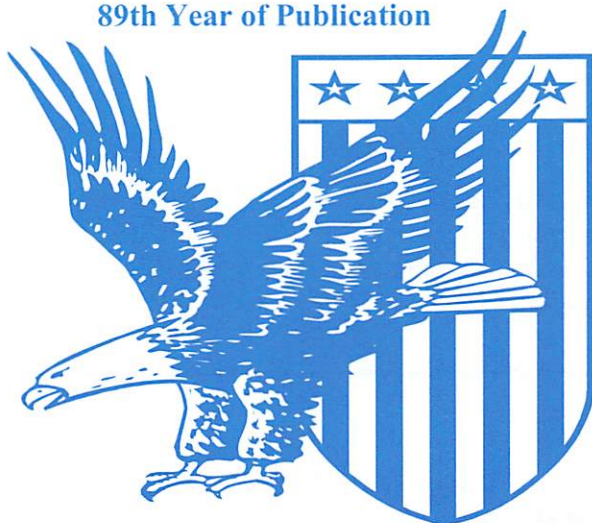


89th Year of Publication



# WHAT EVERY VETERAN SHOULD KNOW

Supplement to 2025 Book -

Published and Edited by:

**VETERANS INFORMATION SERVICE**

**December 2025**

## **Trump Order Restores GI Bill Eligibility for Veterans Discharged Over Covid-19 Vaccine Refusal**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced in November that potentially thousands of Veterans who were separated from the military for refusing the COVID-19 vaccine may once again qualify for GI Bill education benefits.

In January, President Trump signed Executive Order 14184, Reinstating Service Members Discharged Under the Military's COVID-19 Vaccination Mandate.

In response, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth directed the military departments to begin upgrading the discharges of service members who were involuntarily separated solely for declining the COVID-19 vaccine and whose service had been characterized as less than fully honorable.

Under the previous Administration, more than 8,000 service members were separated after refusing to comply with the Department of Defense (now Department of War) COVID vaccine mandate.

Over half received a discharge status below fully honorable, which in many cases made them ineligible for GI Bill education benefits.

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After reviews conducted by the Department of War, 899 of these Veterans have now been determined eligible for GI Bill benefits. Thousands more may also regain eligibility as additional discharge upgrades are completed under the executive order.

In September, VA notified Veterans whose discharges had already been upgraded that they may now qualify for GI Bill education benefits. VA is encouraging all Veterans who were separated for refusing the COVID-19 vaccine to seek an upgraded discharge and then apply for education benefits.

“The prior Administration’s COVID mandate policies disrupted the lives and careers of thousands of service members and Veterans,” said VA Secretary Doug Collins. “We are proud to carry out President Trump’s executive order and help restore the benefits these Veterans earned.”

Secretary of War Pete Hegseth added: “One of the most damaging actions taken against our military in recent years was the separation of healthy, capable warfighters for refusing an experimental vaccine imposed through an unlawful mandate. We must never repeat that mistake. By implementing the President’s order, we are working to correct past injustices and rebuild trust with those who were targeted for standing by their convictions.”

### **FYI for What Veterans Should Know**

Veterans who believe they were improperly discharged, or whose records still reflect an error or injustice related to the COVID-19 vaccine mandate, may request a review by a Discharge Review Board or a Board for Correction of Military or Naval Records. Information on how to apply is available through the Military Department Review Boards website.

Once a Veteran receives official notice that their discharge has been upgraded to fully honorable, they may submit a new claim for GI Bill education benefits to VA.

Veterans seeking more information about VA education benefits can visit VA’s education benefits webpage or call 888-GIBILL-1 (888-442-4551).

## **New VA and DoD Policy Changes for 2026: What Veterans Should Watch**

As 2025 winds down, many veterans are looking ahead to what will change on January 1. While every year brings adjustments, 2026 is shaping up to include several important updates affecting disability pay, retirement income, health care access, and day-to-day benefits.

### **Cost-of-Living Adjustments (COLA) for 2026**

Each year, VA disability compensation and military retirement pay are adjusted based on the Social Security cost-of-living increase. For 2026, a new COLA rate will take effect with payments issued at the start of the year.

That means most veterans receiving VA disability, dependency and indemnity compensation (DIC), or military retired pay will see a change in their monthly deposits. The exact amount depends on your individual rating and circumstances, but it’s worth reviewing your award letter in January to confirm your new rate.

### **Health Care and Access Changes**

Going into 2026, VA and the Department of Defense are continuing to focus on:

- Expanded eligibility for toxic-exposure and service-connected conditions. More veterans are being brought into VA health care through recent legislation and policy changes tied to post-9/11, Gulf War, and earlier service eras.



- Ongoing improvements to Community Care. Rules and processes for getting care outside VA facilities continue to evolve, including scheduling, prior authorizations, and reimbursement.
- Updated TRICARE rules and enrollment windows. Retirees and family members should check TRICARE plan options, pharmacy coverage, and any new enrollment or fee changes that take effect with the new year.
- If you rely on VA or TRICARE for appointments, prescriptions, or specialty care, it's a good idea to log in to your online account before January, confirm your enrollment status, and review any notices about 2026 changes.

#### **Pay, Benefits, and Admin Updates**

In addition to COLA and health care, veterans may see:

- Updated income thresholds and copay rules for certain VA programs, which can affect eligibility for no-cost care or reduced copays.
- Refinements to education and training benefits, especially for those using the GI Bill, VR&E, or licensing and certification test reimbursement.
- Ongoing modernization of online tools, including VA.gov, eBenefits, and DoD portals, making it easier to view payments, update direct deposit, and upload documents.

#### **What You Can Do Before the New Year**

- Review your contact and direct deposit information with VA and DFAS so any 2026 payment changes land in the right account.
- Log in to VA.gov and your TRICARE portal to check for messages about upcoming changes.
- Make a copy of your most recent award letters and keep them with your important paperwork, so you can compare 2025 and 2026 amounts.

If you're unsure how a change might affect you, reach out to a Veterans Service Officer (VSO) or your local VA office for one-on-one help.

The beginning of a new year is a natural reset point. Taking an hour in December to review your benefits can help you step into 2026 with fewer surprises and a clearer picture of what you've earned and what's changing.

### **A Year of Progress: 2025 Veteran Legislation Recap**

As the calendar year draws to a close, it's a useful moment to look back on major legislative and policy changes that affect veterans. Across health care, benefits processing, and eligibility expansions, several landmark updates took effect in 2025 that veterans should know about.

#### **Expanded Benefits for Toxic Exposure & Service-Connected Conditions**

Under the broader framework of the PACT Act, 2025 saw additional presumptive conditions recognized for veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other hazardous service environments. These changes make it easier for many veterans to file claims for health care and disability compensation without extensive proof of causation.

#### **Improvements in Claims Processing and Appeals**

A new law, the Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2025, aimed to streamline the claims process—updating how medical examinations (C&P exams) are handled, enhancing rights of representation, and improving communication with veterans and their advocates.

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Additionally, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025 (NDAA 2025) included provisions relevant to active-duty and veteran support programs.

### **Disability Rating and Benefit Adjustments**

Veterans also faced changes in how certain disabilities are rated—especially for mental health, sleep apnea, and tinnitus. While some proposals may benefit veterans, others require close attention to ensure you understand how updates affect your rating.

### **What This Means for You**

If you've served in environments exposed to toxic substances, review your eligibility under the updated presumptive lists—it may ease your claims path.

If you have an open claim or plan to file one, check with your VSO or VA representative to see whether the improved processes under the Benefits Improvement Act apply to your case.

If you receive disability compensation for conditions like mental health issues, sleep apnea or tinnitus, revisit your award letter and see whether the rating update may affect you.

Keep your records up to date—proof of service, exposure, medical diagnoses and representation documentation are critical when benefit rules change.

2025 has been a year of meaningful policy shifts for veterans and the institutions that serve them.

Staying informed and proactive can help you make the most of these changes—and ensure the benefits you've earned are fully available.

## **Filing a Claim Before December 31: Why Submitting Claims or New Evidence By Year-End Can Protect Your Effective Date**

As the year comes to a close, veterans who are considering filing a disability claim—or planning to submit new evidence for a supplemental claim—should pay close attention to the calendar. The date you file isn't just administrative paperwork; it can directly affect how much back pay you may receive and how soon your benefits begin.

VA benefits are tied to what's called an effective date—usually the date the VA receives your claim or intent to file. That date determines when your compensation starts if the claim is eventually approved.

### **Filing before December 31 can:**

- Lock in an earlier effective date, which may increase the amount of back pay you're eligible for
- Ensure your case is officially in the VA system before new rates, updates, or processing backlogs roll in after January
- Give you a “clean start” in the new year, especially if you're reopening a previously denied issue with new evidence

Even if VA doesn't decide your case for months, the date you submit still controls when compensation can legally begin.

### **For Supplemental Claims**

If you're filing a supplemental claim with new and relevant evidence, submitting before year-end preserves your place in line and maintains the earliest possible effective date based on when the VA receives that new evidence.



If you wait until January, you could lose weeks or months of potential retroactive pay.

### **Don't Wait Until After the Holidays**

VA offices typically see a surge of claims in January. Getting your paperwork submitted in December helps you avoid the annual rush and ensures your effective date is preserved if your claim is approved later.

### **Bottom Line**

If you're on the fence about filing or have been gathering documents for a supplemental claim, submitting before December 31 can make a meaningful difference in your benefits. A few days on the calendar may not seem important now, but when it comes to back pay and effective dates, timing matters.

## **Proposed Law Would Boost Benefits for Veterans with Catastrophic Injuries**

A new bill in the House of Representatives aims to significantly increase disability compensation for veterans with the most severe service-related injuries, as well as support for their surviving families.

The proposal, called the Sharri Briley and Eric Edmundson Veterans Benefits Expansion Act, would provide an additional \$10,000 per year to veterans who sustained catastrophic injuries in the line of duty. These include major traumatic brain injuries, limb loss, paralysis, and other critical wounds that result in lifelong, high-level care needs.

The legislation would also increase payments for survivors of veterans and service members who died from their injuries. Under the bill, survivor benefits would grow by 1 percent per year for five years, representing the first major

increase beyond standard cost-of-living adjustments in more than three decades. The last comparable change to these rates was in 1993.

The bill is sponsored by Rep. Mike Bost of Illinois, a Marine Corps veteran and chair of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, and Rep. Tom Barrett of Michigan, a former Army helicopter pilot and committee member. Several other members of Congress, including Rep. French Hill of Arkansas, Rep. Richard Hudson of North Carolina, and Rep. Morgan Luttrell of Texas, have signed on as co-sponsors.

The act is named in honor of Sharri Briley, widow of Army helicopter pilot Donovan Lee "Bull" Briley, and Eric Edmundson, a former Army sergeant who survived a devastating roadside bomb attack in Iraq.

Donovan Briley served with the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, known as the "Night Stalkers."

He was the co-pilot of a Black Hawk helicopter shot down during the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu in Somalia, an operation later depicted in the film *Black Hawk Down*. He was 33 when he was killed supporting ground forces.

Eric Edmundson was critically injured in 2005 when an improvised explosive device struck his Humvee in Iraq.

He suffered shrapnel injuries, cardiac arrest, and a severe brain injury due to lack of oxygen. Now in his mid-40s, he lives in North Carolina and requires continuous, around-the-clock care at home.

His family describes his needs as constant: he is primarily wheelchair-dependent, nonverbal, and requires assistance with nearly every aspect of daily life. Even relatively small medical issues can quickly become serious given the complexity of his condition.

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Veterans service organizations have voiced early support for the bill. Groups representing paralyzed, severely disabled, and surviving family members note that the cost of home care, equipment, and support services has risen sharply over the past three decades, while benefit levels for those with catastrophic injuries have not kept pace, aside from annual cost-of-living adjustments.

Leaders from organizations including Paralyzed Veterans of America, Vietnam Veterans of America, and the Military Order of the Purple Heart have characterized the proposal as a long-overdue modernization of benefits for the most severely injured veterans and their families. They point out that these families often shoulder intensive caregiving responsibilities and high medical expenses for many years after a service member's injury or death.

The Sharri Briley and Eric Edmundson Veterans Benefits Expansion Act is still moving through the legislative process. If enacted, it would update longstanding benefit structures to better reflect today's costs of care and provide additional financial security for veterans with catastrophic injuries and the families of those who never returned home or later died of their wounds.

### **VA Extends Caregiver Support Protections for "Legacy" Veterans Through 2028**

The Department of Veterans Affairs has finalized a rule that extends support and protections for certain Veterans and their family caregivers enrolled in the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC).

Under a final rule published September 29, eligibility and stipend protections for the program's "legacy" group are now extended through September 30, 2028. This means that, in most cases, these Veterans and their designated family caregivers will remain in PCAFC and will not see a reduction in their monthly caregiver stipend because of a reassessment for an additional three years.

#### ***The Legacy Extension applies to:***

**Legacy participants:** Veterans or service members whose family caregivers were already approved and designated by VA as of September 30, 2020.

**Legacy applicants:** Veterans or service members who applied for PCAFC before October 1, 2020, and were later accepted into the program on or after October 1, 2020, as long as the primary family caregiver is the same person listed on that original pre-October 2020 application.

Key points of the new rule include an extended transition period for this legacy cohort and continued eligibility with no stipend reductions, except in limited situations. Veterans and caregivers in this group can still be discharged or revoked from PCAFC if, for example, the Veteran or caregiver asks to leave the program or if they do not meet program requirements.

The VA is also continuing its temporary suspension of certain reassessments for the legacy cohort. However, caregivers and Veterans may still request a reassessment at any time, including if they believe they might qualify for a higher level of support.

In parallel with this final rule, VA is still reviewing broader changes to PCAFC that were outlined in a separate proposed rule published on December 6, 2024.



Veterans, family members, and caregivers who want more information about the Caregiver Support Program can visit VA's caregiver website, call the Caregiver Support Line at 855-260-3274 (Monday–Friday, 8 a.m.–8 p.m. Eastern), or connect with their local Caregiver Support Program team through VA's online locator.

### **Staying Connected During the Holidays**

For many veterans, December can be a complicated month.

While the season is filled with celebrations and family gatherings, it can also bring feelings of isolation, grief, or stress—especially for those who are far from loved ones, coping with loss, or navigating strained relationships. If this time of year feels heavy, you're not alone, and support is available.

#### **When the Holidays Don't Feel Festive**

It's common for veterans to experience mixed emotions during the holiday season. Memories of deployments, changes in family dynamics, or the absence of friends who served alongside you can make December feel overwhelming. Even joyful events can heighten stress if you're managing PTSD, anxiety, or depression.

The most important thing to remember is that reaching out for support is a sign of strength, not burden.

#### **Ways to Stay Connected**

You don't have to face the season on your own. Consider tapping into resources as follows:

- VA Vet Centers for confidential counseling, group support, or simply a place to talk with someone who understands military life.
- Local veteran service organizations (VFW, American Legion, DAV, AMVETS), many of which host holiday meals, community events, or informal gatherings throughout December.
- Peer support groups, in person or online, that offer connection with other veterans who may be facing similar challenges.
- Faith-based or community centers, which often provide open-door holiday activities and volunteer opportunities.

Even one conversation or event can help break the feeling of isolation.

#### **If You're Struggling**

If the holiday season brings up overwhelming emotions, crisis support is available 24/7. The Veterans Crisis Line (Dial 988, then Press 1) offers confidential help at any hour—whether you're in crisis or simply need someone to talk to during a difficult moment.

Staying connected doesn't require big gatherings or perfect family moments. Sometimes it's a phone call, a shared meal, a community event, or a quiet conversation with someone who understands your experiences.

Staying connected doesn't require big gatherings or perfect family moments. If you're feeling disconnected this December, reach out—there are people and programs ready to stand with you.



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### Season's Greetings!

As we close out the year, we want to extend our heartfelt gratitude to every Veteran, service member, and family who continues to strengthen our communities through resilience, courage, and service. We are entering our 90th year of equipping and providing support to give all Veterans the life they've earned.

Whether your holidays are quiet or full, near family or far from them, we wish you peace, connection, and moments of rest.

Thank you for all you've given—and all you continue to give.

From our team to you: wishing you a safe, meaningful, and hopeful holiday season.

### What Every Veteran Should Know

Published and Edited by

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Annual Supplement Price: \$38.00

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