



**WOUNDED WARRIOR  
PROJECT®**



WWP VICE PRESIDENT JOSE RAMOS (RIGHT) HONORS FAITH WILLIAMS, DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF (MIDDLE) AND LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR FOR REP. MIKE LEVIN (LEFT).

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ **NEWSLETTER | WINTER 2024** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

# PROJECT ADVOCACY

Welcome to the Winter 2024 issue of Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) Advocacy News. 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.

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**LETTER FROM OUR VP**

# A Look Back: Victories and Milestones in 2023

Greetings, and welcome to the Winter 2024 issue of the Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) quarterly policy update, Project Advocacy News.

The first newsletter of the year always gives us an opportunity to look back on the last 12 months, which were an exciting and productive time for WWP™ government and community relations efforts. Our many successes would not have been possible without your help. I want to highlight these items because I believe they're important for you — they'll make a difference in your life and how you interact with WWP and our community. And you — the veteran community — are the focus of our mission and our work.

While our priority in 2022 was the passage of the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our PACT Act (PACT Act), our focus in 2023 was on its implementation. We focused on two critical goals: encouraging warriors to sign up for the benefits offered through the PACT Act and ensuring that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) had the necessary resources to meet the needs of those warriors. More than 1 million toxic exposure claims have been filed since the passage of the PACT Act in August 2022, with VA delivering more than \$1.85 billion in benefits. Those are impressive numbers, and I applaud VA's performance. But at the same time, the number of claims continues to grow, increasing pressure on VA staff. We continue to monitor VA's performance and offered [several recommendations](#) in written testimony last year about how the agency could better meet demand. As a final note, you can still file a toxic exposure claim and sign up for VA health care through the PACT Act. Visit [VA.gov/PACT](https://VA.gov/PACT) to apply or submit an intent to file.

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## LETTER FROM OUR VP (CONT.)

**“Congress has a critical role in our work to change the landscape of support for wounded warriors. WWP is committed to helping your committees identify, develop, and pursue public policy changes that will have the biggest impact on the wounded warriors we serve.”**

— **MICHAEL S. LINNINGTON**,  
CEO, WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT  
LIEUTENANT GENERAL, U.S. ARMY, RETIRED



### Advocating Before Congress

Speaking of testimony, WWP testified before Congress and submitted [written comments and recommendations](#) numerous times in 2023. WWP CEO Lt. Gen. Mike Linnington, U.S. Army (Ret.), appeared before a joint hearing of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees in March 2023 to offer WWP's legislative priorities and policy recommendations for the year. You can find his [written testimony here](#), but to summarize, just some of the issues he discussed were:

- ★ Mental health and suicide prevention (including substance abuse, access to residential care, and telehealth).
- ★ Women veterans (including access to gender-specific care, military-to-civilian transition, and military sexual trauma (MST)).
- ★ Financial security (including the Major Richard Star Act, employment readiness, and access to claims).
- ★ Toxic exposure (including the presumption process and claims processing).
- ★ Brain health (including traumatic brain injury (TBI) research and long-term care).
- ★ Caregivers (including mental health and respite changes and long-term financial security).
- ★ Enhanced quality of life (including home adaptations, dignified air travel, and support for rural veterans).
- ★ VA workforce and modernization (including electronic health record and infrastructure modernization).

That testimony set the stage for much of our policy work in 2023, including holding more than 500 congressional meetings, 73 of those with new members of Congress just elected in 2022. Our efforts helped lead to the passage and signing of the Wounded Warrior Access Act, allowing veterans easier online access to their records with VA. We are also optimistic that Congress will pass the Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act, expanding services for caregivers, in March.

2023 was an important year for caregivers. In addition to Congressional work and debate on the the Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act, the White House also signed a new executive order early in the year to expand access to care and provide much-needed support for professional care providers and family caregivers across the U.S. Taken together, these two policies will dramatically increase the options available for caregivers and the resources VA can provide to them and their families.

### Honoring Our Allies

We could not enjoy so much policy success without the help of our friends and allies on Capitol Hill. At our 2023 Courage Awards, we recognized two members of Congress as our Legislators of the Year. I was thrilled to be able to present these awards to Sen. John Boozman (R-AR) and Rep. Mark Takano (D-CA-41). Both have been incredible advocates for the veteran community over the years.

We also honored key Capitol Hill staff in December at our annual Congressional Holiday Reception. You can read more about our staff honorees in this newsletter. Their work on behalf of warriors has been exceptional, and without their support, many of our legislative priorities would never have been signed into law.

**LETTER FROM OUR VP (CONT.)**

**Increasing Our Impact**

While our policy team is focused on enacting policy changes that improve your life and experience as a veteran, our grassroots team works to educate and train warriors to be legislative advocates for their community. After all, there are no better veteran’ advocates than veterans themselves. To this end, we redesigned portions of the WWP website in 2023 related to government relations, including our [main](#), [bill tracking](#), and [Congressional testimony](#) pages. It’s easier than ever to get the latest updated information on our priorities and what we’re doing to support them.

We also ramped up our grassroots advocacy efforts with the graduation of our first cohort of WWP warriors from warrior advocate leader (WAL) training. Our WALs will serve as the leaders and main contacts for advocacy efforts in their districts and state, and our goal is ultimately to have a WAL in each of the 435 Congressional districts across the U.S. I want to congratulate our first cohort of 22 warriors and thank them for the commitment they have made to advancing the legislative priorities of WWP and the veteran community.

Bringing warriors to Washington, DC, is an important component of our grassroots program. In March, 73 WWP warriors from across the country gathered in Washington, DC, for Operation Advocacy, our [March fly-in event](#), where they conducted 111 meetings with members of Congress and their staffs to discuss WWP’s top legislative priorities, including financial security, mental health, and toxic exposure. In September, more than 50 WWP women warriors traveled to Washington, DC, to participate in the 2023 Women Warriors Summit. They met with more than 50 Congressional offices and attended the release of WWP’s groundbreaking [2023 Women Warriors Report](#) on Capitol Hill with Rep. Nancy Mace (R-SC-1) and Rep. Nikki Budzinski (D-IL-13). These fly-in events are invaluable because they help move legislation forward and strengthen WWP connections on Capitol Hill.

**Working for You**

As I mentioned at the beginning, we engage in public policy to support you and the entire WWP warrior community. You are the focus, and all of us at WWP will never forget the sacrifices each of you has made for our country and our way of life. As a wounded warrior myself, I feel the weight of your sacrifices whenever I drive through



2023 WOMEN WARRIORS SUMMIT, CAPITOL STEPS

**“These fly-in events are invaluable because they help move legislation forward and strengthen WWP connections on Capitol Hill.”**

— **JOSE RAMOS,**  
VP, WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT  
GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

DC or visit Arlington Cemetery, and so many of our teammates have similar experiences. For example, WWP teammate Anna Cherepnina, also a wounded warrior, laid a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Veterans Day in honor of her fiancé. If you haven’t read her story, I encourage you to do so.

Her story. Your story. Our stories. They are what drive WWP forward every day to support you and all wounded warriors. Thank you for your service and for being a part of our community.

To honor and empower,

**JOSE RAMOS,**  
WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT  
VP, GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS




**THE WOUNDED WARRIOR ACCESS ACT**

# Streamlining Veterans' Access to Benefits

**WOUNDED WARRIOR  
MELVIN GATEWOOD**

**On November 13, 2023, President Biden signed the Wounded Warrior Access Act into law. The legislation, long championed by WWP, will help speed up the benefits claims process and modernize the way veterans access their claims files.**

**W**hile many members of Congress supported the legislation, WWP is especially appreciative of Rep. Pete Aguilar (D-CA-33) and Senators Alex Padilla (D-CA) and Mike Braun (R-IN) for introducing the legislation and pushing it through the legislative process.

When a veteran submits a claim for benefits to VA, a claims file (C-File) is created that contains information about the veteran, such as service records and VA exam results. For many veterans, this file is a critical element to accessing service-connected disability benefits and forms the basis of VA's decision on a disability claim. Access to this file is important, as a veteran may want to view their C-File prior to a claim decision to ensure that all information is accurate or to better understand how VA reached its decision to award or deny benefits.

Historically, veterans have faced significant difficulties in accessing their C-Files, including traveling long distances to a regional VA location to request their C-Files, requesting a paper copy of their files via mail, or even submitting a Freedom of Information Act request.

All of these are time-consuming and significantly slow the process of accessing critical benefits.

Under this new law, VA is required to provide a way for veterans to securely request their C-Files online. VA will have ten days to confirm receipt of a request to access a file online and then have 120 days after receipt to provide the records requested in the form selected by the veteran.

This new law will help modernize and streamline the claims process, increase veterans' faith in VA transparency, and decrease unnecessary appeals since more veterans will have access to all the information that VA uses to decide their claims.

VA is required to implement this online system within a year of its signing: November 13, 2024. In the meantime, WWP will remain in contact with VA as they create the online system and will inform warriors of more details about the new system as it is being developed.

If you have not yet filed a claim or have questions about your VA benefits, WWP's National Service Officers can help you.

★ **VISIT [WWP BENEFITS SERVICES ONLINE](#) OR CALL THE WWP RESOURCE CENTER AT** ★  
**888.WWP.ALUM (997.2586) OR 904.405.1213.**

## WWP INTERVIEW

# Tanya Bradsher

## Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs



On September 20, 2023, the Honorable Tanya Bradsher was sworn in as the 10th Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs. WWP was pleased to be able to interview her and learn more about her background and her priorities in this important role at VA.



**You have been a public servant for most of your life, and it all started with the Army. Why did you decide to join the Army?**

I come from a family with a strong history of military service. My father retired as a sergeant first class in the U.S. Army, my grandfathers served in WWII, and my great-grandfather served in WWI. As an Army brat growing up on Fort Liberty, I always admired my father's service, while my brother took it a step further and joined the Army after high school.

As a girl, however, I never saw myself in the Army. After college, my parents divorced, leaving me feeling lost and aimless. I ended up getting married young and working a dead-end job. But my mom saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. A few months into my marriage, she surprised me by driving me straight to the Army recruiting office instead of taking me out to lunch. She reminded me that my parents had sacrificed to send me to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and that I was not living up to my potential.

**“Joining the Army turned out to be the best decision I could have made, and it gave me the direction and purpose I needed. It also set me on a path of service — to our nation and to my fellow veterans — that continues to drive me to this day.”**

— TANYA BRADSHER

DEPUTY SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS



## WWP INTERVIEW WITH TANYA BRADSHER (CONT.)

Q

**Congratulations on being confirmed as the 10th deputy secretary of Veterans Affairs. Not only is this an astonishing accomplishment by itself, but you are also the first woman to serve as deputy secretary, the highest-ranking woman in VA history, the first woman of color to serve in the position, and the first post-9/11 combat veteran in this role. What is the significance of all those “firsts” to you, and what are your biggest priorities coming into this role?**

As the first woman and post-9/11 combat veteran confirmed deputy secretary of Veterans Affairs, I recognize and honor the women who paved the way for me to hold this position. The legacy of those women — a legacy of breaking barriers and fighting for equality — inspires me. And it reminds me that while I may be the first woman to hold this role, I will not be the last. As deputy secretary, my top priority is making sure that every veteran gets the world-class care and benefits that they deserve. As a part of that effort, I’m focusing on a few different aspects of VA:

- ★ Improving the military-to-civilian transition experience. We need to ensure that our military service members can access all the necessary tools and support before departing the service so they can transition as smoothly as possible to civilian life — with VA by their sides every step of the way. Building a modernized, nationwide electronic health record system that improves care for veterans. That means creating a seamless health care record for veterans that lasts from the first day they enter the service to the final days of their lives. Building or rebuilding trust with veterans. I want to ensure that VA is reaching untethered veterans — veterans who have never come to VA before — and getting them the care and benefits they deserve, including through the PACT Act. I will do all of that with one north star in mind — the same north star that Secretary McDonough set forth when he was sworn in: to fight like hell for veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors every day. Because they deserve the very best, and we’ll never settle for anything less.

PHOTO BY PETTY OFFICER 1ST CLASS ANDRE MCINTYRE

THE APPEARANCE OF U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE (DOD) VISUAL INFORMATION DOES NOT IMPLY OR CONSTITUTE DOD ENDORSEMENT.

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— TANYA BRADSHER  
DEPUTY SECRETARY  
OF VETERANS AFFAIRS



U.S. ARMY PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER, MAJ. TANYA BRADSHER, RESTS ON A RAIL THAT CROSSES THE AL ASHAR CANAL IN THE AL ASHAR DISTRICT OF BASRA, IRAQ, JUNE 4, 2009.

## WWP INTERVIEW WITH TANYA BRADSHER (CONT.)

Q

**You've talked about VA's focus on improving outreach to transitioning members separating from active duty military service. Why is this so important, and what do you believe makes for a successful transition to civilian life for veterans?**

Time and again throughout my life, I've seen the importance of this transition firsthand. I've seen what it looks like when one of my fellow soldiers transitions out of the military and gets the support they deserve from VA — how they live happier, healthier, more fulfilled lives. I've also seen what it looks like when that doesn't happen — with my own dad, who didn't get the support he needed and who, because of that, never quite found his way after 22 years of honorable service. Simply put, I know that VA can make all the difference in the world for our nation's heroes. And I know that it's VA's job to ensure that no veteran ever slips through the cracks. That's what the transition is all about.

In 2022, President Biden tasked VA with a multi-year human-centered project aimed at improving the transition from military to civilian life experience. Since then, VA has been working with all six military service branches and several other federal agencies to gather feedback from Service members, veterans, spouses, caregivers, and survivors on how to improve this difficult transition.

The effort has finally paid off, and VA is now prototyping two different products to improve the transition from military to civilian life. The first product is a digital checklist that helps Service members learn about the benefits they have earned much earlier in their military service journey and personalizes the benefits they are eligible for, which is intended to reduce stress and confusion. The second product is a visual management tool being developed for command teams that will help them see which of their subordinate units are compliant with the VOW Act's requirements that allow separating Service members to start the transition process at least 12 months prior to their end of active service and retirees 24 months prior. And we're going to keep working on this moving forward to make this transition as seamless and easy as possible for those who served.

Q

**Women are the fastest-growing segment of both the military and veteran communities. WWP's own Women Warriors Report shows there's so much to do regarding women veterans, transition, access to care, mental health, military sexual trauma, and other issues. Where has VA made significant strides in serving veterans, and where is VA still making improvements?**

The number of women veterans using VA services has more than tripled since 2001, growing from 159,810 to more than 625,000 today, and it's our job to serve them as well as they've served our country. VA is committed to providing high-quality, comprehensive care to all women veterans — including basic preventive care, acute care, chronic disease management, mental health care, and much more.

Over the past couple of years, we've dramatically expanded access to VA care and support for women veterans. The PACT Act was the largest expansion of veteran care and benefits in generations, and we've already seen that women are enrolling in VA health care at higher rates under the PACT Act than they had previously. We've also expanded breast cancer screenings for women veterans under 40 exposed to toxins, begun providing one-on-one maternity care coordination from the beginning of pregnancy to 12 months postpartum, started providing abortion counseling and — in certain cases — abortions to pregnant veterans, and launched marketing efforts specifically targeted at women veterans to encourage them to come.

But there is still work to do — particularly when it comes to building trust with women veterans. Women veterans use VA services at higher rates than their male counterparts, but they trust VA less. That's unacceptable, and we're going to stop at nothing to close that gap in trust by delivering the world-class care and benefits that these heroes deserve.



## WWP INTERVIEW WITH TANYA BRADSHER (CONT.)

Q

**Mental health and suicide prevention have always been a priority for VA, WWP, and the VSO community. You have mentioned the need to rebuild trust with and reach out to “untethered veterans,” who either feel VA let them down or have never opted into VA care or benefits. How does VA rebuild trust with these veterans, and how can the VSO community better support VA’s efforts in getting these veterans connected?**

The best way for us to build trust with these veterans is very simple: we need to earn it. That means reaching out to untethered veterans directly — through texts and other marketing efforts — to inform them about the care and benefits they’re eligible for. It means providing good experiences for their friends and battle buddies, so these veterans hear about us through word-of-mouth. And, most importantly, it means delivering for these veterans when they do finally give VA a try — so they’ll keep coming back to us in the future.

That’s exactly what we’re doing: working to earn the trust of these veterans, day after day, through our words and our actions.

There are many ways that VSOs can help in this effort, but the main one is encouraging your members to reach out to their veteran friends to explain how VA can help. There is nothing more powerful than a friend’s recommendation. The more peer-to-peer recommendations we have, the more trust we’ll be able to build — and the more veterans we’ll be able to help.

Q

**What’s your favorite memory or proudest achievement in your 20-year U.S. Army career, and what would you like to say to wounded warriors across the country?**

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# The Next Step in WWP Advocacy

WAL TRAINING, SAN ANTONIO, TX, NOVEMBER 2023

**Grassroots support is a critical part of WWP’s advocacy efforts. Without warriors engaging with their local members of Congress, our impact on Capitol Hill isn’t the same, and we’re grateful for the engagement of all warriors in public policy.**

**B**ut some warriors want to do more in public policy. Recently WWP took a significant step in empowering those warriors by creating a new volunteer position focused specifically on grassroots advocacy.

Warrior advocate leaders (WALs) are volunteers who don’t just support WWP’s legislative efforts but help lead them at the local level. In collaboration with the WWP grassroots program team, WALs will engage with members of Congress, their staff, and other government officials to advance policies that support and empower the warrior community. WALs also work with the grassroots team to recruit, train, mobilize, and lead other volunteer advocates in their local communities.

Prospective WALs were chosen from our extensive roster of advocates — those who have participated in previous Operation Advocacy fly-ins or demonstrated a commitment to our legislative efforts. These warriors were asked to participate in a six-month pilot program to help develop the program’s requirements and functions.

Following the pilot phase of the new program, these warriors attended the WAL Summit held in San Antonio, Texas on November 2 - 5, 2023. The summit provided comprehensive training in government

relations, communications, and advocacy to those attending. The session aimed to equip WALs with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the complexities of grassroots advocacy and effectively represent their interests. The training covered a range of topics, including understanding legislative processes, crafting persuasive messages, and building relationships with policymakers.

“The training was two days of dedicated, focused instruction and presentation,” said Brent Reiffer, a WAL from Virginia. “We drilled down on the best ways to engage with our elected officials, along with refreshers on how Congress works and the importance of telling our stories, continuing our outreach, and offering to be a resource to them.”

A notable highlight of the summit was a visit by Rep. Tony Gonzales (R-TX-23), a WWP alumnus, who took a keen interest in the training program. Rep. Gonzales shared his appreciation for the initiative, acknowledging the importance of veterans actively participating in the democratic process, and congratulated WALs for undertaking this new and important challenge in their lives — serving their fellow warriors through advocacy.



WARRIOR ADVOCATE LEADERS (CONT.)

“It was refreshing to hear somebody just talk honestly about his experience and how the Hill works,” said WAL Marisa Schultz, who lives in Illinois. “That was my biggest takeaway: how things are working.”

With the summit’s conclusion, 22 attendees graduated from pilot participants into WWP’s first cadre of WALs. There was a sense of empowerment and optimism among attendees, who left with not only a solid understanding of government relations but also a newfound confidence in their ability to advocate for essential veterans’ issues.

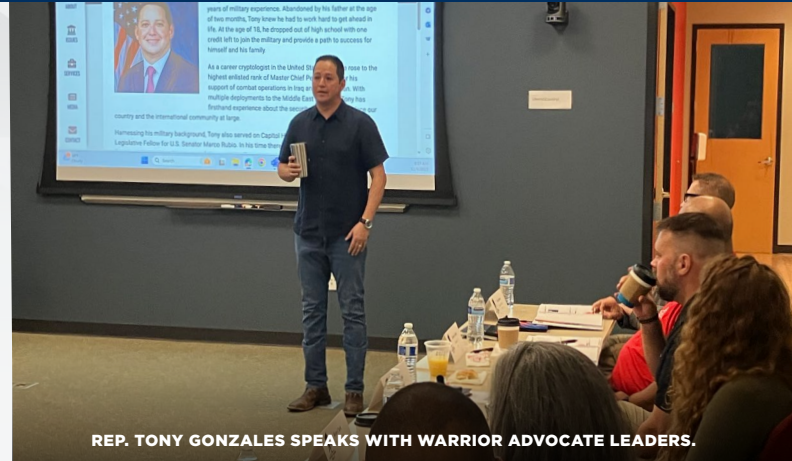
“My biggest takeaway is that my voice does matter,” said Teneka Nieves, a WAL from Maryland. “And I know it sounds cliché, right? But these people do care what I have to say. I can make a difference with the right people in my corner.”

When asked about the specific issues that motivated them to advocate for change, many pointed to the need to improve mental health resources — particularly in rural communities.

“I think it’s important to destigmatize mental health assistance, especially for the special operations community, where it’s about mission, mission, mission,” said Teneka. “When they leave service, many individuals lose their sense of identity, which impacts their mental health.”

WAL Joel Grace from Alabama pointed to the importance of financial wellness and how it relates to mental health.

“Everything kind of goes hand in hand,” Joel said. “It’s hard to worry about your mental health or your physical injuries if you don’t know how you’re going to



pay rent or your energy bill this month. We can do as much as we want for a veteran, but if they don’t have their basic needs met first, then everything else is kind of secondary.”

WWP aims to center and elevate the voices of warriors to ensure that their needs and perspectives remain at the forefront of advocacy efforts. The training summit encouraged discussions on issues the WALs have experienced themselves and those most important to the veteran community.

Congratulations to WWP’s first cohort of warrior advocate leaders!

- ★ **Christopher Carver,** WA, U.S. Army
- ★ **Rana Clark,** TN, U.S. Army
- ★ **Elizabeth Dykstra,** IL, U.S. Army
- ★ **Caroline Fermin,** SC, USMC
- ★ **Amy Fiene,** WI, U.S. Army
- ★ **Danette Fleishman,** VT, U.S. Army
- ★ **Kennery Foster,** LA, USMC Reserve
- ★ **Katie Fulmer,** AK, U.S. Air Force
- ★ **Joel Grace,** AL, U.S. Army
- ★ **Brandon Gregory,** WV, U.S. Army
- ★ **Charles Henry,** TX, U.S. Army
- ★ **Anton Johnson,** MT, U.S. Army
- ★ **Joshua Jordan,** KY, USMC
- ★ **Deanna Love,** FL, U.S. Navy
- ★ **John Mikelson,** IA, U.S. Army
- ★ **Jerome Mitchell,** AR, U.S. Army
- ★ **Scott Moehl,** IN, USCG
- ★ **Teneka Nieves,** MD, U.S. Army
- ★ **Brent Reiffer,** VA, USMC
- ★ **Marisa Schultz,** IL, Army National Guard
- ★ **Tom Smoot,** NY, Army Reserve
- ★ **Brent Whitten,** KS, U.S. Army



# Suicide Prevention Services

WOUNDED WARRIOR  
PHILIP KRABBE WITH HIS SON

Suicide disproportionately impacts veterans and their families. In the 2023 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, VA reported that almost 6,400 veterans died by suicide in 2021. In WWP's 2022 Annual Warrior Survey, about half (51.5%) of WWP warriors reported at least one instance of suicidal ideation in their lifetime, and nearly one in five have attempted suicide at least once in their lifetime.

There is no single solution or cause for suicide, but it's critical that veterans have access to all the tools, information, and support available to them. VA provides a range of initiatives and programs aimed at preventing suicide and helping veterans access critical resources, and we've highlighted a few of them below.

## 988 Lifeline

The 988 Lifeline provides emotional support to veterans experiencing a suicidal crisis or mental distress. The support is free, confidential, and available 24/7. If you — or a warrior you know — are in crisis, dial 988 and then press 1 to connect to the Veterans Crisis Line for lifesaving support, or chat online.

## Keep It Secure

Keep It Secure is a VA program that promotes the secure storage of potentially dangerous items such as firearms, toxic substances, ropes, cords, and sharp objects. A suicidal or mental health crisis can occur suddenly and without warning, and if these objects are readily available, they

can become deadly. Research has shown that if a person experiencing a suicidal crisis can't access the method they planned to use, they generally do not seek out other lethal means to attempt suicide. By promoting the safe and secure storage of these items, we can increase the time and distance between a person in a suicidal crisis and lethal means — and ultimately save lives. Click [here](#) to learn more and take steps for secure storage of these objects.

## National Buddy Check Week

In October, VA kicked off the first-ever National Buddy Check Week, Oct. 16 - 20, which was created through the STRONG Veterans Act of 2022. This dedicated week, now an annual event, encourages veterans to check in on one another in order to reduce suicides among current and former military members. Increased outreach helps break down stigmas about not being afraid to admit you need help, as well as spreading the word about available resources. Although National Buddy Check Week occurs once per year, it's important to always reach out to fellow veterans or anyone who could be experiencing a crisis.



SUICIDE PREVENTION SERVICES (CONT.)



WOUNDED WARRIOR **SCOTT HUGHES** AND HIS WIFE, SHEA, AT A COUPLES PROJECT ODYSSEY®

Another similar event is **Warrior Call Day**, which occurs annually on the Sunday after Veterans Day. WWP also recognizes this important day but encourages warriors to contact their friends and buddies ANYTIME using the resources provided through National Buddy Check Week and Warrior Call Day. It's critical to remain in touch with your buddies and check up on them consistently.

**WWP Programs**

WWP also offers several different programs and services around mental health and suicide prevention. Feel free to contact WWP to learn more and engage with these programs, including:

★ **WWP Talk** is a free program that connects veterans, their spouses, and other family members with a dedicated and empathetic listener. In addition to emotional support and goal-setting guidance, WWP Talk can provide resources for things like anger management, couples counseling, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), other military therapies, and even financial education. WWP Talk Partners also equip you with tools to help you further develop coping and life management skills.

★ **Warrior Care Network**® is a partnership between WWP

and four world-renowned academic medical centers, providing veterans and Service members living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), TBI, MST, and other related conditions with a path to long-term wellness. Participants and their families receive first-class treatment tailored specifically to their needs and individualized care to support their unique journeys. All treatment and accommodations are provided at no cost, and financial assistance is also offered to help cover everyday expenses like groceries, utilities, and housing.

★ **Project Odyssey**® is a no-cost 12-week mental health program for veterans that uses adventure-based learning to help warriors with PTSD, anxiety, and depression manage and overcome their invisible wounds, enhance their resiliency skills, and empower them to live productive and fulfilling lives. Project Odyssey is based on the veterans' unique needs, in which warriors can participate in all-male, all-female, coed, family, couples, or virtual programs.

★ TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WWP'S MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS AND SERVICES, CALL THE WWP RESOURCE CENTER AT 888.WWP.ALUM (997.2586) OR 904.405.1213, OR EMAIL RESOURCECENTER@WOUNDEDWARRIORPROJECT.ORG, MONDAY - FRIDAY, 9 AM - 9 PM EST. ★

**WWP HONORS**

# Congressional Staff and Administration Officials



When the dust has settled at the end of the legislative year, Congress goes home for the holidays, and everything in Washington, DC, comes to a pause (usually). WWP takes that time to reflect on the hard work and accomplishments made throughout the year. It is not lost on us that the staff and those who work on the ground level are behind our policy victories.

At WWP's annual holiday reception, we come together with friends for an evening to recognize and thank congressional staff, government officials, and policy colleagues for their selfless service and work throughout the year. WWP is honored to recognize the champions in Washington, DC, who helped us over the past year, as well as a government agency that has made a significant impact in the lives of those who have served. And while there are countless individuals who could be individually recognized for their contributions, this year WWP was proud to recognize the following outstanding honorees:

**ERIN SCANLON****ERIN SCANLON**

Erin Scanlon, military legislative assistant to Rep. Nancy Mace (R-SC-1) and retired Army field artillery officer, has led the congresswoman's efforts to expand mental health treatment options for service members and veterans and improve how service members access medical records before leaving service. She has also served as an informal mentor for many women veterans working on Capitol Hill and provided input and support for WWP's Women Warriors Initiative.

**REP. MIKE LEVIN AND FAITH WILLIAMS****FAITH WILLIAMS**

Faith Williams, deputy chief of staff and legislative director Rep. Mike Levin (D-CA-49), was a key figure in helping pass the Venture Act, the Veterans Auto and Education Improvement Act, and the Mark O'Brien Clothing Allowance Improvement Act. She's also been a leader in facilitating quarterly meetings with VSOs on the Hill and promoting the GROW for our Veterans Act to provide veterans with more outdoor employment opportunities in national parks.



WWP HONORS (CONT.)



DAHLIA MELENDREZ

★ DAHLIA MELENDREZ

Dahlia Melendrez, majority deputy staff director and general counsel the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, has played a crucial role for committee chairman Jon Tester (D-MT) in helping enact some of the most notable veterans' legislation in Congress over the past few years, including the STRONG Veterans Act, VA CAREERS Act, the Making Community Care Work for Veterans Act, and the Expanding Veterans' Options for Long Term Care Act.



SAMANTHA GONZALES

★ SAMANTHA GONZALES

Samantha Gonzales, minority deputy staff director the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, has been a longtime champion for severely injured veterans and their caregivers through legislative efforts such as the Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act. She has also helped with oversight of several critical VA health programs involving substance use disorders and suicide prevention efforts, as well as ensuring that the PACT Act is fully optimized to help those who've suffered from toxic exposure injuries and illnesses.



JOSH JACOBS

★ JOSHUA JACOBS

Veterans Benefits Administration of VA, led by the Honorable Joshua Jacobs, undersecretary benefits, has completed nearly 800,000 of the over 1.2 million PACT Act-related claims that have been filed. Of those, over 600,000 claims have been granted, representing an approval rate of 76.2 percent. In addition, VBA employees processed nearly 2 million claims in FY 23, breaking the previous record by 16 percent. This enormous effort resulted in \$163 billion in earned benefits delivered to over 1.5 million veterans and survivors — both of which also broke previous records.



JOHN BOOZMAN (ABOVE) AND MARK TAKANO (BELOW) WITH MIKE LINNINGTON AND JOSE RAMOS

★ JOHN BOOZMAN & MARK TAKANO

Earlier this year, during our 2023 Courage Awards and Benefits Dinner, Sen. John Boozman (R-AK) and Rep. Mark Takano (D-CA-41) were awarded WWP's Legislators of the Year award for their efforts on behalf of veterans.



★ ★ ★  
WWP congratulates all our honorees and thanks them for the work they have done over the past year to support warriors and the veteran community.

## WWP WARRIOR STORY

# Anna Cherepnina

ANNA CHEREPNINA AND FAMILY FRIEND  
JOSEPH ROWAN CARRY THE WWP WREATH  
TO THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER

**If someone had told me a year ago that I would have the opportunity to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery on Veterans Day, I would have thought it was an out-of-this-world, delusional idea. At the time, I was going through one of the lowest points in my life. I no longer felt like I had a purpose or hope for the future.**

**O**n April 17, 2019, my world changed forever. I received a call that my partner of six years had passed away during a military freefall training. The sudden death of the love of my life felt like having my heart mercilessly torn open, exposing raw emotions to unforgiving pain and loss, followed by an endless expanse of silence and tears. To this day, I still struggle to find just the right words to describe the profound emptiness.

Still recovering from this loss, I embarked on my final deployment overseas 12 months later with the Maryland Army National Guard, offering mental health assistance to the soldiers in the brigade and other units. Three months into my deployment, I began experiencing gradual numbness spreading from my feet to my ribs, making walking impossible. After my fourth visit to the aid station, I was finally sent to get an MRI and, hours later, I was on the plane to Landstuhl and then Walter Reed for six months. I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and the military thought I was no longer fit to

do my job because I was no longer deployable. Soon after, my grandfather passed away in Ukraine, and due to COVID-19 restrictions, I could not travel to attend the funeral. Another year later, a conflict erupted in the country I once considered home, and within a week, my grandmother passed away. Once again, I was unable to make the journey to be with my family during these difficult times.

After enduring three years marked by multiple losses, I ultimately found myself medically retired from the military. My initial goal of serving a full 20-year term was truncated, concluding at the 13-year milestone due to multiple sclerosis. Compounding the loss of my three dear family members was the deterioration of my physical health, mental well-being, career, and sense of purpose. It all left me feeling profoundly empty and isolated.

On December 18, 2022, I finally called WWP. The support and camaraderie offered by WWP not only saved my life but also restored a sense of purpose that I thought I had lost forever. Through their events, mental



**WWP WARRIOR STORY (CONT.)**

health resources, and Warriors to Work® program, I found a community of fellow veterans who understood the unique challenges we faced. WWP not only provided me with the tools to navigate the complexities of my diagnosis but also empowered me to rediscover my strengths and capabilities. The sense of belonging and shared mission revitalized my spirit, giving me a renewed purpose and a brighter outlook on life. I will forever be grateful for WWP's unwavering commitment to the well-being of veterans like me, as it played an instrumental role in helping me reclaim my life and find meaning once again.

Placing the wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier held profound significance for me both personally and as a veteran. This solemn tradition transcends national boundaries, embodying a universal acknowledgment of the sacrifices made by those who remain nameless and faceless in the annals of history. The wreath, adorned with symbolic elements, serves as a reminder of the collective debt owed to these silent heroes, representing a nation's commitment to recognize and preserve the legacy of those who made the ultimate sacrifice, ensuring that their memory continues to inspire generations to come.

As I stood before the hallowed ground that represents the bravery and commitment of those who gave their all for our freedom, I was filled with gratitude and humility for one person in particular. In that poignant moment, we gathered to remember and pay homage to someone whose presence was not only cherished but also deeply missed. The wreath became a tangible expression of the enduring love and respect I will forever hold for my fiancé — Marine Corps recon turned MARSOC, then Green Beret, dog lover, good-humored but heavy-hearted — whose name I will never stop saying: MSG Nick Sheperty.

**Anna Cherepnina joined WWP**

in April 2023 as an outreach specialist with the Alumni Association. She is a veteran, a mental health advocate with a master's in occupational therapy, and a board member with the MSG Nick Sheperty Foundation.

**“Placing the wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier held profound significance for me both personally and as a veteran. This solemn tradition transcends national boundaries, embodying a universal acknowledgment of the sacrifices made by those who remain nameless and faceless in the annals of history.”**

WOUNDED WARRIOR  
ANNA CHEREPNINA

## OUR TEAM

- ★ **Jose Ramos**, Vice President, Government and Community Relations
- ★ **Michael Nilsen**, Communications Director, Government and Community Relations
- ★ **Shannon Walker**, Administrative Assistant

### Government Affairs

- ★ **Brian Dempsey**, Government Affairs Director
- ★ **Aleks Morosky**, Government Affairs Deputy Director
- ★ **Jeremy Villanueva**, Government Affairs Associate Director
- ★ **Lindsey Stanford**, Government Affairs Specialist
- ★ **Kirsten Laha-Walsh**, Government Affairs Specialist
- ★ **Anne Marie McLean**, Senior Policy and Legislative Analyst
- ★ **Kimberly Powell**, Policy and Legislative Analyst
- ★ **Aaron Locker**, Policy and Legislative Analyst

### Grassroots and Constituent Affairs

- ★ **Justin Beland**, Grassroots and Constituent Affairs Director
- ★ **Coleman Brooks**, Regional Grassroots Director
- ★ **Jacques Dubose**, Regional Grassroots Director
- ★ **Ben Watkins**, Senior Constituent Affairs Specialist
- ★ **Juan Valdez**, Grassroots and Constituent Affairs Coordinator

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#### HOURS OF OPERATION

Monday - Friday, 9 am - 9 pm EST



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