

# THE LIGHTFIGHTER

Monterey and San Benito County  
Military & Veterans Affairs Office



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More at: [www.mvao.org](http://www.mvao.org)

Cover Art- *Pair of Helos Over Iraq*, by SFC Darrold Peters  
[https://history.army.mil/html/bookshelves/resmat/GWOT/art\\_and\\_photos.html](https://history.army.mil/html/bookshelves/resmat/GWOT/art_and_photos.html)



Director’s Message: Jason Cameron, County Military and Veterans Affairs Officer



As we move into the Holiday Season - I want to wish everyone a very healthy, safe, and joyful holiday. With COVID and flu variants still circulating, our office remains vigilant towards serving you in any possible way we can. Safety and convenience are paramount in our approach as we to provide full services. We offer appointments in person, on the phone, or virtually via Zoom. We also offer walk-in availability on Tuesdays in our Monterey office, Wednesdays in our Salinas office, Thursdays at our office in the MG Gourley VA Clinic in Marina, and by appointment in our office in Hollister.

We are looking to make some big changes with our locations over the next 6 months. We are planning to move our main office from the Superior Courthouse in Monterey to a new location offering much more space just south of the VA clinic at 2616 1st Ave., in Marina. In addition, we are exploring a move of our Salinas office from the Life Foundation Building/Quadrangle to the One Stop Career Center Building located at 730 La Guardia St. Salinas. We anticipate the completion of these moves to happen just after the New Year!

Please share the word about our office locations, the services that we provide and the benefits available to the Veteran community. Amazingly, only 32% of Monterey County Veterans access their VA Compensation or Pension benefits. These benefits have been earned but are greatly underused! Help get the word out to the 7 of 10 Veterans not using their earned VA Benefits. We must continue to take care of each other – even out of uniform, regardless of time. Thank you for your service and sacrifices to our great Nation!

Our Mission Statement:

The Monterey County Military & Veterans Affairs Office (MVAO) provides advocacy, assistance, and services designed to enhance the lives of the County’s Veterans who served their country in the Armed Forces, their families, and their survivors. We assist in obtaining entitlements and services from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), California Department of Veterans Affairs (CDVA), and local programs for eligible Veterans and their families.

Office Locations and Hours

Table with 4 columns: Monterey, Salinas, Marina, Hollister. Each column lists office name, address, phone number, hours, and appointment services.



## Veteran's benefits could see a big cost-of-living boost later this year



The [Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act](#) passed unanimously (423-0) in the House on and without objection in the Senate earlier this summer. It now heads to the White House, where President Joe Biden is expected to sign it into law.

**The cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) to reflect annual inflation for veterans' disability payments, as well as compensation for survivors, would increase at the same rate as Social Security payments effective December 1, 2021.**

How much that boost will be next year is still uncertain. The Social Security Administration is expected to announce the COLA rate for 2022 in October, based on consumer price index data determined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The cost-of-living bump hasn't been above 3.0 percent since 2011 and has averaged less than 1.3 percent over the last six years.

But last month, officials from the Senior Citizens League predicted that next year's rise could top 6.2 percent, based on recent inflation and wage data released by federal economists. If so, it would be the **largest increase since 1983 for Social Security and VA benefits recipients.**

"The cost-of-living adjustment to veterans' benefits is so much more than a rate adjustment tied to inflation," said [Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif.](#), in a statement. "It is a quality-of-life guarantee in the retirement years for veterans suffering with service-connected disabilities and ailments."

## Retirees to Pay More for Tricare Enrollment While Pharmacy Copays Rise for All in 2022

Military families and retirees who use retail pharmacies or the [Tricare](#) mail-order delivery system for their medications will see an increase in copayments in 2022, according to a notice to be published in the Federal Register.

Likewise, military retirees still considered to be working age -- those under age 65 who are not old enough for Medicare and [Tricare for Life](#) -- can expect to pay more in health care enrollment fees, although the exact amount of the bump has yet to be determined.

Prescriptions for all Tricare beneficiaries at retail pharmacies will cost \$14 for a 30-day supply for a generic drug, up from \$11; \$38 for a brand-name medication, up from \$33; and \$68 for a non-formulary drug not listed in Tricare's list of covered medications, up from \$60.

Eligible patients can save money by using military pharmacies, which charge no copayments, or they can trim costs of regularly prescribed medications by using Tricare's mail-order pharmacy, managed by Express Scripts.

Copayments for the mail-order pharmacy also will see an increase. The cost of a generic prescription will rise from \$10 to \$12 for a 90-day supply, and from \$29 to \$34 for a brand-name drug for a 90-day script. Non-formulary drugs will cost \$68.

Annual enrollment fees for [Tricare Prime](#) and [Select](#) also are expected to rise for **career retired service members and their families**, but the amount of the increase has yet to be determined because it is based on the calculated cost-of-living adjustment for retired [military pay](#), which is usually published in mid-October.

More than 4.7 million beneficiaries are enrolled in Tricare Prime, and nearly 1.7 million patients use Tricare Select. An additional 2.1 million beneficiaries use Tricare for Life.





## VA Extends Disability Deadline for Persian Gulf War Vets

The VA has extended the time limit for Gulf War veterans to claim presumptive disability for certain chronic illnesses related to their military service.

The illnesses, commonly referred to as "[Gulf War Syndrome](#)," are considered "presumptive by the VA, meaning veterans claiming a disability are not required to prove they were caused by military service.

To qualify as disabling, a covered illness must have caused **illness or symptoms for at least six months** and:

- **Occurred during service in the Southwest Asia theater of military operations from Aug. 2, 1990, to the present. This also includes Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003-2010) and Operation New Dawn (2010-2011), or;**
- **Been diagnosed as at least 10% disabling by the VA after service.**

Originally the VA was scheduled to stop awarding benefits to new Gulf War veterans with a related disability diagnosis that was given after Dec. 31, 2021. However, **the VA has extended that cutoff date to Dec. 31, 2026.**

According to the VA, Gulf War Syndrome can manifest itself in various ways in affected veterans. **The VA currently lists the following illnesses as related to Gulf War service:**

- **Chronic Fatigue Syndrome**
- **Fibromyalgia**
- **Functional gastrointestinal disorders**
- **Undiagnosed illnesses**

If you have any of these, or other, unexplained illnesses and served in the Gulf War, or related area, contact the VA for a medical exam to see whether you may be eligible for free health care or disability benefits related to your service.

Contact our office at **831-647-7613** or [www.mvao.org](http://www.mvao.org) for assistance accessing your healthcare benefits!

## Some Southwest Asia burn pit Veterans get presumptive status for disability benefits

Veterans exposed to [harmful burn pit smoke](#) while serving in certain overseas war zones will for the first time get **presumptive disability benefits status** under a new announcement by the VA.

The new move will cover only veterans suffering from three illnesses — **asthma, rhinitis and sinusitis** — and only if they **manifested within 10 years of a veteran's overseas service.**



**Areas and time periods covered include the Southwest Asia theater of operations (Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar and more) from August 1990 to the present and Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Syria or Djibouti from Sept. 19, 2001 to the present.**

For now, the new presumptive benefits status does not include any rare cancers that numerous veterans groups have said have occurred in alarmingly high rates among veterans exposed to overseas burn pits. VA may add more conditions in the future.

Presumptive status allows veterans applying for disability benefits to forgo certain paperwork and medical exams to prove their injuries and illnesses are directly connected to their time in the military.

Similar status has been granted in the past for illnesses related to Agent Orange exposure during the Vietnam War, where widespread use of the chemical defoliant was well-known but difficult to prove in specific locations decades later.



## LGBTQ(+) Veterans with Other than Honorable discharges will get VA benefits under new plan

Tens of thousands of Veterans who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, or Queer (LGTBQ(+)) [forced from the military](#) for their sexual orientation and given other-than-honorable discharges will be able to receive full [Veterans Affairs benefits](#) despite their dismissal status under a new move announced September 20, 2021.

The change comes as the country recognized the 10th anniversary of repeal of the controversial “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” law which forced nearly 14,000 service members out of the ranks for admitting their sexual orientation.

Outside advocates estimate as many as 100,000 over the last 70 years may have been involuntarily separated from the military based on their sexual orientation. **The VA plans a series of reviews of those veterans’ cases, with a presumption in favor of granting them benefits unless records give a clear reason to oppose that.**

The military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy was in place from 1993 to 2011. It prohibited LGBTQ(+) service members from publicly discussing or acknowledging their sexual orientation, with a penalty of dismissal from the ranks if the truth was discovered. Before that, all LGBTQ(+) individuals were barred completely from serving. VA benefits were typically denied to those veterans, since often discharge paperwork did not show honorable status.

The new move will extend VA medical care, disability payouts, employment assistance and other benefits individuals previously blocked because of other-than-honorable discharges.

## Post-9/11 GI Bill Benefits expanding for Veterans and service members

The GI Bill– and its derivatives like the Post-9/11 GI Bill – continues to help Veterans, service members, family members and dependents achieve their academic and vocational goals.

Legislation such as the [Isakson and Roe Act](#) and the [Colmery Act](#) build on the GI Bill and expand educational benefits, to include:

1. Increased Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit levels for fewer months of service: VA pays Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits at different rates based on length of service. If you receive less than the 100% benefit level, VA has expanded the benefit level for those with fewer months of service.

Additional school funding available: Are you interested in attending an out-of-state, private, or graduate school but concerned about the cost? The [Yellow Ribbon Program](#) may be able to help. If you qualify and your school is a Yellow Ribbon Program participant, your school will contribute a certain amount toward tuition and fee costs that exceed the maximum GI Bill benefit, which VA will then match.

2. See if your school participates with the and learn more about the program in the [Yellow Ribbon Postcard](#).
3. Are you a Post-9/11 GI Bill student currently training in a high-demand Science, Technology, Engineering or Math (STEM) field? If so, the [Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship](#) may be able to provide additional benefits. This scholarship is meant to help you join the STEM workforce, which is expected to grow by 8.8% from 2018-2028, and had a median annual wage of \$84,000 in 2018.

Don’t hesitate to **contact our office at 831-647-7613 or [www.mvao.org](http://www.mvao.org)** for assistance accessing your **educational benefits!**



## VA Disability claims backlog expected to grow in coming months

Veterans Affairs officials don't know how bad the backlog of veteran disability claims will get this fall, but they know it's getting worse. The backlog — defined as the number of first-time disability and pension claims that have been awaiting decisions for more than four months — topped 215,000 in September, **up 16 percent since July and nearly triple what it was in early 2020 before the coronavirus pandemic.**

VA Secretary Denis McDonough acknowledged that the problem is going to get worse before it gets better. **"We anticipate the backlog to further increase this fall as we process claims for new presumptive conditions from the Vietnam and Gulf wars,"** he said.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, the claims backlog hadn't been above 200,000 cases since 2015. In the years before that, the delayed cases swelled to more than 600,000, drawing national criticism from advocates and lawmakers who said the slow pace of work was delaying needed financial support for injured veterans. After the department digitized most of its medical records and hired more claims processors, officials had been able to keep the backlog under 100,000 cases up until early 2020.

Office closings due to the pandemic and new claims filed under the [Blue Water Navy \(BWN\) Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019](#) for individuals who served in coastal waters but were given presumptive disability benefits status by Congress because of possible exposure to chemical defoliants — led to the recent spike in delayed processing.

VA officials plan to hire about 2,000 new personnel to help sort through the existing files and anticipated surge of new ones coming this fall, as the department begins to offer presumptive benefit status for certain [Gulf War burn pit related illnesses](#) for the first time.

Despite the recent surge in caseload, VA officials have not seen a corresponding decrease in claims processing accuracy. According to internal department data, about 95 percent of cases are correctly completed, a figure that has remained steady over the last three years. **If you need assistance filing a claim, please contact our office at (831) 647-7613 or [www.mvao.org](http://www.mvao.org)**

### *Track the status of your Benefits Claim or Appeal*

- 1) Register and sign into [www.va.gov/claim-or-appeal-status/](http://www.va.gov/claim-or-appeal-status/) OR
- 2) Call the VA Benefits Hotline, 1-800-827-1000 M-F 5am-6pm PST

## Flu Vaccinations now available at the MG Gourley Clinic!



### [MG Gourley VA-DoD Clinic \(Monterey\)](#)

201 9th Street Marina, Calif. 93933  
(831) 884-1000

Monday – Friday, 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Or;

Starting October 16, 2021, every 3rd Saturday of the month from 08:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.



**Drive-thru (no appointment needed)**





# Have fun and support the United Veterans Council and the Central Coast Veterans Cemetery on October 30th!

The UVC is hosting the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Heroes Open Golf Fundraiser for the Central Coast Cemetery on Saturday, October 30<sup>th</sup> at Ft Ord's Black Horse Course. UVC is a 501c19 non-profit and all proceeds support Veterans and veteran organizations in Monterey County! Register at [www.uvc-mc.com](http://www.uvc-mc.com) or call Sid Williams at 831-601-3263

11<sup>TH</sup> Annual



*In Support of the*  
**California Central Coast Veterans Cemetery**

Check in at 7:00 a.m.  
Breakfast  
Tee off at 8:00 a.m.  
Scramble Format  
Entry fee \$150\*

## FORT ORD ★ BLACK HORSE GOLF COURSE SATURDAY ★ OCTOBER 30, 2021

\*\$175 after October 23rd entry deadline. Includes green fee, carts, range balls, tee prizes, on-course contests and refreshments, continental breakfast, dinner, awards ceremony and live auction.

Community sponsorships are an important part of our effort to help the

### California Central Coast Veterans Cemetery

- Tournament Sponsorship: \$10,000 and above
- Corporate Sponsorship: \$2,500 to \$9,999
- Hole Sponsorship: \$1000
- Appreciated Donations

Tournament Level Sponsors/Donors  
2 foursomes our guests.

Corporate Sponsors (1 foursome)  
Hole Sponsors (2 for dinner).

Each Individual Sponsor contributing over \$250 dines as our guest.

*Non-Golfers Welcome!*

Join us for the

**BLACK HORSE BBQ**  
★ DINNER ★ AWARDS PRESENTATION ★  
★ PRIZES ★ LIVE AUCTION ★

For directions and information, visit  
[www.bayonetblackhorse.com](http://www.bayonetblackhorse.com)



*Non-cash donations of prizes and auction items are encouraged.*

For more information,  
call Sid Williams at (831) 601-3263  
[www.uvc-mc.com](http://www.uvc-mc.com)

*We thank you!*

### United Veterans Council

James Bogan, President

The United Veterans Council is a 501(c)(19) organization  
Tax I.D. 77-0032191



Our Staff and Veteran Service Representatives are proud to share last Quarter's Activity Report showing the number and value of claims, benefits, and services provided to Monterey and San Benito County Veterans and Families!

# Monterey and San Benito County



## Quarterly Activity Report



July – September 2021

**2,488**



Incoming  
Calls / Email  
Requests

**912**

Vet Rep Appointments



**153 College  
Fee Waivers**

**\$1,001,172**

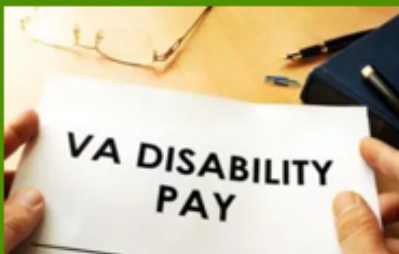
**746 Unique Veterans**

**1,526 Claims Actions**

**566 Compensation Awards**



**New VA Disability Compensation  
Awards Earned in 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter FY21**



**\$968,360**

Retroactive Payments

**\$170,658**

Recurring Monthly Payments