

NEWS AND NOTES FOR FLORIDA VETERANS

Veterans Service Center, VA Regional Office
St. Petersburg, FL

May 2013



The "News and Notes for Florida Veterans" is published monthly by the Veterans Service Center, VA Regional Office, St. Petersburg, Florida, to provide information on VA benefit programs to veterans and dependents in Florida. The material presented does not have the effect of laws or regulations. Please send questions or comments on this newsletter to Veterans Service Center, ATTN: "News and Notes," PO Box 1437, St. Petersburg, FL 33731. We do not have the resources to maintain a mailing list for distribution to individuals; however this newsletter is available on the St. Petersburg VA Regional Office web site at <http://www.benefits.va.gov/stpetersburg/>.

CLAIMS INITIATIVE FACT SHEET (VA News Release)

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is implementing an initiative to expedite compensation claims decisions for Veterans who have waited one year or longer. Effective April 19, the VA will begin to make provisional decisions on the oldest claims in inventory, which will allow Veterans to begin collecting compensation benefits more quickly, if eligible. This initiative provides a one-year safety net to submit further evidence should it become available and protects the Veteran's right to appeal the decision.

For the oldest claims, VA will make a provisional rating based on all current evidence associated with the claim. When benefits are awarded in the provisional decision, the Veteran will begin receiving compensation immediately. These will be decisions based on all evidence VA has received to date and during the time the claim has been pending.

Provisional rating notices will note the evidence on which the decision was based and list any documentation that has not been provided or VA has been unable to obtain. Exams will be provided by VHA in an expedited manner if they are required for a rating.

The Veteran has a safety net – up to one year to submit additional evidence or request VA obtain additional evidence to change the provisional decision. Any awarded benefits will be retroactive to the original date the claim was submitted. If no additional evidence is obtained, the provisional decision will become final after one year (or earlier if the Veteran requests), at which time a final decision and appeal rights will go into effect. These Veterans then will have the standard year to appeal the decision, effectively extending the current appeal window, while also providing them with near-term decisions and benefits, if eligible, based on the evidence in the claims file.

The most vulnerable Veterans will continue to be fast tracked. Wounded, Ill and Injured Veterans from the wars in Iraq & Afghanistan will continue to have priority through the Integrated Disability Evaluation System.

VA will continue to prioritize Veterans who are homeless, terminally ill, former Prisoners of War, and Medal of Honor recipients, those facing financial hardship and our most seriously injured. Fully Developed Claims will continue to receive priority processing.

VETERAN ATHLETES PREPARE FOR NATIONAL VETERANS WHEELCHAIR GAMES (VA News Release)

WASHINGTON – Across the nation, Veterans are preparing for the 33rd National Veterans Wheelchair Games. The Games, representing the largest annual wheelchair sports event in the world, are presented by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Paralyzed Veterans of America. More than 500 Veterans from across the United States, Puerto Rico and Great Britain are expected to compete in the event, taking place July 13-18, 2013, in Tampa, Florida.

The games are open to all U.S. military Veterans who use wheelchairs for sports competition due to spinal cord injuries, neurological conditions, amputations or other mobility impairments. The 33rd Games will be co-hosted by the James A. Haley VA Medical Center and the Paralyzed Veterans of America, Florida Gulf Coast Chapter.

Competitive events will take place at the Tampa Convention Center, Marriott Waterside Hotel & Marina, Pin Chasers Bowling Lanes, Clearwater Long Center, Raymond James Stadium, Silver Dollar Shooter's Club, Jefferson High School, Hillsborough Community College and the Tampa Bay Times Forum. The 33rd Games will include competitions in 18 different events such as swimming, basketball, table tennis, archery, and wheelchair slalom, which is a timed obstacle course. The athletes compete in all events against others with similar athletic ability, competitive experience or age.

In addition to the competitions and the opening and closing ceremonies, the Games will include a "Kids Day at the Games" on Monday, July 15, at Jefferson High School. Local children with disabilities will have the opportunity to interact with the athletes, participate in sporting events, and watch the Veterans compete.

The public is invited to attend any of the sports competitions throughout the week of the Games, and admission is free. Up-to-date information is available on the official National Veterans Wheelchair Games website, www.wheelchairgames.va.gov.

VA LAUNCHES HOTLINE TO ANSWER QUESTIONS ON VA HEALTH CARE AND BENEFITS FOR WOMEN VETERANS (VA News Release) WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs has launched a new hotline — 1-855-VA-WOMEN — to receive and respond to questions from Veterans, their families and caregivers about the many VA services and resources available to women Veterans. The service began accepting calls on April 23, 2013.

The hotline is staffed by knowledgeable VA employees who can provide information about benefits including health care services for women. Callers can be linked to information on claims, education or health care appointments as well as information about VA cemeteries and memorial benefits. Staff can answer urgent questions and provide referrals to homeless and mental health services as well as provide Vet Center information.

Women make up nearly 15 percent of today's active duty military and 18 percent of National Guard and Reserve forces. The population of women Veterans using VA benefits including health care is growing rapidly. Since 2000, the number of women using VA health care more than doubled, from nearly 160,000 in 2000 to more than 354,000 in 2012. Based on the upward trend of women in all branches of service, the number of women Veterans—and female VA users—will keep climbing.

VA is committed to making improvements for the growing population of women Veterans, including the way it communicates with them. In 2010, VA established an outbound call center to contact women Veterans and encourage them to enroll in VA health care.

Women Veterans are entitled to apply for the same benefits as their male counterparts, which include health care and pharmacy benefits as well as education benefits, disability compensation, home loans, employment assistance and more.

The hotline (1-855-VA-WOMEN) joins numerous other VA hotlines that provide critical information and assistance to Veterans, such as those for Veterans in crisis and in danger of becoming homeless. Veterans can also receive information and apply for benefits online at VA's www.eBenefits.va.gov and manage their health care at MyHealthVet.va.gov.

MEMORIAL DAY, which is observed on May 27, commemorates the men and women who died while in the military service. In observance of the holiday, ceremonies are held at many National Cemeteries. Contact the nearest National Cemetery for information on Memorial Day events.

VA FACILITIES ADDRESSES AND TELEPHONE NUMBERS:

SUICIDE PREVENTION 1-800-273-8255

National Call Center for Homeless Veterans
1-877-4AID-VET (1-877-424-3838)

VA Regional Office, St. Petersburg - PO Box 1437,
St. Petersburg, FL 33731 1-800-827-1000

Regional Processing Office, Atlanta, GA (education claims) - PO Box 100022, Decatur, GA 30031-7022
1-888-GIBILL1 (442-4551)
Telephone number for Chapter 30 self-verifications
1-877-823-2378

VA EFT Information Hotline (electronic funds transfer - direct deposit) 1-877-838-2778

Veterans Health Administration Toll-Free Hotline (medical care) - 1-877-222-8387

VA Health Revenue Service (information on amounts owed to VA Medical Centers) 1-866-793-4591

VA Insurance Center, Philadelphia (VA Insurance) -
PO Box 42954, Philadelphia, PA 19101 1-800-669-8477

VA Health Administration Center (CHAMPVA and Spina Bifida health care) 1-800-733-8387 CHAMPVA inquiries:
PO Box 65023, Denver, CO 80206-5023; CHAMPVA claims: PO Box 65024, Denver, CO 80206-5024
Spina Bifida inquiries and claims: PO Box 65025, Denver, CO 80206-5025

National Cemeteries

10,000 Bay Pines Blvd N, Bay Pines FL 727-398-9426
6502 SW 102nd Ave, Bushnell FL 352-793-7740
6501 S State Rd 7, Lake Worth, FL 561-649-6489
4083 Lannie Rd, Jacksonville FL 904-766-5222
Naval Air Station, Pensacola FL 850-453-4108/4846
9810 State Hwy 72, Sarasota FL 877-861-9840
104 Marine St, St Augustine FL 352-793-7740

National Cemetery Administration Office of Memorial Programs (headstones and markers) - 5109 Russell Rd
Quantico VA 22134-3903 1-800-697-6947

Loan Guaranty Eligibility Center (certificates of eligibility)
PO Box 20729, Winston-Salem, NC 27120
1-888-244-6711

Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) - 711

INTERNET SITES OF INTEREST:

VA Web Site: www.va.gov

VA Web Automated Reference Materials System (WARMS) www.warms.vba.va.gov

VA Workload and Performance Reports;
<http://www.vba.va.gov/reports/>

St. Petersburg VA Regional Office:
<http://www.benefits.va.gov/stpetersburg/>

Property Management (sale of VA-repossessed homes): <http://va.equator.com>

Florida Dept of Veterans' Affairs: www.FloridaVets.org
Library of Congress (information on pending legislation) thomas.loc.gov