



WOUNDED WARRIOR
PROJECT®

PROJECT ADVOCACY NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2023

Welcome to the Volume 4, Issue 1 of Wounded Warrior Project Advocacy News, a policy update from Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP). WWP's advocacy efforts connect you and your fellow warriors with your elected officials, providing you a voice in our nation's capital, and empowering you to discuss the issues that matter most to the post-9/11 veteran community.

IN THIS ISSUE:

2022 Year in Review

WWP Participates in Annual
Congressional Testimony &
Hosts *Operation Advocacy* Fly-In

Interview with Tonya Star

Q&A: Meet Dr. Shereef Elnahal,
Under Secretary for Health



MARCH 2023

LETTER FROM OUR VP

Greetings and welcome to Wounded Warrior Project's® (WWP) quarterly policy update, *Project Advocacy News*.

Looking back, 2022 was an exciting year full of many historic moments, from the passage of the *Honoring Our PACT Act* – our generation's most comprehensive toxic exposure legislation – to executing WWP's largest warrior fly-in and launching our first Women Warrior Summit in Washington, DC. I am proud to say those are only a few of our many accomplishments. As the year closed, WWP was proud to wrap our efforts at our annual holiday reception by honoring champions in Washington, DC, who helped us tirelessly over the past year. We awarded several outstanding individuals and groups:

★ **Kirsten Laha-Walsh**, the first ever HillVets-WWP fellow, who provided exceptional support for veteran mental health and caregiver advocacy.



Kirsten Laha-Walsh at WWP's annual holiday reception

★ **Christine Hill**, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health Staff Director for the Minority, who provided crucial support for legislation touching on mental health and long-term care.



Christine Hill and Matthew Reel at WWP's annual holiday reception

★ **Matthew Reel**, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Staff Director for the Majority, who led his team in reviewing, reporting, and supporting passage on many key bills, including ones related to toxic exposure and veteran benefits.

★ **Simon Coon**, Professional Staff Member with the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, who was instrumental in helping to pass the *Honoring Our PACT Act* and in building support for the *Major Richard Star Act*.



WWP presents an award to Dr. Susan Kirsh, Deputy Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Discovery, Education, and Affiliate Networks (DEAN)

★ **Pat McGuigan**, Military and Veterans Legislative Assistant in the office of Sen. John Boozman (R-AR), who was another key staffer in building bipartisan support for the *Honoring our PACT Act* and other priority bills.

★ **James Anderson**, Director of Veterans Engagement with the Office of Public Engagement at the White House, whose efforts supported WWP in many ways, including making the 2022 WWP Soldier Ride DC so successful.

★ **Terri Tanielian**, Special Assistant to the President for Veterans Affairs, who effectively led the Domestic Policy Council's efforts to develop and implement the president's veteran policy and mental health policy agendas.

★ **The Office of Healthcare Innovation & Learning and the Office of Discovery, Education & Affiliate Networks** within the Veterans Health Administration at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which drove advances in how VA partners with the veteran community.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LETTER FROM OUR VP

WWP Government Affairs Update 1

2022 YEAR IN REVIEW 3

WWP ON CAPITOL HILL

WWP Participates in Annual Congressional Testimony & Hosts *Operation Advocacy Fly-In*..... 5

GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

Warrior Advocate Spotlight 9

THE MAJOR RICHARD STAR ACT

Interview with Tonya Star 12

“DID YOU KNOW?”

Annual Warrior Survey 14

Suicide Prevention 14

Q&A

Meet Dr. Shereef Elnahal, Under Secretary for Health 15

VA PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

Toxic Exposure Claims Update 18

GRASSROOTS & CONSTITUENT AFFAIRS

VA Deputy Chief of Staff Roundtable 18

LETTER FROM OUR VP (CONT.)



WWP CEO Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Linnington testifies before Congress



Warriors participate in Operation Advocacy

With the start of the new year and the midterm elections behind us, we have entered the first session of the 118th Congress. Each new session brings new leadership, experiences and insights, and WWP is looking forward to meeting with all new Members of Congress, as well as our long-standing allies, to continue to help them learn about our programs and services, discuss our legislative priorities, and identify ways we can work together to serve America’s veterans.

Our team would like to extend a special congratulations to the incoming Chairs and Ranking Members of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans’ Affairs: Sens. Jon Tester (D-MT) and Jerry Moran (R-KS), and Reps. Mike Bost (R-IL) and Mark Takano (D-CA). We appreciate your leadership and look forward to working together over the next two years.

WWP set an ambitious agenda for the months ahead, and we are ready to hit the ground running. On January 25 and 26, we kicked off the year with the Veterans’ Family, Caregiver and Survivor (VFCS) Federal Advisory Committee Meeting, attended by WWP CEO Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Linnington. During the meeting, senior VA officials to include Secretary Denis McDonough, Senior Advisor Meg Kabat, and Chief Veterans Experience Officer John Boerstler, presented updates to committee members. Additional subcommittees reviewed forthcoming recommendations for VA on support for caregivers and survivors.

We have also been making the rounds on Capitol Hill, meeting with Members of Congress and testifying before a joint House and Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee hearing

on March 8, where Gen. Linnington informed Congress of WWP’s key legislative priorities. That same week, 73 WWP alumni from across the country traveled to Washington, DC, to participate in our annual *Operation Advocacy* fly-in, providing a firsthand perspective to congressional leaders on the issues impacting veterans and their families.

Looking ahead, our legislative priorities for the year include a renewed focus on the issues impacting women warriors through WWP’s Women Warriors Initiative, a re-commitment to mental health resources for veterans and an in-depth look at how we can best support military families and caregivers. Meanwhile outside of our nation’s capital, we will be setting up a substantive grassroots advocacy program for the first time in WWP’s history.

We will continue to work with Members of Congress to ensure these and other necessary policies are passed and enacted, providing veterans and their families with the resources, care, and treatment they deserve. The next few months will be crucial for many pressing legislative and policy initiatives, and we will ensure warrior voices are heard.

It is important to note that our staff could have never achieved the success that we reached over the past year without the help of all the volunteers from the veterans community, including warriors, caregivers, loved ones, and allies. Your commitment to your fellow warriors outside of active service is a testament to your patriotism and dedication, and we cannot thank you enough.

To Honor and Empower,

Jose Ramos

2022 YEAR IN REVIEW



2022

YEAR IN REVIEW

Throughout 2022, WWP was hard at work advocating for legislation that impacts the 230,000 registered post-9/11 warriors and family members we serve and the lives of all 19 million-plus veterans across the country. Our advocacy focused on our 2022 priorities: toxic exposure, women veterans, mental health, financial security, long-term care and support, caregivers, and enhanced quality of life. With your help, we were pleased to witness the passage of several pieces of key legislation that will have a powerful impact on the post-9/11 veteran population for years to come. Below are just some of the many legislative accomplishments to which WWP contributed:



Toxic Exposure

Health Care and Benefits

On August 10, President Biden signed the [**Sergeant First Class \(SFC\) Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics \(PACT\) Act**](#), also known as the *Honoring Our Pact Act*, into law. This historic legislation capped a multi-year effort to improve health care and benefits for veterans exposed to toxic substances during their service.

Throughout 2022, WWP executed a national grassroots mobilization campaign that resulted in lawmakers receiving thousands of messages from across the country. WWP also provided witness testimony before Congress on multiple occasions, spoke at several press conferences, participated in roundtable discussions with the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees, and engaged in numerous media interviews to advocate on behalf of this legislation.

The most comprehensive toxic exposure package ever passed in U.S. history, the *Honoring Our PACT Act* will ensure that every veteran who served near toxic burn pits in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other areas is eligible for VA health care, and that those dealing with more than 20 specific illnesses will be eligible for VA care and benefits on a presumptive basis.



WWP attending President Biden's signing of the Honoring Our PACT Act into law



Women Veterans

Breast Cancer Screenings

WWP was thrilled to help contribute to the passage of the [**Making Advances in Mammography and Medical Options \(MAMMO\) Act**](#), which will help provide better access to breast cancer screening and care for women veterans, rural veterans, and veterans who are injured and/or paralyzed. Among other provisions, this WWP legislative priority requires VA to develop a strategic plan for mammography and to upgrade its breast imaging services. The bill also creates a telemammography pilot program for veterans in areas where VA does not offer in-house mammography and expands veterans' access to clinical trials through partnerships with the National Cancer Institute.

Military Sexual Trauma (MST)

According to the Department of Defense's (DoD) Fiscal Year 2021 Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military, an estimated 8.4% of active-duty women and 1.5 percent of active-duty men indicated experiencing sexual assault. We prioritized improving care for survivors of MST, and our advocacy helped contribute to passage of several bills related to MST support and treatment, including the [**VA Peer Support Enhancement for MST Survivors Act**](#), the [**Dignity for MST Survivors Act**](#), and the [**MST Claims Coordination Act**](#). MST-related bills passed in 2022 establish a peer support program for MST survivors; improve VA's disability exam process for MST survivors through a partnership with the National Academies; modify the VA claims process for claims related to MST; and support veterans as they navigate the Board of Veterans' Appeals appeal process regarding claims for compensation based on MST.

2022 YEAR IN REVIEW (CONT.)



Mental Health

Mental Health Package

One significant accomplishment during 2022 was inclusion of the [Support the Resilience of Our Nation's Great \(STRONG\) Veterans Act](#) in the federal spending bill, the [Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023](#). The STRONG Veterans Act includes measures reflecting several of WWP's priorities, including improving treatment for sleep disorders; streamlining mental health consultations for veterans filing for disability compensation; improving access to care at Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Programs (RRTPs); and studying the availability of treatment programs for veterans with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders (SUD). Additionally, this comprehensive mental health package strengthens VA's mental health workforce and research, increases staff and training for the 9-8-8 Veterans Crisis Line, and expands VA's peer specialist support program to all VA medical centers.

Veteran Treatment Courts

We were also excited about the passage of the [Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Reauthorization Act of 2022](#). This WWP-priority reauthorizes and further expands the Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Program (JMHC), which provides critical grants for mental health courts (including Veterans Treatment Courts), crisis intervention teams, and other programs to support collaboration between law enforcement and behavioral health providers and improve outcomes for justice-involved individuals with mental health disorders.

years old to be eligible, but now eligibility has been expanded to those who acquired a disability before turning 46 years old. With this new age eligibility, over 1 million veterans in the U.S. can now use ABLE accounts for the first time.

Adaptive Vehicles, Military Spouse Hiring, Self-employment

We also saw progress in several other areas surrounding veterans' financial security. The [Veterans Auto and Education Improvement Act of 2022](#) includes the [CARS for Vets Act](#), which authorizes VA to provide an eligible veteran with a new modified vehicle every 10 years under its vehicle adaptation program. In addition, it includes language from two WWP-supported pieces of legislation: the [Veteran Eligibility for Necessities to Undertake Rewarding Entrepreneurship \(VENTURE\) Act](#), which expands access to self-employment assistance under the Veteran Readiness and Employment program, and the [Military Spouse Licensing Relief Act](#), which provides for both the portability of professional licenses of service members as well as their spouses who are relocated outside of the jurisdiction that issued the license.



WWP Alumnus Brian Neuman speaks at a press conference



Financial Security

Clothing Allowance

Another significant accomplishment included within the [Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023](#) was the language of the [Brian Neuman/Mark O'Brien Clothing Allowance Improvement Act](#). This WWP-championed legislation, named after WWP alumni Brian Neuman and Mark O'Brien, requires VA to automatically continue the allowance for damage to clothing caused by a veteran's prosthetic, orthopedic appliance, or prescription skin medication made necessary by a service-connected disability, instead of the current process which requires that veterans reapply annually.

ABLE Accounts

Additionally, the [Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023](#) included the [Achieving a Better Life Experience \(ABLE\) Age Adjustment Act](#), which changes the age for individuals to be eligible for ABLE accounts (tax-free savings accounts for certain individuals with disabilities). Previously, individuals needed to have acquired their disability before turning 26



Brain Health

National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2023

Finally, we were particularly excited about a few of the provisions in Congress's annual defense bill, the [FY23 NDAA](#), which will help provide better care for brain health. This includes the development of a comprehensive initiative for brain health to unify efforts and programs across the DoD and a pilot program to monitor blast overpressure exposure.

With each legislative victory, we are proud of and thankful for the opportunity to help provide veterans and their families with the resources, care, and treatment they deserve and need to succeed. None of this would be possible without our partners at VA, DoD, congressional stakeholders, and all of your hard work and dedication. We are encouraged by everything we were able to accomplish together in 2022 and look forward to new challenges, opportunities, and victories in the year ahead.

WWP ON CAPITOL HILL



WWP CEO Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Linnington testifies before Congress

WWP Participates in Annual Congressional Testimony & Hosts *Operation Advocacy* Fly-In

On March 8, WWP CEO Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Linnington testified before the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs, sharing warriors' stories and bringing congressional attention to WWP's top legislative priorities.

“

Congress has a critical role in our work to change the landscape of support for wounded warriors. WWP is committed to helping your committees identify, develop, and pursue public policy changes that will have the biggest impact on the wounded warriors we serve. Just as the 117th Congress answered our call to pursue initiatives we identified during this annual hearing in 2022, we hope that the perspectives offered today will inform the pursuits of the 118th Congress and help deliver large scale impact.”

– CEO Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Linnington

Gen. Linnington testified about several issues, including:

- ★ The importance of passing the **Major Richard Star Act (H. R. 1282, S. 344)**, which would allow veterans who were retired for combat-related injuries with under 20 years of service to collect their full DoD retired pay and their full VA disability compensation benefits with no offset.
- ★ Proposed legislation that would **expand the Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program** to more veterans who are disabled, such as veteran-friendly policies for when the program can be used, transparency about eligibility determinations, and more consistent training for VR&E counselors.
- ★ The need for **stronger care and coordination for mental health** within the government and VA, including funding and aligning programs that help veterans address invisible wounds from service, such as the **Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program, Mission Daybreak**, and the **Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide**.

WWP ON CAPITOL HILL (CONT.)

- ★ The ways Congress can **improve accessibility and availability of women’s health care** by increasing resources and essential services, emphasizing peer connection and mentorship, professional networks, and optimizing channels of care like telehealth and the Community Care Network.
- ★ The ongoing need for full implementation of the **Honoring Our Pact (PACT) Act** to ensure all impacted veterans’ needs are met efficiently and allow for future expansions.
- ★ The need to expand and advance policies and programs such as the **Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers** to heighten support for caregivers and address their financial and mental health needs.
- ★ The importance of **removing barriers for rural and underserved veterans** to help them access quality and preventative care and improve their quality of life.
- ★ Support policies that **modernize and streamline the VA health system and strengthen its workforce** to ultimately improve veterans’ VA experience and health outcomes.

Operation Advocacy Congressional Meetings

In conjunction with Gen. Linnington’s testimony, Wounded Warrior Project alumni from across the country traveled to Washington, DC, to take part in *Operation Advocacy*, WWP’s grassroots initiative that connects warriors with elected officials. Seventy-three warriors from 38 states held 111 meetings with Members of Congress and their staff to discuss several of WWP’s top legislative priorities, including financial security, mental health, and toxic exposure.

This biannual event gives WWP alumni a chance to meet face-to-face with elected officials to voice their perspectives, discuss the most pressing issues warriors face, and have meaningful discussions that help steer our country forward.



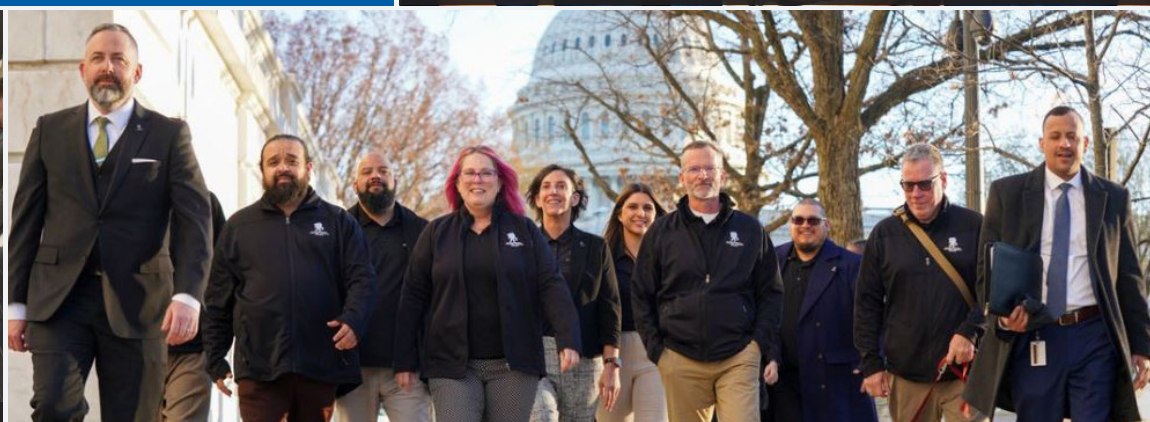
Warriors attend WWP’s annual congressional testimony



Warriors meet with SVAC Ranking Member Jerry Moran (R-KS)



Warrior Danette Harvey with HVAC Chairman Mike Bost (R-IL-12)



Warriors arrive on Capitol Hill

WWP ON CAPITOL HILL (CONT.)

Operation Advocacy Opening Dinner

In addition to their congressional meetings, attendees were joined for dinner on March 6 by The Honorable Donald M. Remy, Deputy Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Deputy Secretary Remy updated warriors on the latest efforts at VA and encouraged WWP’s continued engagement and partnership.



WWP presents Deputy Secretary Remy an award



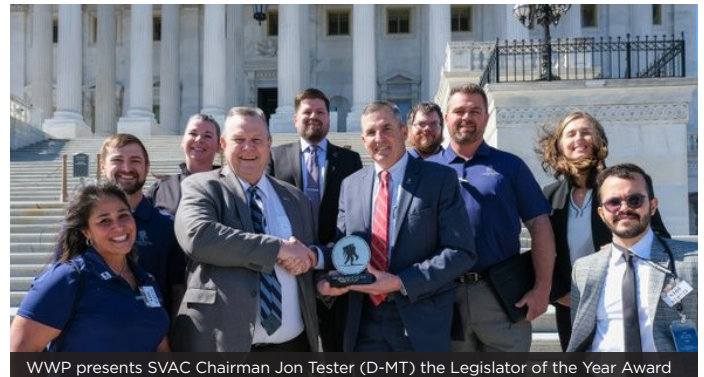
Deputy Secretary Remy with warriors during Operation Advocacy

WWP Meetings with Leadership and New Members

While warriors were busy meeting with members and their staff, part of WWP’s leadership team was busy making the rounds too, conducting nine meetings with Members of Congress as well as meeting with the new Defense Health Agency Director, Lt. Gen. Telita Crosland, USA.

WWP CEO Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Linnington, Chief Program Officer Jen Silva, and GCR Vice President Jose Ramos met with the Chair and Ranking Members of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans’ Affairs (HVAC, SVAC) to discuss WWP’s full legislative agenda. While meeting with SVAC Chairman, Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT), WWP presented him with WWP’s Legislator of the Year Award in front of two MT warriors who were participating in *Operation Advocacy*. Additionally, while meeting with Rep. Takano, former Chairman and now the Ranking Member of HVAC, he presented WWP with a signed copy of the *PACT Act* legislation, a recognition of the collective efforts and impact WWP had on getting this historical piece of legislation passed and signed into law.

WWP also met with a handful of new Members of Congress, all of whom are post-9/11 veterans themselves, to provide them with a general overview of how WWP serves their communities. Each new Member was presented with a WWP plaque welcoming them to Congress and thanking them for their continued service, a memento each was proud to receive and display in their new offices.



WWP presents SVAC Chairman Jon Tester (D-MT) the Legislator of the Year Award



WWP receives a signed copy of the Honoring Our PACT Act from HVAC Ranking Member Mark Takano (D-CA-39)



WWP meets with new Member of Congress, Rep. Rich McCormick (R-GA-06)

WWP ON CAPITOL HILL (CONT.)

THANK YOU

Wounded Warrior Project would like to thank the following warrior-advocates for taking time away from their jobs and families to travel to Washington, DC, to participate in Operation Advocacy from March 5-10:

Adam Long, Sioux Falls, SD
Danny Jackson, Tucson, AZ
John Zuniga, O'Fallon, IL
Patrick Bestler, Mesa, AZ
AJ McKinney, Edgerton, WI
Danny Rodriguez, New Market, MD
Josh Polson, Albuquerque, NM
Patrick Flaherty, Mystic, CT
Alodine Shanks, Port St. Lucie, FL
David Staffa, Clermont, FL
Joshua Jordan, Hebron, KY
Rachel Grant, San Diego, CA
Amy Fiene, Menomonee Falls, WI
Dawn Drake, Mesa, AZ
Juanita Sepulveda, Atascosa, TX
Rana Clark, Chattanooga, TN
Andrew Brewer, Citrus Springs, FL
Dawn Tomei, Portsmouth, NH
Justin Bednar, Rensselaer, IN
Richard Galindo, Hemet, CA
Anthony Duggan, Dunstable, MA
Diana Bourgeois, Reno, NV
Justin Mathers, Fayetteville, NC
Samantha Hargrove, Columbus, GA
Anton Johnson, Missoula, MT
Earl Witman, Jacksonville, NC

Katherine Goode, Scottsdale, AZ
Samuel Lucero, Montgomery, TX
Benjamin Heck, Dupont, WA
Elizabeth Dykstra, Oswego, IL
Katie Fulmer, Eagle River, AK
Sarah Klumpp, Rose City, MI
Brent Reiffer, Moseley, VA
Etta Cleveland, Montgomery, AL
Keara Torkelson, Baldwin City, KS
Scott Martin, Clarksville, TN
Brian Wing, Bristow, VA
Ionatana Ala, Mililani, HI
Kennery Foster, Carencro, LA
Shelton Gore, Davenport, FL
Carlos Gonzales, Lancaster, CA
Jacqueline Price, Jacksonville, FL
Mar Dennis Parungao, Wesley Chapel, FL
Sol Greear, Crowley, TX
Caroline Fermin, Beaufort, SC
James Zoller, Austin, AR
Marisa Schultz, Effingham, IL
Tina Waggener, Troy, MT
Charles Waterman, Ladson, SC
Jeremiah Brewington, Wasilla, AK
Matthew Parrish, Minnetrista, MN

Tom Smoot, New York, NY
Christian Vazquez, Kansas City, MO
Jeremiah Deyarmin, Crown Point, IN
Melanie Junkin, North Charleston, SC
Yvonne Alpough, Houston, TX
Christopher Carver, Spokane, WA
Jeremy Davis, Colorado Springs, CO
Melissa Trotter, Granite City, IL
Christopher Thornton, Athens, WV
Jerry Johnson, Minot, ND
Michael Brown, Epping, NH
Clark Sabo, Cincinnati, OH
Joaney Taylor, Owens Crossroads, AL
Nancy O'Reilly, Wrentham, MA
Claudia Arceo, Pasadena, MD
Joel Grace, Montgomery, AL
Nicole East, McKinney, TX
Connie Johnson, Brandt, SD
John Acevedo, Buffalo, NY
Nonnie Byrd Wright, Cincinnati, OH
Danette Fleishman, Essex Junction, VT
John Tihey, Verona, PA
Olivia Telles, Louisville, KY



GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

Warrior Advocate Spotlight



Amy Fiene, U.S. Army



Amy Fiene with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY)

Amy Fiene

Menomonee Falls, WI - U.S. Army



What did you hope to accomplish during the fly-in, and do you feel you've accomplished that goal?

My hope on my first fly-In with WWP *Operation Advocacy* was to meet up with my team and to naturally form a cohesive unit to work together. The way our team quickly connected and communicated together exceeded my initial thoughts of what was possible. The camaraderie which quickly formed when meeting made sharing parts of our individual stories both natural and effective.



Has this experience inspired you to go home and advocate for veteran-friendly legislation at your state and local level?

The Fly-In experience has definitely inspired me to see ways to advocate and educate, individually and collectively at the federal, state, and local levels. It became apparent to me that some of the issues we face today as veterans, if not spoken about, can easily fall through the cracks of the legislative system. I believe the majority of our country supports and wants to assist service members, particularly those of us who have served our nation in wartime. However, it takes organizations, for example WWP, to drive those real time issues home, which is exactly what we achieved as a collective group in Washington, DC.



Carlos Gonzales, U.S. Army



Carlos Gonzales with Rep. Mike Garcia (R-CA 27)

Carlos Gonzales

Lancaster, CA - U.S. Army



Was there a specific topic or piece of legislation you wanted to advocate for during this trip? If so, what was it, and do you feel the members/staff were receptive to your thoughts?

The specific legislation I wanted to push forward was **S. 10, the VA CAREERS Act**, due to the lack of providers in the VA and the civilian workforce. I feel that all of the congressional offices listened and were very receptive to my thoughts as well as those of my cohorts.



Prior to *Operation Advocacy*, would you have considered advocating for legislation on your own?

Prior to *Operation Advocacy*, I have considered advocating for legislation on my own but mainly on the issues brought up by my State Senators and Representatives and seeing how I add input to current legislation in my local area. To that end, I am so honored to be here on the higher level of advocacy and hope my input will not just help the local veteran community where I live but the entire country of veterans.

GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY (CONT.)

Warrior Advocate Spotlight



Kennery Foster, USMC



Kennery Foster with Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-LA)

Kennery Foster

Carencro, LA - USMC

Q Prior to *Operation Advocacy*, would you have considered advocating for legislation on your own?

All my life I have been told that my calling in life is to help other people. I never dreamed of being on a stage of this magnitude advocating for myself and fellow veterans. I really hope it works out and I can continue to advocate for our veterans.

Q Was there a specific topic or piece of legislation you wanted to advocate for during this trip? If so, what was it, and do you feel the members/staff were receptive to your thoughts?

If I had to pick one it would be mental health because I have had 24 fellow veterans I personally knew commit suicide. I feel it is a powerful message when you can point to an arm band with the name of your best friend that you personally witnessed take his life. And yes, I could tell by the facial expressions that the situation became real for all who were listening.



Liz Dykstra, U.S. Army



Liz Dykstra with Rep. Frank Mrvan (D-IN-01)

Liz Dykstra

Oswego, IL - U.S. Army

Q What did you hope to accomplish during the fly-in, and do you feel you've accomplished that goal?

I was hoping to bring attention to specific issues affecting veterans, where Congress can make a change. Some very meaningful and impactful discussions were had with both staff and Members of Congress. I feel that these small group discussions were taken seriously and that they did influence each office's decision on taking up these issues. After all the meetings were concluded, I do feel as though my mission was accomplished.

Q Has this experience inspired you to go home and advocate for veteran-friendly legislation at your state and local level?

I am inspired to take a more active role in advocating for the needs of veterans. This opportunity has shown me how much impact a personal story has on our elected Representatives. It was also enlightening to see just how many bills each congressional office has to sift through, and being able to spotlight key bills helps bring them to the forefront of each office's research.

GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY (CONT.)

Warrior Advocate Spotlight



Danette Harvey, U.S. Army



Danette Harvey with WWP CEO Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Linnington

Danette Fleishman Essex Junction, VT - U.S. Army



Were you looking to take away any skills from this experience? If so, what were they, and did you apply them in your interactions with members/staff?

Yes, I look at every opportunity as a chance to gain additional “takeaways,” such as tools, resources, connections, and experiences. One of my takeaways from this great opportunity is how to read and zero in on topics of legislation regarding veterans and also to review the background of each Member of Congress - to not only know the information but more importantly know the audience you are speaking to - in order to really have your message be heard and acted on.



Has this experience inspired you to go home and advocate for veteran-friendly legislation at your state and local level?

Yes, this experience has given the tools and resources to better navigate the legislative process. I feel confident I can and will continue to advocate at my local and state level.



Sol Greear, U.S. Army



Sol Greear with Rep. Morgan Luttrell (R-TX-08)

Sol Greear Crowley, TX - U.S. Army



Has this experience inspired you to go home and advocate for veteran-friendly legislation at your state and local level?

Absolutely! This experience has helped me realize how important it is for veterans to advocate for their brothers and sisters. More than anything, we need to keep lines of communication open between Members of Congress and their constituents.



How do you feel WWP can support you in future advocacy efforts?

It was an honor and privilege to be part of *Operation Advocacy*. WWP can help continue this mission in a couple of ways. One way is to help Alumni stay informed on current legislation so we are all fighting for a common cause; we all need to be talking about the same issues in order to inspire change. Another way is setting up meetings for Alumni to meet with Members of Congress locally to talk about these issues.

THE MAJOR RICHARD STAR ACT

Interview with Tonya Star



Tonya Star with husband, Major Richard Star

TONYA STAR

Wife of Major Richard Star

Originally from Texas, Tonya Star is a former secondary teacher and principal of 15 years. She is the wife of Major Richard Star, a post-9/11 veteran who contracted cancer due to toxic exposure while deployed in the Middle East and was forced to retire prior to reaching his 20 years of service. Tonya and Richard married in 2019 after he was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer, and she became his full-time caregiver. Major Star passed away in February 2021. Tonya has two adult sons and currently resides in northwest Georgia with Otis, Richard's retired service dog.

The Major Richard Star Act would allow veterans who were medically retired prior to reaching 20 years of service due to combat-related injuries or illnesses to receive both their retirement pay and VA disability compensation. This is a legislative priority for WWP and has been reintroduced with 58 co-sponsors in the Senate and 220 in the House.



How did you and Major Richard Star first meet?

A: We actually met in College Station where he was stationed, and we had mutual friends from church. I was at church, and he was at church, and we went to lunch together and that's how we met. Ours was what you would consider a non-traditional love story, meeting somebody in your late 40s; we both had families and adult children from previous marriages, and things are just very different when you approach dating from that point in your life. So, we started seeing each other, but he was in the reserves and six months after we started dating, he was unexpectedly deployed to Kuwait to replace an officer who ended up getting sick.



The process of being medically retired is notorious for its confusing forms and rules that discharging veterans must learn on the fly. How did you and Rich know that a law needed to be changed?

A: Rich started having his initial symptoms when he would be going on his runs while still in Iraq. When Rich got his diagnosis, Walter Reed had plenty of support services to help us and walk us through the process. However, Rich knew that financially our benefits were not adding up. We knew from the beginning that Rich had stage 4 cancer and that these benefits would be important for us. It was then that we knew something had to be changed. It was pretty immediate.



Tonya Star receives a flag during Major Star's internment

THE MAJOR RICHARD STAR ACT (CONT.)



Major Star advocates for passage of the *Major Richard Star Act*



Tonya and Major Richard Star

Q

Rich lost his courageous battle with cancer almost exactly a year after the *Major Richard Star Act* was first introduced in February of 2020 by Rep. Bilirakis and Rep. Ruiz. Since you started this journey, what moments have impacted you the most?

A: I think it's getting to meet the veterans and the families this bill would impact. Everyone has a unique story that is tragic and unique. It is hard to describe when something is so profound and on such a large scale. All the families that this would impact. Sitting with them and hearing their stories. Investing in them.

Q

How do you think passing the *Major Richard Star Act* would affect post-9/11 warriors?

A: I think that it would do a HUGE amount for self-esteem – like they matter and what they did was important. Helping with their mental health. It's not just a rubber stamp; this will affect their day-to-day life. Help them provide for their families. My dad was a Vietnam veteran, and I know that those veterans just wanted to come home to a nation that appreciated what they did. Like their lives mattered. Like they won this battle. This would be their win.

Q

In March, Wounded Warrior Project flew in warriors from all over the country to advocate for legislation that would benefit post-9/11 veterans. What would you like to say to the warrior alumni who came to Washington, DC, to advocate for the *Major Richard Star Act*?

A: I think for me, it's "thank you." It's so much gratitude for all those who have taken it on. Especially those who have taken this on even though it is not their battle. To those who are fighting for this – not for them but for their fellow veterans – I can't thank them enough.



U.S. Army Veteran Major Richard Star





DID YOU KNOW?

DID YOU KNOW ?

Annual Warrior Survey

On February 22, Wounded Warrior Project released its **13th Annual Warrior Survey** (AWS), providing the largest and most comprehensive look at the greatest needs of post-9/11 wounded veterans in areas such as mental, physical, and financial health.

Among the most striking findings in this year’s AWS:

 <p>76%</p> <p>of warriors reported PTSD and nearly half presented with moderate to severe PTSD symptoms at the time of the survey.</p>	 <p>80%</p> <p>of warriors reported sleep problems, making it the top reported health issue among warriors in 2022.</p>	 <p>64%</p> <p>of warriors reported not having enough money to make ends meet sometime in the past year. The top-rated source of financial strain was the increased cost of goods.</p>	 <p>39%</p> <p>of warriors reported their physical health or emotional problems were barriers for social activities most or all the time.</p>
---	---	--	---



If you or someone you know is in need of help, call or text the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 9-8-8. To speak to the Veterans Crisis Line, select option 1 after dialing 9-8-8. You can also reach the Veterans Crisis line by texting 838255.

WWP is also on standby to provide mental health assistance. Contact our Resource Center team, available from 9 a.m. – 9 p.m. ET Monday through Friday, at 8-8-8.WWP.ALUM (997.2586) to be connected with mental health programming and services.

Suicide Prevention

As of January 17, 2023, veterans in suicidal crises can receive free emergency health care in any VA or non-VA health care facility regardless of whether they are enrolled in VA care. This no-cost care can extend to inpatient or crisis residential care for up to 30 days and outpatient care for up to 90 days. This new policy was required under the Veterans Comprehensive Prevention, Access to Care, and Treatment (COMPACT) Act of 2020, which WWP supported. Learn more about how to use this benefit by visiting the [Department of Veterans Affairs Fact Sheet on Emergency Suicide Care and Treatment](#).

Fact Sheet

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Office of Integrated Veteran Care

Emergency Suicide Care and Treatment

Starting January 17, Veterans in suicidal crises can go to any health care facility, at VA or in the community, for free emergency health care – including transportation costs, inpatient or crisis residential care for up to 30 days, and outpatient care for up to 90 days, including social work.

During a medical or mental health emergency, you should immediately seek care at the nearest emergency department and let staff know you are a Veteran. If you believe your life or health is in danger, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away. If possible, you should also take steps to safely store personally-owned weapons or ask a trusted individual to assist with securing them, when you believe you are in a mental health crisis.

You are covered if you were discharged from the military under a condition that is other than dishonorable and served more than 24 months of active service or more than 100 days under a combat exclusion or in support of a contingency operation either directly or by operating an unmanned aerial vehicle from another location. Former members of the armed forces who were the victim of a physical assault of a sexual nature, a battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment while serving in the

What should a Veteran do if they are billed for emergency suicide-related care?

VA has developed an expedited review process specific to emergency suicide care to eliminate any additional stress during Veterans’ time of need. If a Veteran receives a bill for emergency suicide care related care at a VA medical facility, they should contact their local VA patient advocate and ask for a clinical review with an appropriate provider. Veterans can also contact the number on their bill to initiate this process.

Veterans who received COMPACT-related care at a community emergency department should submit a signed, written request for reimbursement to their local VA medical facility community care office along with an after-visit summary/medical documentation and a billing statement from the rendering provider showing diagnosis code information and an itemized list of charges.

Veterans can use the [VA Facility Locator](#) to find their closest VA medical facility.

Q&A



Meet Dr. Shereef Elnahal, Under Secretary for Health

Q

Congratulations on your confirmation as the Under Secretary for Health at VA. In this role, you lead the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), the largest integrated health care system in the United States, which oversees the delivery of care to more than nine million enrolled veterans. As we head into the 2023, what issues do you believe should be prioritized to improve care and support for veterans?

A: It's my honor to serve America's Veterans as the Under Secretary for Health. When I took on this role, I established six priorities for system-wide improvement on behalf of the 9 million enrolled veterans we serve and those we hope to serve in the future. I consider them our most important strategic and operational goals.

- ★ Hire faster and more competitively.
- ★ Connect Veterans to the soonest and best care.
- ★ Serve Veterans with toxic exposures.
- ★ Accelerate our journey to High Reliability.
- ★ Support Veterans' whole health, their caregivers, and survivors.
- ★ Prevent Veteran suicide.

These aren't just words on a page. For those of us in VHA, they provide the framework for all we do. On this frame, we are building out programs to create a highly effective, responsive organization for the

nation's Veterans. To enable us to meet these strategic priorities, we will work to retain, invest in, and support our workforce. We will respect and honor the diversity among our employees and Veterans. That is our strength. We'll seek to continually improve our technology, encourage innovation, and modernize our facilities. We also want to enhance our partnerships with federal and state agencies, NGOs, and community organizations. This unity will strengthen our fight against Veteran suicide and our efforts to reach Veterans where they are.

Q

According to WWP's 2022 Annual Warrior Survey, over 9 out of 10 WWP Alumni are enrolled in VA health care, but most of America's veterans are not. Why should veterans choose VA, and how can WWP Alumni spread that message?

A: VA is the largest health care system in the country and is recognized, year after year, for providing quality health care and services. Veterans regularly give VA high marks in customer satisfaction surveys and our clinicians are regarded as among the leaders in the country's health care community and in health research. Most importantly, no other health care system is entirely devoted to providing a lifetime of health care to Veterans and to their overall whole health and well-being. To put it simply, VA knows and understands the Veteran experience and Veterans' needs. You've earned this care as a Veteran. You deserve it. We in VA are entirely and exclusively dedicated to you.

Q

You previously served as the Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Quality, Safety, and Value at VA from 2016 through 2018. During that time, you co-founded the VHA Innovation Ecosystem, a program which fosters the spread of innovation and best practices to improve care for veterans. Can you tell us about what inspired you to co-found this program, and some of the ways that this program has developed and cultivated innovation at VA?

A: We founded the VHA Innovation Ecosystem with a simple hypothesis: that the employees closest to the Veteran know what needs to be done to improve the care we provide to Veterans. We realized VHA needed to create more opportunities to empower our clinicians and

Q&A (CONT.)

administrators to create positive change and decided to empower our front line and teams closest to the Veteran with the power to do so. We sought to improve our capacity to recognize promising innovation when it was occurring, make more intentional investments in those areas, and ultimately deliver the benefits to all Veterans.

VHA Innovation Ecosystem creates value through investment in our frontline employees whom we believe are our greatest asset for delivering innovative solutions to VHA's most pressing health care challenges. For example, through our Spark-Seed-Spread investment program, we focus on bridging the "possibilities gap." This has led VHA team members to pioneer transformative capabilities such as our [Office of Advanced Manufacturing](#) and VA Rideshare.

Additionally, the VHA Diffusion of Excellence (DoE) plays a complementary role by replicating and scaling innovations and promising practices across our nationwide system through an annual Shark Tank competition. To date, VHA DoE has replicated 90 Shark Tank winners over 1,000-plus times and scaled 14 national solutions across the VA health care system.

Discover our innovations and promising practices on the [Diffusion Marketplace](#).

Q

On August 10, the *Honoring our PACT Act* (P.L. 117-168) became law. This comprehensive new law regarding toxic exposure is the largest expansion of health care and benefits in VA history. What steps is your office taking to welcome veterans who are newly eligible for care at VHA facilities and what actions should veterans to take to access their new VA benefits?

A: On outreach to veterans who could benefit from the *PACT Act*, we are working every day to ensure that there is no wrong door for veterans to access VA care. Our Veterans Experience Office has mapped the veteran engagement journey across all possible touch points with veterans. Whether a veteran or survivor comes to VA through a medical center, a benefits office, a website, or any other way, we are ensuring that veterans receive information about these new benefits. This is especially important for our post-9/11 combat veterans, many of whom qualify for the one-year special enrollment period that began on October 1, 2022. As we near the final six months of that eligibility window, we want to get as many veterans enrolled in VA health care as possible.

As soon as the Senate sent the bill to the President's desk, we launched va.gov/pact, a one-stop shop website for understanding the *PACT Act* and applying for benefits. We also enhanced 1-800-My-VA-411, an easy to remember telephonic front door for veterans and their supporters with 24/7 live agents.

We are reaching out to veterans directly through their communities and local VA medical centers. During the week of December 10th, we hosted 127 *PACT Act* "Week of Action" events in all 50 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, to do targeted outreach, including claims clinics, health care enrollment, and toxic exposure screenings. Additionally, we're reaching out to over 370,000 participants in our burn pit registry through email, regular mail, and social media. We're also sending direct mail and email communications to more than 1.1 million eligible but not-enrolled Veterans, inviting them to learn more about their possible eligibility and enroll.

We have implemented a nationwide effort to screen veterans who already get care from us to determine potential toxic exposures. As of March 7, we have screened nearly 2.3 million veterans, with 42 percent reporting exposures. As of November 8th, this is a routine part of care in every medical center in the country. And it allows us to refer veterans directly to VBA as they may qualify for enhanced benefits, or an increase in their priority group.



Dr. Elnahal at WWP's annual holiday reception

Q

Mental health remains a top priority for Wounded Warrior Project. What mental health initiatives are you most focused on in the coming year?

A: VA continues the fight to break down the negative stigma associated with mental health conditions and other barriers that may keep Veterans from getting the care they need and deserve. We will be releasing an updated version of the handbook that spells out the mental health services each facility is required to provide. Our comprehensive national policy outlines the continuum of mental health care: peer support and self-

Q&A (CONT.)

help apps; mental health care integrated within primary care and specialty medicine; outpatient treatment and specialized services for those with trauma, specialized, intensive treatment programs for addiction and those at risk for suicide; and acute inpatient, emergency, and residential treatment. Providing this full continuum of mental health care services ensures Veterans have access to the level and type of care they need when they need it.

We will continue to increase virtual care options and make them more accessible, offering telemental health, as clinically appropriate, to all Veterans. We will be focusing on hiring, particularly for providers for Veterans with substance use disorders, as we face a national opioid epidemic. We will undertake an in-depth examination of access and utilization of VA mental health services by demographic groups and conduct an analysis of health inequities to assist our facilities in addressing identified disparities.

Suicide prevention continues to be a top priority for us and is woven into care across mental health and beyond. We will continue to focus on the public health model, advancing efforts to reach Veterans in clinical settings and in the community. We are training providers in new evidence-based treatments for suicide prevention and we are setting up hubs of providers who can provide these services virtually to increase access. We are also partnering with many community organizations to provide grants and support for suicide prevention work, and we have expanded eligibility to enrolled and non-enrolled eligible Veterans to receive emergent suicide care at no cost.

These are only a few of the many things we will be doing this year. I hope it conveys the overall reality that we cannot focus on mental health without addressing a Veteran's whole health. Our approach to mental health care addresses each Veteran as a unique individual and in advancing methods that empower and equip them to achieve their life goals.

“

Suicide prevention continues to be a top priority for us and is woven into care across mental health and beyond.”

-Dr. Shereef Elnahal

Q

WWP's 2022 Annual Warrior Survey showed that 89.3% of warriors who were offered a telehealth appointment chose to use telehealth at some point during the previous year. How do you see telehealth evolving in the future and how do you see it improving the quality of care that is available to veterans?

A: Telehealth is a core part of VA's mission to connect Veterans to care from anywhere in the U.S. It is one of many essential tools in our clinicians' tool belts for care in VA and should be viewed as such. It is many times an appropriate and more timely option for care, while not as appropriate in other circumstances. Veterans and clinicians should make the decision about telehealth together, and specific to individual Veterans' needs. We've seen the benefits of telehealth during the past three years, when it has grown tremendously. Last year, over 2.3 million Veterans used telehealth as part of their VA care — totaling over 11 million episodes of care.

Telehealth has made care much more accessible and convenient for many Veterans because they can connect with their VA providers from where they are. They don't have to go to a VA facility, which can be time-consuming, costly, or physically taxing in the case of Veterans with disabilities. If a Veteran lives somewhere without readily accessible specialty care, they can use telehealth to consult with a VA specialist that may live hundreds of miles away. Further, many Veterans prefer the comfort and convenience of accessing care from home, particularly for mental health appointments.

We also recognize that many Veterans face barriers to accessing telehealth care. VA is dedicating resources to bridging some of these barriers. For example, through the Digital Divide Consult, VA is helping Veterans who don't have internet access or don't have a working computer or mobile device. The Digital Divide Consult is a process that connects those Veterans with programs that can provide free or discounted internet service, mobile devices, and phone service. These services can enable those Veterans to access telehealth care.

In the future, we envision a VA health system without walls — that will continue to expand care options beyond the clinic to include easily accessible virtual care options. We want to give all Veterans the option to use telehealth care when appropriate, including more specialty care options.

VA PARTNER SPOTLIGHT



WWP's Benefits Services team is available to help warriors and family members navigate the process of filing for benefits

GRASSROOTS & CONSTITUENT AFFAIRS



VA Deputy Chief of Staff Maureen Elias meets with nine Texas Alumni at the WWP San Antonio office

Toxic Exposure Claims Update

As of January 1, 2023, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is processing all related claims under the [*Honoring our PACT Act*](#). Warriors affected by toxic exposure are encouraged to apply now for assistance under the new law.

WWP's [Benefits Services](#) team is available to help warriors and family members navigate the process of filing for benefits and help them understand how the law will affect the application process and their eligibility. Many veterans who served during certain eras, in certain locations, or who had previously been diagnosed with one or more presumptive conditions may now qualify for expanded support and disability compensation, even if they were denied previously.

VA will attempt to contact veterans and survivors who were previously denied benefits and may be newly eligible under the *Honoring our PACT Act*, but we encourage them not to wait and to re-file now. If you believe that you or a loved one qualifies for these expanded benefits, please do not hesitate to reach out to the Wounded Warrior Project [Benefits Services](#) or to another accredited veterans service organization to begin the application process.

For help filling out the application form, please visit the Wounded Warrior Project [Benefits Services site](#) or call VA Benefits and Services at 800-827-1000.

VA Deputy Chief of Staff Roundtable

To close out 2022, Wounded Warrior Project facilitated a roundtable discussion between VA Deputy Chief of Staff Maureen Elias and nine Texas alumni at the WWP San Antonio office. Deputy Chief of Staff Elias engaged with participants on a range of subjects in an informal, open forum setting. Topics of discussion included the *Honoring Our PACT Act* and its implementation, women veterans issues, and access to care challenges. Alumni were able to share stories, concerns, and ideas during the roundtable and continue to provide important and timely feedback to VA senior leadership.



“The best part was being able to connect and feel heard.”

- WWP Teammate and U.S. Air Force veteran Genesee Roberts

CONTACT US

★ **Jose Ramos**, Vice President of Government and Community Relations

★ **Shannon Walker**, Administrative Assistant

Government Affairs

- ★ **Brian Dempsey**, Government Affairs Director
- ★ **Aleks Morosky**, Government Affairs Deputy Director
- ★ **Jeremy Villanueva**, Government Affairs Associate Director
- ★ **Lindsey Stanford**, Government Affairs Specialist
- ★ **Kirsten Laha-Walsh**, Government Affairs Specialist
- ★ **Anne Marie McLean**, Legislative & Policy Analyst
- ★ **Roberto Velez**, Legislative & Policy Analyst
- ★ **Kimberly Powell**, Legislative & Policy Analyst

Grassroots and Constituent Affairs

- ★ **Justin Beland**, Grassroots and Constituent Affairs Director
- ★ **Coleman Brooks**, Regional Grassroots Director
- ★ **Jacques Dubose**, Regional Grassroots Director
- ★ **Ben Watkins**, Senior Constituent Affairs Specialist
- ★ **Juan Valdez**, Grassroots and Constituent Affairs Coordinator

SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

veterans.senate.gov

202-224-9126

Twitter: [@SVACDems](https://twitter.com/SVACDems) ★ [@SVACGOP](https://twitter.com/SVACGOP)

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

veterans.house.gov

202-225-9756

Twitter:

[@VetAffairsDems](https://twitter.com/VetAffairsDems) ★ [@HouseVetAffairs](https://twitter.com/HouseVetAffairs)

HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

armedservices.house.gov

202-225-4151

Twitter: [@HASCDemocrats](https://twitter.com/HASCDemocrats) ★

[@HASCRеспублиans](https://twitter.com/HASCRеспублиans)

SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

armed-services.senate.gov

202-224-3871

Twitter: [@SASCDems](https://twitter.com/SASCDems) ★ [@SASCGOP](https://twitter.com/SASCGOP)

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

va.gov

844-698-2311

Twitter: [@DeptVetAffairs](https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs)

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

defense.gov

Twitter: [@DeptofDefense](https://twitter.com/DeptofDefense)



**WWP
RESOURCE
CENTER**

resourcecenter@woundedwarriorproject.org

888.WWP.ALUM (997.2586) or 904.405.1213

Fax: 904.405.1301 ★ woundedwarriorproject.org

HOURS OF OPERATION

Monday - Friday 9 am - 9 pm EST



1-800-273-8255 **PRESS 1**

**DIAL 988
PRESS 1**