**Headline:** How the Camp Lejeune Justice Act Can Help Veterans Impacted by Toxic Exposure

**Teaser:** Decades of toxic contamination at Camp Lejeune have left veterans, military families, and civilians with devastating health issues

By Jonathan Sharp

**Author Bio:** Jonathan Sharp is the chief financial officer at [Environmental Litigation Group, PC](https://www.elglaw.com/). Headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama, the law firm specializes in toxic exposure cases for veterans and their families.

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**[Article Body:]**

Camp Lejeune, a military base in Jacksonville, North Carolina, was [established in 1942](https://www.lejeune.marines.mil/Offices-Staff/Environmental-Mgmt/Cultural-Resources/History-Live/History-of-Camp-Lejeune/) to train future marines for World War II. While it is known as the home of the “Expeditionary Forces in Readiness,” the facility also has a long history of [contamination with toxic chemicals](https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/camp-lejeune/research.asp#:~:text=Drinking%2Dwater%20systems%20that%20supplied,at%20Camp%20Lejeune%20are%20unknown.) such as perchloroethylene, vinyl chloride, trichloroethylene, and benzene. In 1982, [volatile organic compounds](https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/camp-lejeune/about/index.html#:~:text=In%201982%2C%20the%20Marine%20Corps%20discovered%20specific%20volatile%20organic%20compounds,PCE%20(perchloroethylene%20or%20tetrachloroethylene).)—gases released by these solvents—were found at Camp Lejeune.

Furthermore, since 1966, military firefighters and trainees have used the fire suppressant Aqueous Film-Forming Foam (AFFF) to extinguish jet fuel and petroleum fires, which has only worsened pollution. This firefighting foam contains PFAS, [a group of over 5,000 dangerous substances](https://earthjustice.org/features/breaking-down-toxic-pfas) often dubbed “forever chemicals,” in a concentration of up to 98 percent. With each use, AFFF contaminates the environment with these chemicals. Some take over 1,000 years to break down, hence their nickname.

The highest PFAS level at Camp Lejeune was [172,000 parts per trillion](https://www.aboutlawsuits.com/camp-lejeune-pfas-exposure-lawsuit/), 2,457 times the safe exposure limit as [directed by the Environmental Protection Agency](https://www.epa.gov/pfas). As of 2021, despite the relentless cleanup efforts of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Navy, at least 14 sites at Camp Lejeune still harbored these chemicals. Because PFAS are extremely difficult to remove from the environment, the military base is not expected to be entirely safe for decades.

In 1985, the greatest [trichloroethylene level was 280 times the safe exposure limit](https://www.belllegalgroup.com/detailed-look-at-toxic-chemicals-in-camp-lejeunes-water/#:~:text=The%20maximum%20level%20of%20TCE,Hodgkin's%20lymphoma%2C%20and%20cardiac%20defects.), whereas the highest perchloroethylene level eclipsed the safe exposure limit by 43 times. The dry-cleaning firm [ABC One-Hour Cleaners](https://cumulis.epa.gov/supercpad/SiteProfiles/index.cfm?fuseaction=second.Cleanup&id=0402718#bkground) was responsible for perchloroethylene contamination. As for the other industrial solvents, they ended up polluting Camp Lejeune as a result of the military recklessly using these chemicals to clean weapons and equipment.

**Health Problems Caused by Exposure to Toxic Chemicals**

Exposure to toxic chemicals may cause debilitating health problems, including liver cancer, renal toxicity, prostate cancer, leukemia, female infertility, pancreatic cancer, and scleroderma. Between 1953 and 1987, roughly [1 million people lived at Camp Lejeune](https://www.camplejeuneclaimscenter.com/water-contamination/#:~:text=From%201953%20to%201987%2C%20U.S.,and%20other%20serious%20health%20conditions.), and all had a high risk of developing severe disease.

Until August 2, 2022, veterans affected by toxic exposure could only receive benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). As of this date, due to the Camp Lejeune Justice Act, they can also obtain financial compensation from the U.S. government.

**Veterans Affairs Keeps Rejection Rate High for Camp Lejeune Vets**

The VA has been aware of the diseases veterans might contract at Camp Lejeune since its beginning. Still, Congress passed the [Honoring America’s Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act in 2012](https://www.congress.gov/bill/112th-congress/house-bill/1627). This comprehensive, bipartisan legislative package was meant to grant veterans and family members who lived at the military base access to better health care, education, housing, and memorial services, as well as disability, social security, and indemnity compensation.

Before 2012, veterans were able to file disability compensation claims for health problems stemming from toxic exposure at military bases. However, the VA began using alleged “subject matter experts” in 2012 to review these cases. In February 2022, it was revealed these “experts” were [nothing but general and preventive doctors](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/va-camp-lejeune-contaminated-water-veterans-disability-claims/) with no proper expertise in assessing the complex afflictions Camp Lejeune veterans were struggling with. These doctors’ lack of knowledge led to the claim approval rate plummeting from 25 percent to only 5 percent.

In 2017, the VA deemed [eight diseases](https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/publications/gulf-war/gulf-war-winter-2017/camp-lejeune.asp) as presumptive conditions resulting from Camp Lejeune’s toxic contamination. This decision increased the average claim approval rate over 11 years to [roughly 17 percent.](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/va-camp-lejeune-contaminated-water-veterans-disability-claims/) Nonetheless, this percentage is still below the former yearly average, and thousands of veterans suffering from diseases are regularly denied the compensation and health care services they deserve. While veterans acknowledged the significance of this minor improvement, they believed the list should include a broader range of health problems.

The VA’s list of health issues related to toxic exposure at Camp Lejeune includes not only the eight presumptive conditions but also [15 conditions for which veterans and family members will receive financial compensation](https://www.va.gov/disability/eligibility/hazardous-materials-exposure/camp-lejeune-water-contamination/) to cover the costs of their health care and treatment. Filing a claim for VA disability compensation as a Camp Lejeune veteran is significant.

After a medical evaluation, those assigned a 100 percent disability rating will receive [monthly compensation of over $3,000](https://www.va.gov/disability/compensation-rates/veteran-rates/). Additionally, veterans impacted by toxic exposure can now obtain financial compensation from the U.S. government due to the Camp Lejeune Justice Act.

**Camp Lejeune Justice Act of 2022**

On March 26, 2021, Representative Matt Cartwright (D-PA) introduced the [Camp Lejeune Justice Act](https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/2192/text) bill. The bill aims to allow veterans, military families, and civilians who lived at the military installation between August 1, 1953, and December 31, 1987, for at least one month to seek reparations outside the VA. Furthermore, the Camp Lejeune Justice Act prohibits the U.S. government from asserting immunity from litigation in response to the claims filed by toxic exposure victims.

“When we send our men and women overseas, we make a promise to care for them when they come home. We failed our veterans …, and it is up to us to make it right. Our bipartisan bill … eliminates burdensome red tape to ensure that those exposed to toxic chemicals, including service members, Marine dependents, civil servants, and contractors, can receive their day in court,” [said](https://gregmurphy.house.gov/media/press-releases/camp-lejeune-justice-act-headed-president-s-desk) Representative Greg Murphy (R-NC), a supporter of the Camp Lejeune Justice Act. Put differently, the bill enables veterans to exercise their constitutional right to legal recourse.

On August 2, 2022, [the Senate voted to pass the bill](https://newyork.legalexaminer.com/legal/camp-lejeune-justice-act-passes-congress-presidents-desk/) with a final vote of 86-11. Nine days later, [President Joe Biden signed the Camp Lejeune Justice Act](https://fedsoc.org/commentary/fedsoc-blog/pres-biden-signs-camp-lejeune-justice-act-into-law) into law. The bill is now part of the [Honoring Our PACT Act](https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/3967/text), which is meant to improve healthcare access and funding for veterans exposed to toxic substances during their military service. According to the Camp Lejeune Justice Act, those affected can now file a lawsuit in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina if their previous claim with the VA has gone unanswered for more than six months.

“After years of commitment to this issue, I am grateful that my colleagues on both sides of the aisle agreed to pass this crucial legislation so that poisoned Camp Lejeune veterans can finally seek justice,” [said](https://gregmurphy.house.gov/media/press-releases/camp-lejeune-justice-act-headed-president-s-desk) Representative Cartwright. It is worth noting that punitive damages will not be awarded in any lawsuit under this new law. Therefore, veterans struggling with health problems caused by toxic exposure at Camp Lejeune can only receive financial compensation from the federal government. The settlement payout ranges between $25,000 and $1 million, depending on the severity of the plaintiff’s diagnosis. Victims had until August 10, 2024, to file a claim.

With the passage of the federal court filing deadline, litigation remains ongoing. As of August 21, 2024, [more than 500,000 administrative claims](https://www.lawsuit-information-center.com/camp-lejeune-water-lawsuit.html#update) have been directly filed with the Department of the Navy. According to Peter A. Moore Jr., Clerk of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina, at least [2,067 cases have been filed as of August 4, 2024](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/victims-camp-lejeunes-water-poisoning-found-justice-final-deadline-cla-rcna164572).

Victims have voiced frustrations with the slow processing of the claims. At the time of the deadline, the Navy had processed only [109 of the filed claims.](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/victims-camp-lejeunes-water-poisoning-found-justice-final-deadline-cla-rcna164572) In some cases, the impacts of the slow rollout may have contributed to the deaths of many of the claimants. Attorney Andrew Van Arsdale, whose firm represents over 9,000 of the Camp Lejeune claimants, said in August 2024 that [more than 2,000 of his clients](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/victims-camp-lejeunes-water-poisoning-found-justice-final-deadline-cla-rcna164572) had passed away awaiting action.

Before the Camp Lejeune Justice Act became law, only veterans could receive disability compensation and health care benefits from the VA, while civilians had no right to legal recourse. The cost of treatment for the crippling diseases toxic exposure victims suffer from is exceptionally high. For instance, people with thyroid cancer usually have to pay [up to $40,000 for surgery](https://health.costhelper.com/thyroid-cancer.html). Consequently, veterans and civilians who spent time at Camp Lejeune have been struggling financially. Even though money will not cure most of the health issues toxic exposure victims develop, the financial compensation they can obtain will be of tremendous help.