



AFSA Retiree and Veteran Affairs Newsletter

- BLACK HISTORY MONTH



A Tuskegee Airman crew poses in front of a B-25. (Courtesy photo)

We are a nation of change makers, a nation of those who stand for equality and freedom. And each February during Black History Month, we honor the Black Americans who came before us and still serve, standing for their dreams and rights and making a difference for us all.

Originally founded as "Negro History Week" in 1926 by Black American historian and author Carter G. Woodson, it recognized the contributions of Black Americans to the country and fostered a better understanding of the Black American experience.

In 1976, President Gerald Ford issued the first African American History Month proclamation, calling upon the American people to celebrate the event each February.

Since 1986 "National Black (Afro-American) History Month" has lived as a time set aside by law to recognize the contributions of Blacks to our nation.

AFSA stands to celebrate and honor the Black experience and sacrifices made in support of our great nation and the United States Air Force.

- DEFRAUDING VETERANS WOULD BE A FEDERAL CRIME UNDER BILL PUSHED BY SENATORS

Defrauding veterans of their benefits would be its own federal crime under a bipartisan bill recently reintroduced in the Senate. Under the bill from Sens. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., and Marco Rubio, R-Fla., fraud schemes that target veterans benefits would be punishable by up to five years in prison, a fine or both.

"Anytime the federal government provides essential benefits to our constituents, there's going to be predators out there to take it away," Cortez Masto said in a phone interview with Military.com on Tuesday. "So, we have to make sure that we are imposing the appropriate enforcement to protect those individuals so that their benefits are not taken."

The bill, which Cortez Masto and Rubio formally reintroduced Friday, has been introduced in previous Congresses and has even passed the House several times. Most recently, in 2021, the House overwhelmingly approved the bill in a 416-5 vote. But it has never been taken up by the Senate, meaning the legislative process has to start from scratch again this year.

According to data released by the FTC in February 2022, reports of fraud against veterans, service members and spouses jumped 69% in 2021 compared to the previous year. Within that group, veterans and military retirees reported being targeted the most, with 87,343 fraud reports. The total 110,827 fraud cases reported by military consumers resulted in an estimated \$266 million lost.

Concerns have also been raised that scammers could target veterans more in the wake of the passage of the PACT Act, the sweeping legislation that expanded benefits for millions of veterans exposed to toxins. While fraud is already a crime regardless of whether the target is a veteran, Cortez Masto, who previously served as Nevada's attorney general, said creating a new offense specifically addressing veterans benefits fraud will give prosecutors more tools to go after criminals. For example, she said, "pension poachers" may escape mail or wire fraud charges if they present themselves as an investment specialist trying to help a veteran.

"If a defendant cloaks themselves as some sort of professional that was just trying to help for a fee, even though their intention all along was to defraud these individuals out of their money and not necessarily help them and still get to a fee, sometimes it's difficult for prosecutors to use the existing offense," she said.

While the bill, called the Preventing Crimes Against Veterans Act, has stalled in the Senate in previous years, Cortez Masto vowed to continue pushing until it gets across the finish line.

"This is something we can all get behind, so I think we're both going to do everything we can to get it going and get it passed on the Senate side," she said, referring to her and Rubio. "It is important for our veterans, not only to protect them and their benefits, but [to] hold people accountable that want to defraud them and scam them."

<https://www.military.com/daily-news/2023/02/14/defrauding-veterans-would-be-federal-crime-under-bill-pushed-senators.html>

- HEY VETERANS! SIGN UP TO RUN, WALK, RUCK OR ROLL WITH OLD GLORY!

Team RWB is launching its 9th Old Glory Relay, a national movement showcasing the strength, grit, and commitment of America's Veterans in support of their well-being.

From April 1 - May 20, 2023, Veterans of all generations and supporters will move an American flag more than 4,000 miles from Seattle, Washington, to Atlanta, Georgia, stopping at many Department of Veterans Affairs facilities along the way.

Team RWB invites you to join them and showcase the grit and the heart of the military and Veteran community. Be a part of showing the country that when Veterans come together, they can accomplish incredible things and inspire others along the way. There are no requirements for participants when it comes to speed or distance. The only requirement to be a part of this epic journey is you must show up.

Sign up now to walk, run, or cycle the American flag in Washington State, Oregon, California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, or Georgia. Interested or you need more information visit:

https://about.teamrwb.org/?utm_source=press-release-&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=brandawareness2023

- LEGISLATION TO EXTEND TRICARE DEPENDENT COVERAGE TO AGE 26

Democratic Rep. Pat Ryan announced his first bill of the 118th Congress. If signed into law, it would allow military parents to keep their kids on their health plans until age 26, rather than the current age of 21.

Ryan said the difference was a compromise made during the Affordable Care Act that military families unfortunately foot the bill for.

"Somehow, during those negotiations, they left out TRICARE beneficiaries," Ryan said. "So active-duty military and retirees were left out. So, when every other family had the age raised to 26, military families, frankly, it was patently unfair and unjust."

Ryan said the bipartisan bill, which is co-sponsored by Republican Rep. Michael Waltz of Florida, could save military families nearly \$7,000 a year.

"We're providing desperately needed relief for military families and really stepping up to thank them and to do the right thing after they've done so much to sacrifice and serve us," Ryan said.

Jackson said the potential savings in her case would be a few hundred dollars a month. She said that would go a long way for her family.

With her son planning to go to law school, she says she'll need every bit of help she can get.

"Our kids, they make a huge sacrifice," Jackson said. "We forget that our children are the ones that serve too. So, if there's one little thing that we can do to ease the transition, which is just providing insurance until they're 26, if the civilians can do it, why can't we do it on our side?"

This bill is similar to the TRICARE, Health Care Fairness for Military Families Act of 2021 introduced by Senators. Kelly, Murkowski, Portman, Warren, Tester in June of 2021 S-1972 and HR-475 which AFSA has continually supported. These bills have been re-introduced in the new session of Congress since they weren't approved in the last session of Congress.

- FREE CAREER GUIDANCE FOR VETERANS FROM AMERICA'S TOP COMPANIES

American Corporate Partners (ACP) connects post-9/11 Veterans with corporate professionals for customized mentorships. Veterans find meaningful employment outcomes, whether a higher-paying job or a promotion. The average starting annual salary for Veterans who use ACP is \$93,000. The program helps Veterans find great jobs the first time.

ACP is a national non-profit organization dedicated to helping military Veterans make connections in the civilian workforce. Since 2010, more than 26,000 Veterans have found success through ACP.

How to get started

Visit ACP's website and fill out a brief application. Answer questions about your career goals, military experience, and mentoring preferences.

What to expect after applying?

- ACP will reach out within one business day to schedule a 15-minute phone call to ask a few more questions to match the Veteran with the right mentor.
- ACP will introduce you to a mentor within several weeks of your application to the program. ACP will also check in throughout the year to provide customized resources and ensure positive outcomes. Nearly 100% of Veterans would recommend ACP.
- All post-9/11 Veterans who served at least 180 days of active duty since 9/11 are eligible.
- ACP's weekly LinkedIn Live series connects Veterans directly to partner companies and hiring managers.
- ACP's LinkedIn Group, ACP Connects, offers employment opportunities from military-ready employers and professional development resources.

ACP's roster of mentors is unmatched: senior executives from hundreds of America's top companies, like Amazon, Disney, Johnson & Johnson, Lockheed Martin, Morgan Stanley and more provide volunteer mentors to ACP.

Typical mentorship goals include:

- Resume review and interview preparation.
- Career exploration and understanding job opportunities.
- Career advancement once a position is obtained.
- Work-life balance.
- Networking.
- Small business development.
- Leadership and professional communication.

The sharing of any non-VA information does not constitute an endorsement of products and services on the part of VA. Veterans should verify the information with the organization offering. Looking for more information visit: <https://news.va.gov/116127/free-career-guidance-americas-top-companies/>

- ADVANCE CARE PLANNING

Advanced care planning allows you to make your health care wishes known and to assign someone you trust to make medical decisions for you if you are not able. An advanced directive is a tool to document your wishes.

Benefits of Advanced Care Planning:

- Allows you to have a voice in your medical care when you cannot speak for yourself.
- Caregiver or family members will not be burdened by being unsure of what you want medically.
- Distressed and emotional caregivers or family members can avoid the conflict of decision making and can be there to support you and one another.
- Discussing these important topics can bring people closer by improving understanding of your values and wishes.

Every adult over the age of 18 should take some time to consider the difficult questions that occur in advance care planning. Still, it is especially critical if they have been diagnosed with a chronic disease. Advance care planning provides documented directions for healthcare providers, caregivers, and family members, that support the patient's wishes and identifies a person who can advocate for their wishes if they are unable to for themselves.

Advance care planning documents are available through VA providers or by visiting Advance Care Planning - Geriatrics and Extended Care. Non-Veterans may also want to visit Caring Info: Resources for Serious Illness & End-of-Life Care. For more information or visit:

https://www.caregiver.va.gov/support/Advance_Care_Planning.asp

- PACT ACT FRAUD PREVENTION

Have you recently been contacted by a company aggressively seeking to legally represent you in filing presumptive VA claims authorized by the PACT Act? If so, be wary as the company might be seeking a portion of your VA benefits.

Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022 (PACT Act) represents the biggest expansion of Veteran benefits in history, and many Veterans may be eligible to receive compensation for their service. The PACT Act adds 23 burn pit and toxic exposure-related conditions to VA's list of service presumptions, including hypertension, with the expansion of presumptions related to Agent Orange exposure by including Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Guam, American Samoa, and Johnston Atoll as locations for Agent Orange exposure.

While this legislation brings great promise to Veterans, it's also a monumental opportunity for fraud. VA has received multiple reports of unaccredited law firms or companies targeting Veterans to offer their services to file claims for presumptive conditions. Unaccredited law firms and companies are reaching out to help for a fee as high as 40% of the Veteran's retroactive payment and 40% of the Veteran's first year of entitlement payments.

VA is committed to help protect Veterans from predatory entities, by educating Veterans, their families, and all partners about the types of activity and tactics being used against them.

To avoid being a victim of these schemes, here are some helpful tips to remember:

- Apply directly to VA. You may submit your application securely online via VA.GOV or in person at any regional office. You may file your claim directly with VA, and VA will help you gather the necessary evidence to support it. There are no costs or hidden fees to apply. Do not agree to pay an unaccredited individual or organization a percentage of your disability compensation payment or retroactive entitlement. If you need help filing a claim, there are accredited representatives to assist you.
- Be cautious of aggressive law firms or companies. Firms may use frequent communications (phone, text, and media messages) to establish a sense of urgency.
- Be cautious of for-profit companies that use VA's name. They may alter their name to create a false association with VA and establish legitimacy. Examples include a website such as VAclaimsassistance.com that incorporates VA into its name.
- Review all legally binding documents thoroughly. Never sign a blank form someone else will fill out later or give them full discretion to act on your behalf. See the contents before you sign and keep a copy for yourself.
- Be wary of media advertisements regarding legal representation for presumptive VA claims. Companies advertising legal services may be predatory and financially motivated to obtain your VA benefits.
- If a company or individual is projecting misinformation or has questionable business practices regarding VA entitlements, file a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission at and the Better Business Bureau.
- To report suspected fraudulent activity, please contact the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) Hotline (va.gov).
- Veterans and survivors who think they might be eligible should apply for PACT Act benefits right now. Go to va.gov/PACT or call 1-800-MYVA411 for more information.

By protecting Veterans' benefits against fraudulent activity, you can help honor their service and sacrifice.

- FREE LIFETIME ACCESS TO NATIONAL PARKS

With the Interagency Military Lifetime Pass, Veterans and their families can enjoy free access to approximately 2,000 public locations spread out across more than 400 million acres of public lands. A pass can be obtained in person while visiting a participating site or online through the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Online Store.

Learn more about the pass and if you're eligible. Visit for more information:

<https://www.nps.gov/planyourvisit/veterans-and-gold-star-families-free-access.htm>

- PREPARE YOUR TAXES WITH FREE AARP AIDE & BASE TAX SERVICES

With tax season approaching, prepare now with the AARP Foundation's Tax-Aide Service. The volunteer-run program helps the military community file state and federal tax returns. Trained Tax-Aide volunteers are nationwide and IRS-certified each year to ensure they understand the latest changes and additions to the tax code. Tax-Aide is free and available either virtually or in-person (by appointment only) to all Veterans, service members, and their families regardless of age or whether they are AARP members.

Likewise, many base Family Support Centers or Legal Offices offer tax support services for those members who are filing short form or the EZ tax form. Please check with your installation Family Support Center or Legal Office for more information.

- NEW LAW HELPS SURVIVORS GET VA BENEFITS

A new law makes it easier for survivors of Veterans exposed to toxic material, including burn pits, to receive Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC), tax-free benefit payments available for certain surviving spouses, children, or parents. They may also now be eligible for a one-time payment for accrued benefits, burial benefits, education and training, home loan certificates of eligibility, or health care. Find out which benefits you may qualify for and how to access them.

Need more information visit: <https://www.va.gov/service-member-benefits/>

- NEW TOXIC EXPOSURE SCREENING FOR VETERANS

Veterans who enroll or are enrolled in VA health care, can now receive the toxic exposure screening at VA medical centers and clinics across the country. During your screening, if you believe you experienced toxic exposures during your military service, you may be connected to resources and encouraged to file a disability claim. Need more information visit: <https://www.va.gov/service-member-benefits/>

- DISABILITY HOUSING GRANTS AVAILABLE FOR VETERANS

Veterans and service members with certain service-connected disabilities can receive housing grants from VA to buy, build, or modify a home to meet their needs and live more independently. Changes to your home may involve installing ramps, widening doorways, and more. Find out if you're eligible for a disability housing grant and how to apply. For more information visit: <https://www.va.gov/housing-assistance/disability-housing-grants/>

- ARE YOU A VETERAN IN CRISIS OR CONCERNED ABOUT ONE?

Did you know that VA offers same day services in Primary Care and Mental Health at 172 VA Medical Centers across the country? Contact the Veterans Crisis Line (1-800-273-8255 and press 1, Chat, or Text 838255.)

- AFSA MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

AFSA MEMBERSHIP is open to all: UNIFORMED SERVICES: Active Duty, Guard, Reserve, Retired and Veteran Military Members (Joint Services Enlisted and Commissioned Officers), Public Health Services (PHS), and National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) personnel; FAMILY MEMBERS of Uniformed Service Members, and ASSOCIATE MEMBERS: DoD Civilians, Civil Air Patrol, JROTC, Mission Partners/Sponsors and all Military Supporters. Visit: www.hqafsa.org for more information and to join.