

## *Biden Trumpets Legislation for Veterans Despite Backlog in Claims*

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**By Zolan Kanno-Youngs**  
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Kerrie Wiener did not know if she had another fight in her.

It had been more than a decade since her husband, Robert Wiener Jr., a U.S. Army Reserve veteran, died of lung cancer she said had been caused by toxic burn pits he encountered in Iraq. After the government rejected disability benefits for her family, Ms. Wiener said she never again wanted to go through the onerous process of gathering her husband's medical documents and remembering the doctors, surgeries and long nights at the hospital before his death in 2011.

"I just gave up," Ms. Wiener said in an interview. "I never expected to get any additional benefits from the government."

She still doubted she wanted to go through that ordeal again after President Biden signed legislation last year that expanded medical benefits to veterans and their families. The new law makes it easier for veterans who believe they were exposed to toxins during their service to apply for medical benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Ms. Wiener was persuaded to apply under the new law, and just five weeks later received a check.

"I kept looking at it and putting it in my calculator and I remember sending a picture to my friend saying, 'Does this say what I think it says?'" said Ms. Wiener, 60, of Massachusetts.

Mr. Biden is hoping to convince more veteran families to apply for benefits under the law, known as the PACT Act, part of the reason he spent the last day of his three-state tour speaking at a Veterans Affairs medical clinic in Salt Lake City, Utah. It is part of an effort by the Biden administration to ensure that veterans take advantage of the \$280 billion in federal funding, one of the largest expansions of veterans' benefits in American history.

"We only have one true sacred obligation," Mr. Biden said in remarks marking the anniversary of the signing of the legislation. "And that's to equip those we send into harm's way with the care for them and their families when they come home — and when they don't."

Mr. Biden grew emotional at times during the speech, choking up and wiping his eyes when he described how the lasting effects of burn pits were personal for his family. Mr. Biden described the death of his eldest son, Beau, who died of brain cancer, which the president has long blamed on exposure to burn pits during Beau's Iraq tour. (No firm connection has been established).

"It was personal for my family but it's also personal for so many of you," Mr. Biden said to the crowd that included amputees and many wearing military attire.

Mr. Biden framed the PACT Act as an example of his administration's commitment to bipartisanship, something Gov. Spencer J. Cox, Republican of Utah, also expressed before Mr. Biden walked onstage. Mr. Cox urged members of Congress to work together to provide additional housing and mental health assistance to veterans.





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While there is no deadline to apply for future benefits, Mr. Biden urged veteran families to take advantage of his administration's decision to extend a deadline to Monday for those looking to collect payments retroactive to last year.

The law was written for veterans who suffered after working on military bases where trash such as jet fuel, tires and chemicals was burned. Research suggests the toxic smoke may be responsible for illnesses including cancer, bronchial asthma, sleep apnea and bronchitis. Since the signing of the legislation, the department has conducted more than 4.1 million toxic exposure screenings.

Mr. Biden pledged that the Department of Veterans Affairs would work quickly to resolve applicants' claims for benefits — a process that has already run into a backlog.

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Senator Thom Tillis and Representative Greg Murphy, Republicans of North Carolina and members of the Veterans' Affairs committee, called the backlog for Pact ACT claims "unacceptable" earlier this year.

"The challenge here is when Congress passes a bill, oftentimes they don't think about what it takes to implement it," Mr. Tillis, who voted against the Pact Act, said in February. "That was the concern that I had with the PACT Act."

But the administration, as well as some veterans advocacy groups, says the Department of Veterans Affairs is invested in driving down the backlog and persuading more veterans to seek care. The department has hired more than 4,700 staffers to the bureau handling the claims since October of last year, bringing the total work force to more than 30,700. Terrence Hayes, the Veterans Affairs press secretary, said the department has also improved the technology used to process applications.

"As the surge in claims subsides, our increased capacity will not — which will enable us to further reduce the backlog," Mr. Hayes said.

Candace Wheeler, director of government and legislative affairs for Tragedy Assistance Programs for Survivors, a nonprofit that helps veterans and their relatives apply for benefits, said the legislation has been a "sea change."

Ms. Wiener said at first she felt guilty when she received benefits through the Pact Act, given the number of other families of fallen soldiers who were struggling. But the assistance has now made her "finally feel like I'm going to be OK."

With the Pact funding, she plans to move out of her mother's home and buy property for herself and her two children.

"My husband was my strength and my safety in the world," Ms. Wiener said. "It's been a long time to establish my identity without him."

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