

1ST DISTRICT SERVICE OFFICER VA & R REPORT FOR JUNE 2021



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Notes of Interest;

Spouses of troops killed in the line of duty often face a grim penalty if they remarry: they lose their government-granted survivor benefits. However, two veterans serving in Congress say that needs to change immediately and they are actively working to make a change. Under current law, "Gold Star" spouses lose their Survivor Benefit Plan benefits if they remarry before turning 55. They also lose their Dependency Indemnity Compensation benefits if they remarry before turning 57. Lawmakers reintroduced legislation to address making a change to current law that includes eliminating the rules that call for surviving spouses to lose access to Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) checks, home loans, education benefits and more if they remarry before age 55. Under current law, spouses who get married again after that age can retain their benefits eligibility. The new Bill, the Captain James C. Edge Gold Star Spouse Equity Act, introduced by Reps. Michael Waltz, R-Florida, and Seth Moulton, D-Massachusetts, would remove such age limits.

Congress is zeroing in on providing expanded health care for possibly millions of veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxic environments. It is considering a vast roster of bills that could usher in a new era in the Department of Veterans Affairs' health care system -- if those bills reach the president's desk. The debate over health care for victims of toxic exposure amounts to a legislative ultramarathon for advocates and lawmakers championing the issue, amid little mainstream media coverage and what will likely be sticker shock when the final price tag is tallied -- something that could scare away lawmakers and sink ambitious measures.

Just a reminder that veterans who are enrolled in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care system may be eligible to receive free hearing aids, glasses or contact lenses. These "sensorineural aids" are provided at no charge to veterans who are determined to need the devices, even if the veteran is not "service-connected" for hearing or vision impairment.

Did you know compared with housed veterans, those experiencing homelessness have longer and more expensive inpatient stays as well as more frequent emergency department visits? Efforts to provide stable housing situations for veterans experiencing homelessness could reduce health care costs. Through the Supportive Services for Veteran Families program, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) partners with community organizations to provide temporary financial assistance to veterans who are currently homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless.

New legislation before Congress aims to make it easier for veterans to access private-sector care and have the Department of Veterans Affairs pick up the tab. The Veterans Health Care Freedom Act would largely take the VA out of the community care process by allowing veterans themselves to find and schedule necessary appointments at private-sector clinics in the department's network. Right now, veterans must be approved by the agency to receive community care; the department then refers the patient to a facility. If this measure becomes law, veterans would need approval only from their primary-care doctor.

The Department of Defense (DoD) has released a new list of locations outside Vietnam where herbicides like Agent Orange were tested and stored, a compilation that could provide some veterans proof of exposure needed to support their VA disability claims. According to Marine Times, the list omits more than 40 locations previously noted as exposure

sites by DoD in 2018 — deletions that could undermine other veterans' pending claims. The new DoD list contains nearly 150 testing and storage locations, with updates that include specific dates of release or containment, as well as 26 additions, including places like Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland., Dugway Proving Ground, Utah, and Johnston Atoll in the central Pacific Ocean. But it deletes or alters at least 50 previously identified locations, removing some dates and omitting testing sites like Hawaii, where the DoD previously said field tests were conducted, Puerto Rico, where herbicides were sprayed in forests between 1956 and 1967, and locations in Korea where components were stored. And while the new list contains six locations in Thailand, it adds a new clarification to those locations' descriptions: "No herbicide was sprayed in Thailand."

Nearly all veterans who served in overseas conflicts in the last 31 years would be granted presumptive benefits status and disability compensation for a host of respiratory illness and cancers under a sweeping proposal to be introduced by Senate leaders soon. In addition, Vietnam veterans who suffer from high blood pressure (hypertension) would be granted the same presumptive status for their disability claims, potentially handing out billions more in payouts to the aging group. Including hypertension as a presumptive condition for the Agent Orange list is expected to affect around 160,000 veterans. The new legislation also includes an expansion of Agent Orange presumptive status for individuals who served in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, American Samoa and Guam during the 1960s and 1970s. The measure also includes new research by VA on the issue of toxic exposures, to include health trends for post-9/11 veterans and cancer rates among veterans.



Please Remember..... That all gave some, but many gave all!