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**VETERANS
SERVICES**

*Caring for
America's
Heroes*

BULLETIN

**July
2017**

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To be connected with a VA suicide prevention and mental health professional,
call the toll-free National Suicide Prevention hotline and indicate you are a veteran.
(800) 273-8255

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**If you’ve not already done so, please volunteer to receive the bulletin via email
by emailing Jennel Binsky at
jennel.binsky@veterans.idaho.gov**

FROM BILL'S DESK

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I hope everyone is having an outstanding summer so far, as 2017 seems to be flying by faster than my 4th of July fireworks display, which was pretty awesome! We in the Office of Veterans Advocacy have had some transition with members of our team. Michele Perry was hired in April as a new Veteran Service Officer, replacing Doug Jacobson. Michele is an Idaho native and served on active duty in the Army and for 11 years in the Idaho National Guard. Robert Smith, who served in the Marine Corps, was hired into a full-time position as our Veteran Service Officer in Twin Falls. Our newest Veteran Service Officer here in the Boise VA Regional Office is Lance Santiago, another Marine Corps veteran, was just hired last week. Wes McAuslan transferred into the new full-time position in the Caldwell Department of Labor Office. Kelly McCartney and Frank Fabbri have switched offices, so Kelly is now working out of the Boise State Veterans Home and Frank is back in the VA Regional Office. We welcome Michele, Lance, and Robert to the team, and I am sure they will all be outstanding service officers. I hope to see many of you at our Annual County and Post Veteran Service Officer Training Conference at the Riverside Hotel in Boise August 30th thru September 1st. The following are some of the points of interest concerning VA benefits.

Our office has been fielding many phone calls concerning the President's proposed budget, which includes a recommendation that veterans receiving Individual Unemployability Benefits (veterans who are rated 60-90% service connected, but are being paid at the 100% rate because they cannot maintain gainful employment due to their service connected disabilities) would have the benefit end when they begin receiving Social Security due to retirement age. At that time they would lose the 100% rate and revert back to their actual disability rating. The savings would then be used to fund an expanded Choice Program. This was only a proposal and since the release of that proposal, VA Secretary Shulkin provided testimony on June 14, 2017, which said, "The budget is a process, and this was part of a menu of opportunities that we had for thinking how we can make the budget process better. As I began to listen to veterans and their concerns and VSOs, in particular, it became clear that this would be hurting some veterans and that this would be a takeaway for veterans who can't afford to have those benefits taken away. And I'm really concerned about that. So what I'd like to say is -- is that this is part of a process. We have to be looking at ways to do things better, but I am not going to support policies that hurt veterans. And so I would look forward to working with you and all the members of the Committee on figuring out how we can do this better. We have budget numbers and targets that we have to hit, but we shouldn't be doing things that are going to be hurting veterans that can't afford to lose these benefits."

The secretary of the VA announced his intention to expand provisions for urgent mental health care needs to former servicemembers with other-than-honorable (OTH) administrative discharges. This move marks the first time a VA Secretary has implemented an initiative specifically focused on expanding access to assist former OTH servicemembers who are in mental health distress and may be at risk for suicide or other adverse behaviors. This does not mean that veterans with OTH discharges (or lower) would be permitted to have service connected disabilities if they were previously barred from benefits from the VA.

While the VA signed the VA Dental Insurance Reauthorization Act into law, allowing the current VA Dental Insurance Pilot Program (VADIP) to move forward as a permanent benefit, the program is not accepting new patients while the VA determines who will proceed with the contract to manage the program. If veterans are interested in the status of the contract process and when the VA Dental Insurance Program will again start accepting new clients, information can be found at the VA's website, www.va.gov/HEALTHBENEFITS/vadip/index.asp.

In an effort to speed up the processing time for VA disability claims and certain types of survivor benefits, the VA is working towards Decision Ready Claims. Similar to Fully Developed Claims where all private treatment records are submitted with all the required claims forms, the Decision Ready Claims will also require a completed Disability Benefit Questionnaire (DBQ) for the claimed condition to be submitted with the claim. There are many different DBQs available for each of the claimed conditions which can be found by searching for forms on the VA.gov website or, if a Veterans Service Officer has access to VetraSpec, there is a link for the DBQs on the "Forms" tab. We have been told that if a veteran requests a DBQ be completed by their VA Medical Center Primary Care Provider, they will do so. If the correct DBQ is completed with all of the completed forms, the VA's goal is to have claims for increase and Dependency Indemnity Compensation Claims completed in 30 days or less. Please note you cannot find the DBQ for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, as those exams must be completed by a VA Psychiatrist or Psychologist or a VA-Contract Provider through one of the VA Contracted Providers.

On April 27, 2017, the VA released a fact sheet alerting veterans to a Scam whereas a phone line was setup very similar to the actual VA Choice Program phone number. The imposter phone line offers a \$100 rebate if the caller provides a credit card number and does not state they are affiliated with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The **CORRECT** phone number is (866) 606-8196 and will never ask you for credit card information.

Just a quick reminder that the easiest way for a veteran to obtain a Certificate of Eligibility for a VA Home Loan Guarantee is through the eBenefits website at www.ebenefits.va.gov.

Effective May 1, 2017, military retirees and annuitants corresponding with the Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS) will use the following new addresses.

●Retired Pay correspondence:

Defense Finance and Accounting Service
U.S. Military Retired Pay
8899 E 56th Street
Indianapolis IN 46249-1200

●Annuitant Pay correspondence:

Defense Finance and Accounting Service
U.S. Military Annuitant Pay
8899 E 56th Street
Indianapolis IN 46249-1300

Mail received at the old mailing addresses after May 1, 2017, will be forwarded to the new address. Current phone and fax numbers are not changing.

VA, VFW, & WALGREENS COLLABORATE TO ENHANCE ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

News Release May 10, 2017

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and drugstore chain Walgreens announced a collaborative agreement May 6th, which will help improve mental health care for veterans through enhanced education, access to resources, and outreach. The VA, VFW, and Walgreens will work together to reach veterans in communities across the country with targeted initiatives to address mental health awareness and treatment, veteran suicide prevention, and opioid overdose education. “Our work is driven by our commitment to encourage veterans to get the care and services they need and integrate mental health care as part of their overall wellness and healthy lifestyle,” said VA Secretary Dr. David J. Shulkin. “Joining forces with VFW and Walgreens provides the VA an opportunity to further expand our reach and connect with veterans, their families, and the community to raise mental health awareness.”

As part of the collaboration, the VA, VFW, and Walgreens will:

- Educate VFW members to help reduce the stigma associated with mental health conditions, as well as encourage seeking help through the VA. The outreach effort includes Walgreens and the VA programming at several upcoming state VFW meetings.
- Jointly promote and coordinate with VA’s Make the Connection campaign with the goal of helping to fundamentally change how people think and talk about mental health. Through veterans’ own stories of treatment and recovery, Make the Connection shows the many benefits of opening up about mental health concerns and making mental health awareness and treatment part of a healthy lifestyle.
- Share patient education materials to help build awareness of both Walgreens and VA initiatives to prevent opioid overdose through education, proper disposal of unused medication, and access to naloxone, a lifesaving medication that is an antidote to opioids that can prevent fatal opioid overdose.
- Explore training programs and opportunities for Walgreens pharmacists and Healthcare Clinic nurse practitioners, to enhance providers’ ability to recognize veteran-specific needs, and to better understand the military culture, which may influence veterans’ willingness to seek help.

“We know that the rate of suicide is increasing for all Americans, but the rate of increase is much slower for veterans who receive VA care,” said Dr. Poonam Alagh, Acting VA Under Secretary for Health. “With this in mind, we need to cast a wider net and meet veterans where they live to better engage them in care.” “The mental well-being of America’s veterans is of the utmost importance to the VFW,” said VFW National Commander Brian Duffy. “By working with several organizations including Walgreens and the VA, we’re able to positively impact a great number of veterans, and help to change the narrative associated with mental wellness.” “We’re proud of the collaborations we’ve developed to provide greater access to pharmacy and healthcare services for current and former members of the armed services, including retirees and their families,” said Brad Fluegel, Walgreens Chief Healthcare Commercial Market Development Officer. “We look forward to working closely with VA and VFW to help heighten mental-health awareness and hope to improve the health and well-being of more Veterans by connecting them with VA, VFW and other resources that can help.”

The VA is a leader in educating patients about the risks of opioids, including opioid medications and dispensing naloxone to interested patients. To date, the VA has issued naloxone to more than 60,000 veterans to prevent overdose. Separately, other pharmacies, including Walgreens, have installed safe, medication-disposal kiosks and made naloxone available without requiring a prescription. For more information about VA mental health services, visit www.mentalhealth.va.gov. Information about the VFW may be found at www.vfw.org. More information about Walgreens may be found at www.walgreens.com.

CARE & BENEFITS FOR VETERANS STRENGTHENED BY \$186.5 BILLION VA BUDGET

News Release May 23, 2017

In his fiscal year (FY) 2018 budget, President Trump is proposing \$186.5 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The budget request will ensure the nation's veterans receive high-quality health care and timely access to benefits and services. The budget also supports the continued transformation of the VA to rebuild the full trust of veterans as a premier provider of choice for their services and benefits. "The 2018 budget request reflects the strong commitment of the president to provide the services and benefits that our nation's veterans have earned," said VA Secretary Dr. David J. Shulkin. "VA has made significant progress in improving its service to veterans and their family members. We are fully committed to continuing the transformation across the department, so we can deliver the standards of performance our veterans expect and deserve." This year's budget request includes 82 legislative proposals that will help enable the department to better serve veterans.

The FY 2018 budget includes \$82.1 billion in discretionary funding, largely for health care, and \$104.3 billion in mandatory funding for benefit programs, such as disability compensation and pensions, and for continuation of the Veterans Choice Program (Choice Program). The discretionary budget request is \$4.3 billion (5.5%) above the 2017 enacted level, including nearly \$3.3 billion in medical care collections from health insurers and veteran copayments. The budget also requests \$74 billion, including collections, for the 2019 advance appropriations for medical care, an increase of \$1.7 billion and 2.4% above the 2018 medical care budget request. The request includes \$107.7 billion in 2019 mandatory advance appropriations for Compensation and Pensions; Readjustment Benefits; and Veterans Insurance and Indemnities benefits programs in the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). With a total medical care budget of \$75.2 billion, including collections and new mandatory funding for the Choice Program, the VA is positioned to continue expanding health-care services to over 7 million patients. Health care is being provided to more than 858,000 veterans who served in Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation New Dawn/Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Freedom's Sentinel. Major categories funded within the health care budget are:

- \$13.2 billion for community care;
- \$8.8 billion for long-term care;
- \$8.4 billion for mental health care;
- \$1.7 billion for programs for homeless and at-risk veterans;
- \$751 million for Hepatitis-C treatment;
- \$604 million for Caregivers' benefits; and
- \$316 million for treatment of traumatic brain injuries.

The president's budget ensures that care and other benefits are available to veterans when and where they need them. Among the programs that will expand access under the proposed budget are: \$13.2 billion for community care, compared with \$11.2 billion in 2017, a 13% increase;

- \$505 million for gender-specific health-care services for women, an increase of 7% over the 2017 level;
- \$862 million for the activation of new and enhanced health-care facilities;
- \$855 million for major and minor construction projects, including a new outpatient clinic at Livermore, California, and expansion of cemeteries at Calverton, New York; Sacramento, California; Bushnell, Florida; Phoenix, Arizona; Bridgeville, Pennsylvania; and Elwood, Illinois.

The VBA has continued aggressive efforts aimed at bringing down the disability compensation claims backlog, completing a record-breaking 1.3 million claims in 2016, and reducing the claims backlog by 88%, cumulatively, from a peak of 611,000 claims in March 2013 to 71,690 on September 30, 2016. In 2016, veterans waited, on average, 203 fewer days for a decision than four years ago. In 2018, the VBA is projected to complete 1.4 million claims, and the number of claims pending longer than 125 days is anticipated to remain at about 70 thousand claims. This pending claims status may change as the volume of claims receipts increases or decreases, and as claims processing becomes more efficient. The VBA's success in reducing the rating claims backlog has also resulted in a growing appeals inventory.

From 2010 through 2016, the VBA completed more than 1 million disability compensation rating claims annually. Approximately 11% to 12% of VBA decisions are appealed, with nearly half of those being formally appealed to the Board of Veterans' Appeals (the Board). While the appeal rate has remained steady over the past two decades, the appeals volume has increased proportionately to the increase in claims decisions. The average processing time for resolving appeals in 2016 was three years. For those appeals that reached the board, average processing time was six years, with thousands of veterans waiting much longer. The VA has worked with Congress, Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), and other stakeholders to develop a legislative proposal to reform the appeals process. The appeals process under current law is ineffective and confusing, and veterans wait much too long for a decision on appeal. The new process will establish options for veterans, provide early resolution and improved notifications as to best options, eliminate the perpetual churn of appeals inherent to the

existing process, provide veterans feedback loops to the VBA, and improve transparency of the process by clearly defining the roles of VBA and the board throughout the appeals process. Appeals reform is one of the VA's top legislative priorities, and the department will continue to work with Congress and the VSOs to ensure veterans receive the best possible service.

The budget requests \$1.7 billion for programs to prevent or reduce veteran homelessness, including:

- \$320 million for Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) to promote housing stability;
- \$543 million for the HUD-VASH program, wherein the VA provides case management services for at-risk veterans and their families and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides permanent housing through its Housing Choice Voucher program; and
- \$257 million in grant and per diem payments that support transitional housing provided by community-based organizations.

The VA is requesting a total of \$13.2 billion in 2018 for Veterans Community Care. This consists of a request for \$9.7 billion in discretionary funding for the Medical Community Care account, plus an additional \$2.9 billion in new mandatory budget authority for the Choice Program. When combined with \$626 million in estimated start-of-year unobligated balances from the original Choice Program appropriation, the total Community Care funding level is \$13.2 billion in 2018. The budget also requests \$3.5 billion in mandatory budget authority in 2019 for the Choice Program. This additional funding will allow the VA to continue increasing veterans' access to health-care services by allowing them to choose VA direct care or community care.

Also included in the budget is:

- \$306 million to administer the VA's system of 136 national cemeteries, including funding for the activation of three new cemeteries that will open in 2018 and 2019. Funds are also included to raise, realign, and clean headstones to ensure VA national cemeteries are maintained as shrines;
- \$4.1 billion for information technology (IT), including investments to strengthen cybersecurity, modernize veterans' electronic health records, improve veterans' access to benefits, and enhance the IT infrastructure;
- \$135 million for state cemetery grants and state extended-care grants; and
- \$159.6 million for the Office of Inspector General (OIG) to enhance oversight and assist the OIG in fulfilling its statutory mission of making recommendations that will help the VA improve the care and services it provides.

VA REACH VET INITIATIVE HELPS SAVE VETERAN LIVES

News Release April 3, 2017

Suicide prevention is one of the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) highest priorities. As part of the VA's commitment to put resources, services, and all technology available to reduce veteran suicide, the VA has launched an innovative program called Recovery Engagement and Coordination for Health – Veterans Enhanced Treatment (REACH VET). Recent research suggests that 20 veterans die by suicide each day, putting veterans at even greater risk than the general public. Using a new predictive model, REACH VET analyzes existing data from veterans' health records to identify those at a statistically elevated risk for suicide, hospitalization, illness, or other adverse outcomes. This allows the VA to provide pre-emptive care and support for veterans, in some cases before a veteran even has suicidal thoughts. "One veteran suicide is one too many," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs David J. Shulkin. "This cutting-edge program is saving lives by identifying at-risk veterans and connecting them with the specialized care and support they need."

Once a veteran is identified, his or her VA mental health or primary care provider reaches out to check on the veteran's well-being, and review their condition(s) and treatment plans to determine if enhanced care is needed. The program began as a pilot in October 2016 and is now fully implemented across the VA. "REACH VET is a game changer in our effort to reduce veteran suicide," said Dr. Caitlin Thompson, National Director of the VA's Office for Suicide Prevention. "Early intervention can lead to better recovery outcomes, lessen the likelihood of challenges becoming crises, and reduce the stress that veterans and their loved ones face."

VA's suicide prevention resources include the Veterans Crisis Line, which provides confidential support from specially trained and experienced responders to veterans, even if they are not enrolled in VA health care. Veterans and their families and friends may call (800) 273-8255 and press 1; chat online at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat, or text to 838255. For more information about VA's suicide prevention efforts, visit these resources:

- Veterans Crisis Line website: VeteransCrisisLine.net/BeThere
- Suicide prevention outreach toolkit: VeteransCrisisLine.net/SpreadTheWord
- "Be There" public service announcement: <http://bit.ly/BeTherePSA>
- Suicide prevention fact sheet: <http://bit.ly/2axW88D>
- Make the Connection website: <http://MakeTheConnection.net>
- VA Mental Health website: <http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov>

VETERANS SERVICE OFFICER TRAINING CONFERENCE INVITATIONS WENT OUT

The Idaho Division of Veterans Services 2017 Veterans Service Officer Training Conference is scheduled at the Riverside Hotel in Boise August 30, 31, and September 5, 2017. Invitations and a tentative agenda went out in early June, so if you didn't receive one and would like to attend, please contact Jennel Binsky at jennel.binsky@veterans.idaho.gov or (208) 780-1380.

VA ANNOUNCES PLAN TO DISPOSE OF OR REUSE ALL ITS VACANT BUILDINGS IN 24 MONTHS

News Release June 20, 2017

Following through on a key promise, Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Dr. David J. Shulkin announced a plan to dispose of all vacant VA buildings in 24 months (either by demolishing or setting for reuse). Dr. Shulkin had raised the vacant building issue as a priority in his "State of the VA" address delivered at the White House on May 31st. Nationwide, the VA currently has 430 vacant or mostly vacant buildings that are on average more than 60 years old, and cost taxpayers more than \$7 million per year to maintain.

Dr. Shulkin announced that, of those 430 buildings, the VA has begun disposal or reuse processes on 71. Of the remaining 359 buildings, Dr. Shulkin announced the VA will begin disposal or reuse processes on another 71 in the next six months, and plans to initiate disposal of the final 288 vacant buildings within 24 months. "We owe it to the American taxpayer to apply as much of our funding as possible to helping veterans," said Dr. Shulkin. "Maintaining vacant buildings, including close to 100 from the Revolutionary War and Civil War, makes no sense and we're working as quickly as possible to get them out of our inventory." The Secretary also announced the VA will review another 784 non-vacant, but underutilized, buildings to determine if additional efficiencies can be identified to be reinvested in veterans' services.

Finally, in addition to the building closure, Dr. Shulkin announced the Veterans Benefits Administration is freezing its footprint and will maximize space management by leasing or eliminating office space nationwide, thanks to a robust telework program and the digitization of claim files. The VA estimates these actions will save taxpayers an additional \$15.7 million annually beginning in 2017, for a total of close to \$23 million in combined annual savings from the initiatives. "As I said in my State of the VA presentation, we need to move rapidly to bring savings to taxpayers," said Dr. Shulkin. "We will work through the legal requirements and regulations for disposal and reuse and we will do it as swiftly as possible."

NEW VA ONLINE TOOL HELPS VETERANS LEARN ABOUT & COMPARE EFFECTIVE PTSD TREATMENTS

News Release June 2, 2017

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) launched a new online tool that will help veterans compare various treatment options for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The PTSD Treatment Decision Aid is a free, interactive online tool that helps educate patients about effective treatment options for PTSD and encourages them to participate actively in decisions about their care. "The health and well-being of the courageous men and women who have served their country in uniform is the VA's highest priority," said VA Secretary Dr. David J. Shulkin. "The PTSD Treatment Decision Aid is an important step in putting veterans in control of their health care. By helping to bridge understanding and communication between veterans and providers about the most effective treatment options available, we are ensuring veterans receive the treatments that best promote their healing and recovery."

The tool includes information about evidence-based PTSD treatments, such as talk therapy and prescription medication options. It also includes useful information designed for people who have served in the military. Users can watch videos of providers explaining different treatment options and what to expect with those treatments, and hear from veterans who have benefited from them. Veterans can also build a chart to compare the treatments they prefer and print a personalized summary to share with their providers. All personal information is erased once the tool is closed to protect users' privacy.

According to VA findings, approximately eight of every 100 people will experience PTSD at some point in their lifetimes, and almost 620,000 of the veterans treated by VA have a diagnosis of PTSD. "We know from research and our own clinical experience that veterans can recover and improve their quality of life with the right PTSD treatment plan," said Dr. Poonam Alaigh, the VA's Acting Under Secretary for Health. "We want our veterans and those who care for them to have access to effective treatment options. Knowing about the latest research can help them get the best care possible." To learn more about PTSD visit the National Center for PTSD website at www.ptsd.va.gov. Health-care providers who have questions about the PTSD Treatment Decision Aid or other free resources can email the PTSD Consultation Program at PTSDconsult@va.gov or call (866) 948-7880.

VA MAKES WAIT TIMES TRANSPARENT FOR VETERANS WITH NEW ONLINE TOOL

News Release April 12, 2017

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is taking unprecedented steps to increase transparency. In April, the VA launched a new Access and Quality Tool that provides veterans with an easy-to-use, easy-to-understand way of accessing patient wait time and quality of care data. This tool not only provides veterans with more information about VA services, it increases accountability and ensures VA is held to a higher standard. “Veterans must have access to information that is clear and understandable to make informed decisions about their health care,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. David J. Shulkin. “No other health-care system in the country releases this type of information on wait times. This allows veterans to see how VA is performing.”

The tool allows veterans to access the average times patients are waiting to be seen in their local area; how veterans describe their experiences scheduling primary- and specialty-care appointments at specific VA facilities; timeliness of appointments for care needed right away; and the quality of health care delivered at VA medical centers compared with local private-sector hospitals. The Access and Quality Tool is the most transparent and easy to understand wait time and quality data website in the health-care industry. “This tool is another example of VA leading the way,” said Acting Under Secretary for Health Dr. Poonam Alaigh. “No one in the private sector publishes data this way. This tool will instill a spirit of competition and encourage our medical facilities to proactively address access and quality issues while empowering veterans to make choices according to what works best for them and their families.” The VA will continue to make improvements to this tool based on the feedback it receives from veterans.

VA EXPLORES NEW VETERAN-CENTRIC TREATMENTS

News Release April 18, 2017

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced the launch of the Center for Compassionate Innovation (CCI), which will explore emerging therapies that may enhance veterans’ physical and mental well-being. In addition, the VA is accepting proposals to fulfill CCI’s mission of finding innovative approaches to health care, which may support those veterans who are unsuccessful with conventional treatment. Proposals may be submitted through www.va.gov/healthpartnerships and will be evaluated through a rigorous algorithm that critically assesses the safety and efficacy of the innovation. “VA is unique in our approach to health care,” said Veterans Affairs Secretary Dr. David J. Shulkin. “We are committed to offering veterans cutting-edge and innovative care. That means carefully exploring every avenue that will promote well-being.”

CCI explores innovations in the health care industry as well as innovative practices currently being piloted on a small scale within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). CCI is primarily interested in innovations that address post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, chronic pain, and suicidality. However, CCI will explore any safe and ethical innovation intended to improve veterans’ health and well-being. CCI is not an implementation office intended to conduct research, clinical treatment, or establish a vendor relationship. CCI is strategically positioned to spotlight cutting-edge therapies and treatment modalities emerging in private industry. CCI is an example of the VA’s quest to continue as a leader in providing innovative and effective treatments for veterans.

VA LAUNCHES PHYSICIAN AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

News Release June 6, 2017

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced it has launched the Physician Ambassador Program, an effort to recruit volunteer medical providers, at the more than 1,700 VA healthcare facilities across the nation. The physician and clinician “ambassadors” are qualified, trained, and licensed health providers who will meet the same requirements as VA professionals in terms of credentials, supervision, and evaluation. “Our veterans deserve the highest quality of care — at all times,” said Dr. Poonam L. Alaigh, the VA’s Acting Under Secretary for Health. “The Physician Ambassador Program is one of the many ways we are working to keep and honor our promise to care for veterans and their families. Working with the healthcare teams and staff in our VA facilities, these incredibly skilled and qualified volunteer physicians and clinicians will improve our ability to deliver great care and service.”

The Physician Ambassador Program will enhance access to urgent care, rural healthcare, and emergency medicine for veterans. In addition, the program will create stronger collaboration and allow both VA and community health providers to benefit from the sharing of best practices and experiences. Physicians or healthcare providers interested in volunteering as a part of the Physician Ambassador Program should contact their local VA medical center.

VA EXPANDS TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY EFFORTS

News Release July 7, 2017

U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs David J. Shulkin announced the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is taking a further step on transparency and accountability as a follow-on to the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act signed by the president less than two weeks ago. Beginning July 7th, the department is making public a list of adverse employee actions taken since January 20th. This information is posted at www.va.gov/accountability, and will be updated weekly. Secretary Shulkin pointed to the move as another step in long-sought transparency and accountability actions at the VA, and noted that the VA is the first federal agency to make such data public. "Under this administration, VA is committed to becoming the most transparent organization in government," Shulkin said. "Together with the Accountability bill the president signed into law recently, this additional step will continue to shine a light on the actions we're taking to reform the culture at VA." "Veterans and taxpayers have a right to know what we're doing to hold our employees accountable and make our personnel actions transparent," he continued. "Posting this information online for all to see, and updating it weekly, will do just that."

For privacy reasons, the adverse action list will not include employee names, but will give information on the position, VA region or administration, and type of adverse or disciplinary action taken. The list includes terminations, demotions, and suspensions over 14 days since the new administration came into office January 20th. Additional categories of accountability actions will be included in upcoming releases. In addition to posting the adverse action information, Secretary Shulkin announced he is requiring approval by a senior official of any monetary settlement with an employee over the amount of \$5,000. Any settlement above this amount will require the personal approval of the Under Secretary, Assistant Secretary or equivalent senior-level official within the organization in which the dispute occurs. "Taxpayers need to know that we will engage in good faith settlement negotiations, where required by third parties, but will look to settle with employees only when they clearly have been wronged or when settlement is otherwise in veterans' and taxpayers' best interests, and not as a matter of ordinary business," Secretary Shulkin said. "We're changing to a culture of accountability at VA, and this is an important step in that direction."

VA MODERNIZATION INITIATIVE REDUCES PROCESSING TIME FOR VETERANS' CLAIMS

News Release April 21, 2017

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recently started digitizing older, inactive paper records, which will save taxpayer dollars through reduced, leased office-space that currently houses these records. "This is just one of the ways in which we are modernizing our capabilities, not only to be more responsive to veterans and their families, but also to be good stewards of taxpayer dollars," said the VA's Acting Under Secretary for Benefits Thomas Murphy.

This new "paper-extraction" process ensures that when a claim is filed, the veteran's electronic record is already available in the VA's computer systems, reducing processing time for benefit claims from veterans and their survivors. In the past, when a veteran filed a new or supplemental claim, if a medical condition had worsened, the retired paper files were boxed and shipped to a central site to scan into the VA's systems before work would begin on the new claim. Nearly 2 million inactive files were housed in 33 regional offices across the country before the change. As of April 14th, more than 500,000 files have been collected from eight regional offices for scanning. Once the records have been digitized, the VA will archive and store them in less expensive long-term storage for safekeeping. The agency plans to remove and scan paper claim records from the remaining regional offices by the end of 2018. "This modernization initiative seeks to eliminate delays caused by shipping and digital conversion," said Bradley Houston, director of the VA's Office of Business Process Integration, which oversees the initiative. "It will give claims processors nationwide the ability to instantly access millions of inactive claim records when needed."

Over the past five years, the VA has made concerted efforts to modernize the way it processes compensation and pension claims. Since 2012, 397 million records — consisting of 2.6 billion images — have been scanned, indexed, and uploaded into the agency's electronic-claims processing system, Veterans Benefits Management System. In fiscal 2016, the VA provided compensation and pension benefits to more than 5.1 million veterans and family members, totaling over \$80 billion.

VA OFFERS NEW APP TO HELP SCHEDULE APPOINTMENTS

The VA's new Veteran Appointment Request (VAR) App helps veterans schedule appointments with their VA care team from the convenience of a mobile phone, computer, tablet, or any device with an internet connection. With VAR, a veteran can:

- Directly schedule primary care appointments.
- Make requests to have primary care or mental health appointments scheduled.
- See details for all pending, confirmed, and upcoming appointments, including date, time clinic, care team, and reason for visit.
- Send up to two messages to a VA scheduler about requested and booked appointments.
- Cancel an appointment if no longer able to attend.

To use VAR, a veteran must be a VA patient and have a DS Logon Level 2 (Premiere) Account. Visit mobile.va.gov/dslogon to learn more. Please note not all care teams or providers are participating in VAR at this point, so a veteran should call their provider or care team to inquire if they are participating.

NEW VA INITIATIVE FOCUSES ON COMBATING FRAUD, WASTE, & ABUSE

News Release June 2, 2017

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) announced it will launch the "Seek to Prevent Fraud, Waste and Abuse (STOP FWA)" initiative that will capitalize on existing departmental activities that prevent or identify FWA, as well as ensure a consistent approach to FWA risk management as a way to centralize organizational resources. "VA will create an organizational culture that is committed to STOP FWA," said VA Secretary Dr. David J. Shulkin. "The initiative will protect the resources that deliver services and benefits our nation's veterans have earned."

Historically, the VA has had a decentralized approach to identifying, responding, and preventing FWA. For example, the VA's three administrations — Health, Benefits, and Cemetery — as well as its various staff offices all had separate budgets and programs dedicated to preventing FWA. Under the decentralized approach, the VA's Office of Community Care prevented \$27 million of potentially fraudulent payments in fiscal year 2016 and the VA's Debt Management Center referred more than \$11 million in potentially fraudulent activity, so far in this fiscal year.

STOP FWA's centralized approach will consolidate the VA's resources under one organization to achieve even greater success. The department-wide effort will eliminate duplicative activities and explore potential partnerships with other federal agencies to capitalize on their successes in detecting fraud, waste, and abuse. Finally, the VA will establish a Prevention of Fraud Waste and Abuse Advisory Committee by July 2017. Secretary Shulkin is developing a list of potential co-chairs and committee members, and the department will also seek committee members through the Federal Register. The committee will provide insight into lessons learned and private-sector practices; identify analytical tools that can be used at the VA to prevent FWA; and leverage a deep wealth of experience in building mature, effective STOP FWA programs that protect the VA's resources.

GO GREEN AND GET THE BULLETIN VIA EMAIL

In our continual effort to reduce costs and lessen our "ecological footprint," the Office of Veterans Advocacy is again asking for your help. In order to reduce printing and mailing costs, as well as the amount of paper used, we are asking you to volunteer to receive the bulletin via email.

The bulletin will arrive in your in-box every quarter as a Word document, which will allow to you forward or print and disseminate as many copies as you like. In addition to receiving the quarterly bulletin, you will also receive our annual Veterans Resource Directory via email.

If you can help us with our goal of reducing costs and the saving paper, please email Jennel Binsky at jennel.binsky@veterans.idaho.gov. Thanks for your help with this most worthwhile endeavor! And don't forget you can always view and print the Bulletin and Resource Directory by visiting our website at www.veterans.idaho.gov.

DATES TO REMEMBER

July 2	U.S. Army Air Corps established, 1926
July 4	Independence Day
July 20	Neil Armstrong walks on the moon, 1969
July 27	Korean War Armistice Day, 1953
August 4.....	U.S. Coast Guard established, 1790
August 7.....	Order of the Purple Heart established, 1782
August 14.....	Japan surrendered, ending WWII, 1945
September 4.....	Labor Day
September 11.....	Patriot Day
September 14.....	Star Spangled Banner written by Francis Scott Key, 1814
September 17.....	VFW Ladies Auxiliary organized, 1914
	U.S. Constitution approved, 1787
September 18.....	U.S. Air Force established, 1947
September 21.....	POW/MIA Day
September 29.....	Veteran of Foreign Wars (VFW) established, 1899

CONVENTION SCHEDULES

American Legion

National.....August 18-24, 2017, Reno, NV

AMVETS

National.....August 6-13, 2017, Norfolk, VA

Catholic War Veterans of the United States

National.....August 6-13, 2017, St. Louis, MO

Disabled American Veterans

National.....July 29-August 1, 2017, New Orleans, LA

Fleet Reserve Association

National.....September 17-23, 2017, Washington, DC

Marine Corps League

National.....August 13-18, 2017, Overland Park, KS

Military Order of the Purple Heart

National.....August 9-19, 2017, Dallas, TX

Veterans of Foreign Wars

National.....July 22-26, 2017, New Orleans, LA

Vietnam Veterans of America

National.....August 8-12, 2017, New Orleans, LA

THE HISTORY OF THE POW/MIA FLAG

No symbol better commemorates the sacrifice POW/MIA veterans have made for the country than the famous POW/MIA flag. But many Americans might not know the history behind the iconic flag. The POW/MIA flag was designed during the Vietnam War as a symbol of national concern about U.S. military personnel taken as prisoners of war or listed as missing in action, according to the National League of POW/MIA families. In 1970, Michael Hoff, the wife of a soldier listed as missing in action in the Vietnam War and a member of the National League of POW/MIA Families wanted to create a symbol to honor her husband and other POW/MIA veterans. Hoff reached out to Norman Rivkees, the vice president of Annin & Company, which had recently made a banner for the People's Republic of China to commemorate their entry into the United Nations. Rivkees was sympathetic to Hoff's cause and arranged for her to design the flag with Newt Heisley, one of Annin's advertising agency's employees.

The National League of POW/MIA Families' Board of Directors held a meeting in January 1972 to approve the POW/MIA flag and began manufacturing the banner for distribution shortly after. Since the league wanted the flag to receive as much exposure as possible it did not seek a trademark or copyright for the image, allowing anyone to reproduce the image and spread awareness about the families of POW/MIA veterans.

That was much needed during the Vietnam War, where the U.S. lists 1,350 Americans as having been prisoners of war, including Arizona Sen. John McCain, or designated missing in action. In the United States' conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan since 1991, 12 soldiers have been designated as prisoners of war, including Sgt. Bowe R. Bergdahl, while just one, Navy pilot Lt. Cmdr. Michael Scott Speicher, was declared MIA. Speicher's remains were later found at his plane's crash site after a tip from an Iraqi civilian.

DAV VAN SCHEDULES TO AND FROM VA MEDICAL CENTERS

BOISE & SURROUNDING AREA TO BOISE VAMC

All appointments for rides must be made 72 hours in advance.

For more information call Jim Rossette at the Boise VA Medical Center (208) 422-1000 ext. 7555.

* Homedale, Marsing, and Canyon County: Call Laverne Gillum (208) 422-1000 ext. 7555.

- Pickup points: Star Star Merc
- Middleton Downtown Shell Station
- Shell Station at exit 25 of I-84
- Notus Shell Station
- Parma M&W Market
- Wilder Shell Station
- Homedale Shell Station
- Caldwell Chevron at 10th Avenue South & the freeway
- Emergency entrance of West Valley Medical Center
- Maverick at 10th Avenue South & Ustick
- 20248 Hoskins Road
- Nampa Karcher Mall near Ross Dress for Less
- Albertson's at 7th Street & 12th Avenue South
- D and B Supply on 12th Avenue South
- Melba/Bowmont Chevron at Greenhurst & Southside
- McDonalds at exit 38 of the freeway
- Kuna West side of the Winco parking lot

* Weiser, Payette, Ontario, Emmett, and surrounding area: Call Lori Walla (208) 919-5733

- Pickup points: Emmett Tom's Cabin Restaurant
- Subway near Albertson's
- Stinker Station
- Fruitland Shell Station at Palisades Corner
- Shell Station at the highway
- Middleton (Caldwell) 44 Quick Stop
- New Plymouth Lowell's Market at 5 Corners
- Hamilton Corners at Highways 52 & 30
- Nyssa Anderson Corner
- McDonalds at West Park Plaza
- Ontario McDonalds at West Park Plaza
- McDonalds at K-Mart
- Shell Station at the freeway
- Shell Station on Idaho
- The Elk's
- Payette Albertson's
- Jerry's Market on 6th
- Kings Variety/Maverick at Highway 95
- Weiser Sinclair Station at Highway 95
- Maverick Station at Highway 95
- Chevron Station
- Pioneer Market
- Ridley's Market

* Twin Falls, Jerome, Lincoln, Gooding, and Elmore Counties: Call Calvin Armstead (208) 733-7610 ext. 2415.

- Pickup points: Twin Falls Sheriff's Office
- Filer Logan's Market
- Buhl Oasis Stop-N-Go
- Jerome Ridley's Market
- Gooding Ridley's Market
- Wendell Farmhouse
- Bliss Ziggy's
- Hammett Valley Market
- Glenns Ferry Shell Station
- Mountain Home Foothills Chevron, Albertson's, & Exit 90 Chevron/Burger King

* Cassia, Minidoka, and Blaine Counties: Call Georgia Greenwell (208) 678-3599 or 878-2565.

- Pickup points: Burley Sheriff's Office
- Exit 211 Wayside
- Exit 208 Hub 66
- Greenwood Store

* Southeast Oregon - Baker City, Haines, Halfway, Huntington, John Day:

Call Carl Swinyer (541)-894-2546, Robert Warner (541)523-5340 or the VFW Hall (541) 523-4988.

DAV VAN SCHEDULES TO AND FROM THE SPOKANE VA MEDICAL CENTER

LEWISTON & SURROUNDING AREA

Wednesdays: Spokane VA Medical Center. 6:00 a.m. departure from the State Veterans Home at 821 21st Avenue.

Picks up in Genesee, Moscow, Viola, Potlatch, Tensed, Plummer, and Worley. Arrives Spokane at 9:30 a.m.

Fridays: Spokane VA Medical Center. 6:00 a.m. departure from the State Veterans Home at 821 21st Avenue.

Picks up in Uniontown, Colton, Pullman, Colfax, Steptoe, Rosalia, and Spangle, WA. Arrives Spokane at 9:00 a.m.

All appointments for rides must be made 72 hours in advance.

Call the DAV Transportation Office at the Spokane VA Medical Center (800) 325-7940.

*****If you are interested in being a volunteer driver, please call Voluntary Services at (509) 434-7503*****

LIBBY & SURROUNDING AREA TO SPOKANE VAMC

Tuesdays and Thursdays: 6:00 a.m. departure from Libby, MT.

Picks up in Troy MT, Bonner's Ferry, Sandpoint, Priest River, and Newport WA. Arrives at Spokane VA Medical Center at 9:00 a.m.

All appointments for rides must be made 72 hours in advance.

Call the DAV Transportation Office at the Spokane VA Medical Center (800) 325-7940.

COEUR D'ALENE & SURROUNDING AREA TO SPOKANE VAMC

Daily: Door to door pick up and return, times variable.

All appointments for rides must be made 72 hours in advance.

Call the DAV Transportation Office at the Spokane VA Medical Center (800) 325-7940.

SANDPOINT & SURROUNDING AREA TO SPOKANE VAMC

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays:

Picks up in Noxon, Clark Fork, Hope, Sandpoint, Laclede, Priest River, Newport, Diamond Lake, Chattaroy. Arrives at Spokane at 9:00 a.m.

All appointments for rides must be made 72 hours in advance.

Call the DAV Transportation Office at the Spokane VA Medical Center (800) 325-7940 ext. 7019.

WALLA WALLA VA MEDICAL CENTER VAN TO AND FROM LEWISTON

Thursdays: Walla Walla VA Medical Center Van. 8:00 a.m. departure from the CBOC at 1630 23rd Avenue, Building 2.

Arrives at Walla Walla at 10:00 a.m. Departs Walla Walla at 1:30 p.m. Arrives Lewiston at 3:30 p.m.

*****If your appointment runs past the departure time of 1:30, there is no alternative for returning to Lewiston*****

SALT LAKE CITY VA MEDICAL CENTER

July 6, 10, 12, 14, 18, 20, 24, 26, 28

August 1, 3, 7, 9, 11, 15, 17, 21, 23, 25, 29, 31

September 6, 8, 12, 14, 18, 20, 22, 26, 28

All appointments for rides should be made 72 hours in advance.

Call the VTS/DAV Transportation Office at (800) 613-4012 ext. 2003 or 1027.

