



Georgia Department of Veterans Service

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

February 2024

VA ANNOUNCES ALL VETERANS EXPOSED TO TOXINS DURING MILITARY SERVICE ARE ELIGIBLE FOR VA HEALTH CARE

VA recently announced all veterans who were exposed to toxins and other hazards while serving in the military – at home or abroad – will be eligible to enroll directly in VA health care beginning March 5, 2024.

As directed by President Biden, this expansion of VA health care eliminates the phased-in approach called for by the PACT Act – meaning millions of veterans are becoming eligible for VA health care up to eight years earlier than written into law.

All veterans who served in the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Global War on Terror, or any other combat zone after 9/11 will now be eligible to enroll directly in VA health care without first applying for VA benefits. Veterans who never deployed but were exposed to toxins or hazards while training or on active duty in the United States will also be eligible to enroll.

“Expanding VA health benefits will be transformative

for the many veterans in Georgia who need the high-quality health care VA provides,” said Georgia Department of Veterans Service Commissioner Patricia Ross. “We are glad all of these veterans will be able to see VA for the care they earned and deserve through their service to our country.”

In Georgia, over 539,000 wartime and 151,000 peacetime veterans may now be eligible for VA health care under the expansion.

Additionally, it will now be faster and easier than ever for veterans to enroll in VA health care. Veterans do not have to first apply for VA disability compensation benefits or wait for a claim decision to become eligible. With this expansion and other authorities, millions of eligible veterans can enroll directly in VA care.

All eligible veterans are encouraged to visit [VA.gov/PACT](https://va.gov/PACT) or call 1-800-MYVA411 to learn more and apply for VA healthcare beginning March 5, 2024.

VA PROPOSES RULE TO EXPAND AGENT ORANGE PRESUMPTIVE LOCATIONS AND TIME FRAMES

On February 9, 2024, VA issued a proposed rule to expand the locations and time frames for a presumed exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides. If the proposed rule becomes final, VA will implement a new presumption of exposure to locations where herbicides were tested, used, or stored outside of Vietnam.

The proposed rule was formally published to the Federal Register on February 12, 2024. The rule will not take effect for several months if it passes with no objections or changes.

Specifically, this would add locations in the United States, Canada, and India to the existing presumptive locations in Vietnam, Cambodia, Johnson Atoll, Guam, American Samoa, Korea, Laos, and Thailand.

To be eligible, a veteran must have served in the identified location(s) during a specific time period and

currently have a condition(s) presumptively associated with herbicide exposure.

“Our goal is to provide every Veteran – of every era – with the VA health care and benefits they deserve, and this is another step in the right direction,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough.

Veterans who want to file an initial claim for possible Agent Orange exposure should contact their local GDVS veteran service office. Our VA accredited Veteran Service Officers can help begin the process of applying for federal and state veterans benefits.

Survivors can also file claims for benefits based on the veteran's service if the veteran died from a recognized disease from herbicide exposure.

Find your local GDVS office at <https://veterans.georgia.gov/field-offices>.



RAVEN HOLSTICK NAMED GDVS EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR



Thinking outside the box to find ways to take care of veterans’ overall needs is one of the many accolades coworkers use to describe working with Raven Holstick, the GDVS Employee of the Year for 2023.

“When I got the news,” said Holstick, “I was in a board meeting so I couldn’t jump up and down like I wanted to. But when I got home, I took a

moment to reflect and take it all in.”

A United States Army veteran, Holstick served as a Chaplain Assistant before being med-boarded as a Specialist in 2019. She currently works as an Appeals Officer with the department, as well as the state’s American Legion service officer.

“If I can make an impact on a veteran’s life by filing a claim, representing them as their appeals officer, or just being that listening ear, I feel as though my passion for serving people is complete,” said Holstick.

She received a Certificate of Appreciation from the Legion for her Outstanding Service and her passion to help others extends to volunteer work. She also volunteers her time at the YMCA to teach young ladies how to navigate peer pressure; mentors at-risk youth through Build Yourself Up non-profit organization; assists senior citizens in the Clayton County area; and regularly donates her time with GDVS Outreach events.

In addition to her service as a GDVS Outstanding employee, Holstick was accepted into the 2023 inaugural class of the GDVS Leadership Institute.

NATIONAL EXCELLENCE: GEORGIA HONORED BY VFW



The February issue of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) magazine not only featured Belinda Boldoe, GDVS Appeals Officer and Georgia’s VFW service officer on the cover, but featured her extensive knowledge of representing appeals and filing disability claims for veterans.

During the bi-annual training for VFW Accredited Veteran Service Officers, hundreds of officers gathered for a week in Annapolis, Maryland, to learn about policy changes and new laws that impact disability claims.

Boldoe explained how important it is to learn the process of filing a claim and what it means to help guide others so that no mistakes are made. She assists with about 25 disability claims per month.

“We’ve been seeing a lot more claims due to the passage of the PACT Act,” said Boldoe. “Most of the claims are respiratory related from veterans who served in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq wars.”

“We also get many claims from Vietnam War veterans who have hypertension related to Agent Orange exposure,” said Boldoe.

Although the VA requires accredited officers to spend 40 hours in training each year, the VFW offers up to 80 hours.

For Boldoe, this commitment to veterans is more than just a job. “It’s an assignment. I believe God put me here to help veterans.”

AUGUSTA WAR VETERANS NURSING HOME SCORES TOP MARKS FOR QUALITY CARE

The Georgia War Veterans Nursing Home in Augusta (GWWNH), affectionally nicknamed the “Blue Goose” by locals, recently placed in the top 15% of nursing homes in the nation surveyed by Pinnacle Quality Assurance.

Pinnacle, an authorized Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems, surveys over 3,600 locations across the United States.

Providers who maintain high scores in most categories receive Best in Class awards.

GWWNH received top marks in 14 out of 16 survey categories. “Achieving this award is a validation of our staff’s continued efforts and commitment to provide excellent care to our veterans and their families,” said Carlton Deese, Executive Director of GWWNH.



GDVS PROVIDES HOPE FOR HOMELESS IN HALL COUNTY



The Georgia Department of Veterans Services recently held a “Point in Time” count and homeless outreach event in Gainesville.

Hundreds of homeless residents in Hall County were served hot meals and connected with partner organizations.

Local resources showed up in force to provide assistance and care for their community.

The Cornerstone of Faith Missionary Church for provided food and hygiene bags; the Georgia Hospice and Palliative Care for contributed fresh fruit and information on care; VFW Post 8452 for provided a hot meal, warm clothing and coats; and the Salvation Army contributed their substantial knowledge of community resources while connecting attendees with follow up care.

GDVS veteran service officer and Gainesville office manager Rico Johnson coordinated the event. With his assistance, the GDVS was able to make a positive impact for veterans in need.