



**Georgia Department
of Veterans Service**

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

January 2025

COMMISSIONER’S CORNER

Happy 2025 to Georgia’s service members, veterans, and their families, caretakers, and survivors!

As we embark on an exciting new year dedicated to serving you, I want express my sincere gratitude to the exceptional GDVS team for their tireless efforts throughout 2024.

Georgia’s military and veteran community is a significant part of our state, comprising approximately 12.7% of our population, or roughly 1.4 million individuals.

In 2024, our staff filed 47,849 claims for veterans benefits. We are also proud to have secured over \$23 million in retroactive benefits payments.

Over 80 thousand veterans visited one of our 55 field offices, but we also saw many more at over 55 outreach events held throughout the state.

2025 promises numerous events and opportunities to engage with us within your local communities.

The GDVS team is ready to assist our military and veterans in every corner of our great State of Georgia. We look forward to serving you and your families this year!

NEW EXPANSION OF PRESUMPTIVE CONDITIONS PROVIDES ADDITIONAL BENEFITS FOR VETERANS

Earlier this month, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced the addition of several presumptive conditions for veterans who were exposed to toxic chemicals during their time in service.

The newly added conditions include acute and chronic leukemia, multiple myeloma, myelodysplastic syndrome, myelofibrosis, urinary bladder, ureter, and related genitourinary cancers. The addition of these to the list of presumptive conditions lowers the burden of proof for veterans, meaning they do not need to prove their time in the armed forces caused their condition to receive benefits for it.

This action is part of the PACT Act, signed into law in 2022, which is one of the largest expansions to veterans benefits in decades. The PACT Act addresses the conditions resulting from toxic exposure veterans may have experienced during their time in service.

Since becoming law, nearly 890,000 veterans have signed up for VA health care and more than 4.8 million veterans have applied for VA benefits. Georgia is the 4th in the nation for PACT Act benefits claims filed, with 102,956 filed to date for PACT Act conditions.

Steps like these are also part of VA’s efforts to better serve veterans who served at the Karshi-Khanabad base (K2) and their survivors. 13,002 K2 veterans of the approximately 16,000 known K2 veterans are currently receiving VA healthcare and most are service-connected for at least one condition.

Veterans with any of these conditions are encouraged to apply for benefits as soon as possible, even if your claim was previously denied.

Visit the [Georgia Department of Veterans Service’s](#) website to find a Veteran Service Office near you for assistance with eligibility or applying for benefits.



INSPIRING EXCELLENCE: RICO JOHNSON NAMED GDVS 2024 EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR



Rico Johnson was recently selected as the GDVS Employee of the Year for 2024.

Well known for his unyielding devotion to excellence and gold standard, Johnson has truly dedicated himself to serving Georgia’s veterans and their families, caretakers, and survivors.

A Missouri native, Johnson served as a medic in the United States Army and medically retired as Sergeant after 8 years of military service.

His military service is his motivating factor to help veterans. “I understand how tricky it can be to navigate veterans benefits, and I love using what I’ve learned to support others who are going through it,” said Johnson.

Johnson works diligently to achieve successful claims and outcomes for those in need. “I’ve seen firsthand how life-changing these benefits can be, not just for veterans but for their entire family and community,” explained Johnson.

Not only does he exemplify outstanding

work as a VSO, he also provides support in different areas of the department. Johnson is a member of the second class of the GDVS Leadership Institute and is learning skills to better serve with his fellow VSOs. He also works closely with the GDVS Suicide Prevention and Outreach team as a regional coordinator.

His commitment to the veterans of Hall County is evident in his “Vet-to-Vet” café discussions, partnerships with local non-profits and community resources, and his outreach to homeless individuals.

With years of demonstrating his commitment to the community and working with partners on creative solutions and connections to resources, it is no surprise his response to receiving the honor of employee of the year was to acknowledge this recognition belongs to the team he works with daily.

His advice to new and future VSOs? “Get into this work for the right reasons. It comes with incredible highs and some challenging lows, so it can be draining, but remember, you’re making a difference in people’s lives.”

RUDISILL DECISION EXPANDS EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS ELIGIBILITY

Some veterans and their beneficiaries may now be eligible to receive additional GI Bill® benefits following the Supreme Court’s recent Rudisill decision.

Veterans who qualified for both the Montgomery GI Bill—Active Duty (Chapter 30) and Post-9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33) through separate periods of service may now use benefits under both programs for a total combined period of 48 months.

Separate periods of service can include two periods of service connected via reenlistment.

VA has created a checklist to help determine if this impacts you or your beneficiaries. To find this checklist and more information, visit: <https://benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/rudisill-decision-tree.asp>.

DEDICATION AND SERVICE: KRISTI JONES SELECTED AS EMPLOYEE OF THE QUARTER



Cartersville Veteran Service Officer Kristi Jones was recently selected as the GDVS Employee of the Quarter for Q4 2024.

A Minnesota native, Jones joined the United States Air Force when she was 17.

Jones was thrilled to be recognized for her hard work, especially as she joined the department in 2022. “I have worked really hard to learn everything I can as a VSO in order to provide the best service to our veterans and their families,” said Jones.

Jones has been a vital part of spreading awareness of different kinds of resources to veterans in Bartow and the surrounding counties. She has worked to

forge relationships with the Friends of Officer Kristi Jones was Disabled Adults and Children, the Shepherd Center, and the Vietnam Veterans of Bartow County. These relationships have helped connect veterans with resources to better address their mobility challenges.

Her favorite thing about working for the GDVS? “Being a part of making a difference for veterans and their families. Hearing thank you never gets old,” said Jones.

On her days off, Jones enjoys listening to music. In fact, as a big Elvis fan, one of her memorable trips was traveling to Memphis and seeing Graceland.

Her advice to new and future Veteran Service Officers? “Ask questions, stay organized and network.”

VA AUGUSTA LEADS NATION IN HELPING HOMELESS VETERANS

The Charlie Norwood VAMC’s Homeless Veteran Program was recently recognized for exceeding their goals for housing veterans by 245.7% in Fiscal Year 2024.

They are ranked as the top VA Homeless Veteran Program in the nation.

VA housed nearly 48,000 veterans across all of their Homeless Veteran Programs in Fiscal Year 2024. Overall, VA exceeded their annual goal of assisting homeless veterans by 16.9%.

If you or a veteran you know are experiencing housing instability or are currently homeless, the GDVS can help. Contact GDVS Homeless Coordinator Jarelle Thompson via email at jarelle.thompson@vs.ga.gov or submit a request for help online at <https://gaveteransfoundation.org/get-help/>.