

# NEW TYPE OF VET SCAM ON THE RISE

## When benefits for toxic exposure turn toxic

Veterans stream into Rock Larson's office wondering if they've been the target of a scam. Often, they have been. Over the years, Larson has seen plenty of sketchy pitches from lawyers and mortgage lenders.

Now the veterans service officer for Wood County is seeing something new: attempts to steal personal information through efforts to "help" veterans gain benefits under the PACT Act.

That 2022 federal law dramatically boosts the number of veterans eligible for health or disability benefits due to toxic chemical exposures. "It's a game changer," Larson says of the law.

But it creates openings for predators to insert themselves in the process — something [AARP Wisconsin](#) is trying to prevent. To help veterans stay ahead of the latest scams, AARP and veterans organizations are sharing resources at community events this year and hosting other events for veterans and their families.

The timing couldn't be better, says April Heim, a director in the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs' benefits division. "We're trying to get the word out" about PACT Act scams, she says.

The act provides benefits for veterans who were exposed to toxic chemicals — including from burn pits — while on duty, typically in the Vietnam, Gulf or post-9/11 wars. Instead of requiring individual proof of harm from chemicals such as Agent Orange, the act presumes that all vets who have specific ailments — including many types of cancer — and who served in certain locations are due benefits, even if their illnesses emerged much later.

## **Burn pit benefits bring scams**

With new benefits come new scams, including attempts to charge veterans unwarranted fees or hijack their personal data. The VA and AARP have warned veterans about the potential for fraud, and the VA this year noted an increase in PACT Act-related phishing (email), vishing (phone) and social media scams aimed at veterans and their PACT Act benefits.

“Veterans should be cautious of anyone who guarantees a lucrative financial benefit or service,” the VA says.

Troy J. Broussard, senior adviser-community engagement and integration for AARP, recommends that people develop a refusal script to stop unwanted interactions. A call, email or text from somebody claiming to be from the VA or Social Security could be a scam, he says.

Heim says VA backlogs may prompt veterans to hire attorneys unnecessarily. Also, veterans’ families often aren’t aware of potential help they could receive.

The PACT Act is one of the largest expansions of VA benefits in history; more than 5 million veterans may be able to take advantage of it. These AARP events will help them safely do so:

- On Sunday, July 2, AARP will host a picnic and provide game tickets and veterans-focused resources at a La Crosse Loggers collegiate summer baseball league game.
- AARP will host a telephone town hall about the latest veterans scams. The date will be posted and emailed when it’s set.
- On Tuesday, Oct. 24, AARP will include veteran-focused fraud during a Scam Jam in La Crosse.
- On Saturday, November 4, AARP will share resources at the Veterans Bonanza in La Crosse annual.

Find event details at [aarp.org/wi](https://aarp.org/wi) and resources at [aarp.org/veterans](https://aarp.org/veterans).

*Joanne Cleaver is a writer living in Charlotte, North Carolina.*