiple areas of our operations,” said **Carlton Deese**, executive director of Georgia War Veterans Nursing Home.

“It is affirmation that we are not only providing great technical care, but we are also providing that care with a smile and a positive attitude. Overall, this achievement reflects our staff’s continued efforts and commitment to providing excellent care to our nation’s heroes.”



GET TO KNOW YOUR VETERANS APPEALS OFFICER: SCOTT YARBROUGH

U.S. Army Veteran, **Andrew “Scott” Yarbrough**, remembers when he needed help filing a claim for veterans benefits after leaving military service. The kind service and care he received is what motivates the Georgia Department of Veterans Services Appeals Officer to assist his fellow veterans in need.



Yarbrough served as a Specialist in the U.S. Army from 1988 – 1990. He has been with GDVS for 4 years.

Helping veterans get favorable decisions on their appeals is what he likes most about working with GDVS. “I always have their best interest at heart,” he said.

Born in Birmingham, Alabama by way of Batesville, Mississippi, Yarbrough is passionate about his family—especially his wife, Tanya, who always makes him smile. His favorite place to visit is Batesville because of memories he created on his grandparents farm while growing up. When he is not assisting veterans, Yarbrough is watching his son play travel and high school baseball.

His advice to his fellow and future VSOs is simple. “Don’t put too much pressure on yourself when it comes to learning the job. The more questions you ask, the more you will learn.”



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DEBBIE O’NEAL NAMED FIRST GDVS EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR!

“Committed to service” is just one way to describe **Debbie O’Neal**, who currently serves as Lyons County Office Manager and GDVS district manager in South Georgia.

After receiving an email that she was chosen as the first employee of the year for GDVS, Debbie was both shocked and grateful. “I had to read it several times to let it sink in with me. I felt very blessed and grateful to God that I was chosen. There are so many people in this department that deserve this award. I am very grateful and feel very blessed to be honored with the nomination and the award as Employee of the Year.”

O’Neal served for 4 years in the U.S. Navy, reaching the rank of Storekeeper 3rd Class. Her time in service inspired a lifelong commitment to giving back to those who served our country. “My favorite part of being a veterans service officer is working with veterans from all different wars and hearing their stories, where they served and what they did,” said O’Neal.

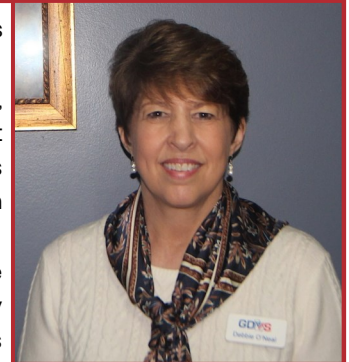
She tackles seemingly impossible challenges to help her fellow veterans, and is always willing to step up, ask questions, and volunteer her time if it means a veteran will get the answers or help they need.

She gives back to her community through several events and ceremonies throughout the year. O’Neal helps plan, organize, and host Vidalia’s annual Veterans Day parade. She is part of a large network of community partners and veterans in Jeff Davis County who make extraordinary efforts to care for each other and their communities. O’Neal truly treats our veterans as heroes every day.

O’Neal is grateful for the support she receives from the GDVS and the opportunities allowing her to be a benefit or blessing to the veterans. “I appreciate having a department that always backs me up in honoring the veterans in ceremonies and other activities we can do outside this office,” said O’Neal.

Her tireless spirit, determination, and dedication to service are an outstanding example of a GDVS Employee of the Year. Thank you for the outstanding job you do and the care you continue to give to our veterans and families, Debbie O’Neal!

(Photograph courtesy of MayKaylee Randolph, *The Advance*.)



“BLUE WATER” VETERANS RECEIVE MILLIONS IN BENEFITS



Veterans who served on open sea ships off the shore of Vietnam during the Vietnam War, also known as “blue water” veterans, are receiving millions of dollars in retroactive benefits for exposure to Agent Orange.

During the Vietnam War, 11 million gallons of this toxic chemical were sprayed to defoliate jungles during the war, which resulted in multi-generational birth defects, dozen forms of cancer, and a host of other diseases.

Initially, the VA recognized chloracne as the only condition caused by the toxic exposure, but the National Veterans Legal Services Program (NVLSP) challenged that regulation. In 1991, NVLSP negotiated a consent decree requiring VA to recognize emerging scientific evidence about the effects of Agent Orange exposure.

The decree included thousands of Vietnam veterans and their survivors who applied for service-connected disability and pay benefits retroactive to the date of the claim. Although “blue water” veterans were not included in that initial decree, in 2019 the *Procopio v. Wilkie* case in the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that Congress intended that all Vietnam veterans who served on ships be entitled to the presumption of exposure.

As a result of the decision, VA was required to readjudicate thousands of claims for veterans benefits. More than \$201 million in retroactive benefits has been paid to nearly 7,000 “blue water” veterans over the past two years.

Are you a blue water veteran? Contact your local GDVS field office to begin filing your claim: <https://veterans.georgia.gov/field-offices>.

WWII VETERAN TURNS 100!

On February 6, 2023, **WWII Veteran Louis Graziano** turned 100 years old!

The Georgia Department of Veterans Services celebrated Graziano with a certificate of appreciation presented by North Region Director, Ken Childre.

Graziano was present at many of the defining battles of WWII. He was part of the third wave of the D-Day invasion on Omaha Beach, then six months later he fought in the Battle of the Bulge.

Mr. Graziano is believed to be the last living witness of the signing of the German World War II surrender.

Read more about Mr. Graziano’s amazing life story, what he’s doing now, and his plans for the future at <https://news.va.gov/93152/veteranoftheday-army-veteran-louis-c-graziano>.

