

Advocates concerned veterans may miss out on benefits

Recent changes in VA benefits mean more veterans and surviving spouses qualify for help - but they may not know it.

In August of this year, the PACT Act was passed, providing streamlined access to health care for veterans serving in areas of known exposure to burn pits and toxic substances. Surviving spouses and veterans with other-than-honorable discharges may also be eligible for benefits.

Additional changes in VA benefits were announced in October making it possible for LGBTQ+ surviving spouses to qualify for benefits even if they were unable to wed prior to the Supreme Court's Obergefell v. Hodges decision in 2015.

While these changes can be seen as a win for veterans and their loved ones, challenges remain when it comes to getting the word out to potential beneficiaries.

Kim Adams, law graduate and veterans advocate at Community Legal Aid, shared concerns that some veterans or family members may not access these benefits.

"If a veteran or family member has been denied benefits in the past, they may not believe they are eligible for them now," she shared, adding that past negative experiences may breed mistrust with the Veterans Administration.

Other barriers to accessing benefits include computer illiteracy, homelessness, lack of transportation, and the ability to prove a marriage-like relationship prior to Obergefell.

Adams, a veteran herself, stressed the need for widespread targeted outreach and training for social service providers. When working with a veteran or a surviving family member, advocates are encouraged to bring up the issue of VA benefits and mention there have been recent changes.

When applicable, local Veterans Services Commissions can provide additional screening to determine eligibility.

“Veterans and their families have made sacrifices to serve our country,” Adams pointed out. “We need to get the message out about recent changes to ensure that they get the benefits they deserve.”

While Legal Aid does not directly assist veterans and family members with benefit claims, advocates are able to help connect them to trusted resources and provide holistic screening to identify any civil legal services that may interfere with their quality of life.

Learn more at www.communitylegalaid.org/vet

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