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NEW HUD-VASH RULING EXPANDS RENTAL ASSISTANCE FOR DISABLED VETERANS

NO LONGER COUNTS DISABILITY BENEFITS TOWARDS ELIGIBILITY

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

A new ruling on the Veteran Affairs Supportive Housing, HUD-VASH, program has lifted restrictions that previously disqualified Veterans receiving disability income

from federal rental assistance after a recent federal court ruling declared HUD's previous policy of counting disability payments as income unlawful and discriminatory.

Before this change, Veterans who received monthly disability payments from the VA were ineligible for federal housing subsidies if their income exceeded certain limits. The updated policy ensures that disability payments will no longer be considered when Veterans apply for permanent supportive housing through HUD-VASH, a program co-managed by the VA and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, HUD.

The program now has a higher income eligibility threshold, allowing Veterans to qualify for rental assistance if their household income is up to 80% of the area's median income, compared to the previous 50% cap. This higher threshold, initially optional, is now mandatory under HUD's new guidelines. Additionally, HUD has allocated \$20 million to 245 public housing agencies to support security deposits



Department of Housing and Urban Development (Photo: U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (HUD))

and incentivize landlord participation in housing voucher programs for disabled Veterans.

Previously, counting disability payments as income excluded some of the most severely disabled Veterans from qualifying for low-income housing, despite their significant needs, according to Public Counsel. While these payments will no longer disqualify Veterans from receiving assistance, total income—including disability compensation—will still factor into rent calculations on a sliding-fee scale. Under the voucher

assistance program, Veterans accepted into HUD-VASH must pay at least 30% of their adjusted family income toward rent, with HUD covering the rest. Once accepted, Veterans have 120 days to find suitable housing.

These changes occur against the backdrop of an ongoing trial in the U.S. District Court in California where 14 Veterans are suing the VA over delays in developing low-income housing for disabled Veterans on a 388-acre campus in West Los Angeles.

“With HUD's new ruling,

they're now saying that they're not going to count disability compensation as income, which I think is a good thing, and the test of how this will all work will be when I see our most Disabled Veterans actually get into that housing in the West LA VA,” stated Robert Reynolds, a Veterans advocate and trial participant, noting the importance of this change.

Advocates and officials have praised the new policy as a long-overdue and much-needed change, with the potential to impact Veterans nationwide.

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Federal Law Forces Disabled Veterans to Repay Separation Payouts, Leading to Financial Hardship

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

Over the past 12 years, nearly 122,000 disabled Veterans have been

required to return payouts they received to leave the military, according to data obtained by NBC News. A little-known federal law prevents Veterans from

receiving both disability benefits and special separation pay, a lump-sum incentive given to Service Members during periods when the U.S. military

needed to downsize.

This law has caused severe financial difficulties.

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Retired Army Colonel Robert Hess is visiting American Legion posts as he drives across the country in his corvette to raise awareness about Veteran suicide (Photo: Central Oregon Daily News)

Legionnaire is Driving Across the U.S. in a Corvette to Raise Awareness About Veteran Suicide

By Rikki Almanza
Staff Writer

Retired Army Colonel Robert Hess of Newport Harbor American Legion Post 291 is driving his Arctic White 2007 Chevrolet Corvette C6 across the country to raise awareness about Veteran suicide, which claims about 20 lives daily.

As part of the Rally4Vets initiative, Hess is traveling along the 3,365-mile Medal of Honor Highway, passing through 15 states from Oregon to Massachusetts. His journey will end at Summit Point Raceway in West Virginia, where the Top Dog Motorsports

Competition, a race between military branches, will take place on October 12.

The Corvette, decorated with emblems from various organizations that support the cause, serves as a moving billboard for suicide prevention. Hess hopes his efforts will inspire people across the country to reach out to Veterans in crisis and potentially save lives. He emphasizes the importance of Veterans supporting one another, stating that shared experiences can turn personal struggles into a collective sense of purpose and belonging.

As Hess, a PTSD survivor, drives the length of the Medal of Honor Highway, he is stopping by American Legion posts along the route. These visits allow him to connect directly with Veterans, share his mission, and listen to the stories of those who have served. Each stop reinforces the sense of community among Veterans and provides an opportunity to remind them that they are not alone in their struggles.

During his stop in Bend, Oregon, Hess met with retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Dick Tobiason, who played a key role in establishing the

Medal of Honor Highway. Tobiason, who has known Veterans who have attempted suicide, shared Hess's belief in the strength that Veterans find in being part of a group with shared experiences. They discussed how connecting with others who understand their challenges can provide essential support for those who might otherwise feel isolated.

Hess's journey also honors previous efforts to recognize Veterans. A few years ago, three Veterans walked the entire length of the Medal of Honor Highway to remember the 80,000 service members still missing in action. For Hess,

this drive is not just about raising awareness but also about honoring those who have served. He considers it a privilege to spend three weeks on the road, visiting American Legion posts and connecting with Veterans across the country.

His hope is that this journey will inspire action to prevent further loss of life among Veterans and ensure that their sacrifices are honored and remembered. Through his travels, Hess seeks to remind the nation of the ongoing challenges faced by many Veterans and the critical need for support within the Veteran community.



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A little-known federal law prevents Veterans from receiving both disability benefits and the lump-sum separation pay given during military downsizing. (Photo: U.S. Military Academy, West Point)

Federal Law Forces Disabled Veterans to Repay Separation Payouts

SEPARATION PAYOUTS page 1

This law has caused severe financial difficulties for many Veterans. For instance, one Veteran faces a 15-year repayment period, while another has had to consider additional employment to manage

their expenses, as reported by NBC.

The VA reported in fiscal year 2018, they had to recoup separation payments from over 17,000 Veterans, the highest annual amount to date. This figure has fluctuated over the years, with an

increase in recoupments following the signing of the PACT Act in August 2022, which expanded benefits to Veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances.

VA press secretary Terrence Hayes explained that the VA is legally obligated

to recover these payments before Veterans can receive disability benefits. Hayes mentioned that the rise in disability claims has contributed to the variations in recoupment numbers. In fiscal year 2023, the VA processed nearly 9,300 recoupments out of 2.3 million compensation claim applications, a 42% increase over 2022.

Several Veterans have reported that errors in VA processing led to their financial woes. For example, a Veteran who accepted a separation payment in 1996 only faced recoupment in 2023 after submitting a PACT Act claim. The VA started withholding his monthly disability payments until the separation pay was fully repaid. Another Veteran began receiving disability compensation the same year he took special separation pay, but only faced recoupment after filing a PACT Act claim, which was denied.

The VA has been working

to prevent future errors. Since 2021, the Veterans Benefits Administration has been scanning all Veterans' service and medical records into electronic files, reducing the likelihood of such situations reoccurring.

Veterans can seek a waiver for their recoupment responsibilities under certain conditions. The process is complex and criteria is strict. The Air Force granted waivers to some Veterans due to erroneous statements of understanding regarding recoupment. However, such waivers are rare across other branches of the military.

Advocates argue that the law unfairly links special separation pay, based on a Service Member's career, to disability pay, which compensates for service-related injuries or illnesses. Efforts to change the law, such as a bill introduced by Rep. Ruben Gallego, have been slow due to the high costs associated with such changes.

VA HEALTH CHAT EXPANDS ACCESS TO VETERAN CARE NATIONWIDE

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

For Veterans, VA Health Chat is a game changer, allowing them to receive VA care without the need to visit a VA facility. Through the app, Veterans can send messages to VA staff from any location using a smartphone, tablet, or computer. They can use it to receive medical advice for non-life-threatening injuries or illnesses, schedule VA appointments, refill VA prescriptions, and more.

The biggest benefit of VA Health Chat is the ability to manage care from anywhere. Whether a Veteran is not feeling well enough to visit the clinic or lacks transportation, they can

still connect with VA staff from home or any other location.

VA Health Chat also allows Veterans to chat privately with VA staff without the need for phone calls. This ensures privacy, even in public settings, as there is no fear of being overheard. Besides convenience, the app offers an added layer of privacy.

VA Health Chat is convenient and easy to use. Upon signing into the app, Veterans are asked to choose a channel based on their health care needs. They can then message a VA staff member trained in that area of health care.

Available channels include:

- Clinical Triage: Talk to

a nurse about health care concerns.

- Pharmacy Support: Refill, renew, or ask questions about VA prescriptions.
- Scheduling and Administration: Schedule VA appointments or ask other administrative questions.
- Virtual Clinic Visit – Urgent Care: Receive medical advice for injuries or illnesses needing immediate care but not serious enough for an emergency room visit.
- Whole Health: Ask questions about overall health and well-being.
- Women's Health: Receive care tailored to women's health needs.

Channels may vary by location, but new channels are added regularly, so Veterans should check back periodically to see what is available.

Veterans can chat with VA staff in most locations from Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. local time, excluding federal holidays. In some locations, staff are available 24/7. The app can be launched through the VA App Store and is available for download on the Apple App Store and Google Play.

For more information on VA Health Chat, Veterans should talk to their VA care team or visit the app's webpage at mobile.va.gov/app/va-health-chat



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THE VETERANS CRISIS LINE HAS ANSWERED MORE THAN 1.6 MILLION CALLS SINCE ITS INCEPTION IN 2022

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

Two years ago, the launch of 'Dial 988 then Press 1' revolutionized access to the Veterans Crisis Line, making it easier for Veterans and their families to get support from the VA.

Since the rollout of 'Dial 988 then Press 1' in July 2022, over 10 million total communications — calls, texts, and chats — have been handled by the service.

The introduction of 'Dial 988 then Press 1' has simplified access to the Veterans Crisis Line's lifesaving services with a memorable number. The average response time for calls has been impressively quick, at just 9.17 seconds. Alongside the increase in calls, the Veterans Crisis Line has seen a 76.7% rise in text communications and a 27.5% rise in chat interactions over the past two years.

"Our Veterans Crisis Line has been providing Veteran-centered support for nearly two decades, and two years ago we made it even easier for Veterans in crisis and their loved ones to reach out for help by launching 'Dial 988 then Press 1,'" VA Secretary Denis McDonough said. "One Veteran lost to suicide is one too many. We're supporting more Veterans than ever through the 988 initiative and will not rest in our continued efforts to spread the word that this resource is available and saves lives."

The two-year anniversary of this initiative coincides with the 2024 VA/DOD Suicide Prevention Conference in Portland, Oregon. This event is important for advancing the Biden-Harris Administration's strategy to reduce military and Veteran suicide. Over 2,000 VA and Department of

Defense (DoD) personnel, leaders, allies, and experts will gather to share the latest research, evidence-based approaches, and data improvements.

The VA is committed to ensuring that every Veteran and their loved ones have access to the Veterans Crisis Line in times of crisis. With over 1,000 responders, many of whom are Veterans themselves, the Veterans Crisis Line provides immediate support. Veterans in need of confidential support, or those worried about a Veteran, can reach out to the Veterans Crisis Line 24/7. No VA enrollment or health care is required to connect.

For assistance, Dial 988 then Press 1, chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/Chat), or text 838255.

VA Announces No Copays for Veterans' First Three Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Visits Through 2027

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

those not enrolled in the VA system.

Through 2027, Veterans will not be required to pay copays for their first three outpatient mental health and substance use disorder visits each calendar year.

This policy, initiated by the VA, attempts to reduce out-of-pocket expenses for Veterans, provided the visits are with VA mental health professionals or within the VA's community care network. This copayment exemption, which started on June 27, 2023, will last until December 29, 2027.

Veterans do not need to take any action to receive refunds for copays paid on or after June 27, 2023, as the VA will automatically process these reimbursements. To qualify, the outpatient visits must be conducted by a VA-affiliated mental health professional or through the VA's community care network.

In addition to the copayment exemption, a new policy was launched in 2023 that allows eligible Veterans and certain former Service Members experiencing acute suicidal crises to receive no-cost emergency care at any VA or non-VA emergency facility. Since its implementation, over 60,000 individuals have benefited from this policy, which has provided crucial, lifesaving care and significantly reduced health care costs. This policy extends access to no-cost emergent suicide care to up to 9 million eligible individuals, even

To further improve access to mental health services, the VA is actively recruiting mental health professionals nationwide. Over the past three fiscal years, the Veterans Health Administration has hired more than 9,000 mental health professionals, including psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, counselors, nurses, peer support specialists, and physician assistants. In fiscal year 2024 alone, 2,000 positions were filled.

The VA, alongside the Biden-Harris administration, is dedicated to ensuring that all Veterans have access to high-quality mental health care. The VA is currently providing mental health services to more Veterans while also reducing wait times for new appointments. Trust in VA outpatient care has reached a historic high of 91.8%, and recent studies and patient satisfaction surveys have shown that VA care outperforms non-VA services.

VA Secretary Denis McDonough noted the importance of making mental health care accessible to all Veterans, regardless of their financial situation. The goal is to ensure that every Veteran can access the necessary care whenever and wherever needed.

For more information on mental health care services provided by the VA, visit va.gov/health-care/health-needs-conditions/mental-health/

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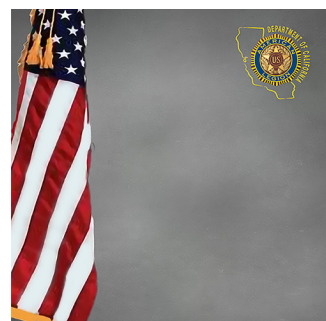
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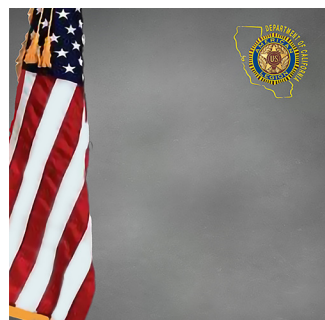
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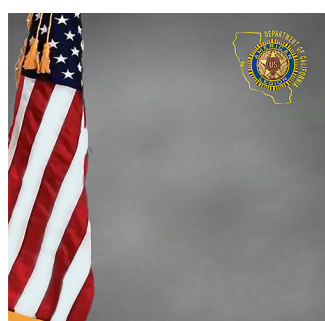
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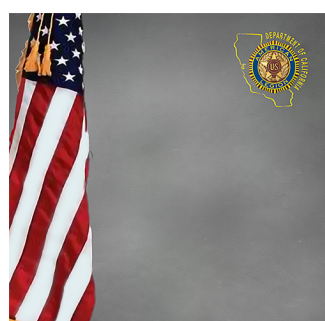
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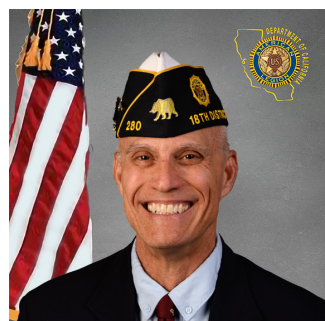
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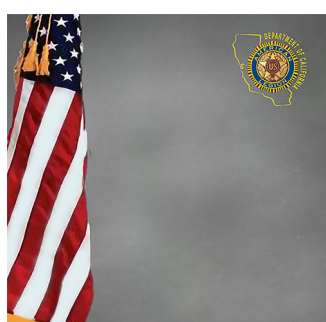
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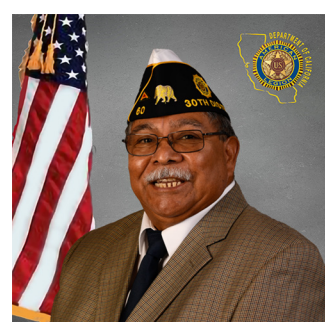
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2024 DEPARTMENT CONVENTION

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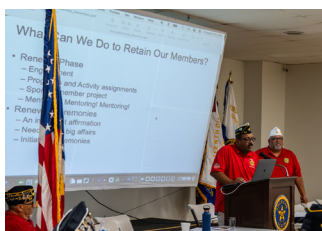
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DEPARTMENT EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING

BAKERSFIELD POST 26 | AUGUST 2024

Photos by Fred Shacklett





Conceptual Illustration of Gypsum Canyon Cemetery (Photo: Orange County Veteran's Memorial Park)

ANAHEIM CITY COUNCIL GREENLIGHTS VETERANS CEMETERY IN GYPSUM CANYON

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

The Anaheim City Council unanimously approved Orange County's first Veterans cemetery to be located in Gypsum Canyon beside the 91 Freeway. Construction of the new cemetery could begin by 2026, with the site expected to open for burials by 2027, as reported by LAist.

This project addresses a need for the county's estimated 80,000 Veterans, as the nearest military cemetery is currently the Riverside National Cemetery, situated over 40 miles away. The Veterans Alliance of Orange County, representing 150 Veteran organizations, has tirelessly advocated for this cemetery for 14 years. The journey to establishing this cemetery began in the early 2010s, leading to the passage of AB 1453, a bill calling for a Veterans cemetery in the county.

Initial efforts to locate the

cemetery at the former Marine Corps Air Station El Toro and Irvine's Great Park were unsuccessful due to local political disputes. Eventually, the focus shifted to Gypsum Canyon, gaining support from county, city, and state leaders. The recent state budget allocated approximately \$5 million towards the project, bringing total funding to \$50 million from various state and county sources. CalVet has also applied for a federal grant to further support the project.

Currently, the county's only public cemetery, El Toro Memorial Park, has around 600 spaces left, enough for roughly two more years of burials. Plans are underway to convert roads into burial spaces at Santa Ana Cemetery, extending available burial spaces for an additional two years.

Nick Berardino, the Alliance's president, shared with LAist that many local Veterans' families

have been waiting for this moment. Some have been storing ashes until the cemetery's completion, while others have traveled to Riverside County or resorted to private burials. Berardino, a Veteran himself, mentioned the deep emotional significance for Gold Star Mothers, who have lost children in combat.

"For mothers who will unfortunately lose their children in future conflicts, this cemetery provides comfort, knowing they can be close to their child," he said. "In a public cemetery, there's a feeling of loneliness. But in a Veterans cemetery, we are laid to rest with our brothers and sisters, providing great comfort."

He further mentioned that being buried in a Veterans cemetery entitles a Veteran to ceremonial activities like a 21-gun salute and for Vietnam War Veterans, a motorbike escort.

The 150-acre site will

house two cemeteries: a public cemetery and a Veterans cemetery. The public cemetery, the first in Orange County in more than a century, will be managed by the Orange County Cemetery District. Meanwhile, the Veterans cemetery will be constructed and maintained by CalVet. Despite their separate management, the two cemeteries will share infrastructure, such as access routes, utilities, and bridge construction costs, creating an integrated yet distinct memorial space.

Tim Deutsch, general manager at the Orange County Cemetery District, said, "It would look like one big cemetery, but in reality, it's two separate cemeteries. We'll share access, a bridge, and utilities, with all related costs being part of a shared agreement."

In addition to honoring Veterans, the public cemetery will feature sections dedicated to allied troops from the Vietnam

and Korean wars and first responders.

For more information, the phone number for the Orange County Cemetery District Office is (949) 951-9102.



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VA Adds Three New Cancers to Presumptive Service-Connected Disabilities Under PACT Act

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

The VA has added three new types of cancer to the list of presumed service-connected disabilities due to military environmental exposure under the PACT Act.

A sub-regulatory policy letter published in the Federal Register now includes the following cancers as presumptive diseases:

- Male breast cancer
- Urethral cancer
- Cancer of the paraurethral glands

This policy establishes presumptions of service connection for eligible Gulf War and post-9/11 Veterans who deployed to Afghanistan, Djibouti, Somalia, Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Uzbekistan, and the entire Southwest Asia theater of operations, including Iraq. When a Veteran is qualified for benefits and submits a claim with proof of diagnosis, the VA will presume that the Veteran has a military connection for the illness automatically.

“We are working with urgency to deliver on the promise of the PACT Act to provide health care and benefits to as many toxic-exposed Veterans as possible — we’re leaning in wherever we can,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. “VA is working with one goal in mind: getting today and tomorrow’s Veterans and their families the benefits they deserve as fast as

possible.”

Veterans who currently have or previously had one of the listed cancers during military service or after separation may be entitled to disability compensation benefits retroactive to August 10, 2022, the PACT Act’s date of enactment. The VA will review all claims from affected Veterans and survivors who previously filed and were denied for these three conditions on or after August 10, 2022, to determine if benefits can now be granted. Veterans enrolled in VA health care can receive cancer screening and treatment at the VA, which recently expanded cancer care services closer to where Veterans reside.

The VA has granted its 1 millionth PACT Act-related disability compensation claim and awarded over \$5.7 billion to Veterans and survivors since President Biden signed the bill into law.

Veterans and survivors can apply or learn more about the PACT Act by visiting VA.gov/PACT or calling 1-800-MYVA411.

There is no charge to file a claim with the VA. For further assistance with the disability claims process, Veterans are encouraged to work with a VA-accredited representative or contact their state veterans affairs office.

Visit cancer.va.gov to learn more about cancer care provided by the VA.

ACTIVIST JON STEWART PUSHES FOR PACT ACT COVERAGE FOR K2 VETERANS’ RADIATION EXPOSURE

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

Jon Stewart is urging the Biden administration to address an oversight in the PACT Act, which has excluded coverage for some of the first U.S. troops who responded after the September 11 attacks. These troops were deployed to Karshi-Khanabad, K2, in Uzbekistan, a base contaminated with dangerous levels of uranium.

Special operations forces arrived at K2 three weeks after the 2001 attacks. This former Soviet airbase, used to launch strikes on Taliban targets in Afghanistan, was heavily contaminated with chemical weapons debris, demolished bunkers, missile parts, and highly radioactive uranium powder. The origins of the uranium powder remain unclear, but its presence has caused significant health concerns among K2 Veterans, many of whom have reported complex medical conditions associated with radiation exposure.

Jon Stewart stressed the serious health dangers that these Veterans face by comparing the conditions at K2 to being inside a nuclear bomb and hazardous chemical factory. The PACT Act, signed into law by President Biden in 2022, addressed many health issues for K2 Veterans but did not include coverage for radiation exposure.

Despite years of pleas for assistance, the VA has yet to act, citing ongoing studies and the need

for more information from the Pentagon before determining coverage for radiation exposure at K2. VA spokesman Terrence Hayes emphasized the need for a factual rationale to establish presumptive conditions for coverage.

Data reviewed by nuclear fusion specialist Arjun Makhijani revealed that soil samples at K2 showed uranium radiation levels up to 40,000 times higher than natural uranium, and air samples were significantly contaminated. The health risks from this exposure include kidney damage, increased cancer risk, and pregnancy complications.

Former Army Sgt. Matthew Nicholls, part of an environmental health team, documented the high radiation levels at K2 in November 2001. Despite these findings, the military continued using the base for four years, during which over 15,000 troops were stationed there. Contaminants were frequently stirred up by wind and rain, exacerbating exposure risks.

K2 Veteran and former Army Staff Sgt. Mark

Jackson has experienced severe health issues since the passage of the PACT Act, none of which have been covered by the VA. Stewart and Jackson are pressing the VA to act faster in addressing these issues. The VA claims to be conducting extensive research to demonstrate radiation exposure, while the Pentagon denies the presence of enriched uranium at the site.

Veterans have taken it upon themselves to organize and collect data on health conditions, with over 1,500 of 5,000 contacted Veterans reporting issues such as cancers, neurological conditions, reproductive system problems, and birth defects.

Jon Stewart, known for advocating for 9/11 responders and Veterans exposed to toxins, believes a small adjustment by VA Secretary Denis McDonough could fulfill the intent of the PACT Act. Stewart emphasizes the urgency, as many K2 Veterans are running out of time, struggling against a system that seems adversarial in providing the benefits and healthcare they have earned.



Jon Stewart urges the Biden administration to cover radiation exposure for K2 Veterans excluded from the PACT Act, 2021 (Photo: J. Scott Applewhite / AP)



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