

## National Legislative Division Weekly

### VA EXTENDS PACT ACT DEADLINE TO MONDAY AFTER WEBSITE ISSUES

[[From Stars and Stripes](#)]



Veterans now have until Monday to submit a claim to get backdated benefits for an illness related to toxic exposure because of technical issues with the Department of Veterans Affairs' website, the agency announced.

Veterans originally had until Wednesday to file a claim, or submit their intent to file a claim, to have their benefits backdated to Aug. 10, 2022, when President [Biden signed the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise](#)

[to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022](#), or PACT Act, into law. Thursday marks the one-year anniversary of the law.

Due to the high volume of claims and technical issues on the VA website, people filing for the benefits were sent error messages. Therefore, the VA extended the deadline to Aug. 14 at 11:59 p.m.

“Despite these messages, VA has successfully logged every one of these intents to file — meaning that every veteran or survivor who has received an error message while applying for PACT Act benefits can consider their intent to file complete,” the department said in a statement. “Most importantly, no veteran or survivor will miss out on a single day of benefits due to this issue.”

The PACT Act seeks to provide an easier path to health care and benefits for veterans who served near open-air burn pits, which were used throughout the 1990s and the post-9/11 wars to burn garbage, jet fuel and other materials. Veterans diagnosed with cancer, respiratory issues and lung disease at young ages have blamed exposure to the toxic fumes from these pits, but the VA contended for years that there wasn't sufficient evidence to support their claims.

Additionally, the PACT Act expanded health care eligibility to post-9/11 combat veterans and added 23 conditions related to burn pits and other toxic exposures to the VA's list of service presumptions.

The VA announced July 25 that it will [review whether three more types of cancers will be added to the list](#) of conditions presumed to be caused by exposure to toxins from military burn pits. The department said it will conduct new studies to determine whether veterans with acute leukemias, chronic leukemias and multiple myeloma outside of the head and neck could have resulted from military service in Iraq, Afghanistan and Southwest Asia.

Since the PACT Act became law, the VA has processed more than 458,000 claims out of more than 843,000 submitted and provided more than \$1.85 billion in benefits to veterans and their survivors.

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### ARMY RESERVE EDUCATION BENEFITS COLLAPSE HALTS FALL SEMESTER ENROLLMENTS

[[From Military.com](#)]

The [Army](#) Reserve ran out of money to cover tuition for its soldiers and is scrambling to reallocate money ahead of the fall semester, which starts within two weeks at many schools.

The Reserve allocated \$20 million for [tuition assistance](#) this year, but it lowballed demand for college money and ended up needing a total of \$40 million to make ends meet, one source with direct knowledge of the situation told Military.com. It's unclear how the service so dramatically misforecast how much money it needed for tuition benefits this year.

But the issue with the Reserve tuition is part of a growing trend for the Army. Education benefits are a vital [recruiting](#) tool, often considered sacrosanct. On top of that, noncommissioned officers are increasingly expected to have college degrees. Yet the Army's delivery of those benefits has been hit or miss recently.

While much of the needed funding has been reallocated, as of Wednesday afternoon, soldiers trying to schedule classes through the Army's online scholarship system were still being told tuition funds had been exhausted -- meaning soldiers were at risk of missing out on the fall semester.

The scholarship covers up to \$250 per credit hour, or up to \$4,500 per academic year. The benefit is separate from the [GI Bill](#), which demands long stretches of active-duty service to earn. That has become more difficult for part-time soldiers as [deployments](#) abroad become less common and the Pentagon shifts from the Global War on Terrorism era.

The halt in payments for Reserve students seemingly came as a surprise, with no service-wide email or social media warning from the service component or its senior leadership. It was unclear Wednesday whether key staff overseeing those benefits were even aware that soldiers were encountering problems.

"It's really surprising that this would be thrust upon me out of the blue, no warning," a Reserve soldier told Military.com on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the press. "This shouldn't have happened in the first place. It's a huge wrench in my life plan. I don't know what I'm going to do."

That soldier is only a few classes from graduating and would have to pay \$3,000 out of pocket to finish. Their semester starts in two weeks, and the classes they need won't be offered again until fall 2024, after they're scheduled to leave the service. In at least one situation, a soldier's request to use their scholarship was initially approved but was later rescinded.

The news comes only a month after the Army [National Guard halted payments](#) to the Student Loan Repayment Program, or SLRP. The service component is at least two years behind paying off student debt accrued by its troops.

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Meanwhile, the Army is still catching up on paying back students and schools who were not compensated by the service due to its faulty launch of Army IgnitED, its online tool for setting up service scholarships that was so buggy soldiers had to pay for school out of pocket.

The issue with the service paying the bills for students got so bad, the University of New Mexico stopped accepting provisional Army tuition payments.

### LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

It is now recess for both the House and the Senate! Be on the lookout for Congressional town halls in your area – start by checking your member of Congress’s website for any information.

In an effort to recognize the weekly accomplishments of our Legionnaires, we will spotlight an individual every week. These individuals demonstrate exceptional grassroots activism by meeting with/contacting their Congressional Representative/Senator to advocate for veterans. Efforts like these truly make a difference and give veterans a voice in Congress.

#### William Wallace, Washington

We are pleased to recognize William Wallace from the Department of Washington. Taking advantage of a recess congressional town hall, Mr. Wallace attended a veterans town hall event in Wenatchee and spoke extensively with Congresswoman Kim Schrier about American Legion priorities. Specifically, Mr. Wallace highlighted the need for passing the *Pay Our Coast Guard Parity Act of 2023*.

Thank you for your advocacy William!

If you have made a grassroots effort and would like to be considered for next week’s “Legionnaire of the Week,” please fill out the Congressional Contact Report Form [here](#). You can also email me at [jkamin@legion.org](mailto:jkamin@legion.org).

### UPCOMING HEARINGS

There will be no hearings as both Chambers of Congress are home for the August recess.