

**STATEMENT OF MR. JOSHUA JACOBS  
UNDER SECRETARY FOR BENEFITS  
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**"THE ONE PERCENT: SUPPORTING AMERICA'S SURVIVING  
MILITARY FAMILY COMMUNITY"**

**JANUARY 30, 2024**

Good morning, Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) efforts to reach and support Veterans' survivors. With me today is Kevin Friel, Deputy Director, Pension and Fiduciary (P&F) Service, as well as Dr. Mark T. Upton, Deputy to the Deputy Under Secretary for Health, Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

**Educating Service members on Survivor Benefits**

In many circumstances, VA's relationship with survivors begins long before they lose their loved one. The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is an interagency program conducted by VA, the Department of Defense (DoD), and other federal agencies, designed to provide Service members and their families with information on benefits and services to ease their transition from military to civilian life. VA's portion of the week long TAP curriculum provides a full 1-day course outlining VA benefits and services not only for Veterans and their families, but also for caregivers and survivors. In addition to the information provided as part of TAP, VA developed the Survivor and Casualty Assistance Resources Military Life Cycle (MLC) module, which was launched in 2019, an online micro-learning course, that provides an overview of VA survivor benefits and eligibility, and what to do following a loss. No assessment responses were received from participants to provide feedback on the course in FY22. FY23 data is expected in March/April 2023. MLCs are online self-paced courses and can be accessed by Service members, Veterans, family members, caregivers, survivors, and other loved ones anywhere, at any time.

**Support for Survivors**

In the event of a Service member or Veteran's passing, VA plays a vital role in supporting their survivors. In October 2008, VA established the Office of Survivors Assistance (OSA) in accordance with Public Law 110-389, 38 U.S.C. § 321. OSA serves as a resource regarding all benefits and services furnished by VA to survivors and dependents of deceased Veterans and members of the Armed Forces. OSA also serves as a principal advisor to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, working to promote the use of VA benefits, programs, and services to survivors while ensuring that they are properly supported as stated in VA's mission. In February 2021, OSA was moved under

the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to better align OSA's work with survivors, outreach, and survivors' monetary benefits under the program office that has oversight of several benefit programs available to survivors.

Over the years, OSA has built and maintained collaborative partnerships with local, state, tribal, and Federal agencies, as well as Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), faith-based and community organizations, and other stakeholder groups to increase awareness of benefits and services available to surviving family members. OSA also advocates for the needs of survivors in VA's policy and programmatic decisions, makes appropriate referrals to VA administrations and staff offices to ensure that survivors receive eligible benefits and services, communicates with surviving family members in a proactive and timely manner, and develops innovative outreach opportunities to reach survivors who are eligible but are not receiving benefits.

OSA works closely with VA's internal and external partners to reach survivors who may be eligible for benefits. This includes regular communications with VSOs, such as the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, and other survivor-focused groups to discuss benefits, changes, and challenges. OSA serves as a representative of VA's Veterans' Family, Caregiver, and Survivor Advisory Committee, offering insight into survivor issues and challenges, and also provides discussion, training, and coordination with other VBA offices, VHA, and the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). There are four positions on the committee allocated for survivors; one is a gold star mother. OSA works with other Federal agencies, such as the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Homeland Security, to provide training, discuss benefits, and disseminate material about VA programs. Through OSA, VBA attends and participates in speaking engagements to share information on benefits for survivors at VSO National Conventions, to include the Legacy Six, Gold Star Mothers, and Gold Star Wives. Additionally, OSA coordinates weekly with our counterparts in DoD and individual service survivor programs, meets monthly with the Gold Star and Surviving Family Member Forum, and provides training to service casualty officers (U.S. Army, National Guard, Reserves, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Navy, and U.S. Marine Corps).

As part of its stakeholder engagement, OSA has a dedicated email address ([officeofsurvivors@va.gov](mailto:officeofsurvivors@va.gov)) and phone number (1-202-461-9383). During Fiscal Year (FY) 2023, OSA received and responded to 9,214 email and phone inquiries from Veterans, survivors, family members, and caregivers about benefits and the status of their claims. During the same period, VBA's National Call Center received 758,104 survivor-related calls. The top 2 primary requests were requests for assistance with a pending survivor-related claim (over 270,000 calls) and First Notice of Death (over 150,000 calls). The remaining calls were general survivor benefit-related calls. To ensure that the most up-to-date information is available to those who work within the casualty/survivor community, in FY 2023, OSA participated in 12 events with TAPS, Gold Star Wives, Gold Star Mothers, and other VSOs and held 7 Casualty Assistance Officer training events, 2 VA/DoD Survivor Forums, and numerous training events for

other VA employees. The OSA Assistant Director also participates monthly with DoD in a Gold Star and Surviving Family Representatives meeting, and quarterly with the Casualty Action Board and the Central Joint Mortuary Affairs Board. These groups address survivor challenges from individual services and also discuss and resolve regulation and policy challenges related to active-duty deaths and the ensuing survivor-related questions and concerns.

## **Improving the Survivors Experience**

In keeping with their mission, in October 2023, OSA revisited an earlier collaboration with the Veterans Experience Office (VEO) to update the Survivor's Journey Map. During findings for the initial journey map in 2019, VEO found that speed and efficiency are valued by survivors during claims processing, while having a dedicated and informed advocate would greatly improve the survivor experience when completing the sometimes confusing and/or overwhelming application for benefits. The Journey Map highlights "life stages" survivors may encounter, from preparing with their Veteran to the end of their own life, as well as "moments that matter" aligned to each life stage. Similar to Veterans, not all survivors are the same, but there are a broad set of shared moments that matter, which are a point in the survivor journey that stand out to many survivors. Using the refreshed journey map as a guide, VA will plan and design better experiences for our Veterans' survivors.

## **VA Benefits Available to Survivors**

VA plays a key role in providing monetary benefits to survivors in the form of non-service-connected survivors pension, dependency and indemnity compensation (DIC) and burial allowance, and transportation expenses. VBA's P&F Service is responsible for oversight of these monetary benefits.

Survivors pension is a benefit that provides monthly payments to survivors of Veterans who meet certain wartime service eligibility requirements, and who have income and net worth within certain limits. VA completed over 20,000 claims for survivors pension in FY 2023. VA also administers DIC, which is a monetary benefit paid to eligible survivors of military Service members who died in the line of duty or eligible survivors of Veterans whose death resulted from, or was contributed to by, a service-related injury or disease. VA completed over 51,000 claims for DIC in FY 2023. VA also pays these benefits to the survivors of a Veteran whose death is not service-connected but who was rated by VA as being totally disabled due to a service-connected disability for a specific period immediately preceding death. Additionally, VA provides burial benefits for Veterans, which are payable to individuals or professionals with a relationship to the Veteran who are paying for the burial or funeral costs and will not be reimbursed by any other organization. VA completed over 145,000 claims for burial benefits in FY 2023.

VA has seen an increase in receipt of DIC claims since the passage of P.L. 117-168, sec. 1(a) at 136 Stat. 1759, the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring

Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022, known as the Honoring Our PACT Act (PACT Act), which was passed on August 10, 2022. The PACT Act was a comprehensive bill to address the health impacts of those who served overseas and were exposed to hazards such as burn pits, radiation, and Agent Orange. This legislation expanded VA benefits eligibility for many Veterans and their survivors.

Beyond expanding benefits to survivors who are filing new claims based on PACT Act presumptions of service connection, VA has identified claims that were submitted and denied prior to the date on which the law went into effect and notifies potentially entitled beneficiaries. Under section 204 of the PACT Act, 38 U.S.C. 1305, a claimant must elect to have a reevaluation of their original DIC claim in view of a newly established or modified presumption of service connection. If reevaluation of a previously denied claim now shows entitlement, monetary benefits can be awarded without delay. In these situations, VA must assign an effective date as if the newly established or modified presumption was in effect at the time of the original DIC claim.

Following the passage of the PACT Act, VA extended outreach to 385,000 potential survivors who may be impacted. Since then, as of January 1, 2024, VA has received 13,768 DIC claims related to presumptive conditions allowed under 38 U.S.C. 1305 as enacted by section 204(a) and completed 8,774 of these cases. A total of \$116 million has been awarded in retroactive benefits to Y survivors.

VA also provides educational assistance to survivors and certain dependents through the Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance (DEA) program and the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship (Fry Scholarship). In general, the DEA program offers education and training benefits to eligible dependents and survivors of Veterans or Service members who have or had a service-connected disability rated as permanently and totally disabling and of Veterans or Service members who died as a result of a service-related condition. The program offers up to 36 months of full-time benefits (45 months if enrolled before August 1, 2018). These benefits may be used for degree and certificate programs, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training. In December of 2022, Public Law 117-328, the "Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023," Division U, section 234 removed the time limitation for DEA in 38 U.S.C. 3512, thereby improving benefits by providing certain spouses and children with additional time to use their benefits. In FY 2023, VA paid \$1.4 billion to 215,934 dependents who trained under the DEA program, which represents a 17.4% increase over FY 2022 in beneficiaries using chapter 35 benefits.

The Fry Scholarship is available for children and spouses of Service members who died in the line of duty on or after September 11, 2001, while serving in the Armed Forces, or for children and spouses of members of the Selected Reserve who died from a service-connected disability on or after September 11, 2001. Eligible beneficiaries may receive up to 36 months of benefits. This includes full in-state tuition and fees for public schools, and tuition and fees for private or foreign schools that are capped at a statutory maximum amount per academic year. Additionally, students may receive a

monthly housing allowance and stipend for books and supplies. In FY 2023, VA paid \$81.5 million to 813 spouses and 3,376 children under the Fry Scholarship program.

In addition, in FY 2023, 22,393 spouses and 97,162 children trained under the Post-9/11 GI Bill using transferred entitlement, bringing the total number of spouses and children training under the Post-9/11 GI Bill to nearly 124,000. The percentage of VA education trainees who are spouses or children of Veterans has doubled over the last decade, from 20% (FY 2013) to 40% (FY 2023).

Survivors and dependents wishing to receive VA educational assistance can use the GI Bill Comparison Tool on VA.gov to compare and locate approved schools or training providers and apply for the benefits through the VA.gov website. While nothing can replace or repay the sacrifice of military families, it is through our daily work that VA reaffirms its mission to provide ready access to, and timely and accurate delivery of, education benefits to the Nation's Veterans, Service members, and their families.

### **In-Service Death**

When a Service member passes while in-service, VA partners with DoD, DHS, HHS, and DOC immediately to provide outreach, guidance, and claims assistance with compassion to support the survivor during this difficult time.

Upon notice of an in-service death, the VA Regional Office (RO) Casualty Assistance Coordinator reaches out to the surviving family members as directed by VA guidance. VA's Office of Field Operations and Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development Service manage the Casualty Assistance Program, which is a cooperative VA/DoD service to help survivors of Service members who die while on active duty. The military will give direction on when VA contact should be initiated. Usually, the first contact with survivors will be made by telephone to set up a personal visit at a time and place convenient for the survivor(s). However, if 30 days have passed, VA will contact survivors with a letter and enclosed business card to set up an appointment.

When VA receives DD Form 1300, *Report of Casualty*, from DoD, VA immediately begins processing the claim for DIC. VBA has a dedicated staff to process original claims for in-service death at the Philadelphia VA RO, ensuring efficient and accurate benefits delivery to survivors during their time of need.

### **Outreach Efforts by the Veteran Health Administration**

In FY 2023, VHA developed and implemented a two-pronged direct outreach approach targeted to eligible beneficiaries who were not yet engaged with VA and provided key benefit information to our Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA) beneficiaries. This was done through various methods, including news articles, podcast segments, and virtual presentations at conferences, and by improving website content. These efforts have

focused on topics like eligibility, enrollment, claims submission, and reimbursement, and aimed to educate VSOs and officers about benefits and eligibility criteria.

VHA outreach programs and initiatives for CHAMPVA beneficiaries are driven at the Integrated Veteran Care, Veterans Integrated Service Network, and Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) levels and through collaboration with nonprofit organizations, community groups, and VSOs. By concentrating outreach programs at these levels and alongside these extraordinary collaborators, we achieve a more centralized approach in addressing the specific needs of these Veteran family members.

Notably, VHA's virtual outreach efforts have had a significant impact in reaching CHAMPVA beneficiaries nationwide. Through these efforts, emotional support, guidance, and practical information are provided to address their unique needs and challenges. By using modern technology and online platforms, VHA offers virtual support groups, counseling sessions, and educational workshops to assist survivors in navigating their grief journey. These initiatives demonstrate VHA's commitment to meeting the evolving needs of survivors in an ever-changing digital landscape, ensuring that they receive the care, understanding, and resources they deserve.

### **Provision of VHA-Related Care**

VHA is committed to providing health care services to Veterans, their families, and survivors. Recognizing the unique challenges faced by survivors, VHA is committed to removing barriers and ensuring that all survivors have access to the benefits for which they are eligible. To fulfill VA's mission of caring for survivors, VHA takes pride in offering compassionate and understanding support through various programs and initiatives. Our dedication lies in ensuring that survivors receive the necessary care, resources, and guidance to the extent authorized by law, to navigate their grief, and find a path towards healing and well-being.

### **Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs**

CHAMPVA is a health care program specifically designed to provide medical care to an eligible spouse or child, surviving spouse or child, or Primary Family Caregiver of certain Veterans.<sup>1</sup> CHAMPVA does not provide direct patient care; rather, CHAMPVA is a cost-sharing program in which the cost of covered services is shared with the CHAMPVA beneficiary. The program covers allowable expenses for medical services and supplies that are medically necessary and appropriate for the treatment of

---

<sup>1</sup> CHAMPVA benefits are available to individuals who are not eligible for TRICARE through the Department of Defense. They must also be a spouse or child of a veteran who has been adjudicated by VA as having a permanent and total service-connected disability; the surviving spouse or child of a Veteran who died as a result of an adjudicated service-connected condition(s) or who at the time of death was adjudicated permanently and totally disabled from a service-connected condition(s); the surviving spouse or child of a person who died on active military service and in the line of duty and not due to such person's own misconduct; an individual designated as a Primary Family Caregiver, under 38 C.F.R. 71.25(f), who is not entitled to care or services under a health-plan contract (as defined in 38 U.S.C. 1725(f)(2)); or an eligible child who is pursuing a full-time course of instruction approved under 38 U.S.C. Chapter 36, and who incurs a disabling illness or injury while pursuing such course in certain circumstances and up to age 23 if authorized by law.

a condition, including both physical and mental health care, subject to certain exclusions.

Under CHAMPVA, eligible survivors can receive coverage for a wide range of medical services, such as hospital visits, doctor appointments, prescription medications, and emergency care.

### Bereavement Services

Bereavement counseling has been proven to effectively reduce grief and depression, as well as assist individuals in restoring their social functioning more quickly.<sup>2</sup> In the case of a Veteran in the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) who passes away, the participating family caregiver is eligible to receive 90 days of extended benefits from the date of death, which includes bereavement counseling.

Bereavement services offered by VA are described in 38 U.S.C. § 1783, which includes certain individuals who are already receiving counseling services from VHA under specific circumstances and immediate family members of Service members who died in active duty unrelated to personal misconduct. It is important to note that the number of Veterans covered by these services is relatively small—approximately 1% of all those enrolled in VHA. Bereavement counseling may be provided through Vet Centers, and VA is able to provide such counseling to grieving families of Veterans who die by suicide each year. While it is a positive development that VA is able to provide counseling to these additional grieving families, it is important to acknowledge that only a small proportion of the families and survivors in need are able to receive bereavement counseling from VA due to limited legal authorities for VA to provide such care.

### Chaplain Services

Recognizing that spirituality plays a significant role in the health of many Veterans and their families, VA has determined that its provision of comprehensive medical and hospital services includes spiritual care. The provision of spiritual care is customized to meet the individual's needs, desires, and voluntary consent. Chaplains<sup>3</sup> meet with the families and loved ones of Veterans to provide spiritual care to both inpatient and outpatient Veterans. They play a crucial role within VA, offering consistent spiritual care and support throughout all stages of a Veteran's hospitalization, and even after their passing. Chaplains provide direct spiritual and emotional care to Veterans receiving inpatient or outpatient care from a VA medical facility.

---

<sup>2</sup> Stroebe W, Schut H, and Stroebe MS. (2005). "Grief work, disclosure and counseling: Do they help the bereaved?" *Clinical Psychology Review*. 25(4): 395-414. doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2005.01.004. See also Stroebe W, Zech W, Storebe MS, and Abakoumkin G. (2005). "Does social support help in bereavement?" *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*. 24(7). Doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2005.24.7.1030. See also, generally, Dyregrov K and Dyregrov A. (2008). *Effective grief and bereavement support: The role of family, friends, colleagues, schools and support professionals*. Jessial Kingsley Publishers. London and Philadelphia. ISBN: 978-1-84310-667-8.

<sup>3</sup> All VHA Chaplains receive comprehensive medical ethics training.

(1) *Bereavement Counseling Services.* Chaplains, as integral participants in facility bereavement programs, contribute significantly to bereavement care. They conduct regular grief support phone calls, send standard mail condolences, and connect individuals with community grief resources as needed. However, there is a gap in providing adequate spiritual care and emotional support during the transition from involvement with VHA to NCA or VBA. The Chaplain Service is implementing a 2-year pilot program at Riverside National Cemetery.<sup>4</sup> As part of this program, a VHA Central Office (VHACO) Chaplain will provide comprehensive bereavement care coordination with available counseling and support for survivors. This includes offering support and assistance to families from the time of a Veteran's interment and beyond. The chaplain's role is to ensure that grieving families have access to the necessary resources and services during this challenging period. The program aims to provide Veterans and their families with comprehensive spiritual care coordination, ensuring they receive the support they need during this difficult time.

(2) *Suicide Prevention Counseling Services.* VA Chaplains are part of Suicide Postvention Teams at VAMC facilities, providing immediate, short-term, and long-term support to Veterans, their families, friends, and employees. These teams ensure that those affected by suicide receive the necessary care and guidance to navigate the challenging aftermath. Their work creates a compassionate environment where individuals can heal and find solace after such a tragic event, ensuring that those affected receive the necessary care and guidance.

### Veterans Crisis Line (VCL)

The Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) recognizes the unique challenges survivors may face in coping with loss and grief. Whether survivors are grappling with the death of their loved one or experiencing mental health challenges, they can reach out to the National Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Helpline and reach a dedicated team of trained professionals, available 24/7, to receive compassionate assistance and guidance as they navigate their journey of healing and well-being.<sup>5</sup> These calls are instrumental in connecting survivors with specialized services, to the extent authorized by law and subject to applicable eligibility, such as bereavement counseling, survivor benefits information, and referrals to local support

---

<sup>4</sup> VA has the authority and responsibility to accommodate the religious needs of all individuals within its purview. When family members of interred Veterans visit National Cemetery sites, the pilot program ensures that their freedom of expression is respected and that they receive appropriate religious services or support based on their needs, desires, and voluntary consent. See generally 38 U.S.C. § 7301, 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3), 38 C.F.R. § 17.33(b)(7), OPM GS-0060 series, and VHA Directive 1111. See also *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Theriault v. Silber*, 579 F.2d 302 (5th Cir. 1978); *Marsh v. Chambers*, 463 U.S. 783 (1983); *Katcoff v. Marsh*, 755 F.2d 223 (2d Cir., 1985); and *Carter v. Broadlawns Medical Center*, 857 F.2d 448 (1988).

<sup>5</sup> While VCL does not initiate first contact, when a survivor provides initial information about a death of a Veteran by suicide, VCL responders do submit a "Postvention Request" to the local Suicide Prevention Program for further follow-up. The coordinator then offers outreach to survivors, focusing on postvention and providing additional follow-up. Suicide postvention is an essential component that complements prevention efforts. More information on the Suicide Prevention Program can be found through the Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention's program guide, available at [https://www.mirecc.va.gov/suicideprevention/documents/suicidepreventionprogramguide\\_06222022.pdf](https://www.mirecc.va.gov/suicideprevention/documents/suicidepreventionprogramguide_06222022.pdf).



groups. The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline also offers confidential phone, chat and text services, ensuring accessibility and convenience for survivors who may prefer these modes of communication when in a crisis.

VCL is also committed to continuously improving its services through data-driven insights. By analyzing call patterns, trends, and feedback from callers, both the Veteran Crisis Line and 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline identify areas for improvement, such as expanding services, refining protocols, and enhancing staff training. This data-driven approach ensures the Crisis Line remains responsive to the evolving needs of Veterans and other callers. VCL actively seeks input from callers and collaborates with mental health experts, VSOs, and other stakeholders to gather insights and incorporate best practices into their operations.

### Care Management and Social Work Services

Care Management and Social Work Services (CMSW) is supported by over 20,000 VA Social Workers who assist Veterans, their families, and caregivers in addressing social drivers of health challenges that impact their overall health and well-being. Importantly, VA does not currently have the authority to directly offer assessment and treatment services to survivors of Veterans who are not eligible for such care from VA. However, it does provide referrals to non-VA resources to help ensure appropriate connections are made.

In May 2023, CMSW was given the responsibility of creating the Survivors Assistance and Memorial Support Program to better serve survivors. The primary objective of this program is to enhance support for survivors and establish standardized bereavement counseling care on a national scale. The program aims to provide personalized and supportive services to families, caregivers, and survivors during the final stages of a Veteran's life.

### **National Cemetery Administration**

VA's NCA directly supports survivors who seek burial and memorial benefits for their deceased Veteran. NCA administers burial and memorial benefits in 155 national cemeteries in 44 states and Puerto Rico. In addition to the VA national cemeteries, NCA manages the Veterans Cemetery Grant Program, which provides funds aiding the establishment, expansion, or improvement of state and tribal Veterans' cemeteries. There are currently 122 grant-funded cemeteries in 49 states and territories (including Guam, Saipan, and Puerto Rico). VA remains focused on increasing access to burial benefits by developing new national cemeteries, developing additional gravesites at existing national cemeteries, and establishing and expanding state cemeteries for Veterans through the grant program.

In addition, NCA provides memorial benefits to Veterans and their eligible family members. These memorial benefits are provided to survivors all over the world for their eligible Veterans and family members—whether they are buried in a national, grant-

funded, or private cemetery. Benefits include headstones and markers, niche covers for columbaria, medallions, and Presidential Memorial Certificates. Every Veteran also receives a [Veterans Legacy Memorial \(VLM\)](http://vlm.cem.va.gov) (vlm.cem.va.gov) page for loved ones to share their tributes online.

VLM offers families an innovative way to remember their loved ones. VLM is the Nation's first digital platform dedicated to the memory of more than 4.5 million Veterans interred in VA's national cemeteries and VA-funded state, territorial, and tribal Veterans cemeteries. VLM allows survivors and family, friends and others to [preserve their Veteran's legacy](http://www.cem.va.gov/videos/Preserving_Veterans_Legacies.asp) (www.cem.va.gov/videos/Preserving\_Veterans\_Legacies.asp) by posting tributes. During the November 2023 Veterans Month, the VLM website doubled in size by adding nearly 5 million Veterans and Service members buried in private and other non-VA cemeteries. VLM's interactive features allow survivors, family, friends, and the public to submit tributes (comments), images, biographical information, and historical documents; create their Veteran's military service and personal achievements timeline; and generate a Word Cloud that describes their Veteran. This provides an important resource for survivors to honor, grieve, and celebrate Veterans.

NCA also supports families prior to the death of a Veteran or family member as well. Since 2016, Veterans and families have been able to get a "pre-need" determination of eligibility for burial in a national cemetery. This program assists family members and Veterans with end-of-life planning, helps them understand their burial benefits, and is consistent with private sector practice. More than 330,000 determinations have been completed to date.

In this same vein, NCA has partnered with other VA offices to integrate communications around the part of a Veteran's journey at the end of their life. Talking about end-of-life planning is never easy, but it's essential. From this partnership, VA developed an *End of Life public service announcement* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjHzQn8GSXA>), created [a new landing page website](https://www.va.gov/initiatives/end-of-life-benefits/) (<https://www.va.gov/initiatives/end-of-life-benefits/>) with links to all of our related benefits, and developed an integrated overview briefing. We are promoting planning ahead this month. Please visit our [website](https://www.va.gov/initiatives/end-of-life-benefits/) at (www.va.gov/initiatives/end-of-life-benefits) to learn more.

## **Improved Delivery of Benefits and Services**

Ensuring the efficient and accurate delivery of benefits to survivors is one of VA's key focuses. To improve benefits delivery to survivors, VA has undertaken several projects that are designed to provide enhanced claims processing through updates in forms, procedures, and the use of automated claims processing.

VA continues to review and update forms related to DIC and burial claims, to ensure that the forms are clear and request information needed to process a claim quickly. We substantially updated VA Form 21P-534EZ, Application for DIC, Survivors Pension, and/or Accrued Benefits, to account for the passage of the PACT Act by

allowing claimants to elect reevaluation under the PACT Act, and VA Form 21-530EZ, Application for Burial Benefits, to include selections for tribal trust land and state burials to account for changes made by the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (Public Law 116-315). In addition, we updated both forms to better align with optical character recognition technology to better use automated claims processing technology in place, to improve readability for claimants, and to improve the instructions for filling out these forms.

VA continues to seek ways to improve and expand the use of automation in its benefits delivery to provide faster, better service to survivors. In some instances, when VA receives a first notice of death of a Veteran, survivor benefit payments to the surviving spouse of record may be automated. This reduces the burden of the surviving spouse from navigating the claims process immediately after the loss of their loved one.

VA is committed to streamlining delivery of DIC and burial benefits using automation. In April 2021, VA completed its most recent delivery of survivor claims automation, which provided the ability to process DIC and burial claims end-to-end. Since then, VA has continued to update and refine the automation process for survivor benefit claims. In FY 2023, these automation processes completed over 62,000 burial claims (60% of burial claims received) and over 13,000 DIC claims (19% of all DIC claims received). This advancement in technology allows field personnel to focus on more complex claims.

## **Challenges and Opportunities**

VA strives to put Veterans and their survivors at the center of everything we do, but this mission is not met without its challenges and opportunities. While the Survivor's Journey Map project will help us identify pain points and challenges, VA is actively working on resolving some known challenges that we are currently facing. One such challenge that we have heard from our stakeholders recently involves the potential lapse in DIC benefits as a dependent child transitions from high school to college. VA is reviewing procedures, training, claims processing systems, and workload management strategies to improve timeliness in this area.

To help meet the increasing demands for VA benefits, we have been aggressively expanding our workforce through hiring fairs and other avenues, with thousands of claims processors hired—including an 18% staff increase in the Pension Management Centers (PMC), since January 2023. While VBA processed 86,600 survivor-related claims in FY 2023, over 39,400 remain pending. VA aims to further improve service delivery through hiring over 100 additional personnel to the PMCs to increase VA's ability to serve more Veterans' survivors in a timely and efficient manner.

Many survivor benefit claims require VA to obtain Federal records before a claims processor can begin adjudicating the claim—as of January 2, 2024, nearly 2,250 survivor benefit claims required such Federal records. Over the last 3 years, VA has made significant progress modernizing the claims process supply chain, to include

brokering several historic agreements that ensured needed records are available as rapidly and as early in the claims process as possible. These efforts are ongoing and VA will continue working to reduce access to barriers to necessary Federal records to support survivor claims processing. Through these efforts, VA hopes to continue to collaborate with necessary Federal entities to obtain all necessary Federal records for survivors on the day a claim is received. Doing so would allow VA to start adjudicating survivor benefit claims on the day VA receives the claim and provide a decision as quickly as possible.

VA is exploring ways to enhance collaboration and identify areas where survivors have encountered questions or hurdles. This will better inform process refinements to ease their potential burdens. We are also working to improve internal alignment within VA administrations to ensure communication and outreach with the survivor community, which reflects the Secretary's vision of VA putting Veterans and their survivors at the center of everything we do.

## **Conclusion**

VA shares the President's and Congress' goal of supporting the survivors of our Service members and Veterans in a caring and compassionate manner that honors their service. I want to express my appreciation for your continued support of our Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. I also want to acknowledge our VSO partners, who do so much to advocate on behalf of Veterans and survivors, as well as other Veteran stakeholders who work with us to provide the best care and services for Veterans and their families. VA continues to work to meet this goal and serves as a resource regarding all benefits and services furnished by the Department to survivors of deceased Veterans and members of the Armed Forces.

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, this concludes my testimony. I am happy to respond to any questions you or the Committee may have.