



**WOUNDED WARRIOR  
PROJECT®**

# PROJECT ADVOCACY NEWSLETTER

**JUNE 2023**

Welcome to Volume 4, Issue 2 of Wounded Warrior Project Advocacy News, a policy update from Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP). WWP's advocacy efforts connect you and your fellow warriors with your elected officials, providing you a voice in our nation's capital, and empowering you to discuss the issues that matter most to the post-9/11 veteran community.

## **IN THIS ISSUE:**

**White House Executive Order  
Expands Support for Caregivers**

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**Soldier Ride Returns  
to Washington, DC**

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**VA and WWP Encourage Veterans to  
File Claims Under PACT Act by August 9,  
2023, and Enroll in VA Health Care Now**

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**JUNE 2023**

## LETTER FROM OUR VP

Greetings, and welcome to the quarterly policy update from Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP).

Every year on Memorial Day, I have the privilege of representing the Wounded Warrior Project at the annual remembrance ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, where we lay a wreath and pay respect to those who have made the ultimate sacrifice. I often find myself reflecting on how I can best honor the legacy of those with whom I served. For many of us, this day is especially personal as we reflect on the friends and fellow warriors we lost on the battlefield or at home. It is also a reminder of how privileged I am to be a part of the Wounded Warrior Project, where we are committed to honoring the legacy of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice and empowering those who have been wounded, ill, or injured – and their families – because of their service.

I am also grateful to see firsthand how many fellow veterans and supporters are committed to helping warriors through volunteer work, advocacy, and support. The entire WWP team is honored to work alongside you on their behalf.



Warrior has the honor of participating in Memorial Day commemorations at Arlington National Cemetery.

Last month, WWP held its annual Soldier Ride event in Washington, DC, a unique event where warriors participating in a multi-day cycling event are hosted by our Commander in Chief, President Joe Biden, and First Lady Dr. Jill Biden at the White House. Soldier Ride DC not only connects warriors from all walks of life but also allows them to experience the history and beauty of the nation's Capital firsthand. We are grateful to Vice President Harris, First Gentleman Emhoff, and the White House staff for welcoming our team and warriors, listening to their stories, and taking the time to think about how we can continue to serve veterans in their everyday lives.

WWP was also honored to testify before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Health. Army Veteran and WWP Chief Program Officer Jennifer Silva informed legislators about how WWP serves warriors dealing with PTSD and Substance Use Disorder and the multiple challenges they face accessing care. Her testimony has already impacted both Congress and the Administration—both VA and the White House have started looking at how to address the gaps highlighted in our testimony.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### LETTER FROM OUR VP

WWP Government Affairs Update ..... 1

### CAREGIVER EXECUTIVE ORDER

White House Executive Order Expands Support for Caregivers ..... 3

### SOLDIER RIDE

Soldier Ride Returns to Washington, DC ..... 4

### INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER CARVER

Christopher Carver, Purple Heart Veteran and VA hospital's Employee of the Year ..... 4

### Q&A WITH REP. MORGAN LUTTRELL

Congressman Morgan Luttrell, WWP Alumni and Member of the House Armed Services Committee, House Committee on Homeland Security, and House Committee on Veterans' Affairs ..... 7

### PACT ACT BENEFITS

VA and WWP Encourage Veterans to File Claims Under PACT Act by August 9, 2023, and Enroll in VA Health Care Now ..... 9



## LETTER FROM OUR VP (CONT.)



Women Warrior Roundtable discussions are taking place around the country.

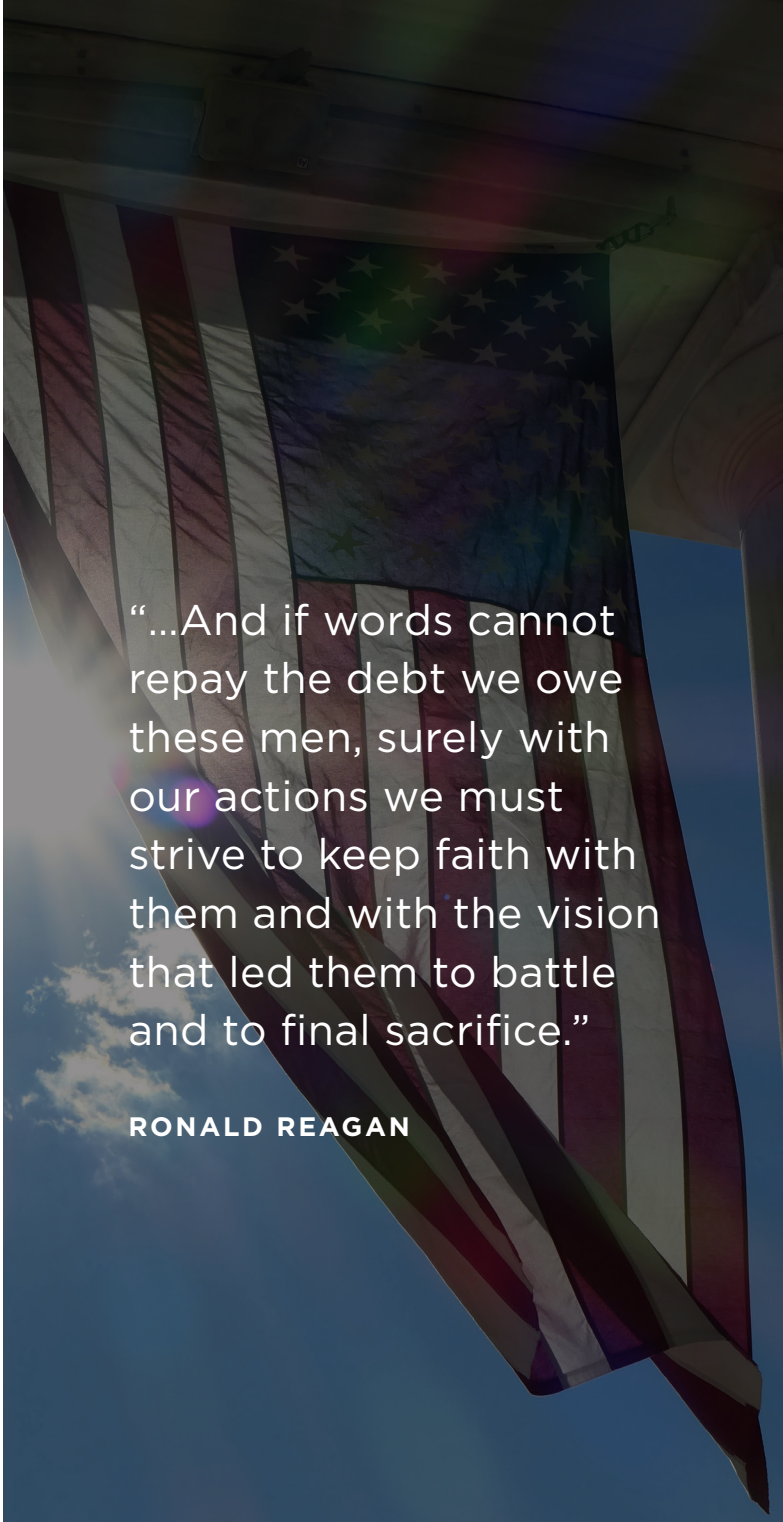
Following the testimony, we were honored to attend a White House signing ceremony for a new [Executive Order](#) (EO 14095), expanding access to care and providing much-needed support for professional care providers and family caregivers across the United States. This critical EO will give veterans more control over their care options and provide VA with additional resources to increase access to those in need. It was wonderful to see WWP Independence Program warrior Jonathon Kohl and his mother and father – who are also his caregivers – standing behind the President as he signed the executive order.

Finally, WWP hosted a series of Women Warrior Initiative roundtable discussions across the country, bringing together women veterans from all walks of life to discuss the critical issues impacting their community. WWP is committed to taking on the many unaddressed hurdles faced by this fastest-growing segment of the veteran population and will continue to advocate on their behalf.

As always, our work would not be possible without the support and dedication of committed warriors, volunteers, and loved ones, and I want to thank each of you. We look forward to carrying on the fight in the coming weeks and months.

To honor and empower,

Jose Ramos



“...And if words cannot repay the debt we owe these men, surely with our actions we must strive to keep faith with them and with the vision that led them to battle and to final sacrifice.”

**RONALD REAGAN**



## CAREGIVER EXECUTIVE ORDER



President Biden signing the Executive Order in the Rose Garden

## White House Executive Order Expands Support for Caregivers

On April 18, 2023, Wounded Warrior Project was honored to join Congressional leaders, warriors, and caregivers at the White House, where President Biden signed a comprehensive [Executive Order](#) (EO 14095) which expands access to care and provides much-needed support for professional care providers and family caregivers across the United States.

The Executive Order has the potential to provide relief for the millions of caregivers across the U.S. in some of the areas of greatest need for military caregivers—as identified by the Wounded Warrior Project and our partners at the Elizabeth Dole Foundation (EDF) through the Hidden Heroes report and the Hidden Helpers Coalition, co-chaired by WWP and EDF. The EO includes more than 50 directives to Cabinet-level agencies on issues ranging from veteran care access to improved childcare resources.

“The actions we are taking today are about dignity, security, working families, and caregivers all across the country,” President Biden noted in front of a crowd of veterans, family caregivers, educators, and advocates.

“

**The issue is fundamental to who we are as a nation.”**

- President Biden

Among the provisions of the Executive Order are several initiatives that seek to improve access to home-based care for veterans that require support in their daily lives, giving them more decision-making power in how, when, and by whom their care is delivered. Several directives were provided to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to meet these needs:

- ★ **Directing VA’s Veteran Directed Care program**, which provides veterans with a budget to hire personal care assistance, to consider expanding to all 172 VA Medical Centers by the end of Fiscal Year 2024.
- ★ **Piloting a new self-directed care program** in at least five VA sites.
- ★ **Requiring VA to consider adding 75 new interdisciplinary teams** to its Home-Based Primary Care program to serve an additional 5,600 veterans in their homes.
- ★ **Directing VA to explore the possibility of expanding access to the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers** and provide more mental health support for caregivers enrolled in that program.

The Executive Order is a great step forward to ensuring we honor our promise to care for those injured in service and fulfill President Lincoln’s promise to “care for those who have served in our nation’s military and for their families, caregivers, and survivors.”

### NEED ASSISTANCE?

If you or your loved one need assistance navigating VA caregiver resources and programs, **WWP is here to help.**



## SOLDIER RIDE

## Soldier Ride Returns to Washington, DC

Wounded Warrior Project's (WWP) Soldier Ride® returned to the nation's capital on April 10, 2023. Soldier Ride is a nationally recognized adaptive cycling program that helps warriors build their confidence and strength through shared physical activities and bonds of service in a supportive environment.

Twenty-six warriors from across the country worked together to build their skills, and gain the confidence they need to begin their journey of recovery and learn about resources and opportunities when they get home. Soldier Ride DC is a truly unique event; in addition to being a multi-day cycling event, the ride includes Active-Duty warriors receiving treatment at a military medical facility and a visit to the White House. The tradition of Soldier Ride participants being hosted at the White House began in 2008 and has continued annually, with a brief pause during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The annual event kicked off on April 11 in McLean, Virginia, with a bike fitting where warriors were equipped with bikes tailored to their individual needs.

On April 12, warriors rode 18 miles in Annapolis, MD, with part of their route taking them through the Naval Academy. That night, warriors joined the VA's Under Secretary for Health, Dr. Shereef Elnahal, at a private dinner where he could see firsthand how resilient warriors are and how Soldier Ride is helping them to connect with their fellow warriors.

On day three, wounded warriors visited the White House, where they were cheered on and hosted by Vice President Kamala Harris and Second Gentleman Douglas Emhoff on behalf of President Joe Biden and First Lady Dr. Jill Biden, who were overseas. The warriors and caregivers were welcomed by members of the Biden-Harris Administration and First Lady Jill Biden's Joining Forces initiative and was



The White House welcomes Soldier Ride participants

widely attended by senior government officials, WWP family members and caregivers, as well as hundreds of our community partners and active-duty Service members.

Warriors were once again able to cycle around the South Lawn as they completed two laps around the Ellipse with spectators cheering them on.

“

**“The service that you have given to our nation, fighting as all of you have, with the best fighting forces in the world, to support and defend all that we as Americans hold dear, is some of the most noble work that any human being could ever do. You all represent the best of what we do. You inspire Americans, and you inspire people around the world. And today, you continue being a source of inspiration with this ride.”**

**- Vice President Harris**

U.S. Army veteran Mark Lalli [shared his story](#) of resilience after enduring a helicopter crash while in Italy that left five survivors of the eleven Service members on board.

The 2023 event closed out with warriors completing a 12-mile ride through Mason Neck State Park in Lorton, VA.

Soldier Ride has been a tradition since 2004, when one civilian rode his bike over 5,000 miles from coast to coast to help raise awareness for injured veterans. For almost twenty years since, Soldier Ride has empowered warriors to find solace, healing, and strength through movement. Today, the nationwide events incorporate a variety of physical activity options, including traditional and adaptive road biking, mountain biking, skiing, snowboarding, virtual events, and skill development camps. The event welcomes warriors of various skill and fitness levels who are interested in discovering how to ride and learn new skills.



To learn more about Soldier Ride and how to participate, [click here.](#)



## INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER CARVER

# Christopher Carver

Purple Heart Veteran and VA  
Hospital's Employee of the Year



Q

**How did you first become involved with VA?**

**A:** I first became involved with VA when I woke up from a two-month coma at the brain injury center at the VA in Palo Alto, California. The care there was exceptional, at least the parts I can remember. Once I began my educational journey, I wanted to complete a work-study with the Social Work department at the local VA hospital, where I became more acquainted with the healthcare process for others.

Q

**What inspired you to work with VA?**

**A:** Honestly, it was the exceptional care I got from the VA that inspired me to go to work for them. I saw providers that wanted to make a difference; they wanted to create opportunities for veterans to better themselves. When examining my own journey from the hospital bed to a clinical Social Worker for those suffering from mental illness, I saw an opportunity to lead the way. During my interview for the transition care team, when asked what I brought to the table, I had seen everything and walked these steps. If I have not done it professionally, then I have personally.

Q

**What are some of the most rewarding aspects of your job?**

**A:** One of the most rewarding parts of my job is that I can be someone a transitioning service member can rely on. I have had veterans call me, saying, "I didn't know who to call, but you always answer the phone." That means more to me than any credit given; I've been in that dark place and do not know who to turn to. I feel a great sense of honor when I can be that person for my brothers and sisters in arms, and I am that force multiplier for good.

Q

**What advice would you give veterans who may be reluctant to try VA?**

**A:** I think the VA healthcare structure has gotten a poor reputation from days past when resources were scarce and, to be fair, poor care was provided. The system has changed in the last 15 years since I entered it. More people care than don't, and the VA boasts one of the highest percentages of veteran employees for any organization, let alone in healthcare. You might find someone who gets your point of view and has experience with the issue you are dealing with. I have also used civilian providers in the past, with mixed results. Some are just not accustomed to seeing the severity of injuries that veterans are coming home with. I'm not saying that every experience will be good, but the percentage of people who can assist you is always better at a VAMC, in my experience.



INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER CARVER (CONT.)

Q

**You participated in our recent Operation Advocacy Fly-In; how do you feel your position at the VA helped shape the conversations during the fly-in?**

**A:** Operation Advocacy was the best use of donor dollars I have ever been associated with from the Wounded Warrior Project. Speaking with our representatives about the issues that affect us directly was powerful, and I appreciated the time of all the Members of the House and Senate that specifically took a chance to speak with us. My position at the VA gave me a unique perspective that really rounded out our ideas and concerns as a small team. It looked like insider trading to have a VA employee speaking to the difficulties we see from the hospital and relating it to the struggles of veterans walking through the door.

Q

**What do you say to other warriors who are on the fence about getting involved in advocacy efforts?**

**A:** Making a direct impact on your care is one of the most empowering things I can tell a veteran to do. You may not realize it, but you have a powerful voice, and people will listen. Our representatives cannot lead effectively without knowing the needs of the people. You can stand up and state you and your fellow service members' needs. You get the chance to tell someone what's wrong and offer ideas on how to improve the system. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see in the world."



Warriors advocating on Capitol Hill on behalf of their fellow veterans

## Q&amp;A WITH REP. MORGAN LUTTRELL

# Congressman Morgan Luttrell

WWP Alumni and Member of the House Armed Services Committee, House Committee on Homeland Security, and House Committee on Veterans' Affairs



Q

**Congratulations on your election and being one of the new Members of the 118th Congress. You served as a U.S. Navy SEAL for 14 years before being medically retired in 2009. Thank you for serving with bravery, diligence, and perseverance. What did you learn from your experience as a SEAL and how has it informed your work in Congress?**

**A:** Humility, integrity, character, and patience — being a service member translates well in Washington. I would say, most of all, problem-solving in any given situation has helped me the most.

Q

**After leaving active duty, you continued your service by earning your graduate degree in applied cognition and Neuroscience. In conjunction with the Boot Campaign, you created Reboot; what can you tell us about ReBOOT and its approach to addressing the root cause of veterans' struggles?**

**A:** ReBOOT was innovative at the time. It created a wellness portfolio for the individual, not for the masses. It started with a deep diagnostic work up — top to bottom, inside and out. Then, a team of doctors from multiple disciplines would treat the various issues he or she may have. It focused on both physical and cognitive injuries because you can't fix one without the other. They're connected.

Q

**Traumatic brain injury (TBI), is sometimes referred to as the "signature injury" for post-9/11 veterans due to the increase in TBI prevalence amongst veterans since the year 2000. According to WWP's Annual Warrior Survey, the majority of WWP warriors (84.2%) reported being injured during military service, and among those, 73.2% reported experiencing symptoms typical of head-related trauma (such as losing consciousness or being "knocked out") immediately following their injury. As someone who has sustained a TBI and traveled through your own recovery journey, where do you see opportunity for Congress to influence innovative policy solutions to address the life-long impacts of sustaining a TBI?**

**A:** The brain is the last frontier, one of God's greatest creations. As a scientist and Congressman, I would say it is our job to listen and question those brilliant minds in the neuroscience space, and to also seek out innovative and creative modalities in order to increase quality of life and decrease symptomatic issues until we can unlock the secret of the brain and find cures to brain disease and injury. Ultimately, it's our job to support the best science that most promising.



Q&A WITH REP. MORGAN LUTTRELL (CONT.)



Rep. Luttrell meets with warriors on Capitol Hill

Q

**Wounded Warrior Project strongly supported the passage of the Honoring our PACT Act (P.L. 117-168). This comprehensive law regarding toxic exposure is the largest expansion of health care and benefits in VA history. As Chairman of the HVAC Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, what are your goals for PACT Act implementation?**

**A:** My first priority is to make sure the VA staff is properly trained on the new policy in order to minimize claims mistakes. Second, I want to ensure the rating pipeline is fluid and communicating properly. Lastly, we have to provide oversight to ensure our veterans are getting what they deserve.

Q

**As a Wounded Warrior Project alumnus who has also experience being significantly injured in a helicopter crash, your heart and determination are inspirational; what pushed you to return to full duty after being injured and then to run for Congress, and what piece of advice can you share with other warriors who are struggling with their recovery?**

**A:** You're never out of the fight. Being a SEAL, for me, was a way of life. Running for Congress was never the plan, but God has a path for everyone. I was raised in my district, so having the opportunity to represent my home in DC is truly an honor.

Q

**To close on a lighter question, we have heard of the infamous "twin switch" with your brother Marcus during his Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) training. Do you think pulling that trick with your brother helped solidify in your mind that you wanted to become a SEAL and how much did you pay for it when you went through BUD/S?**

**A:** No, I knew I was on that path. The day of the switch was great, terrifying, but great. I will say I did pay the man when I was in BUD/S.

PACT ACT BENEFITS

VA and WWP Encourage Veterans to  
**File Claims Under PACT Act  
by August 9, 2023, and enroll  
in VA health care now.**

Are you or a loved one a post-9/11 combat veteran, and were you exposed to burn pits or other toxins while in service? If so, there's important information you should know regarding your veterans' health care and disability benefits, including two fast-approaching deadlines.



On August 10, 2022, the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our PACT Act, also known as the *Honoring our PACT Act* (P.L. 117-168), became law. This comprehensive law regarding toxic exposure is the largest expansion of health care and benefits in Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) history, and Wounded Warrior Project is proud to have championed the effort alongside our veteran community partners. It expands and extends eligibility for VA health care and benefits for veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxins during military deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan, and surrounding areas.

WWP strongly encourages veterans not currently enrolled in VA's health care to take advantage of this earned benefit and **enroll in VA health care now**, even for those not experiencing any symptoms at this time, so that care will be in place in the future if it is needed.

Post-9/11 combat veterans who were discharged over 10 years ago and are not enrolled in VA health care have a deadline of **Oct. 1, 2023**, to take advantage of the open enrollment period. If they miss it, they could be subject to a phased-in enrollment period - based on their discharge date - leaving them vulnerable until they can enroll in VA health care.

WWP also joins VA in encouraging veterans and survivors to seek assistance from a VA-accredited Veteran Service Organization and file a VA claim **before Aug. 9, 2023**.



WWP is committed to the effective implementation of the PACT Act



## PACT ACT BENEFITS (CONT.)

Those who file by Aug. 9 could be eligible for retroactive compensation backdating to August 10, 2022 (when the bill was signed into law). This means that VA would pay veterans the amount they would have received from August 10, 2022, to the date they grant an application.

Additionally, veterans previously denied a toxic-exposure related claim are encouraged to file a new claim, which VA will review under the new law. Active-duty military personnel may also file a claim if they are within 180 days of discharge.

The PACT Act grants permanent VA healthcare eligibility to 3.5 million post-9/11 veterans who may have been exposed to toxic substances during service. The Act adds more than 20 new presumptive service-connected illnesses related to exposure to burn pits and other toxic substances for veterans who served in Iraq, Afghanistan, and surrounding areas. Work with a VA-accredited Veteran Service Organization to enroll in VA health care and file a VA claim now - don't wait until it is too late.

WWP hosted multiple webinars educating Alumni about how the new law will work and how they can access care and benefits. Some of those materials can be accessed online here: [Toxic Exposure - PACT Act Info for Veterans | WWP \(woundedwarriorproject.org\)](#).



Veterans advocating for the passage of the PACT Act on Capitol Hill

## Need more information?

For additional information on accessing your VA benefits and registering for health care can be found at:



[VA.gov/PACT](https://www.va.gov/PACT)



or by calling  
**1-800-MY VA 411**



**Wounded Warrior  
Project is here to help you.**  
To learn more and get started, visit  
[WoundedWarriorProject.org/PACT](https://www.WoundedWarriorProject.org/PACT).

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#### HOURS OF OPERATION

Monday - Friday 9 am - 9 pm EST



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