

Back from the dead



Former Green Beret turns to DAV after benefits failed to arrive

Former Green Beret Samuel Merchant stood in disbelief as he read a letter from the Department of Veterans Affairs notifying him that his benefits would cease. But his response went from shock to fury when he read why: the VA had wrongly listed him as deceased.

Merchant received the letter in June, but he'd already been confused by the VA's inconsistency. Payment had been missed in April, but started back up again the next month. This notification, however, seemed more concrete.

"I started thinking I could lose everything," said Merchant, a 59-year-old Army veteran. "Thank God I had enough saved up to cover all of my bills."

Fearing the benefits were ending, he contacted the VA call center and was told somebody would fix the issue. However, when the first of the month arrived, the benefits payment was not there.

With the security of predictable and stable compensation he'd earned seemingly evaporating, he called upon DAV for critical and timely help. Since DAV benefits advocates helped him more than 20 years ago win a decade-long appeal for his claim, he knew the organization could assist with this baffling oversight.

Nearly 1,500 miles separated Merchant, who lives in Barnesville, Georgia, and the DAV national service office in Denver, Colorado, but that didn't stop DAV benefits advocates from providing vital assistance.

Merchant contacted DAV through a hotline set up in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic to offer veterans the chance to speak one-on-one with a benefits advocate. On the other line across the country was DAV National Service Officer Henry Myers, who listened to Merchant's justifiably serious concerns.

"He was really frustrated," said Myers, "but he answered all of my questions, so I knew he wasn't dead."

Myers kept in constant contact with Merchant over the following days, monitoring a barrage of messages between the veteran, DAV and the VA. He also began to investigate how this mistake could happen, uncovering the missed April payment in Merchant's files and a memo from a VA employee stating they were looking into the matter.

After several unsuccessful attempts to contact the VA official, Myers enlisted the help of his supervisor, Carmen McGinnis, the national area supervisor of the DAV office in Denver.

"The VA call center puts a report of general information into the veteran's file, but action to fix an issue can take a lot of time," said McGinnis. "That's where the delay was."

The duo leveraged their contacts at the VA and sent messages notifying the department of the mistake. A VA supervisor in Denver promptly responded and assured Myers and McGinnis they would reverse the error.

The financial rope was tightening around Merchant even more. However, when Myers called him the following Monday, he learned that the VA paid everything they were owed, including

April's payment.

Merchant was overwrought with gratitude.

"I was in tears," said Merchant. "I thought I was going to lose my home."

The seamless coordination between the DAV office in Denver and VA made all of the difference in Merchant's case, said McGinnis.

"The benefit of working with DAV is we can utilize our resources and the claimant gets to capitalize on the relationships we built over the years," she said. "When a veteran signs a power of attorney with DAV, they think they're getting one national service officer—or even one national service office—but really they're getting all of the DAV, all of the service officers, to help them."

For Myers, he said he made a friend for life in Merchant.

"One thing I love about my office and what DAV does, is we care," added Myers. "We had to help this guy, and we got it done."