

NEWS AND NOTES FOR FLORIDA VETERANS

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

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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/>.

VA GRANTS UP TO ONE YEAR RETROACTIVE BENEFITS FOR VETERANS FILING FULLY DEVELOPED CLAIMS TO HELP REDUCE THE BACKLOG

(VA News Release) WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs announced that Veterans filing an original Fully Developed Claim (FDC) for service-connected disability compensation may be entitled to up to one-year of retroactive disability benefits. The retroactive benefits, which are in effect August 6, 2013, through August 5, 2015, are a result of a comprehensive legislative package passed by Congress and signed into law last year.

Filing an FDC is typically the fastest way for Veterans to receive a decision on their claims because Fully Developed Claims require Veterans to provide all supporting evidence in their possession when they submit their claims. Often, this is evidence that VA legally must attempt to collect on the Veteran's behalf, which is already in the Veteran's possession, or is evidence the Veteran could easily obtain, like private treatment records.

When Veterans submit such evidence with their claims, it significantly reduces the amount of time VA spends gathering evidence from them or other sources -- often the longest part of the claims process. While VA will still make efforts to obtain federal records on the Veterans' behalf, the submittal of non-federal records (and any federal records the Veteran may have) with the claim allows VA to issue a decision to the Veteran more quickly. Typically, VA processes FDCs in half the time it takes for a traditionally filed claim.

FDCs can be filed digitally through the joint, DoD-VA online portal, eBenefits (www.ebenefits.va.gov). VA encourages Veterans who cannot file online to work with an accredited Veterans Service Organization (VSO) who can file claims digitally on Veterans' behalf. While submitting an FDC provides a faster decision for any compensation or pension claim, only Veterans who are submitting their very first compensation claim as an FDC are potentially eligible for up to one-year of retroactive disability benefits under the newly implemented law.

FDCs help eliminate VA's claims backlog because they increase production of claims decisions and decrease waiting times. Also, VA assigns FDCs a higher priority than other claims which means Veterans receive decisions to their claim faster than traditional claims.

VA continues to prioritize other specific categories of claims, including those of seriously wounded, terminally ill, Medal of Honor recipients, former Prisoners of War, the homeless and those experiencing extreme financial hardship. As part of its drive to eliminate the claims backlog in 2015, VA also gives a priority to claims more than a year old.

In May, VA announced a new partnership with Veterans Service Organizations and others known as the "Community of Practice," an effort that seeks to reduce the compensation claims backlog for Veterans by increasing the number of FDCs filed by Veterans and their advocates.

VA is continuing to implement several initiatives to meet the Department's goal to eliminate the claims backlog in 2015. In May, VA announced that it was mandating overtime for claims processors in its 56 regional benefits offices to increase production of compensation claims decisions through the end of FY 2013. In April, VA launched an initiative to expedite disability compensation claims decisions for Veterans who have waited a year or longer.

As a result of these initiatives, VA's total claims inventory remains at lower levels not seen since August 2011. The number of claims in the VA backlog – claims pending over 125 days – has been reduced by 17 percent compared to the highest point in March 2013.

Veterans can learn more about disability benefits on the joint Department of Defense—VA web portal eBenefits at www.ebenefits.va.gov, and the FDC program at www.benefits.va.gov/fdc/.

VA REACHES OUT TO VETERANS ABOUT THE HEALTH CARE LAW (VA News Release) WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs has launched an

awareness campaign and a new website, www.va.gov/aca, to let Veterans know what the Affordable Care Act means for them and their families. Veterans receiving health care from the Department of Veterans Affairs will see no change in their benefits or out-of-pocket costs when portions of the Affordable Care Act take effect next year.

The Affordable Care Act was created to expand access to coverage, reduce rising health care costs, and improve health care quality and care coordination. The Affordable Care Act creates new opportunities for coverage for uninsured Veterans and their families.

There are more than 1.3 million Veterans and more than 950,000 spouses and children of Veterans without health insurance. Most uninsured Veterans are eligible for VA health care. For those who are not eligible for VA care – such as Veterans' family members – the law created a new Health Insurance Marketplace.

For information about VA health care and the Affordable Care Act, VA encourages Veterans and family members to visit the new website at www.va.gov/aca, or call 1-877-222-VETS (8387), Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. or Saturdays from 11a.m. to 3 p.m., Eastern time. The new website includes a Health Benefits Explorer, where Veterans can learn about the benefits they can receive if they enroll in VA care.

VA PARTNERS WITH AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION AND LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION TO LAUNCH A PILOT PROGRAM TO HELP VETERANS RECEIVE DECISIONS FASTER (VA News Release) WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs, the American Bar Association (ABA) and the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) announced a new partnership and pilot program aimed at reducing the claims backlog and making it easier for unrepresented Veterans to receive assistance developing their claims for disability pay.

In the coming months, ABA and LSC attorneys will provide free assistance to a targeted group of unrepresented Veterans who request their help gathering and obtaining evidence required by law to support their disability claims.

The pilot will offer pro bono attorney assistance to Veterans with claims pending at the **St. Petersburg** and Chicago Regional Offices who do not currently have an authorized representative.

In the coming months, VA will identify eligible Veterans to participate in the pilot program and send letters advising them of all their options for representation to help them advance their claims. The VA letter will inform Veterans of a 1-800 hotline and website to connect them to an attorney who is willing to assist with their claim, free of charge.

Veterans will choose whether to accept this pro-bono assistance. Similar Veterans with claims pending at other VA regional offices may also be considered for the pilot, if warranted.

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