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VETERANS

MONTHLY INFORMATION PACKAGE

FLAGLER COUNTY

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‘Where Is the Accountability’: Deplorable Condition of Military Barracks Sparks Outrage, Calls for Change on Capitol Hill

27 Sep 2023

Military.com | By [Rebecca Kheel](#)

Lawmakers vented their frustration Wednesday after a government watchdog report detailed squalid living conditions in military barracks that included overflowing sewage, rampant mold, bed bug infestations and squatters.

In the first public hearing of the House Armed Services Committee's recently launched military quality-of-life panel, both Republican and Democrat lawmakers blasted the findings of last week's Government Accountability Office report on barracks conditions as "deplorable," "unacceptable" and "appalling."

"If I would have had these conditions in any of our barracks, I would have gotten fired," said panel Chairman Don Bacon, R-Neb., a retired [Air Force](#) brigadier general who served as a wing commander at [Ramstein Air Base](#), Germany, and [Offutt Air Force Base](#), Nebraska. "Where is the accountability at with these barracks? Has anyone been held accountable? And what are we going to do to get this right and get this fixed?"

"We cannot allow this situation to persist," Bacon added. "It is an issue not only of justice and dignity, but also of military readiness."

The GAO [report, issued last week, illuminated](#) and confirmed complaints that service members have sounded for years about barracks that are unlivable. Based on visits to 12 installations, the 118-page report featured accounts of undrinkable brown water, broken air conditioning during heat waves, broken and unsecured doors and windows, and, in one of the most extreme cases, service members having to clean up "biological waste" themselves after a suicide attempt.

At Wednesday's hearing, Elizabeth Field, who led the GAO's audit, said conditions were allowed to deteriorate so badly because of chronic underfunding of barracks maintenance, coupled with officials' indifference to junior enlisted members'

opinions and a lack of attention to the issue from the highest levels of the Pentagon.

"One of the most troubling things that we observed during our audit was that the Office of the Secretary of Defense -- which is supposed to oversee the barracks programs, give guidance to the military services -- very much had a hands-off approach to this topic," Field said. "When we asked them some basic questions at the beginning of our audit about how many barracks there were, whether they were not complying with standards, how many service members lived there, they couldn't tell us."

Witnesses from the departments of the [Army](#), Air Force and [Navy](#) acknowledged issues with housing and vowed to improve living conditions but offered few specific solutions, which appeared to frustrate lawmakers further.

When Carla Coulson, the deputy assistant secretary of the Army for installations, housing and partnerships, attributed housing issues to a lack of funding, Bacon noted Congress typically provides the Pentagon more funding than it asks for.

"It doesn't add up," Bacon said.

When Rep. Sara Jacobs, D-Calif., raised the possibility of Congress requiring funds be spent specifically on barracks so it doesn't compete with other facilities funding, officials said they would oppose taking away "flexibility" in how they can spend money.

"We all like flexibility, but I think we're clearly seeing that the barracks are not being invested in, so maybe flexibility is not the only priority here," Jacobs shot back.

Rep. Jen Kiggans, R-Va., a Navy veteran whose Hampton Roads-area district includes a significant Navy presence, said she was "almost in tears" when she saw the living conditions on bases in her district.

"It hurts my heart when I hear other Navy and military parents say, 'I can't recommend this job to my kids for these reasons,' so we have to do better," Kiggans said.

Some lawmakers, including Kiggans, raised the possibility of privatizing more barracks to improve their quality.

While Field said that privatized barracks the GAO toured in San Diego were in "amazing condition," she also stressed privatization is not a "silver bullet." The military's family housing, which is largely privatized, has faced its own issues with unsafe and unhealthy living conditions in recent years.

Pressed on what Congress should be doing to ensure the military improves the barracks, Field suggested mandating the GAO's 31 recommendations in law if the Pentagon does not follow through on them itself.

"The department concurred with most of our recommendations, but in some cases, they were partial concurrences and statements that they've already implemented the recommendations and so they're good. They're not good," Field said.

Bacon, who is planning for his quality-of-life panel to release a report in the coming months recommending reforms to include in next year's defense policy bill, said there is a "smorgasbord" of changes lawmakers will need to look at. "This isn't just a money problem, which it is and we need to know definitively what it's going to cost to get this right," he said. "But it's also policy, accountability."

Robert Thompson, principal deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for energy, installations and environment, appeared to concede that top officials need to change their mindset and consider housing as "mission critical" as other facilities before barracks will improve.

"There needs to be a standard for livability," Thompson said, adding that conversations with the defense secretary's office on what that means started after last week's GAO came out. "There needs to be a plain-eyed, clear-eyed view of what the standard is for this place to be dignified, safe and comfortable."

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ities.

1 in 3 PACT Act Claims Have Received a 0% Disability Rating, Prompting a VA Review

21 Sep 2023

Military.com | By [Patricia Kime](#)

The [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) has approved nearly 80% of the 570,000 claims it has adjudicated under the PACT Act, distributing more than \$2.2 billion in disability compensation to veterans or survivors [since it began accepting claims last year](#).

Of the total claims, however, 34% have received a 0% disability rating, meaning that affected veterans have at least one service-connected condition under the law that is not disabling -- for example, hypertension, which has been linked to Agent Orange exposure, that is controlled by medication.

The VA is now reviewing its ratings schedule to determine whether it can revise it to address medically controlled conditions such as hypertension, VA Under Secretary for Benefits Joshua Jacobs told reporters Thursday.

With veterans service organizations and many affected veterans raising concerns about the 0% disability ratings they have received, Jacobs asked his staff "to explore whether we have the flexibility to consider revising the ratings schedule."

The review will include examining medical research and published studies and working with the Veterans Health Administration to determine how to proceed, Jacobs said.

The VA has received more than 1 million PACT Act-related claims and has processed roughly 570,000, according to Jacobs. Nearly 1.3 million additional claims not related to the PACT Act also have been filed this fiscal year, and together with PACT Act claims, they represent a 40% increase over the record-setting number of claims in fiscal 2022.

"Thanks to the largest outreach campaign in VA history, what we're seeing is that veterans and survivors are applying for their earned benefits at record rates," Jacobs said.

Still, veterans who fought to have illnesses such as hypertension recognized as service-connected are frustrated that they aren't among those receiving disability compensation.

According to VA, 82.1% of PACT Act-related claims for hypertension have received a 0% disability rating.

Former [Army](#) Spc. Jeff O'Malley, a Vietnam veteran whose Freedom of Information Act requests exposed an internal fight within the VA over including hypertension as presumptive condition for Agent Orange, noted that many survivors of cancers included in the PACT Act receive compensation even if their cancer is in remission, but those with hypertension aren't receiving any.

"I'm proud of the PACT Act," O'Malley said in a text message to Military.com. "I think we need to rethink minimum ratings for approved claims."

Jacobs said many veterans have more than one health condition that qualifies for VA disability compensation, so their total disability ratings are usually higher than the rating for any one illness. He noted that a 0% disability rating entitles veterans to benefits that include health care, prescriptions, co-payment waivers and federal hiring preferences.

Also, Jacobs said, a 0% disability rating can lead to "secondary service-connected conditions."

In the case of hypertension, if the condition causes heart disease, the veteran would get service connection for that illness and "would likely have a higher rating," Jacobs said.

That response doesn't sit well with veterans like O'Malley, whose blood pressure is difficult to manage.

"I will have a stroke and it will be too late," O'Malley said.

The PACT Act expanded health care and disability benefits to up to 6 million veterans exposed to burn pits and other environmental pollution while serving in the Middle East, Southeast Asia and elsewhere, including post-9/11, Persian Gulf War and some Vietnam-era veterans -- the largest expansion of VA benefits in three decades.

It removed a requirement that veterans or their survivors, depending on where the military member served, prove service connection for more than 23 health conditions, including respiratory diseases, several types of cancer, high blood pressure and more.

The VA has not provided a list of PACT Act-related conditions that have received the 0% disability rating. Based on anecdotal information from veterans service organizations, hypertension appears to be at the top of the list, but some conditions such as asthma, rhinitis and hypothyroidism also can be medically managed.

According to data from the VA provided to Military.com, the average total disability rating for veterans with granted PACT Act claims is 70%.

Jacobs said he expects the review to yield information on any ratings change in the coming months, adding that a decision must work within "a very clear framework of legal authorities."

Jacobs said he has heard stories that some veterans have considered going off their medications so that when they receive their compensation and pension exam, their "numbers are off the charts."

He had strong words for any veteran contemplating such a move.

"Do not do that. That is a significant health risk to you," Jacobs said.

Editor's note: This story was updated with additional statistics on claims for hypertension and overall average ratings.

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A Suicidal Veteran Texted the VA Crisis Line. A Responder Didn't Send Help, and Minutes Later the Veteran Was Dead



22 Sep 2023

Military.com | By [Patricia Kime](#)

A Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General report highly critical of the Veterans Crisis Line's handling of a suicidal veteran sparked outrage this week from U.S. senators responsible for oversight of the VA.

The OIG report, released last week, detailed the failure of the Veterans Crisis Line, or VCL, to help the veteran, who died by suicide minutes after cutting off contact. The veteran reached out to the hotline by text, telling a responder they had tested out their planned means of suicide and were in a location where they had access to those materials.

The crisis line responder did not contact the veteran directly by phone or alert first responders, but instead directed the individual to enact a safety plan formulated with a nearby family member. The responder terminated the text thread without verifying that the plan had been enacted when the veteran did not respond.

"This is an incredibly damning OIG report, incredibly damning," Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-La., said in a Senate Veterans Affairs Committee hearing Wednesday on suicide prevention at the VA. "I'm struck that the executive director who apparently interfered with the OIG report was not fired. She's reassigned, I presume, still receiving a paycheck."

The report also appeared to outrage the committee chairman, Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont.

"We've had so damn many hearings on mental health, and it doesn't seem like anything has changed," Tester said. "We just got to do better. ... It's ruining lives, it's ruining families."

In addition to the failure of the responder to help the veteran, the inspector general's investigation found systemic issues at the VCL, such as lack of a policy on silent monitoring, which is supposed to be conducted for quality control, and an inability to save texts other than cutting and pasting.

"The OIG determined that the leaders failed to establish a text message retention process in over 10 years of the VCL's use of text messaging for crisis management," wrote Dr. John Daigh, the VA's assistant inspector general for health care inspections.

With an estimated 17 veterans dying each day by suicide, the VA has made suicide prevention a top priority. Matthew Miller, executive director for suicide prevention at the Veterans Health Administration, told senators that the VA hired 900 crisis line workers in the last 18 months.

Since adopting the 988, Press 1 emergency number, Miller added, the VA's crisis line has fielded more than 1 million calls, texts and chats.

In 2016, the VCL came under fire for failing to answer all calls. More than one-third of the calls to the line were rolled over to contractors who had less training than the VA employees who manned the call center.

The number of veterans who died by suicide in 2021 is expected to be released by the VA this month. In 2020, the most recent year for which data is available, [6,146 veterans died by suicide, down nearly 10% from 2018](#).

The inspector general report said the San Antonio-area veteran, who suffered from post-traumatic stress and had a history of suicidal behavior, texted the crisis line in 2021 asking for help. The veteran previously had been flagged as being a high risk for suicide, but that flag had been removed the year before, eliminating a marker that would have warned the Veterans Crisis Line responder of the veteran's mental health history.

The veteran, who was not named in the report, contacted the line at 10:14 p.m. and said they were in a place with access to means. The veteran said they had tested the method to a point, "feeling everything fade."

The veteran then said they had a safety plan with a family member and had texted a hint that the safety plan needed to be enacted. That text, at 11:02 p.m., was the last from the veteran. The responder continued to try to text the veteran but did not receive a response. The responder terminated the call at 11:29 p.m.

According to the report, the veteran died by suicide at 11:40 p.m.

The IG concluded that the crisis line worker's response was inadequate, failing to recognize the veteran's suicide risk and not following up when they stopped texting. The responder never reached out to the veteran by phone and did not send emergency personnel to the scene, despite the veteran saying on the text thread that they had attempted suicide.

Later, crisis line leaders delayed disclosure of the death and did not conduct a root cause analysis of the suicide -- an investigation that is required to be done within 45 days.

Furthermore, leaders failed to update the veteran's status in the electronic health record and elsewhere, exposing the family to calls from providers about appointments and medical care and "caring communication" notices from the VA after the veteran's death.

"Why does it take an inspector general's investigation for this to be addressed? What's not taking place at VA to get this solved before this particular veteran committed suicide?" asked Sen. Jerry Moran of Kansas, the committee's ranking Republican.

In testimony to the committee, Miller acknowledged the veteran's death by suicide immediately following contact with the Veterans Crisis Line.

"We, I, as a veteran grieve the loss of a veteran," Miller said.

The inspector general recommended that the crisis line review all communications between staff and veterans and improve risk assessment guidelines for responders. The VA has plans to update the text messaging service of the crisis line next year, according to the report.

During the hearing, Miller pledged improvements at the crisis line and throughout the VA to prevent suicides.

"It's our earnest desire and pledge to apply the wisdom gained through this review to strengthen processes as we continue to serve veterans who are the center of all we do, even at this very minute as we answer calls," Miller said.

If you are a service member or veteran who needs help, it is available 24/7 at the Veterans and Military Crisis Line, call, 988 Press 1, text 988 or use the online chat function at www.veteranscrisisline.net.

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Trends in heat-related illnesses among Veterans

September 2, 2023

By Madison Coffey

Communications Officer, VHA Innovation Ecosystem

Heat-related illnesses (HRI), such as heat stroke, exhaustion and fainting, are serious concerns for the general public and Veterans. Recent high temperatures have increased awareness around these illnesses. Untreated HRIs can lead to the need for critical care at medical facilities and even heat-related deaths.

To address this issue and support Veterans, VA's [National Center for Collaborative Healthcare Innovation](#) (NCCHI) and [Center for Disease Control's National Center for Climate Health](#) recently published an article assessing 18 years of heat-related illnesses among Veterans.

Examining climate health impacts on Veterans

This first-of-its-kind assessment in VA shows a significant and clinically important increase in the number of Veterans with heat-related illnesses. This comes at the same time as temperatures across the country have risen.

“Our goal is to provide the best care for our Veterans and understanding health risk is critical to our mission,” said Dr. Thomas Osborne, NCCHI director, [Palo Alto VA](#). “Our VA team has an incredible analytics staff which, combined with expertise from partners at CDC, has empowered us to uncover important insights.”

In addition to the concerning increase in heat-related illnesses over time, the assessment also discovered that specific groups have been disproportionately impacted. “Understanding these demographic and geographic trends is intended to help us to enhance care for our unique Veteran population and direct data informed responses to those at risk.”

A look inside the data

The assessment analyzed data for Veterans treated at VA facilities from January 2002 through December 2019. It examined trends in HRI over time, trends in geographic locations and impacts for different patient populations.

There were 33,114 reported cases of HRI that impacted 28,039 Veterans.

There was an increase in HRI among Veterans for nearly all states during the assessment period with a higher-than-average increase in HRIs in California, Florida and Texas. There were also notable increases in HRI diagnoses in other states, such as Missouri, Arkansas, Virginia, Ohio and New York.

HRIs were found to have disproportionately impacted Veterans with complex health conditions, such as congestive heart failure and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Veterans with diabetes-mellitus and hypertension were also disproportionately affected, along with Black and American Indian or Alaskan Native Veterans.

You can learn more about the assessment and what it means for you by reading the article [here](#). You can also learn more about NCCHI on their [website](#).

Want to learn more about innovation at VA? Visit our [website](#), scan [Diffusion Marketplace](#), [subscribe to our weekly newsletter](#), and [explore VA Pathfinder](#) to learn more about our opportunities.

VETERANS AND SURVIVORS FILED MORE THAN 1 MILLION BENEFITS CLAIMS UNDER THE PACT ACT

Sept. 14, 2023

VA delivered more than \$2.2 billion in earned benefits to Veterans and survivors since President Biden signed PACT into law

WASHINGTON — Today, VA announced that Veterans and their survivors have filed more than one million claims for toxic exposure-related benefits under the [PACT Act](#) since President Biden signed it into law Aug. 10, 2022. VA has processed more than 551,000 of these claims, granting 77.9% of them and awarding more than \$2.2 billion in earned benefits to Veterans and survivors. Supporting Veterans and their families is a core pillar in President Biden’s Unity Agenda for the nation, and today’s announcement helps deliver on his promise to comprehensively address military related toxic exposure.

Thanks to the largest outreach campaign in VA history, Veterans and survivors are applying for their earned benefits at record rates. In this fiscal year alone, Veterans and survivors have submitted 2.29 million total claims (PACT and non-PACT) — 40.4% more year-to-date than last fiscal year, which was the previous all-time record. Veterans have also submitted more than 2.1 million “[intents to file](#)” during this fiscal year — 53.1% more than all of last fiscal year and also an all-time record.

The PACT Act is the biggest expansion of Veteran health care and benefits in decades. VA encourages all [eligible](#) Veterans and survivors to [file a claim](#) — or [submit their intent to file a claim](#) — for PACT Act-related benefits now.

“Thanks to President Biden, the heroes who fought for our country are now getting health care and compensation for the conditions that followed them home from war,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. “We’re proud that more than one million Veterans and survivors have applied for their hard-earned benefits to date, but this is just the beginning — and we won’t rest until every Veteran and every survivor gets the VA health care and benefits they deserve.”

Partly due to the PACT Act, VA is delivering more care and more benefits to more Veterans than ever before. Key results to date include:

Delivering benefits to Veterans and their survivors: VA has processed 1.85 million total Veteran claims (PACT and non-PACT) thus far in this fiscal year —15.7% more to date than last fiscal year and already surpassing last year’s all-time record total of 1.7 million claims processed.

Increasing Veteran access to health care: Since Aug. 10, 378,995 Veterans have enrolled in VA health care. This includes more than 158,691 enrollees from the PACT Act population (Vietnam, Gulf War, and Post-9/11 era Veterans).

Screening Veterans for toxic exposures: More than 4.4 million enrolled Veterans have received 5-minute screenings for toxic exposures from VA under the PACT Act.

Right now, there is also a [special enrollment period](#) for Veterans to enroll directly in VA health care without first applying for VA benefits. Specifically, until 11:59 p.m., local time, Sept. 30, Veterans who deployed to a combat zone, never enrolled in VA health care, and left active duty between Sept. 11, 2001, and Oct. 1, 2013, are eligible to enroll in VA health care without first applying for disability compensation benefits. VA encourages all of these Veterans to visit [VA.gov/PACT](#) or call 1-800-MYVA411 to learn more and sign up for VA health care before the deadline.

VA is delivering health care and benefits at record rates partly due to a dramatic increase in hiring at VA. For the first time in VA’s history, the Veterans Health Administration has over 400,000 employees and the Veterans Benefits Administration has over 31,000 employees — and both organizations are growing at the fastest rates in 20 years. Moving forward, VA will continue to modernize and expand capacity to deliver health care and benefits to Veterans as quickly and effectively as possible.

For more information on VA’s implementation of the PACT Act, visit the [PACT Act Dashboard](#). VA is publishing this dashboard every other Friday to document the implementation of this legislation and showcase its impact on Veterans and survivors. The next dashboard, which will reflect the data in this release, will publish on Sept. 15.

Veterans and survivors may apply or learn more about the PACT Act by visiting [VA.gov/PACT](#) or calling 1-800-MYVA411.

VR&E CELEBRATES THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973

September 23, 2023

By Jahmila Boswell

Management Analyst for VBA's VR&E service

Sept. 26, 2023, marks the 50th Anniversary of the passage of the Rehabilitation Act (Rehab Act) of 1973, the first federal, civil rights legislation to address access and equity for people with disabilities. In conjunction with the Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), the Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) service (formerly known as Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, or "voc rehab") is proud to recognize the special observance with the theme of "Advancing Access and Equity: Then, Now and Next."

ODEP's theme for the Rehab Act's 50th Anniversary observance and the provisions in the act echo the mission of VR&E, which is committed to helping America's transitioning service members and Veterans with service-connected disabilities and an employment barrier to prepare for, obtain and maintain suitable careers. It also provides employment resources and expertise, removes obstacles to employment, and provides independent living services and assistance. Prior to the Rehab Act, people with disabilities had a hard time obtaining employment and education. Lawmakers looked at the barriers people with disabilities faced and realized that many were caused by the inability of some people in our society to see the capabilities of people with disabilities.

The Rehab Act extended and revised state vocational rehabilitation services and prohibited discrimination because of disability by federally funded and assisted programs, federal employers and federal contractors. It transformed the lives of people with disabilities and enhanced programs and services, such as VR&E.

This landmark law laid the foundation upon which the more comprehensive Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 now stands. By way of the ADA, the Rehab Act has been amended and become more robust. Both laws are important tools in the quest for people with disabilities to live full and productive lives, including in the areas of education, employment, reasonable accommodation, access to information and much more.

VR&E proudly celebrates laws like these, which aid in advancing access and equity for individuals with disabilities in the workforce, and employers in the non-profit, private and public sectors who have increased employment opportunities for service members and Veterans with disabilities. At the same time, we recognize that barriers to equal opportunity remain. We will continue to work on making the promise of the Rehab Act and the ADA a reality to increase the employment of Veterans and enabling Veterans with disabilities to achieve their dreams and reach their full potential.

To learn more about ODEP and the Rehabilitation Act, visit [ODEP's Rehabilitation Act 50 Years page](#). To learn more about VR&E services, visit <https://www.va.gov/vre>.

Triplets Go Through Marine Boot Camp Together at Parris Island. 'Still My Babies,' Mom Says

28 Sep 2023

The Island Packet (Hilton Head Island, S.C.) | By Karl Puckett

Connor, Matthew and Griffin Wehr came into the world together so tiny and frail they required neonatal intensive care before their parents Michelle and Kenneth Wehr of Marshfield, Massachusetts, could take them home.

The triplets were a big surprise to the Wehrs. Only two showed up on the ultrasound. "I always say one of them was a stowaway," mom Michelle says.

They grew up strong and competing at everything. Living near the ocean, the boys loved fishing. Connor and Matthew ran track. Griffin played rugby. Like all teenagers, they had their "blips," as Michelle puts it, but they were good kids. She was stunned when not one or two but all three of her boys decided to join the U.S. Marine Corps. She couldn't understand it and still wonders. All three?

On Friday, the Wehrs will be in the audience at Parris Island in Port Royal when Connor, Matthew and Griffin graduate together as Marines. They will march across the parade deck wearing white covers and crisp blue slacks and tan shirts as members of one of the world's elite fighting forces.

It's been a long journey that began with a difficult pregnancy and the neonatal intensive care. The all-consuming job of raising triplets followed.

Even though they are now Marines, Michelle Wehr says, "They will always be my babies."

Major Philip Kulczewski, a Marine spokesman, said the graduation ceremony will mark one of the few occasions in the history of the 105-year-old Parris Island — maybe the first time — that triplets have gone through boot camp together. A museum staffer at the base said it would require checking more than a century's worth of graduation records to confirm it. To say the very least, it's a rarity.

"Everybody is amazed by it," Griffin says of the reaction of fellow recruits and Marines to the triplets.

Matthew adds: "Everybody knows us, so it's not bad."

Not only did the 19-year-old brothers complete the same 13-week course, but they landed in the same platoon, living in the same barracks with 96 other recruits. By the time boot camp was over, 82 remained, including the triplets from Massachusetts everybody knows.

They managed to stay together, along with two additional friends from their hometown, through the Marine Corps "buddy program."

Their mom and dad were expected to arrive for family day Thursday and will be in the audience at the Friday graduation along with a sister, niece, aunt and uncle. It's been a difficult 13 weeks for Michelle being apart from her sons. They've not been separated this long since they were born Sept. 10, 2004.

"The whole thing is so overwhelming," Michelle says. "The day we dropped them off, they said, 'Don't cry. We'll see you in three months.'" Then the letters started coming from the boys about how homesick they were.

The boys were born just minutes apart, becoming the youngest in a family of seven children; they have two older brothers and two older sisters. Griffin, the oldest, came first, followed a minute later by Matthew.

Connor and Matthew are identical and both 5-foot-10. But Griffin, who is fraternal, looks a little different and is slightly shorter at 5-foot-8. Griffin, fellow Marines are quick to point out, bears a resemblance to the actor Jake Gyllenhaal, the star of the 2005 film "Jarhead," which chronicled the military service of Anthony Swofford in the U.S. Marine Corps during the Persian Gulf War.

With their hair cut high and tight and wearing green and tan cammies, the brothers sat shoulder-to-shoulder Tuesday on two foot lockers pushed together in their barracks as they talked about what it's like to be triplets in the Marine Corps. They looked fit and ready for anything. The white hats, or "covers," that the newly-minted Marines will wear during the graduation ceremony sat on shelves behind bunk beds made up with drab green blankets.

The process started with learning how to stand at attention on yellow-painted footprints and ended with a rigorous 54-hour training exercise called "The Crucible." Finishing the Crucible and earning the treasured Corps' Eagle, Globe and Anchor emblem was "the proudest moment of my life," says Connor. "I was crying like a baby."

Growing up, the brothers fought and competed. "There's that sibling rivalry," Michelle Wehr says.

Boot camp brought them together.

"It was definitely better having them here," says Matthew. While they did not get to talk much during the grueling physical and mental experience of boot camp, there were opportunities during free time at night.

At the same time, Matthew added, they were the same as any other recruit. "I woke up each day," he says. "I had to give it my all."

Connor says he struggled with homesickness, so it was good to have his brothers by his side. "They don't have families with them like we did," he says of other recruits.

What might be the most difficult experience is coming up, Matthew says. The brothers will go on separate journeys in the Marine Corps. It will be the first time in their lives that they won't be together.

"I can definitely say I changed for the better," says Matthew of boot camp, citing the discipline he gained.

Connor says he thought boot camp would be more difficult than it was. "I thought it was going to be wicked hard," he says. The hardest part, he says, was adjusting to getting up at 4 a.m. and getting quickly dressed.

Matthew decided to joined the Marine Corps first. He wanted to fight for freedom. "I think the Marine Corps helps make the world a better place, if we need to go to war," he says.

Griffin decided to join next. He had always thought about joining a branch of the military one day. After Matthew joined, "he got a recruiter to talk to me."

Connor was third to enlist. At first, he didn't want to but changed his mind after talking to a recruiter. "Since my two brothers were also joining, I just decided to do it," he said.

For her part, Michelle Wehr said she was concerned. An older son had served in the Iraq War the entire first year of the triplets' lives. She admits it got a little "nerve-

racking" when Matthew and Griffin committed. She was totally caught off guard when Conner made it three.

"She got upset," Griffin says of his mother. "She was a mess."

"I still don't understand why they all went," Michelle Wehr says. "How do you have one, two and the third one, and then they're all gone? It's really emotional to be honest."

Still, she is very proud of her sons.

She recalls when the triplets were towheaded little boys with white hair. "They were so cute," she says.

"We've never been separated this long, so it's definitely hard," Michelle says. "It will be nice to be able to see them again."

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LEGION, VA PRIORITIZE REDUCING VETERAN SUICIDE



By Henry Howard
SEP 25, 2023

The American Legion and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) both list reducing the number of veterans who die by suicide as a top priority.

Launched in 2021, The American Legion's Be the One mission aims to destigmatize asking for help, while empowering everyone — veterans, servicemembers and civilians — to take the appropriate action when the life of a veteran or servicemember is at risk.

VA has a range of initiatives that are geared toward getting veterans in crisis the help they need. The most well-known — and for urgent cases — is the 24/7 confidential hotline. Veterans can call 988 and press 1 to be immediately connected to a counselor.

As part of September's Suicide Prevention Awareness Month, VA Secretary Denis McDonough discussed his department's key initiatives, The American Legion's role and more.

Question: Tell me about VA's key initiatives to reduce the number of veterans we lose to suicide.
Answer: This is our No. 1 clinical priority. And we obviously are taking advantage of September to underscore this, but this is a priority every day, of every week, of every month, of every year. I want to just highlight three things.

One, there's a new law, it's called the COMPACT Act ([here's what it means for veterans](#)). If you're a veteran and you're in crisis, and you want to go see a provider, whether you're enrolled in VA or not, this new law allows you to go to a VA hospital or another hospital and get that emergency care. And we'll make sure that we pay for that.

In less than a year, already 32,469 veterans have taken advantage of it. If you need somebody in crisis, don't wait.

Second, you may be far from a hospital. If you're in crisis and you're far from a hospital, pick up a phone and call us. Dial 988 and press 1. We'll get you in touch with mental health professionals, if that's what you need.

Third, you may not be in crisis now, or you might be a family member and you just want to be prepared in the event that there might be a crisis. In which case, what we say is 'Don't wait, reach out, and reach out now.' Visit us at va.gov/reach. And you'll see on that site a bunch of useful information, tips, contacts that we've developed with our mental health professionals, to make sure that people are prepared now in the event that crisis comes later.

We want vets to know we're here. It's natural to find oneself wrestling with mental health challenges. You don't have to wrestle alone. Family members. You don't have to wrestle alone if your vet is struggling.

Question: Those efforts correlate to The American Legion's Be the One initiative, which is empowering veterans, servicemembers, their family members, anyone to 'Be the One' if a veteran's life is at risk. Tell me about how that plays into the joint effort to get a handle on veteran suicide, and what it means to have The American Legion making this our number one priority.

Answer: With Be the One, the Legion — as a strong national and strong community leader — is challenging not just its members but everybody to be the one, to be there for our veterans, to keep your eyes peeled, to make sure that you're the one who reaches out and checks in on our veterans. We're trying to emulate that.

That's exactly what we need, which is every community across the country, looking out for our vets. Mindful that every one of us not only has the obligation, but every one of us can be that pivotal interlocutor. It's an amazing challenge, and you're showing that it works. We're trying to emulate that with many of the things we're doing.

There is something called the Sgt. Fox Suicide Prevention Grants. We just issued 80 grants to community organizations.

This is a simple concept based on exactly what the Legion is challenging us to do, which is local communities know their veterans best. So the Fox Suicide Prevention Grants program says, 'Hey, let's invest in local community organizations who know their vets best,' and therefore they know what's going to work to get vets their care. They know who can 'Be the One,' and they

already have organizations that are being the one to watch out for veterans. That's really a great opportunity.

One of the things we also know, and Be the One underscores this, is we want some distance between a veteran in crisis and lethal means. When you're in your local community, you're keeping your eye out for a veteran in crisis, you can help create that distance. But we also have other tools. Gun safes, gun locks, just so that has some distance between that time of crisis and the lethal means.

Because what we know now is suicidal ideation, this is not a months long or weeks long thing. This is hours, in some cases minutes, in some cases seconds. When lethal means are locked, that helps us.

Question: When you're assessing progress made by all these efforts, VA's Be the One, USAA's Face the Fight, looking into the future, what would success with respect to the veteran suicide rate look like?

Answer: Bottom line is we won't rest until it's zero, right? That's what success looks like. And the clarity and the strength that comes from that goal is very motivating, but it's also based on a simple concept, which is every single one of our veterans is a person made from an image of God, a hero who has taken an unbelievable oath to protect us all. And we want everyone to be with us. We won't rest until that's the case.



ACTION CORPUS WEEKLY



September 25, 2023



VFW Urges Senator to Stop Hindering Military Promotions:

The VFW is calling on Sen. Tommy Tuberville from Alabama to lift his hold on the routine promotion of military general and flag officers. VFW National Commander Duane Sarmiento said, “The line in the sand for the VFW is simple: Political disputes must be handled by politicians — not within the ranks of the all-volunteer force. Sen. Tuberville’s hold on these routine promotions has consequences up and down the active-duty force that will take years to fix.”

[Read more.](#)



Senate Hearing on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention:

The Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs held a hearing to evaluate mental health and suicide prevention measures for our nation’s veterans, including implementation of Chairman Jon Tester’s landmark Hannon Act (P.L. 116-171). In recognizing that September is Suicide Prevention Month, Tester indicated the latest data shows that 2020 had the lowest suicide rate since 2006. Sixty-four percent of these veterans were not using VA resources. VA is urged to continue making strides with suicide prevention for veterans, and to remember its own employees who have died by suicide. [Watch the hearing](#), which begins at the 25:30 mark.



House Subcommittee Hearing on Education: The House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity held an oversight hearing on education benefits for veterans. Subcommittee Chairman Derrick Van Orden expressed his concern with the impact of risk-based surveys and other administrative requirements imposed on schools through legislation over the last few years. The VFW shares his view that requirements established to protect student veterans from predatory schools have gone too far and have had the unintended consequence of becoming too burdensome for schools with limited staff and resources. We are concerned with the number of schools that are opting out of VA education benefits, and will continue to monitor the situation. [Watch the hearing](#), which begins at the 9:09 mark.



50th Anniversary of National Cemetery Administration: VA commemorated the National Cemetery Administration's 50th anniversary in a ceremony at the newly renamed National Memorial Cemetery at Quantico. During the event, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough commented, "For the past 50 years, VA's National Cemetery Administration has provided our nation's heroes with final resting places that honor their service, keep their memories alive, and preserve their legacies long after they pass away. It's our privilege to serve these heroes with honor and respect, just like they served our country." VFW Washington Office Executive Director Ryan Gallucci and National Veterans Service Director Michael Figlioli were in attendance. [Learn more.](#)



Prevent Benefits Fraud and Hold Bad Agents Accountable: The VA Office of Inspector General seeks your help in preventing Public Disability Benefits Questionnaires (DBQs) fraud schemes. These schemes include either unaccredited agents or unscrupulous health care providers charging unjustifiable fees with promises to exaggerate a veteran's medical condition to secure a higher rating than the evidence warrants. [Know the signs and take action.](#)



MIA Update: The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced two burial updates for service members who have been missing and unaccounted for from World War II. Returning home for burial with full military honors are:

--**Army Air Forces Tech. Sgt. Turner Y. Johnston, 21**, of Loraine, Texas, was assigned to the 415th Bombardment Squadron, 98th Bombardment Group, 9th Air Force. He was killed in action on Aug. 1, 1943. He will be buried in Belton, Texas, on Oct. 21, 2023.

[Read about Johnston.](#)

--**Army Air Forces 2nd Lt. Albert W. Stahl, 22**, of Buffalo, New York, was assigned to the 329th Bombardment Squadron, 93d Bombardment Group, 9th Air Force. He was killed in action on Aug. 1, 1943. He will be buried in Kenmore, New York, in the Spring of 2024. [Read about Stahl.](#)

[Click here to view this week's edition.](#)

[Click here for past editions of the VFW Action Corps Weekly.](#)

[Click here to sign up new veterans' advocates.](#)

As always, we want to hear your advocacy stories. To share your stories or photos with us, simply email them directly to vfwac@vfw.org.

**VETERANS
DAY PARADE**

FLAGLER COUNTY, FLORIDA

Visit FlaglerVeteransDayParade.com

to learn more about the parade, subscribe for updates, register to participate & more!



**NOV.
11TH, 2023**

**10AM
FREE
ADMISSION**

**Come celebrate & salute our
COMMUNITY'S VETERANS!**



FLAGLERVETERANS DAY PARADE.COM

ONLINE PARADE ROUTE, PARTICIPANT INFORMATION & FLOAT REGISTRATION

Route starting at Bunnell Coquina City Hall 200 South Church Street, Bunnell
ending at GSB - Veteran's Day Ceremony to follow

HOOK, LINE & SINKER COMEDY NIGHT



OCT. 6 & 7, 2023
IN SUPPORT OF



HOOKIN' VETERANS

TWO NIGHTS OF COMEDY AT VFW POST 8696 IN SUPPORT OF
HOOKIN' VETERANS, VFW POST 8696 & DAV CHAPTER 96

BOBBY HENLINE



ADAM KEYS



DEWAYNE WHITE



TICKETS AND SPONSORSHIPS AVAILABLE FROM

\$45

INCLUDES BUFFET-STYLE APPETIZERS
AND PRINTED PHOTO FROM PREVIOUS
HOOKIN' VETERANS EVENT





Florida
PAYCHECKS
for
PATRIOTS

11th Annual
Paychecks for Patriots
11.01.23 10am-1pm (Wed.)

Museum of Arts & Sciences (MOAS)

352 S. Nova Road, Daytona Beach, FL 32114

**Pre-Register Today &
View Businesses that are Hiring**

The first 25 pre-registrations will receive a complimentary professional head shot on the day of event courtesy of CareerSource.



CSFVp4p.eventbrite.com

JOB FAIR EVENT: OPEN TO PUBLIC

World War II Exhibition:
Stories from the American Experience
Veterans Enter for Free

MOAS

MUSEUM OF ARTS & SCIENCES
In Association with the Smithsonian Institution

Explore a captivating collection of rare artifacts that bear witness to the past, accompanied by the deeply personal memories of their owners.

From **10/14/2023** to **1/21/2024**, In honor of their service and sacrifice veterans are invited to visit the exhibit with free admission.



CareerSource Flagler Volusia offers resume help and more.
For assistance preparing for this event: vetservices@careersourcefv.com



**We invite you to
Join Team RWB Daytona
for our Memorial Event Battle of the Bulge**

**Saturday - Dec. 16th
3:00 pm - 6:00 pm
at Embry Riddle Track**

**Honor the brave service members who helped bring an
end to Germany's final 5-week push on the Western
front during World War II.**

**Join us for this wonderful opportunity to bring our supporters in
our community together. Come out, set up your tent and/or a
table, and bring your friends, family, veterans, and members.
All tents and tables will be on the infield of the ERAU Track. We
are hosting a 5-mile run/walk on the Embry Riddle Track. All are
welcome to participate. Battle of the Bulge lasted 5 weeks and
each mile represents each week. Come out to cheer participants
on, run, walk, or ruck. Bring friends to walk one lap or all the**

Postoned to October 14th

★ SAVE THE DATE ★



REMEMBERING HEROES

(Formerly Remembering VETS)

FALL FESTIVAL

HONORING

**Veterans, 1st Responders,
Gold Star and Military Survivor Families,
and Community Heroes**



Food • Music • Vendors & Family Fun!

Entry Donation: Per Person \$5 - Children Under 3 Free

Postponed to

Town Center Central Park

975 Central Ave • Palm Coast FL 32164

**OCT
14th**



(Formerly Remembering VETS)

For More Information Email
rememberingheroes01@gmail.com
www.RememberingVets.org

