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# Service Bulletin

**April 2014**

## **DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)**

<http://www.va.gov/>

### **VA Announces Rollout of Secure Veteran Health Identification Cards**

[www.va.gov/healthbenefits/vhic](http://www.va.gov/healthbenefits/vhic)

VA is rolling out newly designed, more secure Veteran Health Identification Cards. The new cards are distinguished by additional security features and have a different look and feel. In addition to being more secure, the card has been transformed into a Veterans Health Identification Card (VHIC). Similar to a typical health insurance card, the VHIC displays the Veteran's Member ID, a new unique identifier, as well as a Plan ID, reflecting the Veteran's enrollment in VA health care.

The VHIC is personalized to display the emblem of the veteran's branch of service. It also provides features that make it easier to use, such as the addition of "VA" in Braille to help visually impaired veterans, and the printing of VA phone numbers and emergency care instructions on the cards.

The card replaces the Veteran Identification Card (VIC), which was introduced in 2004. VA recommends veterans safeguard their VIC as they would a credit card, and cut up or shred the old card once it is replaced. While not required to receive VA health care, all enrolled veterans are encouraged to get a VHIC.

Enrolled Veterans can get more information about the VHIC by visiting their VA medical facility enrollment coordinator or the website [www.va.gov/healthbenefits/vhic](http://www.va.gov/healthbenefits/vhic), calling 1-877-222-VETS (8387) or visiting their local VA health care facility.

Veterans who are not enrolled in the VA health care system can apply for enrollment at any time by visiting [www.va.gov/healthbenefits/enroll](http://www.va.gov/healthbenefits/enroll), Calling 1-877-222-VETS (8387) or visiting their local VA health care facility.

**Specially Adaptive Housing Grant Eligibility Automatic  
for Veterans and Servicemembers Living with ALS**

<http://benefits.va.gov/homeloans/adaptedhousing.asp>

Veterans and active-duty military personnel with service-connected amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease are now presumed medically eligible for grants up to almost \$68,000 to adapt their homes. The change affects recipients of VA's specially adapted housing grants, which helps pay for the costs for building, buying or adapting a home, up to a maximum of \$67,555.

Under the change, veterans and servicemembers with service-connected ALS will be determined medically eligible for the maximum grant. The program provides grants to eligible service-connected disabled veterans and servicemembers to construct or modify a home to meet their unique housing needs. Grants are also available to help eligible individuals purchase adapted homes or pay down mortgages on homes that are already adapted. VA estimates this change will save approximately 12 months in the overall process of a Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) grant.

In 2008, VA established a presumption of service connection for ALS for any veteran who develops the disease at any time after separation from service, making them eligible for monthly VA disability compensation benefits. VA amended its disability rating scale in January 2012, to assign a 100-percent disability evaluation for any veteran who has service-connected ALS.

VA's SAH program provides grants to eligible service-connected disabled veterans and servicemembers for the purpose of constructing or modifying a home to meet their unique housing needs. The ultimate goal of the program is to provide a barrier-free living environment that affords a level of independent living that the Veteran or Servicemember may not otherwise enjoy.

**VA Removes Annual Health Care Income Reporting Requirement**

[www.va.gov/healthbenefits/cost](http://www.va.gov/healthbenefits/cost)

VA is eliminating the annual requirement for most veterans enrolled in VA's health care system to report income information beginning in March 2014. Instead, VA will automatically match income information obtained from the Internal Revenue Service and Social Security Administration.

Some veterans applying for enrollment for the first time are still required to submit income information. There is no change in VA's long-standing policy to provide no-cost care to indigent veterans, veterans with catastrophic medical conditions, veterans with a disability rating of 50 percent or higher, or for conditions that are officially rated as service-connected.

VA encourages veterans to continue to use the health benefits renewal form to report changes in their personal information, such as address, phone numbers, dependents, next of kin, income and health insurance.

### **Disability Claims Backlog Reduced by 44 Percent**

One year after the backlog of pending disability compensation claims peaked at over 611,000 in March 2013, VA has reduced that number by approximately 44 percent to 344,000 claims – a reduction of more than 267,000 – while at the same time improving the accuracy of the decisions being made on veterans' disability claims. Additionally, on average, veterans are waiting 119 days less for a decision than they were at this time last year.

The current backlog, defined as claims pending more than 125 days, is at its lowest point since March 2011, when the backlog spiked in part because of the need to readjudicate 150,000 previously decided cases involving exposure to the Vietnam-era defoliant, Agent Orange. The readjudication of these claims was mandated under the *Nehmer* court decision and followed the Secretary's decision to add ischemic heart disease, certain leukemias, and Parkinson's disease to the list of conditions presumed to be related to exposure to Agent Orange. During this same time period, VA also received and processed over 100,000 new claims for these three conditions from Vietnam Veterans and survivors newly eligible for VA benefits as a result of this decision.

Since establishing the goal in 2010 of processing all disability claims within 125 days at a 98-percent accuracy level, VA developed and is implementing a plan that transforms the decades-old, manual paper claim approach into a state-of-the-art electronic process that leverages digital data transfer and automated calculators to reduce processing time and input errors. VA has also increased the productivity of its claims processing workforce through enhanced training, streamlined business processes and other initiatives such as mandating overtime and prioritizing the oldest claims, allowing VA's regional benefits offices to exceed monthly production records four times in fiscal year 2013.

At the same time, the accuracy of rating decisions continues to improve. VA's national "claim-level" accuracy rate, determined by dividing the total number of cases that are error-free by the total number of cases reviewed, is currently 91 percent – an eight-percentage-point improvement since 2011. When measuring the accuracy of rating individual medical conditions inside each claim, the three-month accuracy level is 96.5 percent. VA's accuracy measures are statistically valid and the process has been independently verified by the Institute for Defense Analyses.

VA claims processors continue to prioritize disability claims for homeless veterans, those experiencing extreme financial hardship, the terminally ill, former Prisoners of War, Medal of Honor recipients, and veterans filing Fully Developed Claims (FDC).

## **DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE (DOD)**

<http://www.defense.gov/>

### **DOD Unveils Improved Sexual Assault Prevention Training**

<http://www.sapr.mil/>

As part of efforts to eliminate the crime of sexual assault in the military, Defense Department officials recently announced improvements to sexual assault prevention and response training for all members of the armed forces and civilian employees. Officials said the improvements center on development of consistent sexual assault prevention and response core competencies and learning objectives for:

- Training for new accessions;
- Annual and refresher training;
- Pre- and post-deployment training;
- Professional military education;
- Training for commanders and senior enlisted leaders before assuming their new positions; and
- Training for sexual assault response coordinators, victim advocates and chaplains.

Within the first 14 days of service, new service members receive training that provides a basic understanding of the sexual assault prevention and response program, specific information on reporting options, and the services and resources available both on base and in the local region. Additionally, service members receive annual refresher training in sexual assault prevention and response, as well as before and after deployments.

At the professional military education level, officials said, the training emphasizes participants' leadership role in supporting the Defense Department's sexual assault prevention and response efforts. In their training, commanders and senior enlisted leaders learn about:

- The complexities of the crime and their role in fostering a command environment of professional values, team commitment, and dignity and respect;
- Proactive measures to reduce sexual assaults in their units;
- The protections afforded victims and the accused; and
- The elements of quality victim care.

Training for sexual assault response coordinators and victim advocates emphasize effective crisis management in addition to advocating for the victim and coordinating care. For chaplains, training competencies focus on awareness of sexual assault as a crime, its impact on victims, and sexual assault prevention and response resources the Defense Department provides.

The training improvements incorporate a coordinated effort designed to ensure that everyone in the military community -- including first responders, commanders, new

service members, and those deployed around the world -- have consistent training standards and effective tools to prevent and respond to sexual assault. The services and the National Guard Bureau developed the core competencies and learning objectives jointly to incorporate best practices from the field and input from sexual assault survivors, they added.

### **Sesame Street Friends Help Military Children Move**

Moving can be challenging, especially for preschool children. Military families move often - the average child moves six to nine times between kindergarten and high school. The Big Moving Adventure mobile application, developed for the Department of Defense in partnership with Sesame Workshop, the non-profit educational organization behind Sesame Street, lets kids create a Muppet friend to help through the moving process.

Children can use the app to help their Muppet friend make decisions on a variety of move-related issues like which toys to pack in a box and which to take along in their backpack. Children watch the Muppet say goodbye to their house, military base, and classroom and playground friends. Finally, at the new house, children help their Muppet unpack, settle into the home, and make new friends. Military parents face unique challenges during a move, and the app helps their young children through the experience. A separate parents section contains additional move-related topics and tips.

The Big Moving Adventure mobile app is the newest addition to a portfolio of multi-media resources developed by Sesame Workshop, in collaboration with the Defense Department, to help military families with deployments and life transitions. While developed specifically for military families with children 3 to 5 years old, it is useful for all families with young children experiencing a move. The mobile app is available for download from the App Store, Google Play, and Amazon for Kindle Fire. Users have downloaded the free app more than 130,000 times since its release in December.

## **DEPARTMENT OF LABOR (DOL)**

[www.dol.gov](http://www.dol.gov)

### **DOL Announces Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program Grant Competition**

<http://www.dol.gov/vets/>

DOL has announced a grant competition that will award an estimated 24 or more Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP) grants totaling approximately \$6 million to provide an estimated 2,000 veterans with occupational, classroom and on-the-job training, as well as job search and placement assistance, to help them succeed in the civilian labor market.

Funds are being awarded on a competitive basis to: state and local workforce investment boards; local public agencies; tribal governments and nonprofit organizations, including faith-based and community organizations. Successful

applicants will design a program that addresses the multitude of challenges associated with homeless veterans.

HVRP grantees must promote active engagement with industry, employers and employer associations to identify the skills needed for in-demand jobs and careers. The grantees will coordinate their efforts with various local, state and federal social service providers.

The solicitation for grant applications (SGA 14-02) will be available at <http://www.grants.gov>. More information on the Department of Labor's unemployment and re-employment programs for veterans can be found at <http://www.dol.gov/vets/>.

## **SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION (SSA)**

[www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov)

### **SSA Launches New Expedited Disability Process for Veterans**

[www.socialsecurity.gov/pgm/disability-pt.htm](http://www.socialsecurity.gov/pgm/disability-pt.htm).

In mid-March SSA announced the launch of a new disability process to expedite disability claims filed by veterans with a VA disability compensation rating of 100% Permanent & Total (P&T). Under the new process, Social Security will treat these veterans' applications as high priority and issue expedited decisions, similar to the way the agency currently handles disability claims from Wounded Warriors.

In order to receive the expedited service, veterans must tell Social Security they have a VA disability compensation rating of 100% P&T and show proof of their disability rating with their VA Notification Letter. The VA rating only expedites Social Security disability claims processing and does not guarantee an approval for disability benefits. Veterans must still meet the strict eligibility requirements for a disability allowance.

For more about Social Security's handling of Wounded Warrior's disability claims, visit [www.socialsecurity.gov/woundedwarriors](http://www.socialsecurity.gov/woundedwarriors).

## **DAV National Service Department Program Updates**

<http://www.dav.org/veterans/>

- **On-the-Job Training Program:**
  - Total NSO Trainees hired from January 2014 until present: 12
  - Total NSO staffing: 272
- **Office Activities:**
  - Total number of files reviewed from January 2014 until present: 90,339
  - Total number of Powers of Attorney executed: 30,383
  - Total number of interviews: 52,197
  - Total Rating Board appearances: 76,704

- Total number of Appeals:
  - 646/Brief: 2,003
  - Pre-Certification Review: 647
  - BVA Informal Hearing Presentation: 3,790
- Total number of new claims filed: 56,095
- Total number of electronic claims: 1,806
- Total number of Department meetings: 428
- Total number of Chapter meetings: 595
- **Transition Service Program (TSP):**
  - Total number of briefings/presentations from January 2014 until present: 191
  - Total number of participants: 9,991
  - Total number of files reviewed: 5,443
  - Total number of interviews: 3,794
  - Total number of Powers of Attorney executed: 241
  - Total TSO staffing: 32
- **DSO/CSO Certification Program:**
  - Total number of certifications and re-certifications from January 2014 until present: 432
  - Total number of Departments involved: 6
- **Mobile Service Office (MSO) Program:**
  - Total number of claims filed from January 2014 until present: 1,121
  - Total number of Powers of Attorney executed: 514
  - Total number of interviews: 1,211
  - Total memberships: 41
  - Total miles driven: 4,483
- **Service Seminar Program:**
  - Total number of Service Seminars from January 2014 until present: 13
  - Total number of persons attending: 1,240
  - Total number of interviews: 434
  - Total number of claims filed: 133
  - Total number of new members: 34




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