



Statement of the

**Fleet Reserve Association**

on its

2024 Legislative Goals

Presented to the

U.S. House of Representatives and

United States Senate

Veterans' Affairs Committees

By

**FRA National President**

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# **The FRA**

## *“Heading to 100 Years”*

The Fleet Reserve Association (FRA) is the oldest and largest organization serving men and women in the active, reserve, and retired communities plus veterans of the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. The Association is Congressionally Chartered, recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and entrusted to serve all veterans who seek its help.

FRA started on November 11, 1924, and its name is derived from the Navy’s program for personnel transferring to the Fleet Reserve after 20 or more years of active-duty service, but less than 30 years for retirement purposes. During the required period of service in the Fleet Reserve, assigned personnel earn retainer pay and are subject to recall by the Secretary of the Navy.

The Association testifies regularly before the House and Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committees, and it is actively involved in the Veterans Affairs Voluntary Services (VAVS) program. A member of the National Headquarters’ staff serves as FRA’s National Veterans Service Officer (NVSVO) and as a representative on the VAVS National Advisory Committee (NAC). FRA’s VSOs oversee the Association’s Veterans Service Officer program and represent veterans throughout the claims process and before the Board of Veteran’s Appeals.

In 2016, FRA membership overwhelmingly approved the establishment of the Fleet Reserve Association Veterans Service Foundation (VSF). The main strategy for the VSF is to improve and grow the FRA Veterans Service Officers (VSO) program. The newly formed foundation has a 501(c) 3 tax exempt status and nearly 800 accredited service officers with FRA.

FRA became a member of the Veterans Day National Committee in 2007, joining 24 other nationally recognized VSOs on this important committee that coordinates National Veterans’ Day ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery. FRA will host the ceremony in their centennial year, 2024. The Association is a leading organization in The Military Coalition (TMC), a group of 35 nationally recognized military and veteran groups jointly representing the concerns of over five million members. FRA staff also serve in several key TMC leadership positions.

The Association’s motto is “Loyalty, Protection, and Service.”

## **FY 2025 VA Budget**

This written testimony was submitted before the scheduled March 11 submission of the the Administration's budget request for FY 2025. FRA supports budget initiatives to help ensure adequate funding for the VA, with special attention for VA health care to ensure access and care for all beneficiaries. The new Toxic Exposure Fund, created by the PACT Act, will significantly impact VA's budget and appropriations process. Also, the aging veterans population also increases the need to improve access to VA-provided long-term services and supports. With so much uncertainty, the Administration and Congress must work together with the VSO community to ensure those who served have timely access to their earned benefits.

## **Toxic Exposure**

It is a top priority of the Association that the PACT Act be implemented effectively. This comprehensive veteran's toxic exposure act allows all veterans who were at risk of toxic exposure, including 3.5 million Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, to obtain immediate and lifelong access to health care from the VA for the first time. One of the largest expansions of health care eligibility in the VA's history. The Act provides presumptive care for numerous conditions for veterans sickened by exposure to burn pits and other toxins. We hope as the law is being implemented it will also establish a new science-based and veteran-focused process for the establishment of new presumptive conditions and would provide benefits to thousands of toxic exposure veterans who have been long-ignored or forgotten, including Agent Orange veterans suffering from hypertension.

The Association is thankful that the VA recently announced that all veterans who were exposed to toxins and other hazards while serving in the military – at home or abroad – will be eligible to enroll directly in VA health care beginning March 5, 2024. This means that all veterans who served in the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Global War on Terror, or any other combat zone after 9/11 will be eligible to enroll directly in VA health care without first applying for VA benefits. Additionally, veterans who never deployed but were exposed to toxins or hazards while training or on active duty in the United States will also be eligible to enroll. This expansion of VA health care eliminates the phased-in approach called for by the PACT Act – meaning that millions of veterans are becoming eligible for

VA health care up to eight years earlier than written into law. This is a critical step forward because veterans who are enrolled in VA health care are proven to have better health outcomes than non-enrolled veterans, and VA hospitals have dramatically outperformed non-VA hospitals in overall quality ratings and patient satisfaction ratings. Additionally, VA health care is often more affordable than non-VA health care for Veterans.

Military service for our nation can require service members to go places that may expose them to toxins that cause illness and diseases that may not be diagnosed for years or even decades after their service. The PACT Act that was signed into law on August 10, 2022, recognizes that fact. Before the enactment of the PACT Act, only 25 percent of toxic exposure claims from burn pits were approved. Now the VA claims that 78.6 percent of burn pit claims are approved. FRA wants to thank the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee for allowing FRA to be one of only three associations that testified on the comprehensive veteran's toxic exposure on March 29, 2022.

Since the PACT Act became law on August 10, 2022, more than 500,000 veterans have enrolled in VA health care. The most recent data available indicates that more than one million toxic-exposed veterans and survivors have filed for PACT Act claims, more than 600,000 veteran and survivor claims have been approved, and more than five million veterans have been screened for toxic exposure under this law.

As authorized by the Comprehensive Veterans' Toxic Exposure Act (PACT Act), September 30, 2023, marked the end of the one-year special enrollment period for post-9/11 combat veterans who left active duty between September 11, 2001, and October 1, 2013. September 2023 was one of the largest months ever for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare enrollments, with overall enrollments reaching 48,763. This number is nearly double the enrollment numbers for September 2022 and represents the second-highest month of enrollments in VA's history.

The PACT Act allows all patients visiting VA healthcare facilities to undergo toxic exposure screenings to detect signs of illness and inform veterans that they may qualify for new benefits. The five-minute screening includes a series of simple questions regarding veterans' time in service, potential exposure to toxic substances, and current health status. Veterans will undergo the screening during

their initial visit but will not repeat the questions during follow-up appointments. Officials plan to conduct the screening for every patient once every five years.

On average, it takes 154.3 days to complete a PACT Act claim. The FRA wants the VA to have no disability claims pending for over 125 days, and all claims should have an accuracy rate of 98 percent or higher. However, only 46.8 percent of PACT Act-related claims are being completed in 125 days or less.

There have also been concerns regarding their misguided use of the critical skill incentive (CSI) authority in the Comprehensive Veterans' Toxic Exposure Law (PACT Act). In a letter addressed to VA Secretary Denis McDonough, the leaders of these committees expressed their disappointment with the VA's misuse of the CSI authority. They stated, "Contrary to congressional intent, incentives were used to boost the pay of senior executives at VA rather than enhancing staffing for critical shortage positions requiring highly skilled individuals."

To ensure that the VA could effectively handle the increased demand for care and benefits from the PACT Act included provisions to strengthen the VA's workforce capacity. This included the CSI authority, which was designed to improve staffing for positions that demand critical or high-demand skills essential for the day-to-day operations at the VA. These positions include human resources specialists, information technology professionals, police officers, and housekeepers, which have faced hiring shortages for years. In a recent expenditure review, the VA discovered that \$9.7 million of these incentives had been misallocated to certain career senior executives working at VA headquarters, without ensuring that the payments aligned with the criteria outlined in the PACT Act authority.

## **Disability Claims Backlog**

The Association was concerned about the discovery that tens of thousands of veteran disability cases were lost for months or years in the VA's claims systems due to software glitches. In August 2023, VA leaders announced they had found approximately 32,000 veterans disability claims delayed. Some claims date back years due to technical flaws in the department's VA.gov filing systems. Two weeks later, officials acknowledged 57,000 more delayed claims involving veterans trying to add dependents to their accounts. The lost claims were discussed at a House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Technology, hearing.

In all of the cases, VA officials pledged to backdate veterans' pay as soon as possible. But the mistakes may have delayed potentially thousands of dollars in monthly payouts to individuals suffering from military-related illnesses or injuries. VA officials at the hearing noted that the errors represent a small fraction of the more than seven million cases filed since early 2018, but he also acknowledged that any mistake that causes financial harm to veterans is unacceptable. VA officials said that their work will include better oversight systems to ensure that similar problems in the future are quickly caught, preventing problems from compounding over months or years.

The FRA urges Congress to pass legislation that requires (VA) to be held accountable for achieving the VA's stated goal to achieve an operational state for VA in which no claim is pending over 125 days and all claims have an accuracy rate of 98 percent or higher. As of February 17, 2024, there are more than 377,600 pending claims that have been pending 125 days or more, and the VA is currently experiencing an 86 percent accuracy rating based on a 12-month average. Last year's testimony (based on February 11, 2023, data), there were nearly 195,000 pending claims that have been pending 125 days or more, and the VA had a 95 percent accuracy rating based on a 12-month average. "The total caseload in FY 2023 was nearly 40 percent higher than the previous year.<sup>1</sup>" The increase in the volume of claims has increased the backlog and accuracy has declined with the wave of new claims generated from the PACT Act.

## **EHR Flawed Medication Records**

At a recent House Veterans Affairs Committee Technology Modernization Subcommittee hearing, it was disclosed that 250,000 veterans may be at risk of being prescribed medicine they are allergic to or that would interact poorly with their existing medications because of issues with the VA new electronic health records system. A VA official testifying at the hearing emphasized that the VA has not found any instances of patients being harmed by drug interactions specifically caused by the data issues. The flawed medication records are the most recent concerns with the implementation of the Oracle Cerner Millennium system, which has been concerning enough that the VA delayed adapting it at any more sites while it works to fix the network.

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<sup>1</sup> Marine Corps Times. Feb. 2024, page 48, Leo Shane

It was explained at the hearing that the problem is the way the Oracle system inputs data into a medical records database known as the Health Data Repository that stores information about patients' medications and allergies. When patients are prescribed new medications, a provider will check against the information in the database to ensure there are no allergies or drug interactions. But because of an error in the way the Oracle system codes data sent to the database, incorrect information appears when the database is checked using Vista, the old electronic health records system.

That means if a veteran visits one of the five medical centers that use the Oracle system, their medication history could be wrong if they later seek care at a facility that still uses the Vista system. About 250,000 veterans were affected by the issue as of September, according to data provided by the Veterans Health Administration. The inspector general's office has not "seen evidence that VA has sufficiently notified legacy electronic health record providers about this issue and the mitigations to safely care for these new EHR site patients."

At the hearing it was noted that this program that has been deployed in just five sites in the Pacific Northwest and Ohio, as reports of patient safety issues resulting from system glitches have increased. Amid pressure from lawmakers to pump the brakes on the electronic health records modernization program, the VA announced in April 2023 it was holding off on implementing the new system at any more sites while officials work on fixes. The complete overhaul of the VA medical records system was originally estimated to cost \$10 billion over 10 years. However, a more recent independent estimate predicts \$33-36 billion over 13 years. The FRA welcomes Congressional oversight of the VA technology program that will ensure improvements to the system. The Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM) is an essential element in modernization of the VA healthcare system and there is a tremendous opportunity with the two departments using the same electronic health records.

## **Suicide and Mental Health**

The FRA supports improvements and monitors the implementation of VA and DoD suicide prevention programs to reduce the rate of suicide among veterans and active-duty service members. The Association is grateful to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for allowing any veteran experiencing a suicidal crisis to receive emergency care at no cost from any VA or non-VA health care facility.

Enrollment in the VA system is not required. Specifically, more than 32,000 veterans in acute suicidal crisis have received free emergency health care under the new life-saving VA policy.

Approximately 17 veterans, on average, commit suicide every single day. One death alone from suicide is one too many. But it is an ongoing problem and the loss of just one veteran has a profound ripple effect on their fellow veterans, their families, and their communities.

The VA “2023 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report” provides new information regarding suicide mortality among veterans and non-veteran U.S. adults, from 2001 through 2021. In 2021, 6,392 veterans died by suicide, an increase of 114 suicides from 2020. When looking at increases in rates from 2020 to 2021, the age- and sex-adjusted suicide rate among veterans increased by 11.6 percent, while the age- and sex-adjusted suicide rate among non-Veteran U.S. adults increased by 4.5 percent. Unfortunately, veterans still remain at elevated risk for suicide.

It should be noted that the VA is implementing a 10-year Suicide Prevention Strategy Plan started in 2018 that includes funding local suicide prevention programs. The VA has made it easier to reach the VA National Suicide Crisis Hotline by changing the program to align with the regular National Crisis Hotline that all Americans can use. The new VA Crisis Hotline is now 988 and when the crisis line responds, select option 1, and callers will be transferred to the veterans’ part of the crisis hotline.

The Association supports the “Not Just a Number Act” (S. 928/H.R. 4157) sponsored by Sens. Jon Tester (Mt.), John Boozman (Ark.) and Reps. Gerald Connelly (Va.) and Nancy Mace (SC) respectively. This legislation would require the VA to examine veterans’ benefits usage in their annual suicide prevention report, in order to evaluate the relationship between VA benefits and suicide outcomes. This legislation would also have the VA analyze which VA benefits have the greatest impact on preventing suicide and require the agency to issue recommendations for expansion of those benefits to help combat veteran suicides.

Currently, VA only analyzes how many veterans who die by suicide had recent interactions with VA through medical or mental health appointments.

Acknowledging suicide prevention goes beyond just mental health practices, the legislation would have the VA also look at veterans’ use of disability



compensation, education and employment benefits, home loans and foreclosure assistance, and housing assistance programs.

The FRA also supports the National Warrior Call Day - a national suicide prevention effort aimed at reaching veterans and service members who may be dangerously disconnected from others. The campaign stresses daily connection through calls and unites behind a single day — the Sunday after Veterans Day.

## **Protecting Veterans from Prescription Drug Abuse**

In 2017, the Department of Health and Human Services declared opioid deaths a public health emergency. At the time, studies indicated veterans were twice as likely to die from accidental opioid overdoses. To combat this, Congress included a provision in the VA MISSION Act of 2018 to ensure non-VA providers were informed of VA best practices and evidence-based guidelines when prescribing opioids under VA's Opioid Safety Initiative (OSI). Congress also required third-party administrators responsible for contracting with VA community care providers to check their state's prescription drug monitoring program to mitigate prescription drug abuse and overdose by veterans using VA community care.

However, a September 26, 2023, report from the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) found the third-party administrators failed to provide adequate oversight of whether Veterans Community Care Network health care providers were completing and certifying VA's OSI training module. The OIG also found that approximately 14,700 of 18,200 non-VA providers in the Community Care Network who prescribed opioids to veterans in fiscal year 2021 had not completed VA's OSI training module and did not certify their mandated review of VA's guidelines. An additional VA OIG report found a similar lapse in oversight resulted in patients being overprescribed opioids from both VA and Community Care Network providers—increasing veterans' risk of sedation and overdose.

## **Concurrent Receipt**

The membership of the Association strongly believes that reducing a retiree's retired pay because they are disabled is an injustice! The Association strongly supports the "Major Richard Star Act" (S. 344/H.R. 1282) that is sponsored by Chairman Jon Tester and Rep. Gus Bilirakis respectively that expands concurrent receipt to include Combat Related Special Compensation (CRSC) veterans who are

medically retired with less than 20 years of service. Over two-thirds of Congress co-sponsored concurrent receipt legislation in the last session of Congress. Concurrent receipt refers to the simultaneous receipt of two types of monetary benefits: military retired pay and VA disability compensation. FRA supports legislation authorizing the immediate payment of concurrent receipt of *full* military retired pay and veterans' disability compensation for *all*.

## **Protect Veterans from Predatory Pension Poachers**

Aging veterans represent a segment of vulnerable individuals who are increasingly being targeted by bad actors preying upon the VA benefits veterans have earned. They are often victims of scams including being overcharged for home care, charged for services they did not receive, or given bad investment advice. A report (GAO-20-109) from the non-partisan Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that VA has not taken an aggressive approach in preventing this exploitation from occurring. FRA welcomes Congressional oversight to ensure that the VA works with a sense of urgency to ensure veterans are not victims of scams.

The FRA is supporting the “Governing Unaccredited Representatives Defrauding (GUARD) VA Benefits Act” (H.R.1139, S.740). The bills would reinstate penalties for charging veterans and survivors unauthorized fees related to claims for VA benefits. The National Association of Attorneys General dispatched a letter to Congressional leaders last year on behalf of a bipartisan group of 44 state attorneys general urging the passage of the GUARD Act.

Unaccredited claims representatives are not subject to the VA standards. They strategically advertise their services to avoid regulatory oversight and, as a result, may engage in predatory and unethical practices that target veterans and rob them of their VA benefits. Federal laws and regulations prohibit anyone from assisting a veteran in the preparation, presentation, or prosecution of a VA benefit claim, or charging a fee for this assistance, without accreditation from VA's Office of General Counsel. However, VA and other federal agencies are limited in their ability to enforce existing law because explicit criminal penalties were stripped from statute nearly two decades ago. This has contributed to the proliferation of unaccredited claims representatives in recent years. This legislation will discourage companies from operating outside the bounds of federal law and will give VA and other agencies an additional tool to protect veteran claimants from predatory practices.

## **Long Term Care for Aging Veterans**

The FRA is supporting the "Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act" (HR 542) that recently passed the House (414-5) require the VA to establish agreements with outside providers to furnish medical and social services to veterans who are not in VA nursing homes. The bill would also require the VA to improve in-home assistance and support for caregivers of veterans and raise the limit on expenses for nursing home care provided outside of VA facilities. In addition, the bill would require the VA to conduct several studies related to medical and health services for elderly veterans and report on those topics. Long term care is one of the biggest challenges facing our aging population and their families – and our veteran population is no exception. In fact, almost half of VA's patient population is over 65.

## **Challenges for Reserve Component VA Disability Claims**

A recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) report (GAO-24-105400), in which the Fleet Reserve Association actively participated, notes that changes are needed to address unique challenges Reserve Component members face when filing for veterans' disability benefits with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Members of the National Guard and the Reserves can claim VA disability benefits. But they may struggle to prove that disabilities are service-related when they only serve part-time, making it harder for them to access benefits.

The report notes that although the Department of Defense (DoD) and VA have guidance about disability benefits for reservists, it does not cover the importance of documenting how health conditions are related to time on duty. Also, gaps in VA data make it difficult to verify these claims. GAO recommended that DOD and VA improve their guidance and data sharing to help those who served in the reserves with this issue, and more.

## **Expanding America's National Cemetery**

A majority of FRA members were opposed to burial restrictions for in-ground burials at Arlington National Cemetery (ANC). There are currently 155 VA administered cemeteries that could be transformed into another national cemetery. More than 73 percent of FRA members surveyed January 2023 support creating a

second national cemetery, perhaps on the west coast, in lieu of additional burial restrictions that would afford full military honors. That is why FRA supports the “Expanding America’s National Cemetery Act” (H.R. 1413) that would authorize the Department of Defense and the VA to transform an existing VA cemetery to maintain interment with full honors as ANC reaches capacity. Veterans should not be forced to change their well-earned plans because of unnecessary administration rules. A December 2023/January 2024 survey of FRA veterans indicates that 66 percent rate VA burial benefits as “Very Important”.

### **VA Caregiver Benefits**

Congress expanded the Caregivers Program to veterans of all eras under the FRA supported VA MISSION Act of 2018. FRA and many caregiver families are disappointed in the way the VA expanded the Caregivers Act. The VA announced it will extend caregiver benefits until October 1, 2025. This extension will ensure that thousands of families will continue to receive stipends for the next three years.

The FRA supports the House passed “Caregiver Outreach and Program Enhancement Act” (COPE-H.R. 3581). This bill will create a VA grant program that would help veteran caregivers seek the mental health care they need without fear of reducing access for veterans or concerns about the stigma of mental health.

In addition, the "Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act" (HR 542) that recently passed the House (414-5) would among its other provisions require the VA to improve in-home assistance and support for caregivers of veterans and raise the limit on expenses for nursing home care provided outside of VA facilities. FRA hopes that the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee will approve these bills and send them to the full Senate for further consideration.

### **Survivor Issues**

The Association recognizes the sacrifices Survivors have endured and works to eliminate survivor benefit inequities. The FRA works to improve and protect existing survivor benefits issued by the Department of Defense (DoD) and the VA.

The FRA supports making the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) benefits equal to other federal survivor benefits and is supporting the “Caring for Survivors Act” (H.R. 1083/S. 414). Currently, DIC is approximately 43 percent of

a 100 percent disabled retiree's compensation. Survivors of federal civilian workers have their annuity set at 55 percent of their Disabled Retiree's Compensation. FRA supports raising DIC payments to 55 percent of VA Disability Compensation for a 100 percent disabled veteran. Moreover, when compensation is increased the law should ensure that DIC eligible survivors under the old system receive an equal increase.

Increase DIC payable to survivors of catastrophically disabled veterans to match other Federal survivor benefit plans. Catastrophically disabled veterans, whose spouses serve as primary care givers, receive additional allowances due to the severity of their service-connected multiple disabilities. These spouses perform full-time duty which precludes them from working towards retirement or Social Security benefits in their own right. When the veteran dies, the surviving spouse's income is reduced to the same Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) payment that other surviving spouses of veterans receive, whose death was service connected. The percentage of replacement income can be as little as 15 percent. The income replacement of other federal survivor benefit plans is close to 50 percent of the benefit upon which they are based. Congress should provide for survivors of catastrophically disabled veterans on a similar basis.

At the request of the FRA Senators John Cornyn (Tex.) and Elizabeth Warren (Mass.) and Representatives John Garamendi (Calif.) and Mark Amodei (NV) introduced the "Respect for Grieving Military Families Act" (H.R. 3232/S.1588), which would stop the Department of Defense from clawing back deceased military retirees benefits while their families are still in mourning.

Surviving spouses who are unaware that the Defense Finance and Accounting Services (DFAS) should be notified immediately on the death of the military retiree are surprised to learn of this requirement. Those who had joint bank accounts, in which retirement payments were made electronically, gave little if any thought that DFAS could swoop down and recoup any overpayments of retirement pay from such accounts. This action could easily clear the account of any funds remaining whether they were retirement payments or money from other sources. Instead of withdrawing the payment all at once the bill would allow a gradual repayment over 12 months and gives the Secretary of Defense the option to forgive the over payment.

## **Servicemembers Civil Relief Act**

The FRA wants to ensure that the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) is enforced by regulatory agencies, including the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), Office of Military Affairs and wants to ensure that active-duty personnel are protected from predatory lenders. The Association wants to make mandatory arbitration agreements in financial contracts unenforceable. The FRA supports the “Improving SCRA Benefit Utilization Act” (H.R.6920) that would improve awareness and modernize an interest rate reduction benefit currently underutilized by active-duty military servicemembers.

Under SCRA, active duty servicemembers are entitled to a reduced interest rate on loans they took out before military service. In December 2022, the CFPB did a first-of-its-kind analysis that quantified whether service members were receiving their interest rate reductions on certain loans and made recommendations for financial institutions to increase the use of SCRA reductions. However, recent research on the credit card market suggests that many credit card companies have not adopted simple fixes that could help ensure that servicemembers get interest rate relief.

The CFPB 2022 analysis estimated that fewer than 10 percent of eligible auto loans and 6 percent of personal loans to activated members of the National Guard and Reserves were receiving interest rate reductions, resulting in nearly \$10 million a year in estimated lost savings. This report covered only auto and installment loans, but there is ample evidence to suggest that servicemembers face hurdles in other areas, like credit cards and mortgages. The report recommended that companies apply SCRA interest rate reductions for all accounts held at an institution if a service member invokes protections for a single account.

## **VA Homelessness Program**

The VA and other government agencies should enhance and invest in efforts to ensure that veteran’s homelessness is rare, brief, and nonrecurring. The FRA supports the House passed (408-10) “Housing our Military Veterans Effectively Act” (HOME Act-H.R. 3848) sponsored by Rep. Lori Chavez-DeRemer (OR) to help lift veterans out of homelessness. The HOME Act would increase the per diem rate the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) pays nonprofit organizations that assist veterans with short-term transitional housing, such as the Salvation Army. The per diem rate would also continue to adjust for inflation every year. The

HOME Act also creates a stipend that veterans experiencing homelessness can use to purchase necessities such as food, shelter, clothing, and hygiene items; transportation services; or communications equipment such as smartphones so the veterans can maintain contact with health care providers, prospective landlords, and family members.

In an effort to help homeless veterans and their families find permanent housing, The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) awarded \$14 million in HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) vouchers to 66 Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) across the country for over 1,400 vouchers.

The HUD-VASH program provides housing and an array of supportive services to veterans experiencing homelessness by combining rental assistance from HUD with case management and clinical services provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Through this program, HUD and VA's mission is to end homelessness by assisting veterans and their families in obtaining permanent and sustainable housing with access to high-quality health care and supportive services, and to ensure that homelessness is otherwise prevented.

Thanks to the joint efforts of HUD, VA, and the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), the number of veterans experiencing homelessness has fallen by 4 percent since early 2020, and by 52 percent since 2010. Additionally, VA and HUD partnered to permanently house more than 46,000 homeless veterans, surpassing the calendar year goal by 22.5 percent.

Currently, there are over 110,000 HUD-VASH vouchers being administered by over 700 PHAs. Since 2008 HUD has issued new HUD-VASH vouchers every year. Additionally, over 81,000 of those total vouchers are actively under lease by HUD-VASH veterans, with many additional veterans having been issued vouchers and currently searching for housing to lease.

### **Pause in Foreclosures on VA Home Loans**

The FRA supports the VA suspension of foreclosures on VA-backed loans, extending pandemic protections for veterans facing mortgage payment difficulties. The VA contacted mortgage services to pause VA foreclosures and extend the COVID-19 Refund Modification program until May 31, 2024, ensuring veterans can remain in their homes.

This decision follows a November 11, 2023, report by National Public Radio revealing the risk of veterans losing homes after the VA ended the Partial Claim Payment program. Veterans using the mortgage forbearance program during the pandemic faced bills for missed payments, risking large sums or refinancing at higher rates. Approximately 6,000 VA homeowners are in foreclosure, and another 34,000 are delinquent. The VA calls for mortgage servicers to pause foreclosures and collaborates on workable home retention solutions for veterans.

The extension of the COVID-19 Refund Modification program enables veterans to obtain zero-interest, deferred-payment loans from the VA, covering missed payments and modifying existing VA-guaranteed loans for an affordable monthly payment structure. The VA is establishing a VA Servicing Purchase program to purchase defaulted VA loans, modify them, and include them in the VA's direct loan portfolio.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, allow me again to express the sincere appreciation of the Association's membership for all that you and the members of both of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees and your outstanding staffs do for our Nation's veterans.

Our leadership and Legislative Team stand ready to work with the Committees and their staff to improve benefits for all veterans who have served this great Nation.

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## **John S. Handzuk**

FRA National President John S. Handzuk was elected National President in September 2023. He joined the Fleet Reserve Association in March of 1980. Throughout his 41 years of membership, he has served in various leadership positions at the local, regional and national level.

John Handzuk grew up and attended school in North Tonawanda, NY, studying to become a machinist. At graduation, he learned he had been selected for a draft deferred tool and die maker apprenticeship. He had to decline as he had already enlisted in the Navy's deferred enlistment program.

During his twenty-four years of service in the Navy, he served on seven ships, overseas tours in Japan and Vietnam, and trained recruits for three years in Orlando, FL.

Handzuk was able to pursue his chosen trade as a machinist manufacturing parts for and overhauling valves, pumps and other mechanical equipment. Additionally, he designed and built several special tools and jigs. In June of 1980, he qualified as an Enlisted Surface Warfare Specialist. In early 1983, while training recruits, he qualified as a Master Training Specialist.

As his career progressed, Handzuk went from working in machine shops to supervising and mentoring machinists. In July 1986, he was promoted to Master Chief Machinery Repairman (E-9). In 1988, he was selected to become a Command Master Chief. He served in this capacity on his last two ships before retiring in August 1990.

Upon retirement, he had a second career first as an over the road commercial truck driver and ultimately became personnel director for a trucking company.

An avid wood worker, Handzuk makes wooden toys for young children and donates them to charitable organizations.