

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS NEWSLETTER



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Summer/Early Fall 2014

Greetings,

Those of you reading this are probably veterans, veterans family members, or are with a group or organization associated with veterans causes and programs. If you are a veteran or family member, I want to insure you that a network of veterans offices and organizations is working hard to support you in obtaining the benefits and assistance that you are entitled. If you are associated with a veterans service organization or another group that actively supports veterans programs, I thank you for all you are doing to help our veterans.

A lot has changed and continues to change regarding veterans benefits and how they are provided. A number of new programs have been instituted. A new US Department of Veterans Administration secretary is at the helm. They are increasing their efforts to work down the piles of claims and get responses to you. These efforts are making a difference and wait times are being dramatically cut. No system is perfect. We wish it were. However, please know that a lot of dedicated people across this land are working hard to take care of veterans.

Our office continues to amass and distribute the bi-monthly events calendar. We have begun attaching items concerning specific events to give them a broader audience. We are developing a new, more easily navigated website that will incorporate more references and resources than before. We are also collaborating with several other state government agencies to develop more programs to assist veterans.

From the emails that come to the governor's office and to our office, I'm learning that there is disparity in how veterans receive their assistance and benefits. I've also re-learned that there is no cookie-cutter answer for issues and problems experienced by individuals. Our office works those assistance requests individually until we receive resolution for the veteran. Some of these are resolved quickly; others take longer. Regardless, I assure you that our office and the county veterans service offices and the several veterans service organizations are committed to assisting individual veterans. We are all part of a much larger organization dedicated to helping and assisting you – our veteran.

I firmly believe that you don't need a special holiday or season to celebrate our veterans. We'll soon be celebrating Veterans Day. I know from the number of requests for speeches that have been received in our office that Veterans Day is being observed widely across the state. I hope you will participate in one of these events that may be close to you. However, I firmly believe every day is Veterans Day. Every day is a day to thank our veterans for all they have done and continue to do for our communities. You and I live in a wonderful land that was made possible by our veterans, beginning with the Revolutionary War; veterans who have fought and died for the rights and freedoms of others both here at home and abroad. We all know who the veterans are amongst us. It takes only a little effort to reach out and thank them for what they have given to the rest of you.

I wish you a great day and Veterans Day.

Regards,

Executive Director Robert King


State of Iowa
Executive Department

IN THE NAME AND BY THE AUTHORITY OF THE STATE OF IOWA

PROCLAMATION

- WHEREAS,** every year, Veterans Day is a time to reflect on the service and sacrifice of all generations of veterans; these men and women have given selflessly of themselves to defend our freedoms, and we are constantly humbled by their strength and courage; and
- WHEREAS,** the history of Veterans Day goes back to the Armistice, also known as the Treaty of Versailles, that ended the hostilities of World War I; the treaty was signed in the Palace of Versailles, outside of the town of Versailles, France, on June 28, 1918; and
- WHEREAS,** the fighting had ceased seven months earlier when a temporary cessation of hostilities between the Allied nations and Germany went into effect on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month; and
- WHEREAS,** in 1938, November 11, was dedicated as Armistice Day to honor the veterans of that conflict, and in 1954 was expanded to honor American veterans of all wars; and
- WHEREAS,** our men and women in uniform have been the bearers of a proud military tradition that has been dutifully passed down from generation to generation for more than two centuries; and
- WHEREAS,** in times of war and peace alike, our veterans have served with courage and distinction in the face of tremendous adversity, demonstrating an unflinching commitment to America and our people; many have made the ultimate sacrifice to preserve the country they loved; and
- WHEREAS,** the selflessness of our service members has always been, and continues to be, unmatched, and they remind us that there are few things more fundamentally American than doing our utmost to make a difference in the lives of others; and
- WHEREAS,** on Veterans Day, we pay tribute to our veterans, to the fallen, and to their families; to honor their contributions to our nation, let us strive with renewed determination to keep the promises we have made to all who have answered our country's call; as we fulfill our obligations to them, we keep faith with the patriots who have risked their lives to preserve our Union, and with the ideals of service and sacrifice upon which our Republic was founded:

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Terry E. Branstad, Governor of the State of Iowa, do hereby proclaim November 11, 2014,

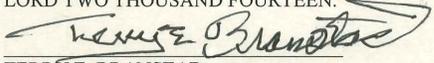
as

VETERANS DAY

and ask all Iowans to make Veterans Day 2014 a special "Welcome Home" for all who have served our nation regardless of which war or conflict including our newest generation of veterans who have served in the post-9/11 era. Let us shine a light on all of them and say 'thank you' for the sacrifices and all they have given while serving our country.



IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, I HAVE HERETO SUBSCRIBED MY NAME AND CAUSED THE GREAT SEAL OF THE STATE OF IOWA TO BE AFFIXED. DONE AT DES MOINES THIS 19th DAY OF SEPTEMBER IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD TWO THOUSAND FOURTEEN.


TERRY E. BRANSTAD
GOVERNOR OF IOWA

ATTEST:


MATT SCHULTZ
SECRETARY OF STATE

Iowa Veterans Cemetery



Photo contributed by Liz Thompson, Van Meter, Iowa



Photo contributed by Mindy McGregor, Van Meter, Iowa

The Iowa Veterans Cemetery reports that through September 30, 2014 there are:
Applications on file (still living): 7,126 Interments: 2,129
Veterans interred: 1,729 Dependents interred: 405

Iowa Veterans Cemetery Facts:

Caskets: 623 Cremations: 1,442 In Memory of markers: 59

IDVA News

2014 Iowa State Fair Veterans Parade

This year's Veterans' Parade was the largest/longest on record as were the number of spectators. The weather was "Fair Perfect" and the crowd proudly enthusiastic!

This year Governor Branstad invited the Spirit of Liberty Foundation to bring the Foundation's *Freedom Bell* to the 2014 Iowa State Fair. Fair attendees were invited to ring the bell to honor a family member or friend who has or is serving in the Armed Forces. The Bell has been a part of many ceremonies including Flag Day at Independence Hall, the 12th anniversary of 9/11 in New York, Remembrance Day at Pearl Harbor and many more. (For more information, visit: <http://spiritoflibertyfoundation.com>.)

The *Freedom Bell* made its first appearance in the Veterans Day Parade accompanied by Carlos Torres, former U.S. Marine sergeant who sustained injuries in the recent fighting in Afghanistan and subsequently lost both legs. He is an employee of American Warrior Brands, a company organized to provide meaningful employment for disabled veterans.



Photos by Robert Nandell, veteran

IDVA News Con't.

2014 Iowa State Fair Veterans Parade Con't.

Grand Marshalls of the 2014 Parade: Five Vietnam War Veterans

Cars provided by Za Ga Zig Shrine Temple, Altoona, Iowa. Photos by Robert Nandell



Army veteran Bill Campell and wife Jeanette



Marine veteran Steve Cox



Navy veteran Larry Spencer and wife Ann



Coast Guard veteran Victor Tate



Air Force veteran Marvin Tooman

IDVA News Con't.

2014 Iowa State Fair Veterans Parade Con't.



34th Army Band, Iowa Army National Guard, Fairfield, Iowa



IDVA Executive Director Robert King MCs the Veterans Parade



The Freedom Bell



Judith Johnson-Mekota, Director, VA Central IA Health Care System, Bob Steben, IDVA; Terri Beer, Director, Des Moines Regional Benefit Office



*Major General (Ret) Robert Sentman
astride his American Quarter Horse Peppy.*



*Sergeant Mark Wiedenhoff
astride his Palamino Quarterhorse Blondie*

IDVA News Con't.

Iowa Trust Fund Awards Record Assistance

IDVA staffer Missy Miller reports that since the beginning of the Iowa Veterans Trust Fund program on July 1, 2007, IDVA has assisted 871 veterans – some of them several times.

This September, however, was our biggest Trust Fund Award month. The Iowa Veterans Trust Fund awarded \$42,527.26 through 26 applications.

About the Iowa Veterans Trust Fund: The State of Iowa established a multi-million dollar fund to provide certain services to veterans. Beginning in December 2007, interest from this fund has been available to provide relief for Iowa veterans and their families. Interest from the Iowa Lottery tickets sold is received monthly, and \$300,000 from the principal is received annually. Currently, funds are used for unemployment or underemployment assistance due to service-related causes, assistance with vision, hearing, dental care, durable medical equipment, and prescription drugs; counseling and substance abuse services; housing repair; and transitional housing in an emergency. Trust Fund expenditures are approved through the Iowa Commission of Veterans Affairs.

Missy noted that “it’s great that we have this program to assist veterans and their family members, but sad that there are still so many veterans in need...”



County News

from Story County

Story County VA held its second homeless stand down at Brookside Park (next to ISU) in Ames on July 29, 2014. Many of the volunteers are pictured below.



from Dallas County

Dallas County will kick off the Veteran’s Day season at the 2014 Veterans Fair and Open House in Van Meter, Iowa. The event will be held on Saturday, November 2, 2014 at the Van Meter Veterans Reception Center located at 910 Main Street, Van Meter, Iowa from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm. The event is open to all veterans.

For more information, contact Ed Vos, Director, Dallas County VA, 515-993-5809, ed.vos@co.dallas.ia.us.

County News Con't.

from Cedar County

Medals Awarded to Muscatine Veteran

Keaton Simons, 24, of Muscatine, Iowa was a Sergeant with the U.S. Army Cavalry unit and served overseas in the Zhari District of Kandahar Province in Afghanistan from January 2011-January 2012. He earned a Purple Heart for his service, but when the package arrived in the mail, it was empty. For Patty Hamann, the Veterans Affairs Administrator for Cedar County, that box was an empty promise that needed to be fulfilled.

"I met him my second day down here. Looking at his military file, I knew we needed to fix a few wrongs," said Hamann. Hamann has been helping in Muscatine County until a new county administrator could be approved, which the Muscatine Board of Supervisors did during its meeting Monday, appointing Jennifer Watkins-Schoening to the position. In the meantime, though, Hamann wanted to help. "He was awarded a Purple Heart and it was mailed, but it was missing. I called up Jessica from Senator Tom Harkin's office and said 'We need to fix this,'" said Hamann.

Simons, who is now in the inactive reserve, was awarded the Purple Heart, (along with Army Commendation Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Army Service Ribbon, Overseas Service Ribbon, Combat Action Badge, Army Lapel Button, Global War on Terror Service Medal, and Afghanistan Campaign Medal with two bronze stars) at the Veterans Affairs Office on June 24, 2014, with about 20 people in attendance – including several members of his family and the Muscatine County Board of Supervisors. Senator Harkin's office sent Simons a board with his medals and ribbons mounted on it.

"In the beginning, he wanted nothing to do with this or any hoopla. But I think he realized the significance of these medals and what it means for the community in Muscatine to recognize him for everything he sacrificed," said Hamann after introducing Simons. "Keaton is 1% of the 1%. He was a Cavalry Scout," said Hamann. "They are reconnaissance specialists. They work to obtain, distribute and share vital combat and battlefield information on the enemy and combat circumstances. He had a pretty significant position and it didn't come very lightly."

Hamann also told the crowd that prior to the ceremony she had tried to look up more information on Simons' unit but wasn't very successful. "It's very closed off and very tight. There's not a lot of information out there about his unit at all, which tells me, significantly, again how important he was to our safety here," said Hamann.

Simons believes his Purple Heart was stolen. "It felt terrible that someone would be that low to steal it," he said. After his service, he came back home to Muscatine and to his wife, Courtney, and bought a house with a VA loan. Simons said out of the nearly 300 people in his unit that went overseas, seven died in combat and 144 were awarded Purple Hearts. "I did what I was supposed to do. They wanted me to wait until Sen. Harkin would present [the award] to me but I didn't want anything big.



Jessica Border (Sen. Harkin's office)
and Keaton Simons

Neither Simons nor Hamann would talk about the actions that lead to Simons being awarded the Purple Heart, but Hamann reminded the crowd that not all injuries are visible. "A lot of times you may not see physical scars or physical wounds but there are a lot of things that have happened that Keaton will carry for the rest of his life," said Hamann. "I can honestly tell you I am honored to have met him and to get to do whatever I can to make his life much simpler in the days to come."

[Source: *Muscatine Journal*, 6-24-14 by Sarah Tisinger]

Local News and Updates

Iowa WWII Airman Returns Home 69 Years Later

Governor Branstad ordered flags to be flown at half-staff in Iowa from 5 p.m. July 18, 2014 until 8 a.m. July 21, 2014 in honor of U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Robert “Bobby” E. Howard, formerly of Mouton, Iowa. Howard had been missing for 69 years.

Howard served with the 450th Bomber Squadron, 322nd Bomber Group, Medium, 9th Air Force, U.S. Army Air Corps and was last seen on April 16, 1945 as his unit was conducting a bombing mission in Germany. The flight originated from Le Culot Airfield near Beauvechain, Belgium and his plane was shot down and crashed near Wittenburg, Germany. Only one of the six crew members was able to parachute from the aircraft and was taken prisoner by German forces. Howard and four other crew-members were declared deceased, but their remains were never recovered.

In 2012, the Joint Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Accounting Company - Central identification Laboratory (JPAC)- received information from German officials of human remains found within a burial site located close to the possible aircraft crash site in Muhlanger, near the city of Lutherstadt-Wittenberg. In 2014, JPAC’s Research and Analysis Group concluded mitochondrial DNA testing on the remains and positively identified part of the remains as belonging to Howard.



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Robert Howard

Robert Howard was born December 19, 1923 in Moulton, Iowa. He enlisted in the U.S. Army on March 19, 1943 and transferred into the U.S. Army Air Corps. Howard served as an engineer/gunner on a Martin B-26B “Marauder.” His military awards and honors include the Purple Heart, Air Medal (with one silver and two bronze Oak Leaf Clusters), Army Good Conduct Medal, American Campaign Medal, European-African-Middle-Eastern Campaign Medal (with three bronze service stars), World War II Victory Medal, and Enlisted Crew Wings.

Howard is survived by brothers Harold and Dennis, sisters Evelyn Lewin, Janie Ballanger, and Evelyn June Nace. His parents and a sister, Betty Howard Harvey, are deceased. A memorial service was held at Sunset View Cemetery in Moulton on July 19, 2014 with full military honors provided by the Iowa National Guard. [Sources: Press Release, Office of the Governor, 7-15-14; *Des Moines Register*, 7-19-14; WOWT TV: Omaha, 7-8-14]

Mount Mercy Recognizes Service Through New Veteran’s Lounge

Veterans attending Mount Mercy University have a new place to network. In June, the university opened a lounge on the first level of Warde Hall specifically for service men and women to call their own.

“With computer stations and a printer, microwave and mini-fridge, meeting table and comfortable seating, we hope the lounge offers a welcoming place for veterans to connect with one another as well as to study and relax in between classes,” said Rob Callahan, vice president for enrollment management at Mount Mercy.

The lounge is in convenient proximity to the Office of Financial Aid and the registrar, both important players in sorting out veteran’s educational benefits. “I’m glad the lounge is close by,” said Mount Mercy Registrar Chance McWorthy, whose office is just a flight above the space. “I hope the location encourages students to drop by with any questions they may have about their education benefits.”

The Veteran’s Lounge is open during regular building hours for Mount Mercy students, as well as staff, who have served in the U.S. military. [Source: <https://www.mtmercy.edu/news-events/article/2014/07/18/mount-mercy-recognizes-service-through-new-veteran%E2%80%99s-lounge>, 7-18-14]

Local News and Updates Con't.

Update on State Veteran License Plate Fees

<u>SF303</u>				
Amends 321.34 to eliminate the initial plate fee for one set of numbered plates and reduce the fee to \$25 for one set of personalized plates for persons qualified to receive the following military special plates:				
Plate Name	Numbered Plates (1st Set)	Personalized Plates (1st Set)	Numbered Plates (2nd & subsequent)	Personalized Plates (2nd & subsequent)
Bronze Star	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Gold Star Family	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Iowa National Guard	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Pearl Harbor Veteran	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Purple Heart	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Retired Armed Forces Air Force	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Retired Armed Forces Army	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Retired Armed Forces Coast Guard	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Retired Armed Forces Marine	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Retired Armed Forces Navy	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Air Force Cross	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Airman's Medal	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Distinguished Service Cross	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Navy and Marine Corps Medal	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Navy Cross	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Soldier's Medal	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Silver Star	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50
Veteran	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$50

The Iowa Department of Transportation currently updated the applications on their website; this link is also available on the IDVA website.

Senate File 303: Military Retirement Benefits Exemption

Governor Branstad signed Senate File 303 on May 26, 2014, which provides for the exclusion of military retirement benefits from Iowa individual income tax retroactive to the tax year beginning on or after January 1, 2014.

The exclusion also applies to military survivor benefits received under 10 U.S.C. 1447. The exemption is available to both residents and nonresidents of Iowa. Because the change is retroactive to January 1, 2014, individuals receiving military retirement benefits may immediately change or eliminate the amount of Iowa tax being withheld or their military pension. They may also leave their withholdings as they are and receive a refund when their taxes are filed.

There are several methods that may be used to accomplish this.

1. Form IA W-4P, Withholding Certificate for Pension or Annuity Payments (form at <https://tax.iowa.gov/sites/files/idr/forms1/1444020.pdf>), may be completed and sent to:
Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS): US Military Retirement Pay
P.O. Box 7130
London, Kentucky 40742-7130
2. DD Form 2866, Retiree Change of Address Request/State Tax Withholding Authorization (form at www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/infomgt/forms/eforms/dd2866.pdf), may be mailed to the same address as above.
3. You can fax the forms to DFAS: 1-800-469-6559.
4. You may call DFAS: 1-800-321-1080.

Local News and Updates Con't.

Veterans History Project: DMACC Newton Campus

DMACC Newton Campus has announced their partnership with the Veterans History Project on November 7, 2014 from 9:30 am – 1:00 pm on the DMACC Newton Campus, 600 North 2nd Avenue West in Newton, Iowa.

Background: The United States Congress created the Veterans History Project in 2000 as part of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

Mission: The VPH is part of a national initiative to collect, preserve and make accessible the personal accounts of American war veterans so that future generations may hear directly from veterans and better understand the realities of war.

What: DMACC and the Iowa Court Reports Association will host the Veterans History Project at the DMACC Newton Campus. At this time, we are taking the names of those interested and will interview 15 veterans on November 7th about their military service. Preference will be given to WWII vets. If you don't have the opportunity to share your story/memories this November, we do plan to make this an annual event and will keep your name on the list. The interviews will be written and transcribed by court reporters. Transcripts will become an official record in the Library of Congress and the Iowa Gold Star Military Museum in Johnston, Iowa as well as the DMACC library will receive a copy.

Copies of the transcripts, a DVD of the interview, and a framed certificate will be presented to the veteran and his family.

The veteran will get a packet, a set of questions to help prep for the interview, a bio form, and a release form. The day of the event, the veteran may bring a family member or other guest(s) with him. The veteran will be provided with a host for the morning. The interview will be a minimum of 30 minutes with an interviewer, court reporter and a videographer attending. They will have a waiting area with refreshments for guests. Following the interviews, the veteran and his guest(s) will be honored at a luncheon ceremony. Photos will be taken and certificates handed out. A confirmation letter, detailed agenda, map, etc., will be mailed to the veteran the end of October.

To be considered for the project, contact Julie Van Cleave, 641-791-1720 or javancleave@dmacc.edu. If you'd like more information, you can also visit www.ncra.org and go to Oral Histories - The Veterans History Project

In case you missed it...



President Barack Obama greets retired Army Command Sgt. Major Bennie Adkins and family in the Oval Office before awarding him the Medal of Honor at a ceremony in the East Room of the White House, Sept. 15, 2014. President Obama also awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously to Army Specialist Four Donald Sloat. *(Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)*

Local News and Updates Con't.

Iowa Judge Leads Effort to Establish Veterans Court

District Judge Jeffrey Poulson knows that military veterans, many having served multiple tours of duty in recent wars, are entering Woodbury County's courtrooms in trouble. They fought for their country in Iraq and Afghanistan. Now some are fighting drug and alcohol addictions and mental health problems here at home, and committing crimes.

"They come back broken, and we're starting to see them in our court system," Poulson said.

The *Sioux City Journal* reports that District Judge Jeffrey Poulson is leading an effort to establish a Veterans Treatment Court in Woodbury County — a program that would get help for veterans of any age who commit crimes in the county by assigning a mentor to the offender and, hopefully, keep them out of jail. An Iraq War combat veteran would be paired with another veteran with combat experience, for example. It would be the first such court program in Iowa. Poulson hopes it's operational by Jan. 1.

A judge, in addition to requiring mentoring, could order an offender to seek mental health or substance abuse treatment and receive help enrolling for services through the Veterans Administration. Those who fail could be sent to jail. Incentives would reward positive behavior.

The program would be comparable to Drug Court, Family Treatment Court and Project Compass, diversionary programs already operating successfully in Woodbury County.

In April, *Justice for Vets* personnel trained Woodbury County volunteers, including court administrators, prosecutors, public defenders, substance abuse and mental health treatment providers and the Veterans Administration. Becky Hess, veterans justice outreach coordinator with the VA in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, said the court could help connect veterans with VA care or find them services with private providers. She has observed similar courts in other states. "The initial evidence at this point is excellent. The success rate is high," she said.

Still unknown in Woodbury County is where funding would come from and how many veterans might be served. Poulson said at least one veteran a day goes through the County Jail, but jailers have been asking about military service status during bookings only since the beginning of the year.

Funds would be needed for random drug testing, Poulson said, and the program may also need a paid administrator. Poulson said he hopes volunteers and donors will step forward to give back to troubled men and women veterans who have served.

"This isn't a problem that's going away," Poulson said. "These guys will be dealing with this for the next 60 years." [Source: Associated Press, Nick Hytrek/*Washington Times*, 7-20-14]

Governor's 2014 Volunteer Awards

Congratulations to Megan Hartwig, vocalist extraordinaire and Gloria Doyle, bugler par excellence for receiving "Individual Governor's Volunteer Awards" for their volunteer service on behalf of the Iowa Department of Veterans Affairs. We appreciate their ongoing volunteer efforts for veterans on behalf of IDVA.

The awards were presented in Pleasant Hill on June 18, 2014 in the auditorium at Southeast Polk High School. IDVA's Executive Director, Bob King, presided over the event, assisted by Kim Reynolds, Lieutenant Governor, Missy Miller, Jill Joseph of the IDVA staff and many other volunteers.

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Governor's 2014 Volunteer Awards Con't.

Continued from page 13

The Governor's Volunteer Awards are a way we can recognize individuals and groups that provide extraordinary support to all of us – including the IDVA and the county veteran offices. Yes there is a cost – to us. Colonel King considers the cost of each award (approximately \$15 each) as approved expenditures of the county allowances. Please keep track of those who are helping us help our veterans. We will provide nomination forms for the 2015 awards when next year's program is announced.



Federal News and Updates

New Burial Payment Regulations for Veterans' Survivors

New burial regulations became effective on July 7, 2014 that will now allow the Department of Veterans Affairs to automatically pay the maximum amount allowable under law to most eligible surviving spouses more efficiently – without the need for a written application.

Under former regulations, VA paid burial benefits on a reimbursement basis; this required survivors to submit receipts for relatively small one-time payments that the VA generally paid at the maximum amount permitted by law. The new changes allow the VA to assist these survivors bear the cost of funerals by changing regulations to get the benefits to them quickly. This revised regulation will further expedite the delivery of these benefits to surviving spouses, reduce the number of claims requiring manual processing, and potentially make available resources for other activities that benefits veterans and their survivors.

For more information, visit: <http://www.benefits.va.gov/compensation/claims-special-burial.asp>.

VA Update: Facility-Level Patient Data 9-18-14

In keeping with the commitment to improve transparency in the department's processes, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) today released the latest update of facility-level patient access data. Of note in this, VA's eighth updated data set:

- The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has reached out to 302,000 Veterans to get them off wait lists and into clinics as of September 12, 2014.
- VHA has also made over 1,115,000 referrals for Veterans to receive care in the private sector.
 - o This is 256,671 more referrals to receive care in the private sector than in the same period in 2013 (between May 16 and September 14, 2014).
 - o Each referral represents an average of 7 appointments.
- Additionally, VA has decreased the number of Veterans on the Electronic Wait List by more than 33,900 (59%) since May 15, 2014.
- VA has directed every medical center and VISN Director to make regular monthly, in-person inspections of their clinics to assess scheduling practices and identify obstacles to timely care. So far VHA has conducted over 3,150 of these visits.

Beginning on August 28, 2014 and moving forward, the VA is posting wait times for completed (previously referred to as retrospective) appointments on a monthly basis, based on when appointments actually occurred. This data takes into account appointments moved up, cancelled, rebooked, and missed. VA will continue to release pending appointment data including NEAR and EWL data on a bi-monthly basis.

Federal News and Updates Con't.

New Rules May Allow Benefits Long Denied to Vietnam-Era Veterans

“Thousands of Vietnam-era veterans barred from receiving benefits because of less-than-honorable discharges may be eligible for upgrades under a new set of guidelines released by the Defense Department on September 3, 2014. The new rules offer the first guidance to military discharge review boards on how to address post-traumatic stress disorder. Many experts and veterans’ advocates assert that the disorder may have contributed to misconduct by veterans who were later kicked out of the military and stripped of benefits,” reports David Phillips.

Phillips further states that “the guidelines ask independent boards that review petitions from veterans seeking upgrades [to their discharges] to give “liberal consideration” to any symptoms of PTSD...In a recent statement, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said the guidelines were intended to create ‘fair and consistent results in these difficult cases...this new guidance reflects our commitment to those who served our country in times of war many decades ago.’”

A class-action lawsuit was filed in federal court by a group of Vietnam veterans and the advocacy group “Vietnam Veterans of America,” charging that the military systematically denied applications for upgrades

involving PTSD. The lawsuit estimated that 250,000 Vietnam-era veterans had received other-than-honorable discharges and that up to 80,000 of that number may have had PTSD.

Although the new rules promise to provide a long-overdue recognition for a “wound of war that was denied for decades,” Jennifer McTiernam, a Yale law school student who helped file the suit said that the suit will still go forward because it is unclear how the new policy will be carried out.

Under the new rules, veterans applying for an upgrade will have to show that they had symptoms of PTSD at the time of their misconduct, that the PTSD was related to military service, and that it contributed to their less-than-honorable discharge. (Veterans with so-called “bad paper” are ineligible for education, disability and housing benefits, and are sometimes barred from Veterans Affairs health care.) The new guidelines urge boards to listen to doctors, but to exercise caution in cases of serious misconduct – especially any crimes involving premeditation.

[from a *New York Times* article published 9-3-14, by Dave Phillips]

Important VA Information on Marriage

The Department of Veterans Affairs offers a variety of benefits and services that depend on “spouse” and “surviving spouse” status. For the purpose of VA benefits, spousal status is predicated on a valid marriage under state law. Under the current Federal law, 38 U.S.C. § 103(c), VA may recognize a Veteran’s marriage for VA purposes if:

- the marriage was legal in the place where the Veteran or the Veteran’s spouse lived at the time of the marriage; or
- the marriage was legal in the place where the Veteran or the Veteran’s spouse lived when he or she filed a VA claim or application (or a later date when the Veteran became eligible for benefits).

The VA is providing information about when it can recognize a marriage on its application form instructions and through public outreach. The VA generally accepts a claimant’s or applicant’s statement that he or she is married as sufficient evidence to establish a Veteran’s marriage for the purpose of VA benefits.

The VA is dedicated to serving all eligible service members, veterans and their families, and providing them the benefits they have earned.

How To Determine If VA Will Recognize a Marriage: <http://www.va.gov/opa/marriage/>

Federal News and Updates Con't.

VA Updates Disability Claims Application Process for Veterans, Survivors New Process Will Reduce Processing Times and Improve Quality

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) today announced that it is introducing a uniformed disability claims form to better serve Veterans, families and survivors. Standardizing process by which Veterans file claims and initiate appeals will make it easier for Veterans and their survivors to clearly state what benefits they are seeking from VA and provide information that is necessary to process their claims and appeals. The new forms eliminate applicant guesswork, which often leads to delays in decisions and ultimately delays in receiving benefits. The new regulations go into effect in late March 2015.

“We must do everything that we can to make it as fast and easy as possible for Veterans and their survivors to file for and receive an accurate decision on their claim,” said VA Secretary Robert McDonald. “Our Veterans and survivors will know, at the outset of the claims process, what is needed, which removes subjective interpretation from the process. We want to eliminate any barriers that make it difficult for our Veterans or survivors to receive benefits to which they are entitled.”

In the past, a Veteran or survivor did not have to use a certain form to seek compensation or other benefits from VA. Claims or appeals (Notice of Disagreement) could be submitted on any piece of paper which caused delays due to missing information.

By using standard forms for all disability claims, VA can more quickly and accurately identify what the Veteran

is claiming or appealing. This will allow VA to immediately move on to next steps in the evidence-gathering and decision-making process, which saves administrative processing time and speeds the delivery of earned benefits. The existing process is also inconsistent with most, if not all, other government and non-government application processes, such as applying for social security, applying for a driver's license, applying for a job or filing for an income tax refund.

“These days government agencies and private businesses rely on standard forms to deliver faster and more accurate customer service,” said Under Secretary for Benefits Allison A. Hickey. VA's ability to deliver better customer service requires the use of standard forms as well. That is why we worked extensively with our partners in the Veterans community to streamline the way we process claims while preserving the effective date rules concerning informal claims through the creation of a new intent to file a claim process.”

The updated process also includes standardizing the traditional informal claims process by employing a new “Intent to File a Claim” process which affords the Veteran or survivor one year to compile the necessary documentation or evidence to support the claim while preserving an effective date of claim.

More information about VA Forms [21-526EZ](#), [21-527EZ](#), [21-534EZ](#) or VA Form [21-0958](#), Notice of Disagreement, may be found at www.ebenefits.va.gov or www.va.gov/vaforms. [VA news release 9-24-14]

Veterans Social Security Program

Did you know that many disabled veterans and wounded warriors may qualify for Social Security disability benefits, in addition to their Veterans Affairs benefits? To assist veterans and members of the public to better understand the Social Security disability process, the Social Security Administration has created a seven-part YouTube video. (<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGSYaZN04xzFCoEqDIY3n7xgWLh55vvDh>)

Please share this information with others in your organization and network to help spread the word about Social Security's disability program to our veterans and wounded warriors.

Federal News and Updates Con't.

VA Names New National Cemetery in Nebraska

The Department of Veterans Affairs selected the name Omaha National Cemetery for the national cemetery that VA will construct in the Omaha region.

VA purchased the Sarpy County land located along South 144th St. (Highway 50), at 14250 Schram Road for \$6 million in December 2012. The cemetery will serve more than 112,000 veterans in eastern Nebraska and western Iowa not currently served with an open national, state or tribal veterans cemetery within 75 miles of their residence.

VA awarded Vireo Planning & Design of Omaha, a small business, the \$1 million architect and engineering contract for the cemetery in Aug. 2013. In fall 2014, VA plans to award a design/build construction contract to complete the remaining cemetery design work and construct the cemetery. VA anticipates that the initial phase of the design/build project will take 2 to 2 ½ years to complete and develop approximately 35 acres of land for approximately 5,500 interment sites, including casket interments, columbarium niches, in-ground sites for cremated remains and an ossuary. The project will also incorporate memorial walls to commemorate those whose remains are not available for interment.

In addition to the gravesite development, construction will include access roads, an entrance area, a flag/assembly area, committal shelters; an administration building/public information center with electronic gravesite locator, public restrooms, a memorial walkway, a maintenance complex and more.

The closest national cemetery is Leavenworth National Cemetery located in Leavenworth, Kan., approximately 180 miles to the southeast. Fort McPherson National Cemetery in Maxwell is the only other VA cemetery in Nebraska.

VA dedicated the Nebraska Veterans Cemetery at Alliance, located in the western part of the state, in August 2010. The cemetery is run by the state and is comprised of approximately 20 acres. The Nebraska Veterans Home Cemetery in Grand Island, also administered by the state, is comprised of four acres and serves the residents of the Nebraska Veterans Home.

Veterans with a qualifying discharge, their spouses and eligible dependent children may be buried in a VA national cemetery. Also eligible are military personnel who die on active duty, their spouses and eligible dependents.

Other burial benefits available for all eligible Veterans, regardless of whether they are buried in a national cemetery or a private cemetery, include a burial flag, a Presidential Memorial Certificate and a Government headstone or marker.

In the midst of the largest expansion since the Civil War, VA operates 131 national cemeteries in 40 states and Puerto Rico and 33 soldiers' lots and monument sites. More than 4 million Americans, including Veterans of every war and conflict, are buried in VA's national cemeteries.

[Source: VA News Release, 9-5-14]

Final Regulations for Camp Lejeune Veterans and Family Members

The Department of Veterans Affairs has announced the publication of two regulations related to Camp Lejeune drinking water contamination. One regards providing health care for Camp Lejeune veterans and the other for reimbursing of health care expenses of family members potentially affected by contaminated drinking water at the U.S. Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. The regulations implement provisions of the "Honoring America's Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act of 2012."

Additional information can be found here: http://www.va.gov/ORPM/docs/20140924_A078_HospitalCareandMedicalServicesforCampLejeuneVeterans.pdf or contact Mandy.Hartman@va.gov for questions.

Federal News and Updates Con't.

108-year-old Veteran Lucy Coffey Fulfills Her Dream

Meet Lucy Coffey – age 108 and the nation’s oldest living female military veteran! For years, Lucy has dreamed of visiting the Women in Military Service for America Memorial in Arlington, Virginia, for over 65 years, and this year – on July 25 – she finally got her wish.

Lucy was greeted by a mob of supporters and well-wishers at Reagan National Airport and was welcomed to the White House by President Obama and Vice President Biden. They both humbly thanked her for her service.

Coffey enlisted in the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps in April 1943, around the time of her 37th birthday, and then transitioned to the WAC when it was established a few months later. (She had tried to enlist several times before, but was rejected for being too short or too slim.) WAC members were the first women besides nurses to serve in the U.S. Army and served mainly in the Pacific theater – going to Australia and Dutch New Guinea before arriving in the Philippines in April 1945. Her last stop was Okinawa, Japan. She worked as an accountant-statistician and served in the procurement office. She earned two Bronze Stars, a WAC Service Medal, a Good Conduct Medal, and a World War II Victory Medal. Coffey, whose last rank was staff sergeant, was one of 150,000 women who served as WACs during the war.

Coffey was honorably discharged in November 1945, but stayed in Japan as a civil servant for about 10 years. She later transferred to Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio where she worked until her retirement in 1971. Though she dreamed of going back to Japan, she never did. But she WAS able to visit the Women in Military Service for America Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery in July.



“America’s sweetheart, Lucy Coffey, 108-year-old WWII veteran went from Texas to the Whitehouse!”



President Obama presents Lucy with a medal

Although Coffey can not walk nor speak very much, she was actively engaged with the people around her during the tour. She smiled at the old uniforms on display and listened intently to the president of the women’s memorial, Ret. USAF Brig. Gen. Wilma L. Vaught as she explained different exhibits. She also met former Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kansas) and Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas).

As part of the Austin Honor Flight, American Airlines provided a free, first-class trip for Coffey. The Honor Flight team took care of the rest. Her nephew, John Mulrey – also a veteran of Vietnam, accompanied his aunt from San Antonio, Texas to Washington D.C. “This, I think, has made her feel so proud...It is the ultimate memory for Lucy.” [Source: www.stripes.com/news]

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