



**WOUNDED WARRIOR
PROJECT®**

PROJECT ADVOCACY NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2022

Welcome to Volume 3, Issue 1 of Wounded Warrior Project's (WWP) quarterly policy update, Project 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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Sen. Joni Ernst



March 2022

LETTER FROM OUR VP

Greetings, and welcome to Wounded Warrior Project's quarterly policy update, *Project Advocacy News*.

WWP kicked off 2022 ready to tackle the challenges our community of veterans and caregivers face and embrace opportunities to enhance warriors' quality of life. With your help, we have already made tremendous strides connecting warriors with their elected officials and policymakers to elevate their voices and discuss the issues that matter most to the post-9/11 veteran community. Some of the major items we've focused on include toxic exposure, mental health challenges among the warrior community, and increased access to care for women warriors.

We are incredibly proud to have played a part in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) Memorial Location Act, which authorized the establishment of the memorial within the reserve section of the National Mall. You can read more about it [here](#).

WWP's priorities for advocacy and engagement are shaped through the programs we deliver and our [Annual Warrior Survey](#), in which we solicit thousands of responses from warriors about the issues impacting their lives. Thank you for your sharing your insights through this survey. Your input helps to guide our focus and inform our annual congressional testimony. This year, that testimony took place on March 2 where WWP Chief Executive Officer, Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Linnington, testified before the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs, highlighting [WWP's 2022 legislative priorities](#), which are as follows:



- 1 Increasing access to care for women veterans;
- 2 Providing care for veterans exposed to toxic substances;
- 3 Improving mental healthcare resources and preventing veteran suicide;
- 4 Improving veterans' financial security;
- 5 Expanding caregiver program eligibility and support services;
- 6 Improving long-term care and support; and
- 7 Enhancing quality of life, including support for rural veterans.

We will continue to work with Members of Congress to ensure that these and other necessary policies are passed and enacted, providing veterans and their families with the resources, care, and treatment they deserve and need to succeed. The next few months will be crucial for many pressing legislative and policy initiatives. We thank you for the opportunity to be a voice for veterans.

To honor and empower,
Jose Ramos

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2021 YEAR IN REVIEW



Part I: 2021 Key Legislative Accomplishments

While 2021 was challenging, WWP was hard at work advocating for legislation that impacts the 200,000 registered post-9/11 warriors and family members, and the lives of all 19 million-plus veterans across the country. Our advocacy focused on women veterans, toxic exposure, mental health, caregivers, financial security, and enhanced quality of life. With your help, we were pleased to witness passage of several pieces of key legislation that will have a powerful impact on the post-9/11 veteran population for years to come.

WWP has always placed a strong emphasis on improved mental health care, and 2021 was no different. We were thrilled to help contribute to the passage of the ***Sgt. Ketchum Rural Veterans Mental Health Act of 2021 (H.R. 2441)***. VA currently offers its Rural Access Network for Growth Enhancement (RANGE) Program in 81 locations. This legislation will establish three new RANGE program centers to serve rural veterans who do not have access to intensive outpatient mental health care in their area. The program provides intensive community-based clinical case management and psychotherapy services for rural veterans with severe mental health issues.

We were also excited about the passage of the ***PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act***. When properly trained and cared for, service dogs can empower warriors with PTSD to participate more freely in daily activities by mitigating symptoms. In addition to the benefits that a service dog provides, work therapy to train and socialize dogs can also have a powerful impact. The ***PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act (H.R. 1448)*** will allow VA to provide service dogs to veterans with mental illnesses who do not also have mobility impairments and establish a pilot program on dog

training therapy for veterans. It was exciting to see VA recently announce the five medical centers where they will launch the pilot program. The program will launch out of ; Anchorage, AK; Asheville, NC; Palo Alto, CA; San Antonio, TX; and West Palm Beach, FL.

Recognizing that women are the fastest-growing group in the veteran population, and throughout 2021, we prioritized improving reproductive health care for women veterans. Our advocacy helped contribute to a milestone victory for maternity care through passage of the ***Protecting Moms Who Served Act (S. 796)***. This legislation will provide community maternity care providers with training and support to meet pregnant and post-partum veterans' unique needs. It also authorizes increased data collection on maternal mortality and negative health outcomes, including mental health conditions or substance use disorders caused by labor and delivery; this study will include a focus on racial and ethnic disparities.

We also saw progress on legislation surrounding veterans' safety when visiting VA facilities. The ***Veterans' Camera Reporting (VCR) Act (H.R. 1510)*** will require VA to submit a report on the use of video cameras for patient safety and law enforcement at medical centers. The report generated by the VCR Act will include information on how security cameras are maintained, how cameras are used to monitor staff and patients, where cameras are positioned in facilities to increase patient safety, and how law enforcement is using this information. This report will help VA and Congress identify if additional policies are needed. The safety and security of our nation's veterans is vital. We believe the *Veterans' Camera Reporting (VCR) Act* will help ensure the wellbeing of those who visit VA medical facilities.

Finally, one of the most significant legislative accomplishments during the past year was the inclusion of the ***Global War on Terrorism Memorial Location Act (S. 535/H.R. 1115)*** in Section 6605 of Congress's annual defense bill, the *FY22 National Defense Authorization Act*. This new **law** authorizes construction of a Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) Memorial on the centrally located "Reserve" area of the National Mall in Washington, DC. It will ensure that the GWOT Memorial will be constructed in a highly visible area, close to other memorials honoring those who served in World War II, Vietnam, and Korea. WWP is grateful for those who made their voices heard on this issue. We know this would not have been possible without your help.

Each legislative victory represents the capacity for progress that exists thanks to our partners at VA, congressional stakeholders, and all of your hard work and dedication. We are encouraged by everything we were able to accomplish together in 2021, but we know there is still much work to be done and are excited about the opportunity and potential of 2022.

2021 YEAR IN REVIEW (CONT.)

Part II: 2021 By the Numbers

- ★ **Testified before Congress nine times**, submitted **four** written statements for congressional hearings, and signed onto **36** advocacy letters to Congress.
- ★ **Met with 136 members of Congress, including 53 new members** to discuss legislative priorities for post-9/11 veterans.
- ★ **TOXIC EXPOSURE**
Provided witness testimony before Congress three times, spoke at three press conferences, participated in one public roundtable with the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees. Engaged in several media interviews, including [NBC Nightly News](#), [The War Horse](#), the [Dr. Phil show](#), and the Australian Broadcasting Channel to advocate for health care for veterans who were exposed to toxic substances.
- ★ **WOMEN VETERANS**
Amplified the voices of nearly 5,000 women warriors through the release of the [Women Warriors Initiative report](#). This report represented a year of research into the experiences, challenges, and livelihoods of the women veterans WWP serves.
- ★ **MENTAL HEALTH**
 Worked with Congress to **introduce mental health legislation, including 12 new provisions** to improve veterans' access to quality care, bolster VA's mental health workforce, and strengthen mental health research.
- ★ **BENEFITS**
 Helped introduce legislation to automatically re-enroll qualifying veterans in VA's clothing allowance benefit, eliminating an unnecessarily burdensome enrollment process for veterans with injuries and adaptations. **Approximately 40,000 veterans** received clothing allowance benefits in 2020.
- ★ **GLOBAL WAR ON TERRORISM MEMORIAL**
Convened more than 30 WWP alumni and 11 members of Congress, along with community partners and Gold Star family members, on Capitol Hill to urge the U.S. Senate to authorize construction of a Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) Memorial on the centrally located "Reserve" area of the National Mall in Washington, DC.



Part III: 2021 Alerts Did You Know?

A critical financial security measure was passed into law last year that will have a substantial impact. ***The Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act (S. 189)*** increased the amounts payable for veterans' disability benefits and survivors' compensation. The annual cost-of-living adjustment rose 5.9% in 2022, the largest increase in 40 years.

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Passes are now available, without charge, to service members, veterans, and Gold Star Families. ***The Alexander Lofgren Veterans in Parks (VIP) Act (S. 2580/H.R. 4300)***, which **[Congress passed as part of the annual defense bill](#)**, grants free lifetime access to more than 2,000 national parks, wildlife refuges, national forests, and other federal recreational areas for U.S. military veterans and Gold Star Families. These new lifetime passes will be available later in 2022. The *VIP Act* also creates annual passes for current members of the Armed Forces, which may be converted into lifetime passes once service members leave the military.

WWP ON CAPITOL HILL



work is essential in our progress for better health care, quality of living, and access to programs that best serves our fellow brothers and sisters. Thank you to Wounded Warrior Project for this opportunity to continue to serve!”

WWP and warriors discussed a number of issues, including:

- ★ The importance of passing the **Post-9/11 Veterans Mental Health Improvement Act (S. 3293)** and the **Support the Resiliency of Our Nation’s Great (STRONG) Veterans Act (H.R. 6411)**, which will help the VA improve treatment for veterans with mental health challenges.
- ★ The need for Congress to **improve accessibility and availability of women’s health care** by increasing resources and essential services, creating safe and welcoming VA care environments, and optimizing channels of care like telehealth and the Community Care Network.
- ★ The ways Congress can support survivors of **Military Sexual Trauma (MST)** by enacting greater coordination across agencies and disciplines to improve awareness, accessibility, and quality of care.
- ★ The urgent need to pass the **Comprehensive and Overdue Support for Troops (COST) of War Act (S. 3003)** and the **Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act (H.R. 3967)**, which would grant VA health care enrollment eligibility to any veteran who suffered toxic exposures while in service regardless of their service-connected disability claim status.

WWP Participates in Annual Congressional Testimony & Commences Operation Advocacy

On March 2, WWP CEO Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Linnington testified before the Senate and House Committees on Veterans’ Affairs, relaying powerful warrior stories that illustrate the needs behind WWP’s top legislative priorities.

In conjunction with the testimony, WWP staff and 32 dedicated warriors met with their elected officials and policymakers as part of WWP’s virtual fly-in, Operation Advocacy, to make their voices heard and discuss the issues that matter most to post-9/11 veterans. This event gives wounded veterans a chance to convey to policymakers their unique perspectives.

“It was the first time I have participated in any advocacy of any kind and eye opening to see how much effort WWP puts into making sure Congress is aware of what challenges veterans face and what we need to combat them. It will not be the last time I step up to speak on behalf of myself and my fellow brothers and sisters,” said John Fiery, (U.S. Army).

“Operation Advocacy 2022 was an amazing experience that allowed our veteran voices to be heard on Capitol Hill. The legislation that we are working on will help veterans nationwide,” said Charles M. Henry Sr., (U.S Army). “Advocating for veterans issues and lobbying



Wounded Warrior Project would like to thank the following warrior-advocates for taking the time to make their voices heard: Dru Amos (AL), Joel Grace (AL), Bonnie Dorman (AK), Jerome Mitchell (AR), Dawn Drake (AZ), Fernando Monarrez (AZ), Giovanni Perez (CA), John Mikelson (IA), Scott Gilje (IA), Jeremiah Deyarmin (IN), Scott Moehl (IN), Angela Hlavacek (IL), Elizabeth Dykstra (IL), Brent Whitten (KS), Deron Santiny (LA), Angela Waller (MD), John Fiery (MD), Michelle Riggs (MI), Anton Johnson (MT), Dana Hutson (NC), Jonothan Conover (NC), Jason Pratscher (NC), Jason Woodall (OH), Thomas Chimenti (PA), Lucinda Anderson (SC), Connie Johnson (SD), Charles Henry (TX), Diana Calero (VA), Beth Schmidt (VA), Alanna Rathkpof (WA), Stephanie Williams (WV), Brandon Gregory (WV)

ANNUAL WARRIOR SURVEY

WWP Survey Highlights Veterans' Mental Health, Toxic Exposure Concerns

Wounded Warrior Project released its 12th Annual Warrior Survey (AWS) on Feb. 22, providing the largest and most comprehensive look at the greatest needs of post-9/11 wounded veterans in areas such as mental, physical, and financial health.

Among the most striking findings in this year's AWS:

- ★ **Nearly 1 in 4 of the approximately 18,000 post-9/11 wounded veterans** who responded the survey said they have had suicidal thoughts in the preceding year, with most of those (70%) having those thoughts in the preceding two weeks.
- ★ **One in 5 WWP warriors reported having difficulty or delays in receiving mental health care**, and 2 in 3 of those said they felt embarrassed about receiving such care, and 59% don't know where to find it.
- ★ **Nearly all WWP warriors (98%) reported exposure to hazardous or toxic substances** during their military service.

In addition, women represent the fastest-growing population in both military service and the veteran community, and they experience unique challenges and gaps in care. Among this year's AWS findings:

- ★ **Nearly 7 in 10 female WWP warriors** report they have experienced military sexual trauma (MST).
- ★ When asked about barriers to VA care, **20 percent of WWP women warriors cite a lack of sensitivity to women's needs**.
- ★ From a financial wellness perspective, **female warriors employed full-time earned on average \$100 less weekly** than their male counterparts.
- ★ Overall, **female warriors agree that their military experience was positive less frequently than male warriors (66% vs. 82%)**, that they're able to maintain a social support of military friends (60% vs. 66%), and that co-workers respect they are a veteran (79% vs. 86%).

The AWS helps WWP develop programs that target and address the problems of greatest concern to post-9/11 veterans across America. It also helps inform the group's efforts to advocate for public policies in Washington, DC, that will make the federal government more effective at delivering care and assistance to veterans who need it. For example, WWP cited key AWS findings repeatedly during



its recent Congressional testimony before a joint hearing of the U.S. Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees ([See accompanying article for more details.](#))

The greatest casualty is being forgotten – and the Annual Warrior Survey reminds us to never forget the service and sacrifice of our veterans,” WWP CEO Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Linnington said. “We must act on the survey's findings to support their needs.”

This year's survey was sponsored by Fortune 500 company CSX, which has a particular interest in veterans' issues because 1 in 5 of its employees served in the military, and many continue to hold Reserve or National Guard status.

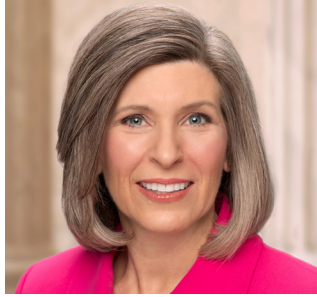
As part of this year's AWS announcement, three WWP officials and a senior White House official participated in a widely viewed panel discussion with the Brookings Institution on Feb. 22. More than 700 people tuned in to watch the event live online. Representing WWP were Chief Program Officer Jennifer Silva, Vice President of Connection and Wellness Program Management Tracy Farrell, and Vice President of Program Operations and Partnerships Melanie Mousseau. They were joined by Terri Tanielian, Special Assistant to the President for Veterans Affairs.

“The whole reason we started this effort over a decade ago was to make sure that we put our precious resources towards the biggest challenges for the warriors and families that we serve” Silva said at the Brookings event. “In order to foster the most successful, well-adjusted of generation of injured veterans in our nation's history, we wanted to tackle those biggest challenges and make sure that they could really thrive after service.”

WWP will also use this year's AWS findings to advocate in support of legislation to improving access to mental health care, improve financial security, and address the unique challenges facing women veterans and caregivers. Click [here](#) to learn more about WWP's 2022 Legislative Priorities and [here](#) to read the full Annual Warrior Survey results.

Q&A

Meet Sen. Joni Ernst of the Great State of Iowa



Q There are currently 92 sitting members of Congress who served in the Armed Forces, and you are one of only 17 Senators within that group. As part of your impressive military career, you served as company commander in Kuwait and Iraq, where you led 150 Iowa Army National Guardsmen as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. After 23 years of military service, you retired as a lieutenant colonel from the Iowa Army National Guard. How has your military experience, and your deployments leading troops, shaped your approach to serving in the Senate, and what impact has it had on choosing your priorities as a legislator?

As a former company commander and retired lieutenant colonel, my experience serving our nation in uniform for over 23 years guides my decision-making daily. In the Senate, I've made ensuring my fellow veterans have the support they need one of my top priorities. The men and women who have selflessly sacrificed in defense of our freedoms, and our way of life, deserve nothing less than the benefits they were promised and a quality of care we can all be proud of. As a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, I've also continued to work to equip our military with the resources necessary to defend America today and in the future. And I've been able to do a lot of this important work in a bipartisan way.

Q As women continue to represent the fastest-growing population in both military service and the veteran community, we'd like to reflect on some of the pioneering accomplishments in your career. You were the first woman elected to Congress from Iowa and the first female combat veteran elected to the Senate. In 2018, you were elected vice chair of the Senate Republican Conference, becoming the first woman to serve in Senate Republican leadership in a decade. What did you learn from these experiences, and what do you believe Congress should do to better support female service members as they separate from the military and pursue new careers?

In 2014, I was elected as the first woman to serve in federal elected office from the State of Iowa — and the first female combat veteran to serve in the U.S. Senate. Fast forward to today — in the 117th Congress, women make up just over a quarter of all members — the highest percentage in U.S. history, and Iowa's congressional delegation is majority female for the first time in our state's history. It is truly an honor to work alongside so many remarkable women who come from different fields and backgrounds. My colleagues and I may not agree on all issues, but we can all get behind the idea of more women serving in elected office, as CEOs, as soldiers, as engineers and manufacturers, and in any other profession in our society.

Women continue to make strides in serving in critical roles within our nation's military. As a woman who served in combat and commanded troops during Operation Iraqi Freedom, and with my own daughter who is going through training right now at West Point, I understand just how important it is for all service members to be properly equipped for the battlefield. That's why I've worked hard to continue the development and fielding of protective body armor designed specifically for female servicemembers.

We also know that, tragically, female veterans commit suicide at six times the rate of non-military females. I was proud to get my bipartisan legislation signed into law to require the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to identify the most effective programs and approaches in reducing suicide rates among female veterans.

Q *The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) Memorial Location Act* was one of Wounded Warrior Project's legislative priorities during the first half of the 117th Congress. We appreciate you sponsoring this important piece of legislation and leading the effort to get it passed and signed into law through the *FY22 National Defense Authorization Act*. Why was construction of the GWOT Memorial in the centrally located Reserve area of the National Mall a priority for you?

As a veteran of the Global War on Terrorism myself, watching the disastrous collapse of Afghanistan was extremely heartbreaking. I've heard from so many service members and fellow veterans of the Global War on Terrorism, many of whom are disheartened, distraught, and disappointed. I also heard from so many Gold Star Families who lost their spouses, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters during the war. As they watched the Taliban retake control of Afghanistan, many even questioned if their family member's sacrifice was worth it.

Q&A (CONT.)

I want them to know that the brave Americans who have kept us safe in the 20 years since Sept. 11, 2001, are heroes — every single one of them. They've succeeded in protecting our citizens and allowing us to enjoy the freedoms and liberties we possess every day. That's why I continued to fight to honor the servicemembers, fallen soldiers, their families, and all those impacted by the Global War on Terrorism with a memorial on our National Mall. When folks from our home state of Iowa, and across the country, visit our nation's capital, they should have the opportunity to honor their fellow Americans who served our nation honorably during this war. The Global War on Terrorism Memorial on our National Mall will be a longstanding testament and reminder of their selflessness for generations to come — and I'm so proud to help make this memorial a reality.



Q You have sponsored suicide prevention legislation for both service members and veterans. One of your current initiatives is the *Save Our Servicemembers Act of 2021*, which would require the Department of Defense to evaluate the effectiveness of its suicide prevention efforts and take steps to improve the accuracy of suicide data reporting. Looking back, what policies have you supported that you think have been most successful in meeting the mental health needs of service members and veterans to prevent suicide?

Our service members carry out selfless duties every day to protect our nation and oftentimes they face serious and unique challenges. We cannot fail them. I joined with Sen. Mark Kelly of Arizona on the Save Our Servicemembers (S.O.S.) Act, which directs the Pentagon to evaluate the effectiveness of their suicide prevention efforts and to improve its data collection, reduce bureaucratic duplication, and strengthen collaboration between its offices. These are simple steps that will save lives.

I was proud to support, and get signed into law, the Sergeant Daniel Somers Veterans Network of Support Act. This bill creates a pilot program to allow active duty servicemembers transitioning to civilian life to designate up to 10 loved ones to receive information from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) about benefits and services available to veterans through the VA and community partners. I've also worked on bipartisan legislation to establish an interagency committee on the development of "Green Alert" systems that would be activated when an at-risk veteran goes missing.

Q Another one of your initiatives is legislation directing VA to designate one week each year as "Buddy Check Week." During the "Buddy Check Week," VA would organize outreach events and educate veterans on how to conduct peer wellness checks and recognize signs of suicide risk among fellow veterans. Why do you believe it's so important for peers to be involved, and what advice do you have for those who want to do more to help keep their friends safe or guide them to care?

As you mentioned, my bipartisan bill with Sen. Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire would direct the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to designate one week per year as "Buddy Check Week" to organize outreach events and educate veterans on how to conduct peer wellness checks. This legislation will help our veterans recognize signs of suicide risk so they can check in with their fellow veterans and help get them the care and support they need.

Oftentimes, those who are struggling may turn to their friends or peers before a medical professional, and it's important we educate folks on the resources available. For anyone who wants to do more to look out for their friends and loved ones, I'd encourage them to visit the Department of Veterans Affairs website to learn more about the resources available. The Veterans Crisis Line offers free, confidential support, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT



Photo credit: Katie Dance

WWP Joins First Lady Jill Biden, Elizabeth Dole at White House Event Honoring Children Caregivers

Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) knows that caregiving is more than a full-time job, even for the children and siblings who care for their loved ones. Children and youth play a key part in supporting wounded veterans and other family members during life after injury. Many of them assume caregiving responsibilities the outside world neither sees nor understands.

That's why WWP is proud to support the [Hidden Helpers Coalition](#), a multi-organization coalition initiated by our partners at the Elizabeth Dole Foundation and co-chaired by WWP. This coalition includes the [White House's Joining Forces initiative](#), and over 60 other military and veterans service organizations. Together, these organizations are committed to improving the quality of programming and support for children and youth caregivers of service members and veterans.

Caregivers are critically important, often being the difference between a veteran living at home surrounded with family support or spending the rest of his or her days in a long-term rehabilitative care facility. Yet, caregivers who support post-9/11 wounded veterans often struggle to meet the demands of caregiving and daily life. According to WWP's Independence Program survey, 6 in 10 caregivers provide over 40 hours of care per week.

On Nov. 10, during an event celebrating the launch of the [Hidden Helpers Coalition at the White House](#), WWP announced a new \$1.5 million dedicated fund for members of the Hidden Helpers Coalition. This funding will help support an extensive network of resources, programs, and services, and provide greater quality of life for the youngest caregivers of America's wounded warriors.

Since 2012, WWP has invested more than \$15 million in partner organizations dedicated to connecting military families, caregivers, and children with life-changing programs and services. WWP also provides caregivers and military families members with direct access to high-quality programs and services. Learn more, [here](#).



Photo credit: Katie Dance

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HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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HOURS OF OPERATION

Monday - Friday 9 am - 9 pm EST



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