**Headline:** How America Can Better Care for Its Veterans

By Tom Conway

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**[Article Body:]**

Sergeant Jackie E. Garland, twice wounded during combat in Vietnam, returned home only to face even more battles that battered his spirit as well as his body.

The ex-Marine and his wife, Helen, struggled for decades to support their six children while fighting for service disability benefits that always remained a few steps out of reach.

Garland—wracked by pain from the shrapnel he took in his back and hepatitis he contracted during surgery to repair the damage to his spine—died feeling abandoned by his country.

Spurred by that tragedy, George Walsh, Garland’s son-in-law, now finds himself on the front lines of efforts to improve support for veterans and arrest the epidemics of [suicide](https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/11/preventing-veteran-suicide), [homelessness](https://www.bu.edu/articles/2022/why-veterans-remain-at-greater-risk-of-homelessness/), and [alienation](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/07/us/politics/afghan-war-iraq-veterans.html) afflicting those who served.

Walsh, a trustee of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 10-00086, is helping to lead the [union’s push](https://usw.org/news/media-center/articles/2023/conway-urges-congress-to-back-commitment-to-veteran-support-and-outreach) for the federal Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach (CVSO) Act. The bill would expand the ranks of county veteran service officers across the nation and provide other resources needed to connect veterans with care.

“This is a no-brainer. We send people to war. We ask them to fight for their country. We need to start taking care of them,” explained Walsh, himself a veteran of the Navy submarine service who later served in the Reserve as a Seabee. “We need to start putting our money where our mouths are and helping these veterans and their families.”

“This is really a good piece of legislation. We should have had this years ago,” added Walsh, a USW safety representative at the Merck plant in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, noting many veterans feel adrift and lose hope. “My father-in-law was that way.”

County veteran service officers are trained advocates, accredited by the federal government, who help former service members, their loved ones, and caregivers“[navigate the complex intergovernmental chain](https://www.naco.org/resources/authorize-resources-county-veteran-service-officers) of veterans services and resources.”

They make veterans aware of the medical benefits as well as the education, job search, housing assistance, and other services available to them. They also assist veterans in applying for these opportunities and go to bat for them if government agencies balk at approving claims or applications.

These grassroots officials leverage billions in support every year. But there’s a dire shortage of them across the country.

The CVSO Act would provide [$50 million a year](https://www.baldwin.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/CVSO%20Act%20One%20Pager%20-%20116th2.pdf) for counties to hire more veteran service officers and fund outreach campaigns aimed at connecting ex-service members with assistance.

High levels of suicide and homelessness speak to veterans’ struggles on the home front. Yet the resources to confront these challenges often go unused because veterans either [don’t know what’s available to them](https://www.psu.edu/news/research/story/researchers-examine-why-health-and-social-services-go-unused-new-veterans/) or struggle to access it.

Walsh’s in-laws felt overwhelmed trying to penetrate the bureaucracy on their own while coping with life’s daily challenges.

“If it wasn’t for my mother-in-law, I don’t know how they would have done it,” said Walsh, noting that Helen Garland, a Navy nurse who met her husband during his recovery at Camp Pendleton in Southern California, largely held the family together on her own.

He said his father-in-law, once a “Marine’s Marine” who wanted a military career, endured pain every day and became so disillusioned with the government’s treatment of him that he refused to let taps be played at his funeral.

Walsh knows what an enormous difference a county veteran service officer would have made because, at the end of his father-in-law’s life, he found one.

He recalled watching a nonprofit television channel one night when he saw an interview with [Elias Tallas](https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/caller/name/elias-tallas-obituary?pid=189558816), a veteran service officer from Berks County who served with the Army in Vietnam.

He tracked down a phone number for Tallas, met him a couple of days later, and handed over the “meticulous notes” his mother-in-law kept about Jackie Garland’s quest for benefits.

Tallas agreed to wade into the case. And although his assistance came too late to help Jackie Garland, he succeeded in securing benefits for Helen Garland that enabled her to live decently for the rest of her life.

Walsh wants all former service members to have the expertise, support, and compassion that Tallas provided. Motivated by respect for his in-laws and a sense of duty to fellow veterans, he’s meeting with members of Congress to explain the need for the CVSO Act.

He starts those meetings by showing his father-in-law’s photo. “I’d like to introduce you to Sergeant Jackie E. Garland,” he says, then tells his story.

While the Garlands fought on their own, other veterans lean on one another—sharing leads, tips, and information—as they try to navigate the system. In July 2023, for example, Frank Brondum and a friend exchanged information about the various education opportunities available to them.

It’s outrageous, he said, for the nation to leave veterans in the dark. “I’m 42 years old, I served for 13 years, and I’m still learning about the benefits I’m qualified for,” said Brondum, a member of USW Local 13-1 who works at the Shell refinery in Deer Park, Texas.

Brondum, who served in the Army, said more than two dozen former service members at the refinery alone would benefit from a single point of contact for veterans programs.

However, it’s as important to publicize the work of the county veteran service officers as it is the benefits and services themselves, Brondum said, noting he only found out about his county’s representative in July 2023.

Once they’re back home, Walsh said, veterans deserve a system of care that serves them as reliably as they did the nation.

“When he was asked to serve, he served,” Walsh observed of his father-in-law. “There was no hesitation on his part.”