



The Military Exposures Research Program

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VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

MERP Introduction

Who, What, How

Who does MERP help?

Millions of Veterans have encountered toxic agents. Lack of a nexus between exposure and health outcome(s) has been a barrier for Veterans to become eligible for VA care and disability benefits.

What is MERP?

Military Exposures Research Program (MERP) is an Actively Managed Portfolio (AMP) that was created to centralize management of and improve access to all VA Veteran Exposure research.

How is MERP going to help?

MERP will generate high-quality evidence through military exposures research using Core's, VA internal partnerships, and inter-agency coordination. MERP will utilize peer-reviewed research, ORD research enterprise resources, and PACT Act resources and collaboration opportunities.

PACT Act

PACT Act (1 of 4)

What is the PACT Act?

The PACT Act is the largest health and benefit expansions in American history

- On August 10, 2022, the President signed into law the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022.
- It recognizes toxic exposure as a cost of war by addressing the full range of issues impacting toxic-exposed Veterans, ensuring generations of Veterans who suffer from toxic exposure-related conditions get the benefits and care they've earned.
- To assist in addressing these issues the PACT Act included the creation of the Toxic Exposure Fund.

PACT Act (2 of 4)

How will the PACT Act improve care for Veterans?



Improved Veteran Care

PACT ACT

- Expands and extends eligibility for VA health care for Veterans with toxic-exposures and Veterans of the Vietnam era, Gulf War era, and Post-9/11 era.
- VA will improve the decision-making process for determining what medical conditions will be considered for presumptive status.
- Every enrolled Veteran will receive an initial toxic exposure screening and a follow-up screening every five years. Veterans who are not enrolled, but who are eligible to enroll, will have an opportunity to enroll and receive the screening.
- VA health care staff and claims processors will receive toxic exposure-related education and training.
- Requires research studies on Veterans who served in Southwest Asia during the Gulf War, Post-9/11 Veteran health trends, and Veteran cancer rates.
- Authorizes 31 new medical facilities across the country, providing greater access to VA health care.

PACT Act (3 of 4)

What diseases are specified by the PACT act?*

For Gulf War and post 9-11 Veterans:

- | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| ▪ Respiratory (breathing-related) cancer of any type | ▪ Lymphoma of any type | ▪ Chronic rhinitis |
| ▪ Gastrointestinal cancer of any type | ▪ Interstitial lung disease (ILD) | ▪ Emphysema |
| ▪ Asthma (diagnosed after service) | ▪ Neck cancer of any type | ▪ Granulomatous disease |
| ▪ Lymphatic cancer of any type | ▪ Glioblastoma | ▪ Pleuritis |
| ▪ Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) | ▪ Pancreatic cancer | ▪ Pulmonary fibrosis |
| ▪ Reproductive cancer of any type | ▪ Kidney cancer | ▪ Sarcoidosis |
| ▪ Constrictive bronchiolitis or obliterative bronchiolitis | ▪ Head cancer of any type | ▪ Chronic bronchitis |
| ▪ Melanoma | | |

For Vietnam Veterans and other Veterans exposed to tactical herbicides, the act includes two Agent Orange presumptive conditions:

Monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance (MGUS)

High blood pressure (hypertension)

* List of New and Expanded Presumptions is current as of December 14, 2023



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PACT Act (4 of 4)

Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022 Public Law 117-XXX



TITLE I: EXPANSION OF HEALTH CARE ELIGIBILITY

(Sections 101-111)

Short Title: Covenant Act of 2022

- Expands eligibility to specific categories of Toxic-Exposed Veterans
- Expands eligibility to Veterans supporting certain overseas contingency operations
- Expands eligibility period for certain eras
- Creates a one-year open enrollment period for Post 9/11 combat Veterans who did not enroll during the initial five years following discharge



TITLE II: TOXIC EXPOSURE PRESUMPTION PROCESS

(Sections 201-204)

Short Title: TEAM Act of 2022

- Improves presumptions of service connection based on toxic exposure



TITLE III: IMPROVING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SERVICE CONNECTION PROCESS FOR TOXIC-EXPOSED VETERANS

(Sections 301-303)

Short Title: Veterans Burn Pits Exposure Recognition Act of 2022

- Any entry in an exposure tracking record system is a qualifying toxic exposure risk activity
- Any entry in an exposure tracking record system is a presumption of exposure for a claim for service connection



TITLE IV: PRESUMPTIONS OF SERVICE CONNECTION

(Sections 401-407)

Short Titles: Mark Takai Atomic Veterans Healthcare Parity Act of 2022

(s.401); Palomares or Thule Veterans Act of 2022 (s.402); Veterans Agent Orange Exposure Equity Act of 2022 (s.403); Fair Care for Vietnam Veterans Act of 2022 (s.404); Presumptive Benefits for War Fighters Exposed to Burn Pits and Other Toxins Act of 2022 (s.406)

- Expands Agent Orange exposure and adds hypertension & monoclonal gammopathy to the list of presumptions
- Establishes a presumption of service connection for 23 respiratory illnesses and cancers related to burn pits and airborne hazards exposure
- Improves compensation for Persian Gulf War Veterans with disabilities



TITLE IX: IMPROVEMENT OF WORKFORCE OF DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

(Sections 901 – 909)

- Improves national rural recruitment and hiring planning for VHA
- Improves the ability of VA to hire and retain staff, including health care providers, human resources staff, and housekeeping aides



TITLE VIII: RECORDS AND OTHER MATTERS

(Sections 801-808)

Short Title: Camp Lejeune Justice Act of 2022 (s.804)

- Creates a fund to cover health care and benefits expenses associated with exposure to environmental hazards in service
- Allows certain individuals to bring an action for Federal Cause of Action Relating to Water at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina



TITLE VII: RESOURCING

(Sections 701-707)

- Appropriations to enhance claims processing capacity and automation
- Authorizes 31 major medical facility leases across 19 states



TITLE VI: IMPROVEMENT OF RESOURCES AND TRAINING REGARDING TOXIC-EXPOSED VETERANS

(Sections 601-604)

Short Title: Fairly Assessing Service-Related Toxic Exposure Residuals Presumptions Act of 2022

- Creates a list of resources and outreach program for toxic-exposed Veterans
- Incorporates a clinical toxic exposure screening for VHA enrollees
- Requires additional training for health care and benefits personnel and guidelines for training service members on toxic exposures



TITLE V: RESEARCH MATTERS

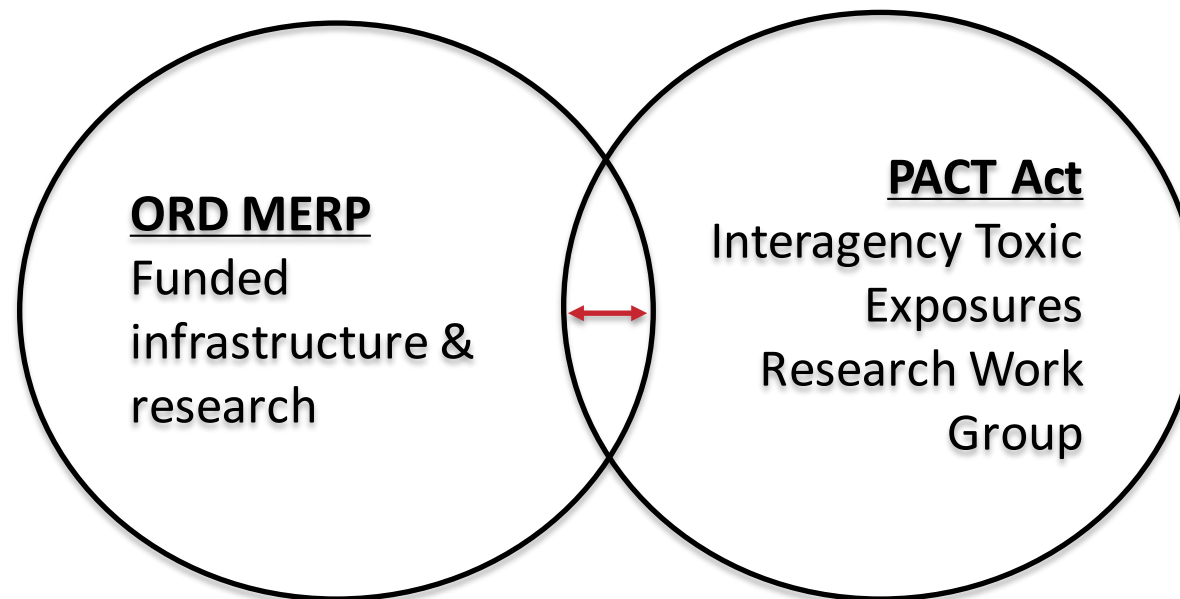
(Sections 501-510)

- Includes studies on mortality of Veterans who served in Southwest Asia during the Gulf War, post-9/11 Veterans' health trends, Veterans' cancer rates, and the effects of toxic exposures and mental health outcomes
- Includes studies on the effects of waste related to the Manhattan Project, Veterans in Territories of the United States, and the health effects of jet fuels
- Strengthens interagency working groups on toxic exposure research

Military Exposures Research and PACT Act

Military exposures research and PACT Act are often used interchangeably. However, the field should understand key distinctions between the efforts.

VHA Military Exposures & PACT



Military Exposures and Research Program

VA



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MERP – Building Nexus (1 of 3)

Why is MERP Needed?

The Military Exposures Research Program supports Veterans:



Every military conflict has had a characteristic exposure-related health concern



Lack of a nexus between exposure and health outcome(s) has been a barrier for Veterans to become eligible for VA care and disability benefits



Military exposure research was identified by Veterans Affairs Chief Research & Development Officer of the Office of Research & Development as a top cross-cutting clinical priority

MERP – Building Nexus (2 of 3)

MISSION STATEMENT

The VA MERP seeks to advance military exposure assessments and to understand the effects of military exposures on Veterans' health outcomes to inform care and policy.

MILITARY EXPOSURES

Refers to contact with toxic agents, singly or in combination, acquired through ingestion, respiratory, or skin contact routes during military service (Deployment, Occupation, or Garrison).

EXPOSURE ASSESSMENT

Refers to qualitative and/or quantitative identification and measurement of toxic agent(s) to which a Veteran was exposed during military service.

- May include the development of new methods and/or assays that will directly or indirectly identify and measure an exposure to a toxic agent using biological materials or surrogates.

MERP – Building Nexus (3 of 3)

MERP PARTNERSHIPS

VA PARTNERSHIPS

ORD Services and Programs

- MVP
- CIPHER
- VA SHIELD
- Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI)

- Health Outcomes Military Exposures (HOME)
- War Related Injury Illness Study Centers (WRIISCs)

NON-FEDERAL AFFILIATES/ SMEs

- Academia
- National Academy of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NAEM) (Emerging Science for Environmental Health Decisions)

COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

- Veterans with Toxic Exposures
- Veteran Service Organizations (VSO)
- Private Foundations – Toxic Exposures

FEDERAL PARTNERSHIPS

DoD

- Army Public Health
- Defense Health Agency
- Millennium Cohort Group
- DoD Biorepository
- Individual Longitudinal Exposure Record (ILER)
- Toxic Exposures Research Program (TERP)

National Institutes of Health

- Environmental Health Sciences
- Aging
- Neurological Diseases
- Nursing

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

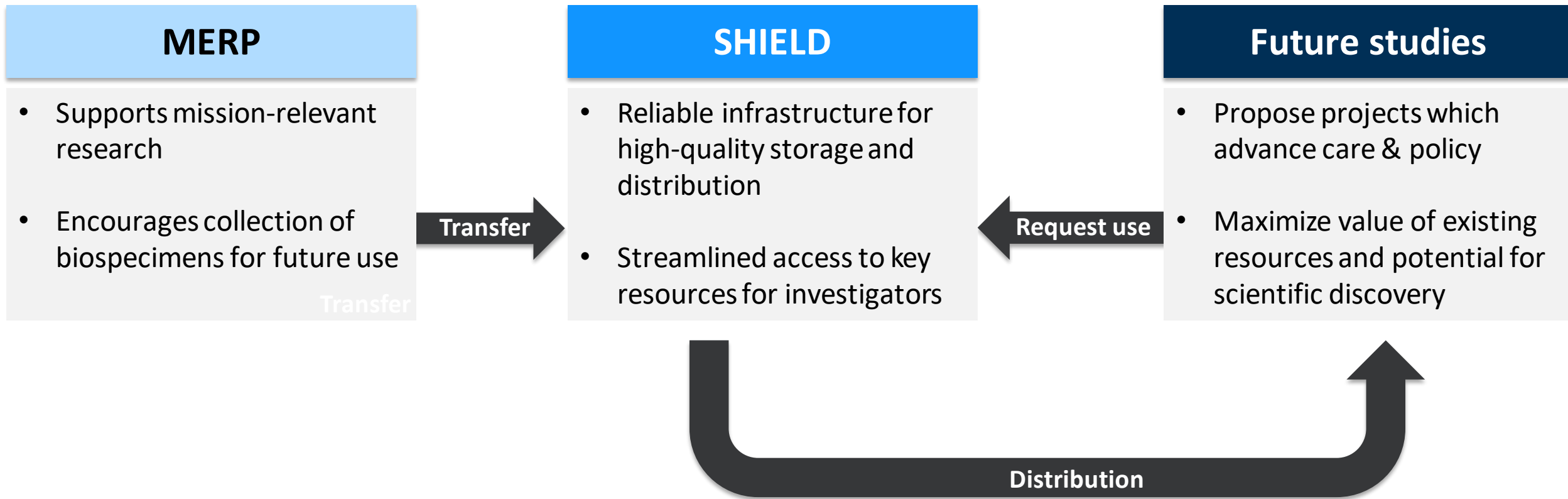
Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR)

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)



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MERP-SHIELD Biorepository Synergy



[VA SHIELD \(Central Biospecimen and Data Repository\)](https://research.va.gov/programs/shield/about.cfm) – <https://research.va.gov/programs/shield/about.cfm>

Actively Managed Portfolio (AMP) Approach (1 of 2)

What is an Actively Managed Portfolio Approach?

MERP is an AMP. The AMP structure is needed to ensure that the world-class research performed by VA is responsive to the healthcare challenges facing Veterans and generates improved real-world outcomes for them and their families.

To do this, the AMP initiative will:

Coordinate research activities within disease/condition areas to enable end-to-end research execution, translation into clinical practice, and to inform decision making.

Provide mechanisms to rapidly respond to emerging research needs.

Promote use of common data elements to enhance interoperability and interchange of data between stakeholders within a research area.

Actively Managed Portfolio Approach (2 of 2)

What is Unique about an Actively Managed Portfolio?

As an AMP, MERP will:



Administer an accelerated review process for priority research that allows for the peer-review of research during all 4 quarters of the year.



Utilize a matrixed organizational model that reduces duplicative research and increases collaboration.



Set Critical Research Priorities that will guide medium and long-term planning of the AMP.

Military Exposures Research Program

How does MERP work?

3 Pillars of MERP

Research

- Post-Service Military Exposure Assessments
- Chronic Health Outcomes from Military Exposure
- Interplay of Military Exposures, disparities and co-morbidities
- Leverage the three supporting Cores for seamless research

Communications / Education

- Communication, external-facing (website) to establish transparency, community of practice
- Provide tools and resources to Military Exposure Stakeholders

Expanding Capacity through Partnerships

- Subject Matter Expertise
- Technology
- Data and Biospecimens

MERP Infrastructure (FY24)

Military Exposures Research Program (MERP) - Research Infrastructure

Enterprise-level core capabilities to support funded investigator studies needing exposure assessment, data/survey tools and analysis, biospecimen collection, storage and analysis.

Requests for Applications (RFA): RFAs were developed and released broadly to support key gap portfolio areas.

ORD Military Exposure Research Innovation Center(s) (MERICs) have been launched to support high impact, highly innovative key priority projects.

Capacity Building: Intra- and Inter-federal and academic partnership building are imperative to move military exposure assessment and health research forward efficiently and uniformly.

The Toxic Exposures Fund for ORD is \$45 million. Roughly \$25 million is available for RFA's, Career Development Awards (CDA's), and administrative funding.

MERP – Expert Resources

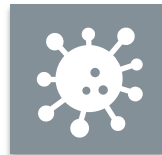
Cores



Administrative Core
(Admin Core)



Data and Biorepository
Commons Core (DBC Core)



Exposures Assessment Core
(EA Core)

MERP – Program Structure



COMMITTEES:

Please note these committees are still under development.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

The Executive Committee will be responsible for programmatic over-site.

SCIENTIFIC STEERING COMMITTEE

The Scientific Steering Committee will be responsible for scientific over-site.

MERP Cores

MERP – Program Structure

What are MERP Cores?



Admin Core

The Administrative Core will facilitate programmatic coordination and strategic planning among MERP stakeholders, including providing guidance to MERP investigators on MERP procedures and regulatory needs.



DBC Core

The mission of the Data and Biorepository Commons Core is to fill programmatic gaps with a focus on building and facilitating knowledge and access to trusted military-exposure data and biospecimens for military exposures research.



EA Core

The mission of the Exposure Assessment Core is to build VA capacity in exposure assessment science and support MERP-funded investigators in the characterization of military exposures by providing subject matter expertise and technical assistance.

MERP Opportunities

VA



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MERP – Funding

Where to apply for MERP funding?

Service	Preapplication/LOI	Merit	CDA-1	CDA-2
Biomedical Laboratory R&D (BLRD/BX)	Under development Spring 2024 – Not required Fall 2024 – required	BX-24-009 (MERP)	BX-24-021 (Veterans)	BX-24-023 BX-24-024 (Minority institutions) CX-24-023
Clinical Science R&D (CSR/D/CX)	Under development Spring 2024 – Not required Fall 2024 – required	CX-24-009 (MERP)	CX-24-021 (Veterans)	BX-24-023 CX-24-023 CX-24-024 (Minority institutions)
Health Services R&D (HSRD/HX)	Summer 2024 Winter 2024	HX-24-001 (Parent I01)	N/A	HX-24-009
Rehabilitation R&D (RRD/RX)	Summer 2024 Winter 2024	RX-24-002 (Parent I01)	RX-22-016	RX-22-017 RX-22-018 (Minority institutions)

Requests for Applications (RFA) and Program Announcements (va.gov) – <https://vaww.research.va.gov/funding/rfa.cfm#blrd>



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MERP Summary

Who, What, How

Who is MERP helping?

The MERP program is managed by executive leaders and scientists who have a passion for, and real-world experience in, research into the medical issues that impact our Veteran population.

What is MERP?

MERP's mission is to advance military exposure assessments and to understand the effects of military exposures on Veterans' health outcomes to inform care and policy. The program will accomplish this by adding additional funding opportunities and guidance to VA researchers.

How is MERP going to help?

Working with researchers to fund and focus their research and to socialize their findings to improve the treatments, practices, and outcomes for our veterans.

MERP Contact

MERP – Contact Us

Contact

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Thank You