



RESEARCH SUMMARY

The PACT Act: Awareness, Understanding and Opportunities to Engage Veterans

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Introduction

In August 2022, the federal government expanded eligibility for health care and benefits for Veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange and other military environmental exposures. The PACT Act (short for The Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022) expands a list of health conditions the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) assumes are caused by exposure to these military environmental exposures. The law expands and extends eligibility for VA health care for Veterans with military environmental exposures and Veterans of the Vietnam War, Gulf War, and post-9/11 eras.

To gauge Veteran awareness and understanding of the PACT Act, as well as any action Veterans may have taken in response to the law, Aptive and Artemis ARC surveyed 205 members of the Veterans Experience Council (VXC) in October 2023. The VXC is a group of 403 Veterans, active-duty Service members, National Guard members and Reservists who provide feedback and insight to improve services for the Veteran community through philanthropic, corporate and client engagements.

Results at a glance:

Here's what the survey found:

VA Outreach Successful. The survey reported that more than 80% of participating Veterans had heard of the PACT Act before they took the October 2023 survey and that VA outreach to Veterans is working. Sixty-five percent of respondents said they got PACT Act information from a VA newsletter, 51% from a VA email, 44% from the MyHealthVet website or phone app, 28% from a VA mailer and 15% from a VA Facebook post.

Barriers to Taking Action. Veterans identified several barriers to applying for PACT Act benefits, including not understanding the process, risks and benefits of program participation and anticipating negative consequences from participating, such as losing other VA benefits or reliving trauma.

Continued Outreach. Sixty-five percent of PACT Act survey participants were using VA for some aspect of health care at the time of the survey. The study recommends focusing on strategies to successfully reach Veterans who are not already using VA health care. Findings showed interpersonal conversations and trust are essential to engaging this group. VA can have a marked impact reaching potentially eligible Veterans who have not applied for PACT Act benefits by simplifying and clarifying processes on the dedicated PACT Act website on VA.gov and making information easy to find and understand.

PACT Act Participation

Veterans who applied for PACT Act benefits reported several things encouraged them to do so:

- An easy application process (22% of Veterans)
- Concern that they were exposed to military environmental exposures (46%) or had symptoms related to exposure (35%)
- Getting encouragement from trusted sources to apply for benefits, such as another Veteran or service member (32%), a friend or family member (30%), a VA health provider (24%) or a Veterans service organization (VSO) (22%)

The main motivator to apply for benefits for Veterans who had not already done so was concern for their health. They also indicated that a trusted person who had confidence in the PACT Act or concern for their well-being would motivate them to apply. The third most cited reason encouraging Veterans to apply for PACT Act benefits related to being told how to do so, either with technology or someone walking them through the process.

Barriers to Applying for PACT Act Benefits

The main reason Veterans gave for not applying for PACT Act benefits was a lack of understanding and confusion about the law. For example, many Veterans believed the law applies only to Veterans who were directly exposed to burn pits. Only 40% of participants said they felt informed enough about the PACT Act to make decisions regarding their own medical needs and military environmental exposures.

The second most often-cited reason Veterans gave for not applying for benefits is the belief that they are healthy and hadn't been exposed to military environmental exposures or hazards. Other reasons Veterans gave for not applying were concerns over having current VA benefits reduced, navigating a long and challenging application process and having their application delayed or rejected.

How to Increase Veteran Participation

Veterans responding to the survey had several suggestions for increasing Veteran participation in the PACT Act program. One was to make information clearer and more accessible so Veterans could understand the program's purpose and impact on them. Ways to do this include presenting information from the Veterans' point of view and using videos, illustrations and diagrams, such as infographics and flow charts, that explain eligibility and whether to file a claim. Respondents said a more transparent claims process would help them know the status of their claim and whether they needed to take additional action.

Where Veterans Go for Information

In response to the question of where Veterans typically go for military or Veteran-related information, the following sources ranked highest: VA.gov (81%), a military news source (33%), a fellow Veteran or service member (33%), a VSO (29%), other online news sources (22%) and social media (22%).

Veterans also identified how they would like to receive PACT Act information: VA.gov (75%), email (48%), a VSO (30%), military news sources (29%), VA mobile app (24%), postal mail (24%) and a local VA facility (23%).

PACT Act and Predatory Advertising

When asked about ads for legal advice or help filing a PACT Act or VA disability claim, 60% of responding Veterans said they have not seen the ads, 27% were unsure and 13% reported seeing "for-fee" ads. Of those who have seen "for-fee" ads, 72% saw them on social media and 28% on television.

Slightly more than half (51%) of responding Veterans said they did not believe a lawyer or other non-VA help was needed to get PACT Act benefits, while 44% said they were unsure. The remaining 5% said non-VA assistance would be necessary to get PACT Act benefits. Most survey participants said they dismissed these types of ads.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods survey (which included qualitative questions) suggests VA is successfully reaching most Veterans using VA health services with PACT Act information. Things VA can do to promote Veteran participation in the PACT Act program include explaining PACT Act benefits and potential risks to Veterans and families in plain language and making information about eligibility and the application process easy to understand.

The survey found the most reliable outreach strategies for PACT Act information involve the overlap of where Veterans most often go for Veteran-related news and how they want to receive PACT Act information specifically. Outreach efforts should focus on Veterans who are not already using VA health care. Survey findings show that interpersonal conversations and trust are essential for engaging this group.

Finally, predatory advertising is mainly ineffective on Veterans who participated in this study. However, the data show that certain elements of predatory advertising – namely, clear eligibility criteria combined with the promise of a successful application that results in economic and medical support – appeal to some Veterans. This area needs additional research.

VA can make a substantial impact reaching potentially eligible Veterans who have not applied for PACT Act benefits by simplifying and clarifying processes using the dedicated PACT Act webpage on VA.gov and making information about the PACT Act accessible and understandable. Doing so may make Veterans more likely to share information with one another and VA to share information with participating facilities and other organizations that serve Veterans.

About the Survey Respondents

Survey participants indicated they were:

- Predominantly between the ages of 30 and 49 (68%)
- 64% male, 34% female; <1% identified as other than male or female and the remainder declined to answer
- 54% White, 29% Black, 10% Hispanic, 7% Asian, 1% Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian; <1% American Indian or Native Alaskan and 5% declined to answer (exceeding 100% indicates multiracial responses)
- 62% married, 28% single and 7% divorced
- 65% employed full time and 10% unemployed; the remainder identified as retired, students, part-time employed, disabled or declined to answer
- 46% have graduate degrees and 33% bachelor's degrees
- 80% previously enlisted, 15% officers and 2% warrants
- From various military branches, primarily 34% Army, 26% Navy, and 23% Air Force
- Active duty for various durations, with 32% serving 0 to 5 years, 31% serving 6 to 10 years, and 22% serving 20 years or more
- Mostly deployed to combat zones (55%), while 44% were not; <1% said their deployment status was uncertain
- Primarily eligible for potential PACT Act benefits according to era of service, with 87% serving after 2002 and another 10% serving between 1990 and 2001

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VETERANS EXPERIENCE COUNCIL

The Veterans Experience Council (VXC) is comprised of more than 400 Veterans, Active Duty Military, National Guard Members and Reservists who serve as advisors and help improve the services Aptive and Artemis ARC provide to the Veteran community through philanthropic, corporate and client engagements. VXC welcomes research ideas and participation and partnership inquiries at vxc@aptiveresources.com

Learn more at aptiveresources.com/veterans-experience-council

