



LETTER FROM OUR VP

Greetings, and welcome to the third edition of Wounded Warrior Project's (WWP's) quarterly policy update, *Project Advocacy News*. WWP's advocacy efforts connect wounded warriors with their elected officials, provide them with a voice, and empower them to discuss the issues that matter most to the post-9/11 veteran community.

A lot has happened since you read the last edition of this newsletter. While COVID-19 continues to impact our daily lives, keeping our regional offices around the country temporarily closed, we remain focused on our mission, ensuring that the wounded warriors that serve receive the support and care they have come to expect from our organization.

One of the biggest developments was the final passage of the **Ryan** Kules and Paul Benne Specially Adaptive Housing Improvement Act of 2019. This was a multiyear effort spearheaded in our Washington, DC office, but could not have been possible without bill sponsors Sen. Jerry Moran and Rep. Gus Bilirakis, and co-sponsors Sen. Kyrsten Sinema and Rep. Mike Levin; their leadership and tireless efforts made this possible. Warriors played an incredibly important part too — they gave large amounts of time and effort with our staff and on Capitol Hill. They called Congress, sent letters, spoke to members of Congress in person, and made their voices heard. This law will help all generations of wounded, ill, or injured veterans live better lives in their own homes by reinstating SAH benefits to eligible veterans every 10 years to accommodate moving and normal life changes. It will also increase the aggregate amount of the benefit for buying a house with special features from \$85,645 to \$98,492, and increase the amount of assistance for adaptations to veterans' residences from \$12,756 to \$19,733.

To better serve the female warriors among us, we have embarked on a series of roundtable discussions with women warriors, focused on key concerns and issues identified through WWP's Annual Warrior Survey and the WWP Women Veterans Survey. In addition to roundtable discussions, we continue to work with Congress and the Department of Veterans' Affairs to identify ways organizations like WWP can help to fill gaps in care. To that end, WWP Chief Program Officer Jennifer Silva was invited to speak on a forum on women veterans' mental health hosted by the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs (HVAC) Women Veterans Task Force. All of these efforts are part of our commitment to providing better programming, support, and care for a changing and increasingly diverse warrior population.

WWP's government affairs team has also hosted several interactive, digital webinars that teach warriors the importance, function, and impact of veterans' advocacy. These webinars are a first step to help educate alumni on the WWP legislative priorities, discuss current "hot" veteran issues, and provide a forum to answer questions you may have. In the future, you will also have the opportunity to participate in cases that show warriors how to advocate, how Congress writes and passes legislation, and which priorities we advocate for, with a deeper insight into why a warrior's advocacy and voice are so critical.

Our focus, however, has not just been in engaging with warriors but also with key policy makers and stakeholders - we have participated in three major panel discussions with members of the press and Congress:

- Derek Fronabarger, one of our Government Affairs directors, spoke with the House Committee of Veterans' Affairs on mental health in regard to the growing impact that telehealth could have on program delivery.
- Michael Richardson, WWP Independence Services and Mental Health vice president; Brian Dempsey, WWP Government Affairs director; and Kayla Williams, senior fellow and director of the Military, Veterans, and Society program at the Center for a New American Security, recently participated in a Brookings event discussion, hosted by Dr. Michael O'Hanlon, senior policy fellow at the Brookings Institution, about innovative PTSD treatments.
- David Ignatius, columnist at the Washington Post, also hosted a Washington Post Live panel with Derek Fronabarger and comedian and activist Jon Stewart about burn pits and toxic exposures.

We have also sent eight position letters to HVAC and Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs (SVAC) leaders in Congress, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, and others, on issues including:

- CARES Act tax rebates for Supplemental Security Income recipients
- **TRICARE** prescription copays
- Military Family Readiness Improvement Act •
- Work Opportunity Tax Credits •
- COVID-19 Aid and Attendance Stipend increases •
- TEAM National Defense Authorization Act priorities
- The Ryan Kules and Paul Benne Specially Adaptive Housing Improvement Act
- WWP's coronavirus response priorities

As we all await the nation's return to a sense of normalcy, WWP's Government Affairs team will continue engaging officials on behalf of America's wounded veterans, their families, and caregivers.

Jose Ramos

Vice President, Government and Community Relations

U.S. Navy Veteran



August 25-27: Digital AWP Symposium September 21-25: **Congressional Awards Ceremony** September 23-24: Annual Warrior Survey September 25: Military Influencer Conference

 \star \star \star \star \star On July 21, 2020, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 3504, the Ryan Kules and Paul Benne Specially Adaptive Housing Improvement Act of 2019, and sent it to the President to sign into law. This would not have been possible without the voices of our warriors, the loyalty of our supporters and the commitment of our nation's lawmakers. This critical piece of legislation will provide America's injured veterans with financial support to adapt their homes to their continually changing needs. WE COULDN'T HAVE DONE THIS WITHOUT YOU!







Washington Post Live Panel

THE WOMEN VETERANS INITIATIVE AND ROUNDTABLE **DISCUSSIONS WITH FEMALE WARRIORS**

On May 19, Wounded Warrior Project's Chief Program Officer Jennifer Silva participated in a virtual forum addressing the mental health challenges faced by women veterans. The forum was hosted by the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Women Veterans Task Force. During her remarks, Silva highlighted how WWP's programs and services fight isolation among women veterans and increase peer connection opportunities, provide care to women who experience military sexual trauma, ensure access to quality mental health care, and activate a community-based model of outreach and support for women veterans.



WWP Chief Program Officer Jennifer Silva

In addition to providing ways that veteran service organizations like WWP can work with Congress to fill in gaps in mental health care, WWP made four recommendations to the task force:



Authorize VA to facilitate childcare for veterans attending health care appointments.



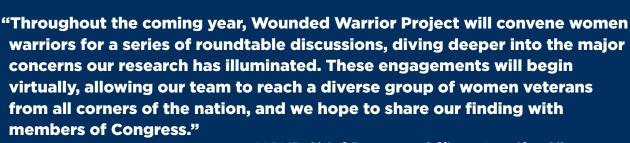
Support programs and services that provide compassionate, comprehensive care to survivors of military sexual trauma.



Urge VA to pursue a community grant program to connect women veterans with clinical and nonclinical services in their communities.

Read our full testimony on "Resilience and Coping: Mental Health of Women Veterans"

Mental health is a key component of WWP's Women Veterans Initiative. In addition to transition, access to care, and economic opportunity, WWP is digging deeper into mental health needs through virtual roundtable discussions with diverse groups of women warriors from across the nation. These conversations will help connect WWP registered women warriors with each other, illustrate the key challenges facing women veterans, and inform future WWP legislative goals. The experiences shared by those we serve will be the bedrock of proposals to change policies, regulations, and management practices at VA to better serve women veterans. We look forward to sharing our findings with Congress.



-WWP Chief Program Officer Jennifer Silva

STAYING CONNECTED: The Importance of **Peer-to-Peer Engagements for Women Veterans**

By Tracy Farrell, WWP Engagement and Physical Health and Wellness Vice President



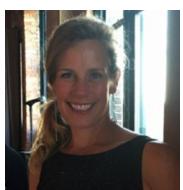
When I separated from the military five years ago, I was convinced my next path in life would not involve an arm of the federal government or individuals who served. It wasn't that I associated any negativity with my service or transition; I had a positive and rewarding experience in the military, and I was able to thrive. But after a 44-year relationship with the Army, through my father's career and my own, I felt I needed to explore other options, and I was determined to do so on my own. Five years later, I found myself working for Wounded Warrior Project, a nonprofit dedicated to assisting post-9/11 veterans with direct programs and services. I often hear women veterans express an inability to easily connect with others, find purpose, and navigate the VA and civilian environment. Looking back, perhaps my initial eschewing of anything military-oriented was a reaction to the same.

Women make up the fastest-growing cohort of the military community, representing 17% of the active duty force. Women serve in units throughout the world, in almost every military occupational specialty. The woman veteran is balancing work, marriage, family, and community. Her trajectory represents the value that women bring to American society and security, all the more reason to continue moving the needle on gender equality. However, as we read reports of military sexual trauma, harassment, health care concerns, LGBTQ+ inequities, childcare availability, and overall respect, we realize there are still serious issues that the military and society at large must improve.

This is why Wounded Warrior Project launched the Women Veterans Initiative. Through surveys and roundtable discussions, we are gathering data and comments about key topics like transition and acceptance; access to care; and mental, physical, and financial health. We learned, for example, that a

shocking 90% of women warriors report feeling isolated from others. This illustrates the importance of connection with another woman veteran - not just to assist with navigating the VA system, but to listen and relate shared experiences. There are many public and private resources available to women veterans nationally, but women often learn about them only through word of mouth. That is why I believe having a peer by one's side is so vital.

Much of Wounded Warrior Project's direct programming, and that of many of our partner organizations, is conducted utilizing a cohort model. Whether it is a peer support group, a physical health and wellness workshop, or a mental health workshop, the camaraderie participants share is a critical component of the positive outcome. Through post-event surveys, participants in WWP's single-day connection events reveal that 62% participated to connect with other veterans. Women return time and time again to participate in multiday WWP events because of the laughter, compassion, and acceptance they experienced during the weekend. We're heartened to receive comments like "Participating in events with other female veterans who share the same struggle was liberating." Another woman veteran told us that a WWP event was "a turning point in my self-confidence and belief in myself post-military. It was very helpful to be doing it with a group of women veterans."



Being a woman in the military is a defining experience. Just like our male counterparts, some of us choose to view it as a path to develop ourselves, others hold on to rank upon departing, and still others embrace the title "veteran." However, unlike our male

counterparts, finding another woman with a similar experience is rare in our immediate communities. Our hope for the Women Veterans Initiative is threefold: to give women veterans a voice across the nation; to see increased advocacy efforts and policy reforms; and to provide the connection, understanding, and pride my fellow women veterans deserve. I welcome you to join me in exploring how best to do so while finding new ways to connect women veterans with each other.

Digital Engagement and Advocacy in the Age of COVID-19

By Jose Ramos, WWP Government and Community Relations Vice President

With the onset of COVID-19, and new social distancing requirements, many companies and organizations were forced to reevaluate how they interacted with their constituents. On March 16, WWP paused all in-person programming, in order to adhere to the new social distancing guidelines provided by the CDC and protect the warriors we serve. As an organization that prides itself on person-to-person engagements, both with the warriors and families we serve and the staff that make up our organization, going to an entirely virtual environment was a challenge we had never faced before. However, no matter how uncomfortable or what uncertainties existed,



we felt compelled to be true to our mission of honoring and empowering wounded warriors. We saw this as an opportunity for innovation and rapid change. It was a chance to do something different, and even improve what we were doing organization wide.

Through our daily interaction via the programs we deliver, we have learned that the post-9/11 generation is also looking for ways to share its stories to impact change. We also understand that through your voice, both as a warrior and a constituent, you can be a strong partner in helping WWP educate members of Congress and key policy stakeholders on policy issues to enact change. We started by executing Project Advocacy in February of this year, by flying in 26 wounded warriors from across the country to meet with members of Congress and congressional staff in Washington, DC, to advocate for themselves and other veterans.

the halls of Congress and meet with strangers on issues that were deeply personal. The warriors' passion for learning more about the process was clear - and it was also true of the staff

asked, solutions were discussed, and relationships were made. Even though we consider Project Advocacy a success, we learned that there was an information gap when it came to understanding what WWP legislative priorities are, how Congress works, and how to advocate on your own.

and Congressional members we spoke to. Questions were

This is why we launched a series of webinars to train, educate, and engage warriors in the legislative process in Washington, DC. Using Zoom to facilitate these discussions, the Government Affairs team covers a range of topics, such as how WWP identifies legislative priorities; how bills are introduced, passed through committee, and eventually signed into law; and the difference between advocacy at the federal level vs. the state level. We also discuss our top legislative priorities such as mental health, toxic exposures, and women veterans' needs, which are broken down in depth, providing more context and data to make advocacy efforts more effective. Our goal is to give warriors chances to grow and train their voices to be the most effective advocates they can be.

The work we do as the voice of warriors in our nation's capital is no substitute for those same warriors speaking with our nation's leaders at home. That is why opportunities like Project Advocacy and these training webinars matter. It gives those



Project Advocacy confirmed what we believed to be true: that warriors were passionate about their own stories. They wanted to share their personal challenges and victories faced during recovery from their injuries and transition to civilian life to encourage Congress to act. They were willing to overcome their own personal anxieties and physical limitations to walk who have lived through these challenges an opportunity to make their voices heard and advance change.

We need the voice of warriors to join our chorus - and we want anyone who is interested in learning more about this training to please visit our web page or consult your edition of The Post to register and join.

MEET THE CHAIRMAN OF THE HOUSE **COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

Rep. Mark Takano of the 41st District of California



WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER THE COMMITTEE'S MOST **IMPORTANT SUCCESSES FOR VETERANS TO DATE,** AND HOW HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE BEEN SO FAR?

When I became Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, my first priority was to finally give Blue Water Navy Vietnam veterans the justice and benefits they earned while exposed to Agent Orange during their service. I'm so grateful that we were able to pass the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019 last summer and ensure Blue Water Navy veterans are eligible and able to get the benefits they earned more than 40 years ago - finally righting a terrible wrong. Additionally during my time on the Committee, we've refocused our efforts on veteran suicide prevention after three suicides at VA facilities in just five days in April 2019. I was heartened to see how quickly we were able to get to work and pass more than 15 bills to address veteran suicide, but there's still so much more to do to combat this public health crisis. Still, with more than 30 bipartisan bills passed



through the House, over 50 hearings, and oversight visits to 25 states, six countries, and four territories, I'm so proud of the work the Committee has completed for our nation's veterans in this Congress.

ONE OF THE COMMITTEE'S FIRST ACTIONS IN THE 116TH CONGRESS WAS TO LAUNCH THE NEW WOMEN VETERANS TASK FORCE TO IDENTIFY AND BRING AWARENESS TO THE ISSUES FACING THE FASTEST GROWING DEMOGRAPHIC IN BOTH THE MILITARY AND VETERAN POPULATIONS. WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN VETERANS AND



WHAT SOLUTIONS ARE YOU PURSUING? It was an incredible honor to help launch the Women Veterans Task Force, and under Chairwoman Brownley's leadership, we've already made significant progress, passed the most comprehensive women veterans package in over a decade through the Deborah Sampson Act, and brought America's two million women veterans to the forefront. But there's still more work to do. We need to make sure that women

veterans can walk through VA facilities without facing sexual harassment or assault and that VA has mandatory sexual harassment training for all of its employees. We have to make sure they have access to the reproductive health care they need. Women veterans are also at higher risk of dying by suicide – we must ensure they have access to the lifesaving mental health services, health care, and benefits they need. I look forward to working with Chairwoman Brownley to make sure our women veterans never feel invisible again.



WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT'S PRIMARY FOCUS IS SUPPORTING POST-9/11 VETERANS, MANY OF WHOM ARE PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION WITH THE FOREVER GI BILL. AS SOMEONE WHO HAS TAUGHT IN THE CLASSROOM, WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE SOME RECENT POLICIES THAT HAVE HELPED IMPROVE VETERAN EDUCATION AND WHAT REFORMS ARE STILL NEEDED?

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, I have heard from too many student veterans about the uncertainty the pandemic is causing as schools rightly close to stop the spread of the coronavirus. Recently, my bipartisan Student Veteran Coronavirus Response Act of 2020 was signed into law and will help ensure that no student veterans lose their work-study payments, have their housing cut off, or lose their benefits due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I also remain committed to closing the 90/10 loophole and safeguarding GI Bill benefits from predatory for-profit schools. Too often I've heard stories in which these schools shutter suddenly and leave student veterans with credits they cannot transfer and student loans that they cannot repay. Recently, the bipartisan resolution overturning the Borrower Defense rule was vetoed — I'm concerned this decision gives for-profit schools a green light to continue their predatory tactics, failing student veterans in the process.



OVER THE LAST SEVERAL WEEKS, THE CORONAVIRUS HAS BROUGHT ATTENTION TO THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL ISOLATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING. WHAT CAN YOU SHARE ABOUT THE MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVES THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS IS WORKING ON AND HOW HAS THE CORONAVIRUS IMPACTED YOUR WORK?

As you know, veteran suicide prevention continues to be this Committee's top priority, and as the COVID-19 pandemic increases feelings of social isolation and loneliness, it is even more important to address it. That's why I spoke with the American Psychological Association's Dr. Lynn Bufka about strategies and resources veterans can use to cope during this uncertain time. She highlighted the importance of buddy checks and checking in on the veterans in your life. The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized just how important this work is, and I'm grateful I was able to include a provision in the Heroes Act that will ensure National Guard members and reservists are eligible to receive mental health care at VA's Vet Centers. Additionally, earlier this year I introduced the Veterans ACCESS Act – key legislation that would make sure no veteran will have to worry about cost when seeking lifesaving emergency mental health care. We need to take a comprehensive approach to veteran suicide prevention that looks at all the factors that lead to suicide from housing insecurity to hunger to access to care and more – my bill is just one piece of the puzzle.



WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR POST-9/11 VETERANS WHO WANT TO BECOME MORE ENGAGED IN ADVOCACY AND WHY DO YOU THINK THEIR PARTICIPATION IS IMPORTANT?

It has never been more critical for post-9/11 veterans to speak up and continue to serve their communities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In my conversations with VSOs and even WWP's Vice President of Government and Community Relations Jose Ramos, I've heard stories of veterans who are serving as leaders in their communities — delivering groceries, checking in on neighbors, and even making masks for frontline employees. Congress needs your advocacy too. Our veteran population is changing — with more women, minority, and LGBTQ veterans than ever before. When I became Chairman I vowed to implement this VA 2030 vision to make sure VA is ready to care for our increasingly diverse veteran population, but I need your help to bring post-9/11 veterans to the forefront too. With your advocacy, we can produce better legislation that reflects the unique identities of all of our veterans.

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Members

MAJORITY

- Chairman Mark Takano (California)
- Rep. Julia Brownley (California) Rep. Kathleen Rice (New York)
- Rep. Conor Lamb (Pennsylvania)
- Rep. Mike Levin (California)
- Rep. Anthony Brindisi (New York) Rep. Max Rose (New York)
- Rep. Chris Pappas (New Hampshire)
- Rep. Elaine Luria (Virginia)
- Rep. Susie Lee (Nevada)
- Rep. Joe Cunningham (South Carolina) Rep. Gil Cisneros (California)
- Rep. Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan
- (Northern Mariana Islands) Rep. Colin Allred (Texas)
- Rep. Lauren Underwood (Illinois)

MINORITY

- Ranking Member Dr. Phil Roe (Tennessee) Rep. Gus Bilirakis (Florida)
- Rep. Amata Radewagen (American Samoa)
- Rep. Mike Bost (Illinois) Rep. Dr. Neal Dunn (Florida)
- Rep. Jack Bergman (Michigan)
- Rep. Jim Banks (Indiana)
- Rep. Andy Barr (Kentucky) Rep. Dan Meuser (Pennsylvania)
- Rep. Steve Watkins (Kansas)
- Rep. Chip Roy (Texas) Rep. Greg Steube (Florida)
- **★ VETERANS BENEFITS UPDATE**

On May 18, Wounded Warrior Project hosted a livestream about the challenges veterans are experiencing as the COVID-19 pandemic affects the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits processing and exams. VA Undersecretary of Benefits Dr. Paul Lawrence spoke with WWP Financial Wellness Vice President Tom Kastner about the current state of veteran benefits.

"With the onset of COVID-19, we put a stop to in-person C&P tests on April 2," Lawrence said. "The reality of the situation is that there are a lot of folks we have to see in person when it comes to testing, so we are working

with some of our medical vendors to expedite this. But I want to make clear - if you miss a C&P exam because you don't want to leave your house, we will not deny your claim, and you will not lose your place in line."



PARTNER SPOTLIGHT AND UPDATE: THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

PRE-NEED ELIGIBILITY

Veterans can be eligible for VA burial and memorial benefits, but many don't know that this documentation can be filled out in advance, so your family doesn't have to go searching for documentation at the time of your death. Waiting for your

family to try to establish your eligibility at the time of death can sometimes result in a non-eligible decision with little or no time to provide additional information. You owe it to your family to take care of this while you are still alive. By establishing this "Pre-Need Eligibility," veterans and their families can have peace of mind. This information is particularly important for members of the Guard and Reserve, many of whom don't realize that their service entitles them to burial benefits. VA will review your application, and you will get a letter confirming or denying eligibility. If approved, place the

letter in a safe location and inform your family. To get started and get more information, visit the Pre-Need Eligibility webpage.

*** TAKE ACTION**

Wounded Warrior Project proudly serves as a voice of wounded warriors in our nation's capital, providing advice and expertise to the legislative and executive branches of the federal government on the issues America's 20 million veterans care about most.

It's ongoing work, and it needs your voice too. We work with our nation's leaders to represent the interests of the wounded warriors whom we serve and the unique challenges they face upon returning to civilian life. But no one can speak to these important issues better than you, the warriors who live with them.

Currently, there are numerous pieces of legislation that we're working to move forward through Congress, on issues ranging from mental health care improvement, improved access to benefits and pay, expedited TSA screening for physically wounded veterans, and more sensible adaptive housing policy funding procedures.

These are all issues that have strong bipartisan support – but we need your support too, and your voice, to make the changes that warriors need to get the benefits and care they have earned through their service and sacrifice. Help us take action on these critical pieces of legislation.

★ BILL TRACKER

PASSED NOT PASSED Specially Adaptive Housing (SAH) - <u>S.2022/H.R.3504</u> SHOW YOUR SUPPORT INTRODUCED HOUSE PASSED HOUS INTRODUCED SEMATE PASSED SENATE SIGNED BY PC 23/2019 27/2019 2020 Veterans Expedited TSA Screening Safe Travel Act - <u>S.1881/H.R.3356</u> SHOW YOUR SUPPORT INTRODUCED HOUSE PASSED HOUSE INTRODUCED SENATE PASSED SENATE SIGNED BY POTUS 6/19/2019 6/18/2019 5/13/2020 Passed the House Homeland Security Committee on September 12, 2019 National Suicide Hotline Designation Act - S.2661/H.R.4194 INTRODUCED SENATE INTRODUCED HOUSE PASSED HOUSE PASSED SENATE SIGNED BY POTUS 8/20/2019 10/22/2019 10/22/2019 The Federal Communications Commission began regulatory action on Dec. 12, 2019 Deborah Sampson Act - S.514/H.R.3224 INTRODUCED HOUSE PASSED HOUSE INTRODUCED SENATE PASSED SENATE SIGNED BY POTUS 11/12/2019 3/13/2019 **Commander John Scott Hannon** SHOW YOUR SUPPORT Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act - S.785 INTRODUCED HOUSE PASSED HOUSE INTRODUCED SENATE PASSED SENATE SIGNED BY POTUS 3/13/2019 Passed the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs on Jan. 29, 2020 Major Richard Star Act - <u>H.R.5995/S.3393</u> SHOW YOUR SUPPORT INTRODUCED HOUSE PASSED HOUSE INTRODUCED SENATE PASSED SENATE SIGNED BY POTUS 2/27/2020 3/14/20 Introduced to Senate as S.3393 on 3/4/20 ***** CONTACT US advocacy@woundedwarriorproject.org

JOSE RAMOS Vice President of Government and Community Relations

BRIAN DEMPSEY Government Affairs Director Issues: Mental health, brain health, and caregiver policy

DEREK FRONABARGER **Government Affairs Director** Issues: VA benefits, toxic exposures, and education

RAMSEY SULAYMAN Government Affairs Director Issues: Women veterans, electronic health records, and transition assistance programs

MEGHAN JACKSON Government Affairs Specialist Issues: Women veterans, electronic health records, and transition assistance programs

ANNE MARIE MCLEAN **Government Affairs Specialist** Issues: Mental health, brain health, and caregiver policy

ALEKS MOROSKY Government Affairs Specialist Issues: VA benefits, toxic exposures, and education

MEDIA INQUIRIES

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★ RESOURCES



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WWP RESOURCE CENTER

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