

AMVETS Hawaii

Legislative & VA Affairs Update

October 2026 / Vol 1



Commander's Message



Donovan Andrew Lazarus
US Army, Retired

*Aloha AMVETS Family, Veterans,
Community Partners, and Friends,*

As we begin a new fiscal year, I am pleased to share two significant federal grant developments that strengthen AMVETS Hawaii's ability to serve Veterans and families across our community. These awards reflect the work of our staff, volunteers, coaches, community partners, and Veterans who continue to build programs centered on service, connection, wellness, and opportunity.

*VA Adaptive Sports Grant Renewal - Continuing the Mission
AMVETS Hawaii's Adaptive Fitness & Sports Program has received renewal support through the U.S. Department of*

Veterans Affairs Adaptive Sports Grant Program. The renewed funding allows us to continue building on a program that has become an important point of connection for Veterans through adaptive fitness, sports, recreation, coaching, and community engagement.

During FY26, our adaptive sports grant totaled \$452,600 and supported a year of sustained programming at the West Oahu Veterans Center and through community activities. By closeout, the program recorded 3,012 sessions and 4,664.5 coaching hours. Three of four grant deliverables had exceeded their annual targets, while the remaining participation deliverable stood at 97 percent at the time of the final closeout review. The program also averaged 76 distinct Veterans per month.

Our work has included Big Tire Bootcamp, adaptive e-sports and gaming, Tai Chi Po Fit, Okinawan Kenpo/karate, indoor climbing, fitness assessments, competitive events, and outreach. Just as important, the program has created an environment where Veterans can reconnect with one another, strengthen their health, and remain engaged in their community.

The renewal gives us the opportunity to carry that momentum forward. We will continue strengthening our partnership with VA, expanding Veteran participation, and developing pathways that allow Veterans of different abilities and fitness levels to participate, train, compete, and belong.

FY27 Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant - \$683,905

- Donovan Andrew Lazarus

State Commander, AMVETS Department of Hawaii
President & CEO, AMVETS Hawaii Service Foundation Corp
Founder, AMVETS West Oahu Veterans Center

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Legislative & VA Affairs Update

Veterans Health: VA Announces Expanded Informed-Consent Requirements

On September 28, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced additional informed-consent requirements for psychotropic medications beginning in 2027. The changes are intended to standardize patient education and documentation so Veterans receive information about medication risks, side effects, benefits, alternatives, and safe discontinuation.

Under the announced guidance, patient education and written consent will be required before concurrent prescriptions of opioids and benzodiazepines and before prescribing an antidepressant to a Veteran younger than 30. Standardized education and documented informed-consent discussions will also apply more broadly to psychotropic medications, including medications for which oral consent is otherwise sufficient.

VA stated that it will use the remainder of 2026 to train staff and update policies and procedures before implementation begins in 2027.

Veterans Benefits: VA Surpasses Three Million Disability Claims in FY2026

The Department of Veterans Affairs reported that it had processed more than three million disability benefits claims in fiscal year 2026 as of September 18, surpassing the 3.001 million claims completed during fiscal year 2025 before the end of the current fiscal year.

VA also reported awarding more than \$207 billion in compensation and pension benefits to Veterans and survivors.

According to the department, the claims backlog declined by more than 70 percent from January 20, 2025, while the average time to complete a disability claim decision fell from 141.5 days to 75.6 days by September 2026. VA reported a 94 percent claims accuracy rate, its highest in two years.

These figures are agency-reported performance measures and provide an important benchmark for Veterans and service organizations monitoring access to earned benefits.

Military-Connected Employment: Transition and Hiring Resources

Military-connected job seekers continue to navigate the transition from military experience to civilian employment. U.S. Department of Labor data show that the annual Veteran unemployment rate was 3.5 percent in 2025. Approximately 200,000 service members transition from military service each year, while military spouses frequently face employment disruptions associated with permanent-change-of-station moves.

RecruitMilitary provides free hiring events, career resources, job-matching services, and employer connections for Veterans, transitioning service members, military spouses, and other military-connected job seekers. Its Veteran Talent Source recruiting platform is designed to help employers identify military-affiliated talent and translate military experience into civilian workforce skills.

For Veterans service organizations, the continuing policy issue is not only unemployment, but also successful skills translation, career mobility, retention, credential recognition, and access to employers that understand military experience.

Military Survivors: Bipartisan GRACE Act Introduced

Senators Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) and Tim Sheehy (R-MT) introduced the bipartisan GRACE for Military Survivors Act (S. 5445) on September 22. The bill was referred to the Senate Committee on Finance.

Current law generally gives eligible surviving spouses and children one year to contribute qualifying military death gratuities and Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance benefits to certain tax-advantaged accounts. The legislation would extend that period from one year to three years for Roth IRAs and Coverdell Education Savings Accounts, giving survivors additional time to make long-term financial decisions following the death of a service member.

Representatives Mike Thompson (D-CA) and Jack Bergman (R-MI) introduced companion legislation in the House. AMVETS is among the veterans and survivor organizations identified by the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee as supporting the proposal.

What AMVETS Hawaii Should Watch

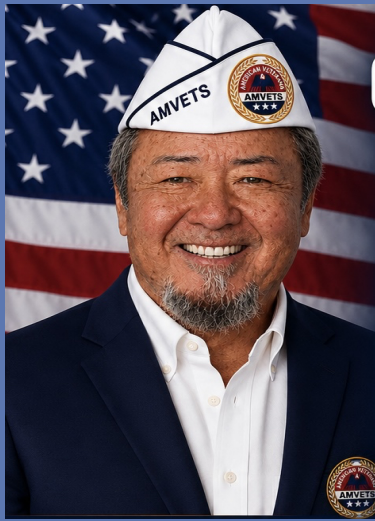
VA implementation guidance and training associated with the 2027 psychotropic-medication informed-consent requirements.

Final FY2026 VA disability-claims performance data and trends in backlog, accuracy, and processing time.

Movement of S. 5445 and its House companion, particularly provisions affecting military survivors and Gold Star families.

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Chaplain's Message



Dr. James Kimo Walz, Sr.
USN, Ret. • Department Chaplain

WHAT OCTOBER CAN TEACH A VETERAN

October is an interesting month. For many parts of the country, the heat of summer begins to fade. The days become shorter. The leaves change color. People begin preparing for colder weather. Here in Hawaii, the summer ends by ushering in rain, wind, and storms, with some sunshine mixed in.

October is a month of transition, and Veterans understand transition. You know what it means to prepare for a change you didn't completely control. You know what it means to leave one assignment and begin another. You know what it means to say goodbye to people who became like family. You know what it means to move forward while part of you is still looking back. Perhaps October has something to teach us about that.

October Reminds Us That Change Is Normal One of the most difficult things about life after military service is that change doesn't stop when you leave the service. Our bodies change. Our families change. Our friendships change. Our responsibilities change. Even our understanding of ourselves can change. Sometimes we look back and think, "I wish things were like they used to be." But nature doesn't apologize for changing seasons. October doesn't try to remain July. It simply becomes October.

There is something freeing about that. Maybe we don't have to spend the rest of our lives trying to recreate an earlier version

of ourselves. Maybe this season of life has something of its own to offer.

October Is a Month of Preparation

Military people understand preparation. You prepare before deployment. You check your equipment. You know your assignment. You learn the terrain. You think about what could go wrong before it happens. October has traditionally been a month when people begin preparing for winter. That raises an interesting question for us: What are we preparing for in the next season of our lives? Not everything in life can be controlled. Veterans know that better than most. But preparation still matters.

Maybe this is the season to prepare for retirement. Maybe it's time to strengthen a marriage or friendship. Maybe it's time to organize important documents. Maybe it's time to have a conversation you've been avoiding. Maybe it's time to take better care of yourself. Or perhaps it's time to prepare spiritually for the later chapters of life. Preparation isn't fear. Preparation is wisdom.

October Has a Day of Masks

Halloween gives October another unusual characteristic. For one night, people put on masks and pretend to be someone—or something—they aren't. Veterans sometimes know something about masks too. Not Halloween masks. The masks we wear in everyday life. The mask that says, "I'm fine." The mask that says, "I don't need anybody." The mask that says, "I've handled worse." The mask that says, "Just leave me alone." Sometimes those masks helped us survive difficult circumstances. But there comes a time when a person needs a safe place where the mask can come off.

A Word of Encouragement

If you are a Veteran reading this and wondering where you fit in this season of life, remember this: You have already lived through seasons that once seemed impossible. You adapted, you learned, you endured, you served, and you made it home.

October doesn't tell us exactly what winter will bring. It simply reminds us that seasons change—and we can change with them. Whatever your next season holds, don't assume your best contribution is behind you. There may still be people who need your wisdom. There may still be stories that need to be told. There may still be relationships that need to be restored. There may still be acts of service waiting to be done. And there may still be a purpose you haven't discovered yet.

My Prayer for You

God of every season, Thank You for those who have served our nation and for the experiences that have shaped their lives. As October reminds us that seasons change, help us accept the changes taking place in our own lives. Give us wisdom to know what to carry forward, courage to release what we need to leave behind, and faith to step into the future without knowing everything it will bring. For Veterans carrying difficult memories, bring peace. For those experiencing loneliness, bring companionship. For those facing uncertainty, bring courage. And for those wondering whether their lives still have purpose, remind them that their story is not finished.

Help us enter this new season with gratitude for where we have been, peace about where we are, and hope for where we are going.

Amen.

October's Thought To Carry With You

"I cannot change the season I am in, but I can choose how I enter it."
- Your AMVETS Hawaii Chaplain

-Dr. James Kimo Walz, Sr. (USN, Ret.) Chaplain, AMVETS Department of Hawaii

COMMANDER'S MESSAGE CONTINUES:

AMVETS Hawaii Service Foundation has also received a \$683,905 FY27 award from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs through the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program (SSG Fox SPGP). The one-year award period runs from September 30, 2026, through September 30, 2027.

The SSG Fox SPGP supports community-based organizations that provide or coordinate suicide prevention services for eligible at-risk Veterans, service members, and their families. VA describes the program as part of a public-health approach that combines community-based prevention with access to evidence-based clinical intervention.

Through this award, AMVETS Hawaii will serve Honolulu County with a goal of reaching 150 Veterans during the grant year. Our program will emphasize outreach, screening, case management, Veteran peer support, suicide-prevention education, stability supports, and warm connections to VA and community resources. A central priority will be reaching Veterans who are not currently connected with VA care.

The need for this work remains significant. VA's FY27 Grantee Toolkit reports that 6,398 Veterans died by suicide in 2023 and that 3,900 - 61 percent - were not receiving Veterans Health Administration care in the year of, or the year before, their death. That reality reinforces why trusted community organizations and Veterans Service Organizations must help create pathways to support before a crisis occurs.

Our mission is to reach Veterans where they are, build trust before a crisis occurs, and make sure no Veteran has to navigate the path to support alone. This grant strengthens our ability to bring Veterans, families, peer support, community partners, and VA together around one objective: saving lives.

A Legislative and Community Partnership

These two VA investments demonstrate how federal grant programs can translate into direct, community-level services for Veterans in Hawaii. Adaptive sports can strengthen physical health, social connection, confidence, and purpose. Suicide prevention programs can help identify risk, address barriers to stability, provide peer connection, and link Veterans with clinical and community resources when needed.

As we move into FY27, AMVETS Hawaii will continue working with our congressional, state, county, military, VA, nonprofit, and community partners to ensure these resources are implemented responsibly and produce measurable results for the Veterans we serve. We will also continue documenting outcomes and sharing the impact of these programs with our members, partners, and stakeholders.

To everyone who has supported these programs - our Posts, volunteers, staff, coaches, Veterans, families, donors, community organizations, and VA partners - mahalo. These awards are not simply about funding. They are about expanding the network around our Veterans and ensuring that service continues long after the uniform comes off.

VETERANS CRISIS LINE If you are a Veteran in crisis or are concerned about one, dial 988 then Press 1, text 838255, or connect through the Veterans Crisis Line online chat. Veterans do not have to be enrolled in VA benefits or health care to connect."

Yours in Service,

- Donovan Andrew Lazarus
State Commander, AMVETS Department of Hawaii
President & CEO, AMVETS Hawaii Service Foundation Corp
Founder, AMVETS West Oahu Veterans Center

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