



Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation

Western Division

March 2024

DATES TO REMEMBER

- March 3 – Navy Reserve Birthday,
- March 13 – K-9 Veterans Day,
- March 25 – National Medal of Honor Day,
- March 26 – Anniversary of the U.S. Victory at the Battle of Iwo Jima,
- March 29 – Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day.

News from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)



VA Proposes to Expand Access to Health Care For Toxic-Exposed Veterans

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is proposing a plan to expand the locations and time frames for which it presumes exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides.

Under the proposal, VA would implement a new presumption of exposure to locations where herbicides were tested, used, or stored outside of Vietnam. Specifically, this proposed rule would add locations in the United States, Canada, and India to the existing presumption for Agent Orange in Vietnam, Cambodia, Johnson Atoll, Guam, American Samoa, Korea, Laos, and Thailand.



A presumption of exposure means that VA automatically assumes veterans who served in certain locations were exposed to certain toxins. Presumptives lower the burden of proof required to receive disability benefits, helping veterans get the benefits they deserve as quickly as possible. This expansion of presumptives will help veterans who served in the specified locations receive health care and benefits for certain cancers and chronic conditions.

To be eligible, a veteran must have served in the identified location (s) during a specific time period and currently have a condition(s) presumptively associated with herbicide exposure. VA has expanded presumptive service connection for more than hundreds of health conditions related to toxic exposures under the PACT Act –

the largest expansion of Veteran care and benefits in generations.

“This proposed change would make it easier for veterans exposed to herbicides who served outside Vietnam to access the benefits they so rightly deserve,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. “Our goal is to provide every veteran – of every era – with the VA health care and benefits they deserve, and this is another step in the right direction.”

Veterans who want to file an initial claim for a herbicide-related disability can visit VA’s website, use VA Form 21- 526EZ, Application for Disability Compensation and Related Compensation Benefits, or work with VA recognized veterans service organizations such as DVS to assist with the application process. Survivors can file claims for benefits based on the veteran’s service if the veteran died from at least one of the recognized presumptive herbicide diseases.



Ah, spring. Winter may have its charms, but there's nothing quite like the moment when the world begins to wake up from its cold weather slumbers. No wonder the season of rebirth has inspired so many of the world's great minds to share words of celebration for spring. With warm days right around the corner, "Spring: a reminder of how beautiful change can truly be."



VR Therapy Takes Veterans Back to “Virtual Vietnam” to Help Heal PTSD

Article is being shared from the Monthly NM Veterans Services Newsletter

A landmark virtual reality app geared toward helping older veterans looking for closure and dealing with trauma is taking exposure therapy to new places – to the markets of Hanoi or to the landscapes of Vietnam.

The new application, pioneered by immersive technology company Mynd Immersive in partnership with VA Immersive, part of VA's Office of Healthcare Innovation and Learning, focuses specifically on Vietnam War veterans, digitally transporting them back to places they may have visited during the war, so they can work through trauma and discover a "path to peace."

"We're tapping into the power of VR to really, really provide an emotional uplift to these aging veterans," Chris Brickler, co-founder and CEO of Mynd Immersive. Brickler helped start the company approximately seven years ago, intent on improving the lives of the elderly, with digital therapeutics eventually taking shape by strengthening the bond between patients and caregivers. *A Path to Peace* is one of the ways it achieves its purpose.

"A Path to Peace is targeted to veterans aged 75 and older," said Brickler. "About 40% of our population of older men above 75 are veterans. So, it's an absolute massive percentage of older veterans that have survived and have been living a lot of times with a lot of emotional scars."

"Some veterans go back to Vietnam or have over the years, and that's a very emotional trip for a lot of folks, but a lot of folks don't have the mobility or financial ability to go back now," added Brickler. "Many would love to go back to obtain some closure or some emotional feelings around those aspects of the content," he continued.



The project uses crisp, clear high-resolution spherical video to immerse patients in a number of scenarios, giving off the impression they are in a faraway place without having to make the travel. The device used for the therapy almost resembles a large pair of sunglasses.

"When you're at a memorial or at a beautiful market in Hanoi, it's really crisp and clear. It's three-dimensional, and you feel like you're right there, so it gives a lot of these veterans that would want to go back and pay homage the opportunity to do that," Brickler said.

Content being built into the app would enable veterans to meditate on a beach in Vietnam or witness other areas of the country that might bring about peace. Brickler said the goal isn't to necessarily bring veterans back to the battlefield, but instead show them that they contributed to something historical, and the war was not all for naught.

Dr. Skip Rizzo, director of the medical virtual reality group at the University of Southern California, is also advising the project. He said he has worked in the virtual reality field since the 1990s, during the early days when people were especially skeptical of the technology.

"VR sometimes has been seen as some kind of Star Trek science fiction holodeck kind of thing, but functionally, it's a technology that allows us to put people in simulations, in a controlled fashion that helps them to confront their fears or experience positive things or get distracted from pain or engage them in activities clinically that they might not ordinarily do with traditional therapy," he said.

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Rizzo, in 2004, helped build out a system geared toward veterans of more recent conflicts, namely Iraq and Afghanistan, rooting it in a "prolonged exposure" approach that immerses people in virtual experiences to face their trauma in a manageable way.

"So maybe they got blown up in a Humvee. We don't put them in the Humvee and blow it up at first. We start off, maybe they're walking around by some vehicles and talking about their experience and talking about what they thought back then, as if they're going through it. Then we might put them in a Humvee and have them sit in it for a while. Then we may have them drive on a road in, provocative settings. So, by this gradual exposure and reprocessing of the emotional memory, we see reductions [in PTSD symptoms]."

The technology is said to help veterans develop mindfulness practices commonly used in therapy, giving the experience a surreal quality without the distractions of the surrounding world.

Mynd's VR technology can also help people beyond veterans, including those with ADHD, people suffering from chronic pain, the elderly experiencing loneliness or stroke victims who need more engaging approaches to rehabilitation.

Service Dog Veterinary Health Benefit

What are service dogs?

Service dogs are guide or service dogs prescribed for a disabled veteran under 38 CFR 17.148 for the purpose of the veteran being diagnosed as having a visual, hearing, or substantial mobility impairment.

Recognized Service Dogs for the Insurance Benefit: VA will recognize, for the purpose of paying benefits the following service dogs: The dog and veteran must have successfully completed a training program offered by an organization accredited by Assistance Dogs International or the International Guide Dog Federation, or both (for dogs that perform both service- and guide-dog assistance). The veteran must provide to VA a certificate showing successful completion issued by the accredited organization that provided such program.

Does VA Provide Service Dogs?

No. Veterans approved for service dogs are referred to Assistance Dogs International accredited agencies or International Guide Dog Federation accredited agencies.

Does a service dog serve the same function(s) as Animal Assisted Therapy or Animal Assisted Activity dogs?

No. Animal Assisted Therapy and Animal Assisted Activity dogs are used either to assist therapists to accomplish therapeutic goals or for general engagement of the patients. Neither type of dog is for personal use by the Veteran. They are used only in a medical setting.

How can a Veteran apply for VA Veterinary Health Benefits?



Hearing, Guide, Mobility: The Veteran should meet with their VA Clinical Care Provider to begin the application process for this benefit. The specialist will complete an evaluation and make a clinical determination on the need for assistive devices, including a service dog. Once the evaluation is completed and a service dog determined to be the optimal tool for the Veteran's rehabilitation and treatment plan, the provider will work with the Veteran to obtain the necessary information and documents to request the benefit on behalf of the Veteran through coordination with the local VA Medical Center Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service.

Mental Health Mobility: The Veteran should meet with a VA Mental Health Provider to begin the application process for this benefit. The mental health provider and care team will evaluate and determine whether the mental health condition is the primary cause of the Veteran's substantial mobility limitations.

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Cont'd Service Dog Veterinary Health Benefit

The team will also assess whether a mobility service dog would be the optimal intervention or treatment approach for the Veteran. If the team considers a service dog to be the optimal intervention, they will request the benefit on behalf of the Veteran through coordination with the local VA Medical Center Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service.

- Each Veteran's case is reviewed and evaluated by a prescribing clinician for the following:
- Ability and means, including family or caregiver, to care for the dog currently and in the future.
- Goals that are to be accomplished through the use of the dog.
- Goals that are to be accomplished through other assistive technology or therapy.

The Veteran will be informed of an approval or disapproval of their service dog request by the VA Prosthetics and Sensory Aid Service. Veterans approved for service dogs are referred to Assistance Dogs International or International Guide Dog Federation-accredited agencies.

*Please contact your local Prosthetic and Sensory Aid Service Department if you have additional questions. Use the [Facility Locator](#) to find the local Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service near you.

What benefits does VA provide?

VA will provide to a veteran enrolled under the insurance program only the following benefits for one service dog at any given time. A commercially available insurance policy, to the extent commercially practicable, that meets the following minimum requirements:

VA, and not the veteran, will be billed for any premiums, copayments, or deductibles associated with the policy; however, the veteran will be responsible for any cost of care that exceeds the maximum amount authorized by the policy for a particular procedure, course of treatment, or policy year. If a dog requires care that may exceed the policy's limit, the insurer will, whenever reasonably possible under the circumstances, provide advance notice to the veteran.

The policy will guarantee coverage for all treatment (and associated prescription medications), subject to premiums, copayments, deductibles or annual caps, determined to be medically necessary, including euthanasia, by any veterinarian who meets the requirements of the insurer. The veteran will not be billed for these covered costs, and the insurer will directly reimburse the provider.

The policy will not exclude dogs with preexisting conditions that do not prevent the dog from being a service dog.

Hardware, or repairs or replacements for hardware, that are clinically determined to be required by the dog to perform the tasks necessary to assist the veteran with his or her impairment. To obtain such devices, the veteran must contact the Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service at his or her local VA medical center and request the items needed.

Payments for travel expenses associated with obtaining a dog: Travel costs will be provided only to a veteran who has been prescribed a service dog by a VA clinical team and annotated in the Veteran's record that the Veteran has been Pre-Approved for the insurance benefit. Payments will be made as if the veteran is an eligible beneficiary. Note: VA will also provide payment for travel expenses related to obtaining a replacement service dog.

The veteran is responsible for procuring and paying for any items or expenses not authorized by this section. This means that VA will not pay for items such as license tags, nonprescription food, grooming, insurance for personal injury, non-sedated dental cleanings, nail trimming, boarding, pet-sitting or dog-walking services, over-the-counter medications, or other goods and services not covered by the policy. The dog is not the property of VA; VA will never assume responsibility for, or take possession of, any service dog.

Year-End Impact Report Forms **Why report these numbers?**



Important note about reporting volunteer hours

Every hour, every dollar ALA members invest in our mission of helping veterans adds up. It not only gives each member a sense of pride in belonging to the organization, but it allows us to demonstrate our effectiveness to the world. Each small sum of numbers gets added into the collective numbers that are called Impact Numbers.

These numbers proclaim our impact and help make membership in the ALA meaningful. These numbers are also reported to The American Legion, which includes them in its annual report to Congress. To make this process easier for you, it has been simplified and the form has been condensed to include only essential information. If you aren't sure, giving an estimate is better than not reporting at all. Impact forms can be found on the National web page.