



## 2020 Critical Policy Goals 116th Congress, 2nd Session

### 1. Ensure Veterans Exposed to Toxic Substances Receive Full and Timely Benefits

Service members have been routinely exposed to environmental hazards and toxins such as burn pits and Agent Orange during military service. Veterans whose health has been negatively impacted because of these exposures often wait years for science to identify an association and sometimes decades to receive disability benefits.

- ▶ Congress should enact S. 2950 to concede burn pit exposure and remove the obstacles for veterans having to prove their individual exposure to burn pits and the types of toxins emitted for VA claims based on direct service connection.
- ▶ Congress should enact legislation, such as H.R. 2200 or H.R. 5610, to add the presumptive diseases of hypertension, bladder cancer, hypothyroidism and “Parkinson-like symptoms,” which the National Academy of Medicine has scientifically associated to Agent Orange exposure.

### 2. Strengthen Veterans Mental Health Care and Suicide Prevention Programs

The VA has implemented a wide range of mental health services to address higher rates of suicide in the veteran population; however, despite increased resources and targeted efforts, rates of suicide among veterans have not significantly decreased.

DAV supports the VA's suicide prevention strategy to improve collaboration with community partners to ensure all at-risk veterans have access to needed mental health services but also insists that the VA must play a primary and integral role in any new suicide prevention initiatives for veterans.

- ▶ Congress should enact legislation to ensure the VA receives appropriate funding levels to hire and train a sufficient number of mental health providers, improve and promote access to VA services, and better coordinate mental health and community care services.

### **3. Improve Benefits for Disabled Veterans' Spouses and Survivors**

Spouses and survivors of veterans who pass away due to a service-connected condition are eligible for a number of VA benefits, including monthly Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) payments and educational benefits under Chapter 35. However, the current value of DIC benefits is insufficient to provide meaningful support to survivors of severely disabled veterans, and some eligibility rules have limited the number of deserving recipients.

- ▶ **Congress should enact legislation to increase and index the DIC benefit and change eligibility rules for both DIC and Chapter 35 educational benefits.**

### **4. Fully and Faithfully Implement the VA MISSION Act**

The VA MISSION Act (P.L. 115-182) contains a number of critical policy priorities for DAV. Most notably, the VA must provide access to timely, high-quality care; expand internal capacity to provide care; modernize and align its health care infrastructure; and improve and extend its caregiver program to all severely injured service-connected veterans. However, the success of the MISSION Act depends on continued collaboration of the VA with Congress and veterans service organization (VSO) stakeholders to achieve the law's intended purposes.

- ▶ **Congress must provide continued oversight to ensure the VA MISSION Act is fully and faithfully implemented in an open and transparent manner with VSO collaboration and provide the VA with sufficient funding to achieve this goal.**

### **5. Address Gaps and Inequities in the VA's Women Veterans Health Care Program**

The VA must ensure women veterans have access to timely, high-quality and specialized health care services to the same extent as their male peers.

The VA has struggled to meet increasing demand for gender-sensitive care, hire and train enough clinical providers to offer expert care to women veterans at all sites of care, and improve environment of care standards. DAV supports legislation to improve VA programs and health services for women veterans and address barriers to care that women veterans often experience.

- ▶ **Congress should enact S. 514 or H.R. 3224, the Deborah Sampson Act—comprehensive legislation aimed at fixing known barriers to care and improving VA health services for women veterans.**



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