

THE LIGHTFIGHTER

Monterey and San Benito County
Military & Veterans Affairs Office



Salinas native, U.S. Navy Lt. **Everett Alvarez Jr.** on his 2,000th day in captivity (left). Alvarez was the first U.S. pilot shot down and detained during the Vietnam War. Taken prisoner on August 5, 1964, Alvarez endured **3,114 days in captivity** until he was released on February 12, 1973, making him the second-longest held POW in US history. Alvarez served 20 years in the Navy, retiring as a Commander. Alvarez went on to successful public service careers with the Peace Corps, VA, numerous colleges, and private businesses. He was recently nominated for the Congressional Gold Medal by Rep. Jimmy Panetta.

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More at: www.mvao.org



Director’s Corner

Happy New Year – we hope that your Holidays were wonderful, and you had a safe New Year! The Military and Veterans Affairs Office (MVAO) is excited for 2023 – With the PACT Act in full effect there are many newly added Presumptive Conditions for Gulf War Veterans, and new Presumptive Conditions for Vietnam Veterans as well. Remember that Presumptive status negates the need to prove that the specific condition was a result of service, making it much easier to get Service Connected!

MVAO has moved! We have moved two of our offices – the Monterey and Salinas offices have both moved.

- **The Monterey Office moved to 2620 1st Ave. Marina, CA 93933**
- **The Salinas Office moved to 730 LaGuardia St. Ste. 119 Salinas, CA 93905**

Our telephone and web contacts remain the same; 831-647-7613 or www.mvao.org

The office is navigating some recent Veteran Service Representative vacancies, so you may experience longer than usual wait times for an appointment. We appreciate your patience and understanding!

The Office of the Director

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.

****NEW****

Office Locations and Hours

****NEW****

Peninsula	Salinas	Marina	Hollister
<p>Monterey County Coastal Offices</p> <p>2620 1st Ave. Marina, CA 93933</p> <p><u>(831) 647-7613</u></p> <p>Monday – Thursday 8:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. 1:00 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.</p> <p>Appointments Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday</p> <p><u>Walk-In Services on Tuesday</u></p> <p>Closed on Fridays</p>	<p>Monterey County One Stop Community Center</p> <p>730 La Guardia St., Ste 119 Salinas, CA 93901</p> <p><u>(831) 647-7613</u></p> <p>Monday - Thursday 8:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. 1:00 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.</p> <p>Appointments Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday</p> <p><u>Walk-In Services on Wednesday</u></p> <p>Closed on Fridays</p>	<p>MG Gourley VA Outpatient Clinic</p> <p>201 9th St. Marina, CA 93933</p> <p><u>(831) 647-7613</u></p> <p>Monday - Thursday 8:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. 1:00 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.</p> <p>Appointments Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday</p> <p><u>Walk-In Services on Thursday</u></p> <p>Closed on Fridays</p>	<p>San Benito County Veterans Memorial Bldg.</p> <p>649 San Benito St. Hollister, CA 95023</p> <p><u>(831) 637-4846</u></p> <p>Monday - Thursday 8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. 1:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.</p> <p><u>Please Call for an Appointment</u></p> <p>Closed on Fridays</p>



VA begins processing PACT Act benefit claims for all Veterans and survivors

On Jan. 1, 2023, the Department of Veterans Affairs began processing PACT Act benefit claims for all Veterans and their survivors.

The PACT Act is the most significant expansion of Veteran benefits and care in more than three decades, empowering VA to help millions of toxic exposed Veterans and their survivors. Since President Biden signed the PACT Act into law Aug. 10, more than 213,000 PACT Act-related claims for benefits have been submitted. Additionally, more than 959,000 Veterans have received VA’s new [toxic exposure screenings](#), with nearly 39% reporting a concern of exposure.

“The PACT Act is the least we can do for the countless men and women...who suffered toxic exposure while serving their country,” said President Biden during the PACT Act bill signing ceremony. “It means access to life insurance, home loan insurance, tuition benefits, and help with healthcare. It means new facilities, improved care, more research, and increased hiring and retention of healthcare workers treating Veterans.”

From the moment the PACT Act was signed into law, VA’s priority has been getting Veterans the benefits they deserve as quickly as possible. **VA sped up the timeline for many Veterans to get their PACT Act benefits by several years by deciding not to phase in PACT Act benefits through 2026**, as written into the legislation, and **instead made all new PACT Act presumptions of exposure and service connection applicable Aug. 10**. January 1 is the earliest date that VA will have both the authorities and capabilities necessary to fully process all PACT Act claims.

“We at VA are ready to process these claims and deliver PACT Act-related care and benefits to toxic exposed Veterans and their survivors,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. “To all Veterans and survivors: don’t wait, apply now – we will get you the care and benefits you deserve.”

“Right now, VA is delivering more benefits, more quickly, to more Veterans than ever before – and we are ready to deliver PACT Act benefits to all Veterans starting January 1,” said Josh Jacobs, VA Senior Advisor for Policy, who is currently performing the delegable duties of the Under Secretary for Benefits.

To prepare for the influx of PACT Act claims, the Veterans Benefits Administration has been aggressively hiring and training new staff around the nation. Over the past two years, VA has hired more than 2,700 individuals to help process Veteran claims. As a result of these efforts, VA is processing Veteran benefits claims at the fastest rate in VA history: in 2022, VA completed more than [1.7 million VA disability and pension claims](#) for Veterans, an all-time VA record that broke the previous year’s record by 12%.

While VA did not have the capabilities to begin fully processing PACT Act claims for all Veterans until Jan. 1, 2023, VA was [able to expedite processing for terminally ill Veterans beginning Dec. 12](#). **VA continues to prioritize processing claims for terminally ill Veterans, Veterans with toxic exposure-related cancers, Veterans experiencing homelessness, Veterans older than 85 years old, Veterans experiencing financial hardship, and Medal of Honor and Purple Heart recipients.** In most cases, if a Veteran files a claim within the first year after the President signed the bill, the effective date for benefits will be Aug. 10, 2022.

VA is currently executing the [largest Veteran outreach campaign in its history](#) to inform Veterans, their families and survivors about the PACT Act and encourage them to apply for the health care and benefits they have earned.

For more information about PACT Act and how to file a claim, visit va.gov/PACT or contact our office at 831-647-7613 or www.mvao.org.



Highlights of the PACT Act:

All PACT Act presumptions of exposure and service connection are applicable as of August 10, 2022

The benefit: Presumptive status for disability benefits for 23 conditions related to burn pit exposure.

Who gets it: Most Veterans who served in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars era are expected to be covered under the provision, although specifics of how to implement that still must be written by VA officials.

Veterans will receive disability benefits if they contract any type of the following cancers: head, neck, respiratory system, gastrointestinal system, reproductive system, lymphatic system, kidney, brain, skin or pancreas.

Veterans will also receive disability benefits if they contract any type of the following ailments: asthma, chronic bronchitis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, constrictive bronchiolitis, emphysema, granulomatous disease, interstitial lung disease, pleuritis, pulmonary fibrosis, sarcoidosis, chronic sinusitis, chronic rhinitis or glioblastoma.

The benefit: Ten years of health care coverage from VA upon separation from the military. Currently, all separating troops get five years of coverage.

Who gets it: All Veterans who left the service in summer 2017 or later will have their eligibility automatically extended. Veterans who left between summer 2014 and summer 2017 will be able to apply for additional years of health care coverage, ending at 10 years after the date they separated.

The benefit: Presumptive status for disability benefits related to Agent Orange exposure for Veterans suffering from hypertension or monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance (MGUS). The effective date is August 10, 2022.

Who gets it: All Veterans currently eligible for disability benefits related to Agent Orange exposure.

The benefit: Presumptive status for disability benefits related to Agent Orange exposure for Veterans who served in areas previously not recognized for the chemical defoliant use.

Who gets it: All Veterans currently eligible for disability benefits related to Agent Orange exposure. The eligible groups include:

- ✓ Veterans who served in **Thailand** (or any Royal Thai base) from Jan. 9, 1962, to June 30, 1976;
- ✓ Veterans who served in **Laos** between Dec. 1, 1965, and Sept. 30, 1969;
- ✓ Veterans who served in Kompon Cham province in **Cambodia** between April 16, 1969, and April 30, 1969;
- ✓ Veterans who served in **Guam** or **Samoa** (and territorial waters) between Jan. 9, 1962, and July 31, 1980;
- ✓ Veterans who served on the **Johnston Atoll** between Jan. 1, 1972, and Sept. 30, 1977.

The benefit: Presumptive status for disability benefits for Persian Gulf War Veterans.

Who gets it: All Veterans who served in the first Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm and/or Desert Shield). The provisions remove rules regarding eligibility expiration.

Continued on Page 5



Highlights of the PACT Act (cont.):

The benefit: Presumptive status for disability benefits related to **radiation exposure** for Veterans who served at the Enewetak Atoll.

Who gets it: Veterans who served at **Enewak Atoll** from Jan. 1, 1977, to Dec. 31, 1980.

The benefit: Presumptive status for disability benefits related to **radiation exposure** for Veterans who served in Palomares, Spain.

Who gets it: Veterans who served at the **Palomares, Spain** from Jan. 17, 1966, to March 31, 1967.

The benefit: Compensation for select cancers or health issues related to **drinking water contamination** at USMC Base Camp Lejeune, Jacksonville, NC

Who gets it: Veterans who served at **Camp Lejeune, NC** for at least 30 days between Aug. 1, 1953, to Dec. 31, 1987

If you need assistance with applying for any PACT Act benefits, please contact our office at **831-647-7613** or www.MVAO.org

VA Palo Alto PACT Act Outreach Event

VA Palo Alto is hosting a Bring a Buddy PACT ACT event at the **MG Gourley VA Clinic in Marina on Saturday January 28, 2023**, at the MG Gourley Clinic in Marina. This event aims to enroll Veterans, register, and receive a Toxic Exposure Screening (TES). If the Veterans choose to do so, they'll be able to file a presumptive claim related to toxic exposure screening on site.

The events will feature Veterans, Veteran families and survivors, VA leaders, local elected officials, Veterans Service Organizations, state directors of Veterans Affairs and more — all of whom are working together to spread awareness about the new health care and benefits available to Veterans and survivors.

"There are millions of Veterans and survivors across America who are eligible for new health care and benefits, and we will not rest until every one of them gets what they've earned," said **Denis McDonough, Secretary of Veterans Affairs**. "That's what this PACT Act Week of Action is all about: educating Veterans, their families and survivors — and encouraging them to apply today."

If you need assistance with applying for any PACT Act benefits, please contact our office at **831-647-7613** or www.MVAO.org





The VA Crisis Line

Are you a Veteran in crisis or concerned about one?

You're not alone—the Veterans Crisis Line is here for you. You don't have to be enrolled in VA benefits or health care to call.

The VA has a 24/7 free, confidential support line for Veterans, their Families, and Friends. The [Veterans Crisis Line](#) serves Veterans, service members, National Guard and Reserve members, and those who support them.

What to expect when you call the Veterans Crisis Line

If you're going through a tough time or having thoughts of suicide, you're not alone, and **there is hope**. There really are people who want to listen and help.

Reaching out for help may be the last thing you want to do, and you may think no one understands what you're going through. But the responders at the [Veterans Crisis Line](#) are trained to provide support no matter what you're experiencing.

Since many responders are Veterans or have Veteran family members and friends, they are prepared to listen to and help you address the challenges you're facing.

Calling the Veterans Crisis Line

After you **Dial 988 then Press 1**, you'll hear a brief message that you're being transferred to the next available Veterans Crisis Line responder. Responders are there to provide the support you need on your path to safety, hope and healing.

Once you're connected to a Veterans Crisis Line responder, they'll listen to better understand what you're going through and why you called. They may also ask a few questions to make sure they're providing support and resources that best fit your needs. You decide how much information you share.

If you or the Veteran you're concerned about is in crisis, the responder will work with you and help you make a plan to stay safe. This could include discussing things that have worked for you in the past, thinking about family or friends you feel comfortable reaching out to or helping you to make your home safe. The responder can also connect you with the support services you need, either from your local VA medical center or elsewhere in your community.

Texting and chatting with the Veterans Crisis Line

In addition to calling the Veterans Crisis Line, Veterans and their supporters have the option to chat ([VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](#)) or text (**838255**) to reach responders.

With the Veterans Crisis Line chat or text feature, confidential crisis support is a click away. After you start a chat or text, a VA responder will join the conversation. There's no cost for you to chat and text the Veterans Crisis Line, and you decide how much information you share.



The VA Crisis Line (cont.):

After the call

If you choose, the responder will share your name and some personal information with your local VA suicide prevention coordinator who will contact you the next business day.

You may also be connected to the Peer Support Outreach Call Center. This center is staffed by trained Veterans who proactively reach out to Veterans Crisis Line callers who might benefit from additional support. Veterans who have peer mentors are more likely to keep their VA appointments, access additional treatment methods, and meet other important health benchmarks.

[VA's Resource Locator](#) can also connect you to resources and support systems. Whether you're looking for clinical care, counseling, or assistance with benefits, you can use this tool to search for local VA resources in your area.

To find resources nearby, visit the Local Resources page on the Veterans Crisis Line website: <https://www.VeteransCrisisLine.net/find-resources/local-resources/>. Scroll down to see the Search Local VA Resources box. Here, you can enter your ZIP code and distance parameters. You can search from 10-30 miles from your ZIP code.

Results will include the type of resource (Vet centers, VA medical centers, VA benefits offices) and its name, address, and phone number, a link to its website, and the distance from the ZIP code you entered.

Millions of Veterans have contacted the Veterans Crisis Line. **Don't wait. Contact the Veterans Crisis Line today: Dial 988, then press 1, chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](#), or text 838255.**

Respond Quickly and Ask for Help



[VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://www.VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat)



New VA Life Insurance Program

The Department of Veterans Affairs opened enrollment for [Veterans Affairs Life Insurance](#) — the first new VA life insurance program for Veterans in more than 50 years

VALife provides up to \$40,000 of whole life insurance for all Veterans, age 80 or under, with service-connected disabilities rated from 0-100%. Acceptance in the program is guaranteed, and no medical underwriting is required.

VALife also allows Veterans to complete their application online, receive instant decisions, and perform self-service functions — including electronic payments and beneficiary updates.

VALife can increase Veteran access to life insurance in several ways:

- **There is no time limit to apply:** VALife has no time constraint for Veterans aged 80 and under.
- **There is no health requirement to apply:** VALife has no medical evaluation tied to it.
- **Veterans are eligible for more coverage than before:** Under VALife, all Veterans are eligible for up to \$40,000 of coverage.

VA currently serves nearly 6 million Veterans, service members and their families with more than \$1.2 trillion of insurance. Veterans currently enrolled in S-DVI will have the option to keep their current coverage or switch to VALife. These Veterans can apply for VALife at any time after Jan. 1, 2023; however, if they apply between Jan. 1, 2023, and Dec. 31, 2025, they can also retain coverage under S-DVI during the two-year waiting period for the VALife death benefit to go into effect.

To learn more, visit [VALife](#) or contact our office at **831-647-7613** or www.mvao.org



The My HealthVet Program

Did you know you know that through the VA's [My HealthVet website](#) you can view your health information online as well as refill prescriptions, make appointments and more?

With [My HealthVet](#) you can:

- Use the VA Blue Button to **view, save, download and/or print your VA health and DoD Military Service Information.** You can also share this with your caregiver, non-VA provider or others you trust
- See your VA test results
- View vaccination records, including COVID-19 vaccine
- See your appointment notes made by your VA caregiver
- Learn about different health conditions and treatment options
- **Use secure messaging to communicate online with your VA health care team.** You may send messages to request or cancel VA appointments. Use it to ask about lab results or find out about a medication or health issue. Or simply to discuss other general health matters
- **Make appointments** with your primary care physician or specialist
- **Fill prescriptions**
- and much more

[Check out the My HealthVet website for details.](#)

If you need assistance registering for My HealthVet or have questions about online access, please contact us at www.mvao.org or **831-647-7613**



Flu and COVID Vaccinations at the MG Gourley VA Clinic in Marina

The Flu / COVID / RSV season is upon us!

The MG Gourley VA Clinic in Marina is providing **free Flu and COVID vaccinations**, to include Moderna booster shots.

The **Walk-in** service is offered **Monday-Friday**

9:00-12:00 and 1:00-3:00

You do not have to make an appointment.

A Facemask is required.

The MG Gourley VA-DoD Clinic is located at **201 9th Street in Marina**. If you need more information, please call the MG Gourley Clinic at **831-884-1000**



MVAO's Monterey Office has Moved!

Monterey Office has relocated to

2620 1st Avenue, Marina, CA 93933

WANTED: Items related to Ft Ord or of historical military significance!

Our new office has a 'Heritage Room' and a couple of large conference rooms to proudly and safely display items and memorabilia.

Please **contact Jack or Adam at 831-647-7613** if you are interested in donating or loaning items.

Hail and Farewell

We are proud to announce the **promotion of Adam Errahebi** from Veteran Service Representative III to Management Analyst I!



Adam is a US Air Force combat Veteran who began his tenure at MVAO in January 2017 as a student-Intern while attending Monterey Peninsula College. He continued as a VA GI Bill Work Study while attending

CSU Monterey Bay and was hired in July 2019 as a VSR I-II due to his outstanding performance and potential. After being selected to VSR III, Adam served as the Lead VSR for our Monterey Branch before taking on the Interim Management Analyst position in August 2022.

Until the VSR III position is backfilled, Adam will continue to work with claims and benefits as his time allows. **Congratulations on your promotion, Adam!**

Its bittersweet for MVAO, however as of December 31, 2022, our own **Cathy Chavez retired after 20 years** as a Monterey County employee. Cathy was a true pleasure to work with, and she will be fondly remembered for her warm smile, outstanding customer service, and superior attention to detail.



Cathy began her public service as a Clerical Assistant in the Dept. of Social Services (DSS) Eligibility and Community Benefits departments. In April 2017, Cathy began her tenure with MVAO as our Office Assistant II, a position for which she was recognized numerous times with DSS's annual Outstanding Customer Service award. In July 2021, Cathy was promoted to Veteran Services Representative II.

Congratulations on your 20-year Retirement, Cathy!




THE WALL THAT HEALS

In San Luis Obispo, CA on March 16 – 19, 2023


Vietnam Veterans Memorial Replica Wall and Mobile Education Center spreads healing legacy of The Wall and educates about the impact of the Vietnam War

The Wall That Heals, a three-quarter scale replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial along with a mobile Education Center, is coming to San Luis Obispo, CA on March 16th-19th at The Madonna Meadows and will be open 24 hours a day and free to the public. *The Wall That Heals* honors the more than three million Americans who served in the U.S. Armed forces in the Vietnam War, and it bears the names of the 58,281 men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice in Vietnam.


The three-quarter scale Wall replica is 375 feet in length and stands 7.5 feet high at its tallest point. Visitors will experience The Wall rising above them as they walk towards the apex, a key feature of the design of The Wall in D.C. Visitors are able to do name rubbings of individual service member’s names on The Wall.



San Luis Obispo County Veterans Services Office
&
Central Coast Veterans Memorial Museum



Proudly Presents




THE WALL THAT HEALS
VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL REPLICA & MOBILE EDUCATION CENTER


★
A PROGRAM OF THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL FUND
FOUNDERS OF THE WALL

OPEN TO ALL	INVITED: EVERYONE COST: FREE OPEN: 24 HRS A DAY *** Closes at 2 on Sunday
WHERE	MADONNA MEADOWS 100 MADONNA ROAD SAN LUIS OBISPO
WHEN	MARCH 16th-19th, 2023

In Partnership with



For more information on how to donate or volunteer scan the QR Code or visit: www.vetmuseum.org/the-wall-that-heals



The Wall That Heals is transported from community to community in a 53-foot trailer. When parked, the trailer opens with exhibits built into its sides, allowing it to serve as a mobile Education Center telling the story of the Vietnam War, The Wall and the divisive era in American history.

The Wall That Heals is a program of VVMF, the nonprofit organization that built the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. in 1982. *The Wall That Heals* is the only traveling exhibit affiliated with The Wall in Washington, D.C. and includes the largest Wall replica that travels the country.

More information on The Wall That Heals’ visit to San Luis Obispo, how to volunteer, or how to donate can be found at: <https://vetmuseum.org/the-wall-that-heals/> or by contacting Chris Emert, SLO County Veteran Service Office at **805-781-5766** or twthinfo@co.slo.ca.us



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



October – December 2022

1,956

Incoming Phone
Calls / Email
Requests



898

Vet Rep Appointments



18

California College
Tuition Fee
Waivers

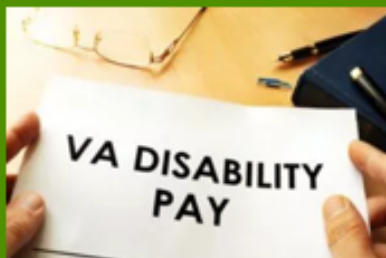
1,276 Claims Actions

675 Unique Veterans

392 Compensation Awards



New VA Disability Compensation Awards Earned this Quarter



\$1,168,162

Retroactive Payments

\$192,147

Recurring Monthly Payments