Duckworth Urges Congress to Expand VA Care for Veterans Exposed to Toxic Hazards

by Grace Christin, Sen. Duckworth Communications
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BELLEVILLE — On Veterans Day in Belleville, U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) called on Congress to pass her new legislation that would expand care at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for all Veterans who suffer from toxic exposure. Before the landmark *PACT Act* became law in 2022, red tape at the VA caused generations of Veterans to go without the care they needed after being exposed to Agent Orange, burn pits and other toxic hazards during their service in Iraq, Afghanistan and

Vietnam. Duckworth's *New PACT for Iran Veterans Act* seeks to ensure that Iran Veterans—who are being exposed to many similar hazards—and all future Veterans don't face similar barriers to access care when they return home due to gaps in current law. Photos from today's ceremony are available on the Senator's website.

"Our Veterans put their country over themselves time after time, tour after tour, for the sake of families, neighbors and total strangers who will never know their names," said Duckworth. "They deserve more than an ovation on Veterans Day. They deserve to be honored every single day of the year by a nation that makes sure they get the health care they've earned. Congress must learn from past mistakes and proactively ensure all future Veterans, including those serving in the Iran War, aren't faced with similar barriers to accessing care that hurt so many Veterans who served in Iraq, Vietnam and Afghanistan. Congress must pass the *New PACT for Iran Veterans Act.* Because no servicemember should fight a war overseas only to come home and be faced with another battle to get the care they've rightfully earned through their service."

Specifically, Senator Duckworth's *New PACT for Iran Veterans Act* would:

1. Cut Red Tape for Iran War Veterans by statutorily presuming toxic substance exposure for Iran War Veterans, helping streamline their access to health care and benefits at VA. The bill would ensure that federal law protects *all* Veterans who fought in Iran, including those who operated in Iranian airspace and territorial waters.
2. Leave No Veteran Behind by requiring, for the first time, that the VA's Military Environmental Exposure Sub-Council (MEESC) conducts studies at least every five years to review all overseas assignments for toxic substance exposures. Additionally, when the military begins a contingency operation, the VA must commence a similar review of the locations from which servicemembers support this operation within 180 days. This would ensure the VA *proactively* looks into whether servicemembers are being exposed to toxic hazards, for current and future assignments.
3. Enhance Transparency at the VA by requiring the VA Secretary to publicly explain their justification for any denial of a country that's recommended for presumed toxic-exposures in these reviews, or any removal of existing presumptions.

At today's event, Duckworth joined Veterans and their families at the City of Belleville's 28th Annual Veterans Day Ceremony alongside Belleville Fire Department Chief Curt Lougeay and Brigadier General Joseph Janik, Eighteenth Air Force Commander.

“May we remember the sacrifices of our veterans, support them and their families, and work together to safeguard the freedoms they defended. To every veteran in Belleville and across our nation: we salute you, and we thank you,” said Belleville Mayor Jenny Gain Meyer.

The Senator also hosted a roundtable discussion with local Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) and Veterans Commissions (VCAs) where she highlighted her *New PACT for Iran Veterans Act* and heard directly from the leaders who serve our nation’s heroes every day about how she can continue fighting on the federal level to protect access to resources and care for Illinois Veterans. Photos from the roundtable are available on the Senator’s website.





Duckworth has long been fierce leader and advocate for our nation’s Veterans. Some of her efforts include:

- On April 29, 2026, Duckworth helped introduced the *Servicemember Civilian Transition Support Act* to better support servicemembers as they transition back to civilian life.
- On April 3, 2026, Duckworth introduced the bipartisan *Copay Fairness for Veterans Act* to eliminate unfair out-of-pocket health care costs for Veterans. Earlier this year, she helped lead a bipartisan push to make it easier for Veterans to use their GI Bill benefits in apprenticeship programs.
- On March 27, 2026, Duckworth helped introduced the bipartisan *Veterans Health Administration Novel Therapeutics Preparedness Act* to increase Veterans’ access to innovative health care and ensure the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is prepared to better care for Veterans with emerging mental health therapies.
- On February 18, 2026, Duckworth demanded that the VA rescind a rule change that put millions of Veterans’ disability ratings and care at risk. The VA later paused enforcement of the rule.
- On May 7, 2025, Duckworth introduced the *Protecting Veterans in Crisis Act* to help safeguard the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) for the brave Veterans who depend on it by increasing transparency and strengthening Congress’s oversight of it. On the same day, Duckworth also introduced the *VA Employee Fairness Act* to empower VA health care professionals with the protections needed to speak out about disruptions and advocate for the Veterans they serve as Donald Trump and Elon Musk’s VA cuts continued to jeopardize care.
- On March 10, 2025, Duckworth introduced the *Protect Veteran Jobs Act* to reinstate Veterans who were fired from their jobs as part of Donald Trump and Elon Musk’s indiscriminate purge of federal employees.
- On January 4, 2019, Duckworth’s bipartisan *Veterans Small Business Enhancement Act* was signed into law, allowing Veteran small business owners to acquire surplus federal equipment and personal property by adding Veterans to the list of eligible recipients, which already includes women and minority small business owners.