

Operation Enduring Freedom Operation Iraqi Freedom

REVIEW

INFORMATION FOR VETERANS WHO SERVED IN IRAQ & AFGHANISTAN, AND THEIR FAMILIES

VA to Cover New Illnesses for OEF/OIF and Gulf War Veterans

A new VA regulation now makes it easier for Veterans to obtain disability compensation for certain diseases associated with service in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the Gulf War.

The final regulation, announced in September 2010, establishes presumptive service-connection for nine specific infectious diseases associated with military service in Southwest Asia during the Gulf War and other conflicts in Iraq from August 2, 1990 to the present; and in Afghanistan on or after September 19, 2001.

“This is part of historic changes in how VA considers Gulf War

Veterans' illnesses,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Eric K. Shinseki. “By setting up scientifically based presumptions of service connection, we give these deserving Veterans a simple way to obtain the medical and compensation benefits they earned in service to our country.”

The regulation affects claims involving the nine diseases listed on page 3. Most of these diseases must be diagnosed within one year of return from service, though some conditions may manifest at a later time.

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New Research will Increase Understanding of OEF/OIF Veteran Health

The National Health Study for a New Generation of U.S. Veterans is a 10-year investigation by VA to study the health of OEF/OIF Veterans. The study will look at chronic and acute medical conditions, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), general health perceptions, reproductive health, pregnancy outcomes, use of health care, behavioral risk factors (e.g., smoking, drinking, sexual behavior, and risky driving), and VA disability compensation.

Launched in 2009, the study has already reached out to assess the health status of a sample of 60,000 Veterans through voluntary surveys and interviews. Of this number, 30,000 were deployed to OEF/OIF and 30,000 served elsewhere during the same time period. The study includes Veterans from all branches of service, representing active duty, Reserve, and National Guard members. Twenty percent of the 60,000 Veterans contacted are women.

Over the 10 years of the study, Veterans will be asked to complete surveys about every three years and additional studies may be included in this initiative. The research will help VA plan more effectively to provide the best care possible for the Nation’s newest generation of Veterans.

As a follow up within this study, the MIND study (Markers for the Identification, Norming, and Differentiation of TBI and PTSD)

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VA Launches IOM Study of Burn Pit Illnesses in Veterans

VA has commissioned an 18-month study by the National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine (IOM) to investigate any association between exposure to burn pit smoke in Iraq and Afghanistan and illnesses reported by OEF/OIF Veterans.

By mid-2011, the IOM will provide a report of any evidence-based association between exposure to burn pit smoke and long term health effects. VA will then convene a task force to review the IOM report and recommend any updates or changes to benefits and treatment based on the findings.

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About the OEF/OIF Review

The OEF/OIF Review is produced by VA's Environmental Agents Service (EAS) to provide information on health issues and other concerns of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom Veterans, their families, and others interested in possible long-term health effects of military service in Southwest Asia. The Review provides updates on a wide range of VA programs and other Federal resources for Veterans.

This issue was completed in December 2010, and does not

include developments that occurred after that time.

For past issues of the newsletter and related information, see the Web site at www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/oefoif.

Questions, comments, and suggestions for future issues are encouraged and can be sent to: Editor, OEF/OIF Review, Environmental Agents Service (131), U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 810 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20420.

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will focus on helping clinicians more easily and accurately diagnose TBI and PTSD. Traumatic brain injuries are caused by impacts to the head, which may occur during a fall, motor vehicle crash, or when the brain is shaken during a blast. PTSD is an anxiety disorder that can develop after a person has been through a traumatic event. The symptoms of TBI and PTSD are often similar, affecting how a person thinks and acts.

By closely examining Veterans with TBI and/or PTSD

symptoms and comparing them to Veterans without these symptoms, the MIND study will explore the differences between the two conditions and develop more accurate tools for diagnosis and treatment.

For more information, go to www.publichealth.va.gov/newgenerationstudy or www.publichealth.va.gov/research/epidemiology/research_studies.asp#MIND. ■

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1 *VA Launches IOM Study of Burn Pit Illnesses in Veterans*

One of a range of possible benefit changes could include a presumption of service-connection between burn pit exposure and related illnesses. Currently, when Veterans apply for benefits, they must provide documentation of their exposure and establish a connection to a particular condition. Such a presumption would relieve the Veteran of the burden of proving a connection between burn pit exposure and related illnesses.

Burn pits are areas in which jet fuel is used to burn refuse. Sometimes, especially early in the conflict, the refuse included plastics, metals, rubber, chemicals, petroleum, medical, and human waste. Burn pits and incinerators have been used at U.S. military bases throughout Iraq and Afghanistan. Smoke from these pits

can blow over bases and into living areas.

Short term health effects commonly related to smoke from burn pits include burning eyes, nose, and throat irritation, cough, short-term nausea, headaches, and skin rash. The long term health effects of exposure to burn pit smoke are unknown. The IOM study will assist VA in determining any long term health effects.

VA believes that further scientific investigation will help ensure that Veterans receive appropriate benefits and health care.

For more information about potential exposure to toxins from burn pits, possible health-related problems, and VA benefits, go to www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits. ■

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Sign up for Electronic Newsletter Notification



Be the first to read the latest edition of the newsletter!

The OEF/OIF Review is often posted online before print copies arrive in the mail. Sign up at www.easmailcall.aac.va.gov to receive notice via e-mail that the latest newsletter is available.

VA Offers “Seven Touches of Outreach” to Connect OEF/OIF/New Dawn Veterans to VA Benefits and Care

VA’s outreach efforts connect returning Servicemembers with the various health care, education, and other benefits they have earned in service to the Nation.

Using in-person outreach events as well as Web and phone-based resources available around the clock, VA works to enroll and register Veterans for their benefits as soon as they are eligible.

Getting enrolled quickly is critical to accessing important benefits. For instance, Guard and Reserve members returning from combat are entitled to five years of free VA health care and have 180 days to obtain a one-time dental evaluation and treatment.

Veterans can connect with specially trained VA outreach staff or OEF/OIF Program Managers at any—or all—of the following touchpoint opportunities designed to reach Servicemembers at least seven times from the time they deploy through their first six months back home.

Touch point 1 is VA's Reserve Component Demobilization Initiative where OEF/OIF Veterans returning from the combat zone are introduced to VA services during out-processing at the 61 demobilization sites.

Touch point 2 is VA's Individual Ready Reserve Muster (IRR), where IRR reservists are informed of their enhanced VA health and dental benefits.

Touch point 3 is VA's Combat Veteran Call Center, which contacts OEF/OIF Veterans to ensure they are aware of VA

services and benefits. Veterans may also contact the Call Center at **866-606-8216**.

Touch point 4 is DoD's Yellow Ribbon Program (YRP), where VA staff provides "boots on the ground" for Yellow Ribbon events hosted by each of the services during the 30-60-90 days post-deployment cycle. To learn about local YRP events, go to www.jointservicesupport.org/OSD.

Touch point 5 is DoD's Post-Deployment Health Reassessment (PDHRA), where VA supports the DoD health assessment and is able to link Veterans with appointments for mental health or other follow-up needs.

Touch point 6 is VA's partnership with the National Guard and the training of Transition Assistance Advisors (TAAs), who work for the adjutant general in each state. TAAs work to reach out to Veterans and refer them to VA services or benefits. Contact information for each state’s TAA is available online at www.vet-trans.org/TAA/SearchTAA.asp.

Touch point 7 is the www.oefoif.va.gov Web site that offers information on benefits, answers to questions, a blog community, Twitter feeds, and links to hot topics. There is also a section on the Web site for women Veterans and family members.

In addition to the opportunities noted above, Veterans can connect to VA benefits and services any time by visiting their local VA Medical Center (VAMC) and asking for the OEF/OIF Program Manager. A directory of VAMCs is available online at www.va.gov/directory. ■



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1 VA to Cover New Illnesses for OEF/OIF and Gulf War Veterans

To obtain disability benefits under the new rule, Veterans only have to show service in Southwest Asia or Afghanistan, and a diagnosis of one of the nine diseases within the designated time period after service. This will reduce the amount of paperwork needed to apply for benefits and the amount of time required to process claims.

The conditions covered by the ruling are:

- Brucellosis
- Campylobacter jejuni
- Coxiella burnetii (Q fever)
- Malaria
- Mycobacterium tuberculosis
- Nontyphoid Salmonella
- Shigella
- Visceral leishmaniasis
- West Nile Virus

In the past, a Veteran was required to establish through medical evidence an actual connection between military service in Southwest Asia or in Afghanistan, and any one of these diseases.

Eligible Veterans are encouraged to apply for benefits at <http://vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp> so that claims may be processed. Information is also available at www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/compensation_benefits.asp.

For more information about health problems associated with military service during Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, as well information about disability compensation and other VA benefits, go to www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/oefoif. ■

VA Expands Efforts to Address Environmental Exposures: Working with DoD to Identify and Contact Affected Veterans

VA monitors numerous hazards in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other military installations that could potentially present health risks to Servicemembers and Veterans.

In a letter to VA Regional Offices (VAROs) in April 2010, VA noted that "It is imperative that regional office personnel are aware of these environmental health hazards and are well-trained to handle disability claims from Veterans based on exposure to them."

Recognizing that not all Veterans may be aware of their exposure during service, VA is also providing information to clinicians about which Veterans may have been affected and when to ask about exposures.

Potential exposures for Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan include burn pits; particulate matter; sulfur fires; and hexavalent chromium exposure at Qarmat Ali Water Treatment Plant in Basrah, Iraq in 2003. Other potential exposures include contaminated drinking water at Camp Lejeune between 1953 to 1987 and Veterans exposed to pollutants from a waste incinerator near the Naval Air Facility in Atsugi, Japan, from the early 1980s to 2001.

VA is working with the Department of Defense to identify and contact individuals who may have been exposed to specific

environmental hazards while serving in the military. However, it may not be possible to identify all individuals because some exposures, such as burn pits, are widespread. Veterans who believe they may have been exposed to one or more of these hazards are encouraged to contact their local VA Environmental Health Coordinator www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/coordinators.asp. ■

Potential Environmental Exposures in Iraq and Afghanistan

- *Burn pits:* Areas used to burn waste products at most forward operating bases.
- *Particulate matter:* Extremely small particles and droplets in the air, such as those from dust storms and emissions from local industries.
- *Sulfur fire:* Sulfur dioxide and hydrogen sulfide released during the June 2003 fire at Mishraq State Sulfur Mine near Mosul, Iraq.

New Benefits Available for OEF-OIF Veteran Caregivers

A new law will allow VA to provide primary caregivers of Veterans of all eras with increased support and resources. Caregivers play a vital role in the lives of Veterans, especially as a new era of younger, severely injured Servicemembers return from Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Caregivers are the family members and loved ones who take care of the severely injured Veterans who need assistance on a daily basis," said VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki. "These mothers, wives, fathers, husbands, and other loved ones make tremendous sacrifices to be there every day for the Veterans who served this Nation. They are our partners in Veteran health care and they deserve our support."

VA is rolling out a variety of programs for Veteran caregivers in 2011. These include a Caregiver Helpline, a comprehensive caregiver Web site, and a variety of caregiver support and training programs. VA has been consulting with Veterans organizations, as well as individual Veterans and their family members, to ensure

"Caregivers... are our partners in Veteran health care and they deserve our support."

these new programs are implemented to provide the best possible support for those who have sacrificed so much.

The law authorizes VA to provide primary caregivers of OEF/OIF Veterans with training, support, and access to health care coverage, including mental health counseling. It will also allow eligible caregivers to receive stipends, travel assistance to attend appointments, family assistance, and respite care when appropriate.

These benefits will add to the range of compassionate and practical programs for Veteran caregivers currently available from VA, including in-home and community-based care, respite care, education and training, and family support services. For more information, go to www.caregiver.va.gov.

To access these caregiver programs, contact the Caregiver Support Coordinator at the nearest VA Medical Center (VAMC). A directory of VAMCs is available online at www.va.gov/directory. ■

Fast Facts: Environmental Exposures

Toxic Embedded Fragments

An embedded fragment (also called ‘shrapnel’) is a piece of metal or other material that stays in the body after exposure to a blast or other similar traumatic incident. The word “toxic” pertains to fragments from potentially harmful materials.

VA’s Toxic Embedded Fragment Surveillance Center (TEFSC) in Baltimore, MD provides special testing for chemicals that may be released by the fragments and maintains a health registry of Veterans with fragments in their bodies.

OEF/OIF Veterans who believe they may be affected by toxic embedded fragments and who would like an evaluation can contact the Environmental Health (EH) Coordinator at their local VA Medical Center. The EH Coordinator may refer Veterans to the TEFSC.

For more information, go to www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/toxic_fragments/surv_center.asp.

Depleted Uranium

Depleted Uranium (DU) has been used in U.S. military tank armor and some bullets since the early 1990s.

Exposure to depleted uranium is a potential health hazard if it enters the body, such as through embedded fragments (shrapnel), contaminated wounds, and inhalation or ingestion. Soldiers who were on, in, or near vehicles hit with “friendly fire;” rescuers entering burning vehicles, and those near burning vehicles; soldiers who served near fires involving DU munition; and those salvaging damaged vehicles are among those who may have been exposed to depleted uranium. Simply riding in a vehicle with DU weapons or DU shielding will not expose a servicemember to significant amounts of DU or external radiation.

To date, no health problems have been found to be associated with DU exposure, however VA researchers and clinicians continue to monitor the health of these Veterans.

For more information, go to www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/depleted_uranium/index.asp.

Exposures in Qarmat Ali

Approximately 830 Servicemembers including National Guard, Active Component, and Reserve troops, who worked at the Qarmat Ali water treatment plant in Basrah, Iraq, in the spring or summer of 2003 may have been exposed to sodium dichromate, containing the hexavalent chromium. Many of the Guard/Reserve members were from Indiana, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Oregon.

The chemical was used as an anti-corrosion agent by previous workers at the plant and was found on the ground after bags of the chemical were opened at the site. Short-term health effects can include respiratory problems, skin rashes, eye irritation, nasal sores, and other health effects. Long-term exposure can cause lung cancer. VA has developed a medical surveillance program to track possible health concerns among these Veterans.

For more information, go to www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/oefoif/qarmat-ali.

Veterans concerned about health problems associated with toxic embedded fragments, depleted uranium, exposure to hexavalent chromium, or other environmental health concerns may contact the OEF/OIF Program Manager or Environmental Health (EH) Coordinator at their nearest VA Medical Center.

A listing of EH Coordinators is available online at www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/coordinators.asp

and a list of VA medical facilities is located at www.va.gov/directory

Information is also available through VA’s Health Resource Center helpline at

1-866-606-8216

VA Reaches Out to OEF/OIF Vets via Web and Social Media

The OEF/OIF Web site—www.oefoif.va.gov—welcomes home Veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts with a social, informative Web site focused on their needs and questions. VA seeks to make the site a helpful and engaging resource for returning Veterans. The Web site features videos, Veteran stories, Q&As, and information on VA benefits and resources.

VA is also reaching out via Facebook and Twitter, engaging Veterans in social networking communities and via micro-blogging. These sites allow VA to update Veterans on new health and benefits information, as well as open a dialogue between Veterans and VA.

VA's Facebook page, www.facebook.com/VeteransAffairs, has over 80,000 fans and provides a forum for Veterans to share experiences and information. The Twitter page, @DeptVetAffairs or <http://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs>, has over 10,000 followers and publicizes a steady flow of “tweets” about VA initiatives, news, health tips, benefits, profiles of Veterans, and events.

In addition to the main VA pages, several other VA departments maintain Facebook and Twitter pages, including the Veterans Health Administration, Veterans Benefits Administration, and National Cemetery Administration. Many Medical Centers across the country have also launched their own pages with information about local resources and events. ■

Stay in Touch with VA Online



Twitter: Follow

@DeptVetAffairs

@VeteransHealth

@VAVetBenefits

@VANatCemeteries



Facebook: Become a fan at

www.facebook.com/VeteransAffairs

www.facebook.com/VeteransHealth

www.facebook.com/VeteransBenefits

www.facebook.com/NationalCemeteries



YouTube: Watch videos at

www.youtube.com/user/DeptVetAffairs

www.youtube.com/user/VeteransHealthAdmin

Blogs: Read and comment at

www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage

Mobile Web site: Keep up with news on the go at

m.va.gov

OEF/OIF Web site: Find information at

www.oefoif.va.gov

Comprehensive Health Care for Women Veterans: You Served, You Deserve the Best Care Anywhere

As the frontlines of battle and the rules of warfare have changed dramatically in the last 50 years, so has the face of the U.S. military and the Veteran population.

VA now treats more women Veterans than ever before. Women make up more than 11 percent of the Veterans who served in the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Almost half of these female OEF/OIF Veterans have enrolled in VA health care, and it is expected that these numbers will continue to increase over the next few years.

VA is committed to providing a comprehensive approach to women Veterans' health care needs, including primary care, preventive care screenings for breast and cervical cancer, gender-specific mental health care, and beyond.

To better serve women Veterans' needs, VA is launching a number of programs to address provider education and



has increased access through clinic enhancements and home tele-health. They have also begun to focus on the development and improvement of clinical services and created a system-wide focus on continuity of care.

At each VA Medical Center (VAMC) nationwide, a Women Veterans Program Manager is designated to help provide the quality care women Veterans need and deserve. The Program Manager can help coordinate the range of available services, from primary care to medical services to

Mental Health and Sexual Abuse Counseling.

Contact the Women Veterans Program Manager at any VAMC or call **1-877-222-8387** to find the nearest VA facility. Learn more about Women Veterans Health Care online at www.publichealth.va.gov/womenshealth. ■

VA Simplifies Access to Health Care and Benefits for Veterans with PTSD

VA streamlined its process to provide health care and disability compensation for Veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with the publication of a final regulation in the Federal Register in July 2010.

The rule, which applies to Veterans of all eras, will simplify the process for a Veteran to establish service-connection for PTSD by reducing the evidence needed to support a claim.

While each claim will be evaluated and require confirmation by a VA psychiatrist or psychologist, the new process is

expected to allow for faster and more accurate decisions to help connect Veterans to medical care and other benefits available through VA.

More than 400,000 Veterans with PTSD currently receive VA compensation benefits. PTSD is an anxiety disorder with symptoms that include recurrent thoughts of a traumatic event, emotional numbing, hyperalertness, anxiety, and irritability.

For more information, go to www.va.gov or call 1-800-827-1000. ■

WRIISCs Provide Specialized Health Care for Combat Veterans

When Charonda Taylor was in the Air Force, she received numerous awards and decorations for outstanding performance. But when she returned to civilian life, she faced several unexpected challenges with her health and well-being.



Taylor enlisted in the Air Force in 1999 because she wanted to give back to her country. She was deployed twice, working as an intelligence analyst in Qatar and Iraq.

When she returned home, readjustment to civilian life was difficult. Taylor's back and joint pain, which began when she was deployed in Iraq, continued to get worse. "My family was the first to recognize that I was not the same person. I was flying off the handle, yelling at the TV or crying over silly things," she said.

Taylor made the decision to reach out and ask for the help she needed. With the support of her family, she contacted the Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Program Manager at the Wilmington, DE, VA Medical Center.

Putting the Puzzle Back Together

She received a referral to the WRIISC in East Orange, NJ, where she was struck by the comprehensiveness of her evaluation and that the team of clinicians looked at "the whole picture,"

The War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) is a VA National program that specializes in post-deployment care for Veterans with Difficult to Diagnose illnesses and deployment related exposure concerns.

For more information, go to www.WarRelatedIllness.va.gov

by asking questions about her entire medical history. Taylor appreciated getting specific recommendations on what she could do to improve her quality of life.

She recalled, "I really liked getting the WRIISC 'roadmap,' which included tips on exercise including aqua aerobics, along with healthy eating and stress reduction techniques. I felt like I was able to put the pieces of the puzzle together."

That roadmap has also helped Taylor follow through and implement a number of changes that have helped improve her overall quality of life.



Enjoying Life Again

Today, Taylor still has her good days and bad days, but her health is much improved. She now serves as a military and Veteran constituent advocate for U.S. Senator Ted Kaufmann of Delaware.

When asked what advice she would give to Veterans about life after deployment, she advises, "Deal with whatever issues you have, no matter how difficult they are to confront. There are resources out there, and it's up to you to take advantage of them. Do whatever you have to do to advocate for yourself. Approach the mission to be healthy with the same energy you approached your military life and combat." ■

Disability Compensation from VA



Veterans with service-connected illnesses or injuries are eligible for monthly payments, called disability compensation. The disability must have been incurred or aggravated during active military service. Furthermore, the military service of the Veteran must have been terminated through separation or discharge under conditions that were other than dishonorable.

Disability compensation varies according to the degree of disability and the number of

dependents. Benefits are not subject to Federal or state income tax. Receipt of military retirement pay, disability severance pay, and separation incentive payments, known as SSB and VSI (Special Separation Benefits and Voluntary Separation Incentives), may affect the amount of VA compensation paid.

Disability ratings range from 0 to 100 percent (in increments of 10 percent). Veterans with disability ratings between 30 and 100 percent also are eligible for monthly allowances for eligible dependents.

A Veteran who is in need of regular aid and attendance of another person (including the Veteran's spouse), or who is permanently housebound may be entitled to additional benefits. VA must make that determination before the Veteran can receive these benefits. ■

Veterans can **apply for VA disability benefits** by completing and submitting VA Form 21-526, Veterans Application for Compensation and Pension. Please include the following materials with the application, if available:

- Discharge or separation papers (DD-214 or equivalent).
- Dependency records (marriage and children's birth certificates).
- Medical evidence (doctor and hospital reports).

Apply online through VA's Web site at <http://vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp>

Monthly Disability Compensation Rates for 2011

Percent Disabled	No Dependents	Veteran & Spouse
10	\$123	----
20	\$243	----
30	\$376	\$421
40	\$541	\$601
50	\$770	\$845
60	\$974	\$1,064
70	\$1,228	\$1,333
80	\$1,427	\$1,547
90	\$1,604	\$1,739
100	\$2,673	\$2,823

Free OIF Health Registry Evaluation

VA maintains a health registry evaluation program to track the health of Veterans exposed to environmental hazards during military service. Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) Veterans are covered by the Gulf War Registry for exposures that may include pesticides; infectious diseases; chemical and biological warfare agents; oil well fires; and depleted uranium.

Veterans concerned about exposure to environmental hazards during military service can contact an Environmental Health (EH) Coordinator at the nearest VA Medical Center to request an evaluation.

A listing of EH Coordinators is available online at www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/coordinators.asp.

Information is also available through VA's special health issues helpline at **1-877-222-8387**.

The health registry evaluation is available free of charge to all eligible Veterans. Veterans do not need to be enrolled in VA health care to be eligible. The evaluation provides Veterans with:

- A free specialized health evaluation
- Answers to questions about environmental exposures
- Information on health care and other VA benefits
- Test results shared and maintained in VA medical records

Note: A health registry evaluation or exam is not a claim for VA benefits. ■

New Hotline for Homeless Veterans: 1-877-4AID VET Helps Veterans Find Food, Shelter, and Assistance

VA's National Call Center for Homeless Veterans launched a telephone hotline to provide support and resources to homeless Veterans in March 2010. Well-trained expert responders staff the **1-877-4AID VET** hotline 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Family members, workers at community agencies, and non-VA providers also may call the hotline to find out about the many programs and services available to assist homeless Veterans.

"It is unacceptable for a single Veteran to spend the night on the streets of America," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Eric K. Shinseki. "The hotline will provide homeless Veterans with caring, timely assistance, and coordinated access to VA and community services."

VA recognizes that homeless Veterans are in need of food and shelter, clothing, financial assistance, and treatment for

medical conditions. Many also require access to permanent housing, Veterans benefits, and vocational resources. In addition, assistance is available for homeless Veterans who may have substance abuse, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and other mental health issues.

The National Call Center for Homeless Veterans is part of a series of initiatives to help homeless Veterans. In 2009, VA launched a campaign to eliminate homelessness among Veterans within five years. VA supports this initiative with approximately 4,000 agreements with community partners to help homeless Veterans. In 2009, more than 92,000 homeless Veterans were served by VA's specialized homeless programs.

For additional information about VA's efforts to help homeless Veterans, go to www.va.gov/homeless. ■

News Briefs Benefits and Care for OEF/OIF Veterans

Health

[Veterans Suicide Prevention Hotline and Online Chat](#)

VA has national suicide prevention resources to ensure Veterans in emotional crisis have free, around-the-clock access to trained counselors.

Veterans can call **1-800- 273-TALK (8255)**, and press "1" to be connected to the Veterans Hotline or visit www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/Veterans to connect with trained VA counselors on the Internet.

[5-year Health Care Eligibility](#)

The period of enhanced enrollment opportunity for health care eligibility has been extended. Combat Veterans who were discharged or released from active service on or after January 28, 2003, are now eligible to enroll in the VA health care system for five years from the date of discharge or release.

Combat Veterans who were discharged from active duty before January 28, 2003, but who did not enroll in VA's health care system now have until January 27, 2011, to enroll and receive care as combat Veterans.

For more information on enrollment and eligibility visit: www.va.gov/healtheligibility/eligibility/CombatVets.asp.

[VA Enrollment Information for Priority Group 8](#)

VA's Priority Group 8 includes Veterans who either have no service-connected disability or a zero percent disability rating,

with incomes above specific thresholds based on family size. VA has updated regulations for Priority Group 8 Veterans. These regulations allow certain Priority Group 8 Veterans to enroll in VA's health care system, even though they may have been denied in the past. This regulation went into effect on June 15, 2009.

For more information about enrollment and to access the financial calculator, visit www.va.gov/healtheligibility or call **1-877-222-8387**.

Work and Home

[Federal Jobs for Veterans](#)

Information about employment opportunities for Veterans in the Federal government is available from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. The www.fedshirevets.gov Web site offers resources including: information on Veterans' preference policies, how Federal jobs are filled, special hiring authorities for Veterans, education/training opportunities, and contact information for Veteran Employment Program Offices at various Federal agencies for openings across the country.

For more information, go to www.fedshirevets.gov or call **202-606-5090**.

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VA Home Loan Guarantee

A VA-guaranteed home loan offers Veterans advantages and safeguards that may not be available with other home loans. For example, interest rates are is competitive with conventional rates with little or no down payment required. VA-guaranteed loans are made by private lenders, such as banks and mortgage companies, and guaranteed by VA.

For more information, including eligibility requirements, go to www.benefits.va.gov/homeloans/faqelig.asp or call 1-888-244-6711.

VA Home Loan Counseling

VA counselors are available to assist homeowners with VA-guaranteed home loans and help avoid foreclosure by providing both counseling and intervention with the lender. VA counselors also can assist Veterans with non-VA loans by providing advice on how to deal with their lenders to avoid foreclosure.

To obtain help from a VA financial counselor at the nearest Regional Loan Center, call 1-877-827-3702.

For more information on avoiding foreclosure, or about the VA loan program in general, please go to www.benefits.va.gov/homeloans/veteran.asp.

Education

VA Education Benefits for Veterans

VA's Education Service administers education assistance programs that provide benefits to qualified Veterans, Servicemembers, Reservists, and dependents.

Information about educational programs and the application process is available on the Web at <http://vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp> or via phone at 1-888-GIBILL1 (1-888-442-4551).

Post-9/11 GI Bill

The Post-9/11 GI Bill, passed by Congress in 2008, provides eligible applicants with tuition payments to assist them in getting a college education. For many, it also provides a housing allowance and a stipend for books and supplies.

Under this bill, Veterans, Servicemembers, Reservists and National Guard members who have served an total of 90 days either on or after September, 11, 2001, or individuals discharged with a service-connected disability after 30 days, are eligible to receive financial assistance for undergraduate and graduate degrees, and vocational/technical training.

For more information, visit www.gibill.va.gov or call 1-888-GIBILL1 (1-888-442-4551).

Yellow Ribbon Program

The Yellow Ribbon GI Education Enhancement Program (Yellow Ribbon Program) took effect in August 2009 as part of the GI Bill that covers the cost of in-state tuition at state universities and shares the cost of more expensive private colleges and some state schools. The government matches dollar-for-dollar any additional tuition aid provided by the private school. The bill applies to community colleges and four-year institutions. Veterans may also receive a monthly housing allowance and a stipend for books and supplies.

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CONDITIONS RECOGNIZED FOR PRESUMPTIVE SERVICE-CONNECTION

The information below has been updated as of December 2010.

FOR OEF/OIF AND GULF WAR VETERANS

VA has determined that the following conditions are presumed service-connected for Veterans who served in certain regions during Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Enduring Freedom, and Iraqi Freedom.

Brucellosis	Malaria	Shigella
Campylobacter jejuni	Mycobacterium tuberculosis	Visceral leishmaniasis
Coxiella burnetii (Q fever)	Nontyphoid Salmonella	West Nile virus

For more information, visit www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/infectious_diseases.asp

FOR OIF AND GULF WAR VETERANS

VA has determined that the following conditions are presumed service-connected for Veterans who served in Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, and Iraqi Freedom.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome	Fibromyalgia	Irritable Bowel Syndrome
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For more information, visit www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/associated_illnesses.asp

Presumptive service-connection means that VA acknowledges that a condition is service connected even without direct evidence showing that it was incurred during military service. However, claims must still be filed by these Veterans to be considered for disability compensation. VA encourages Veterans with these conditions to apply for VA disability compensation.

Where to Get Help and Additional Information



VA Health
Resource
Center

1-866-606-8216



VA Benefits
Information

1-800-827-1000



OEF/OIF
Veterans
Web Sites

www.oefoif.va.gov
[www.publichealth.va.gov/
exposures/oefoif](http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/oefoif)



Nearest VA
Medical Center

www.va.gov/directory

Veterans with concerns about their health should contact their nearest VA Medical Center and ask for the OEF/OIF Program Manager. Medical care is available, and a Gulf War Registry examination for OIF Veterans is also available on request.

Veterans in need of marital/family counseling should contact the nearest VA Medical Center or VA Vet Center. The Vet Centers provide quality readjustment services in a caring manner to assist Veterans and their family members toward successful post-war adjustment in their communities.

Veterans seeking disability compensation for illnesses incurred in or aggravated by military service or interested in learning about the wide range of benefit programs administered by VA can contact a Veterans Benefits Counselor at the nearest VA Regional Office or health care facility at **1-800-827-1000**. Veterans can also start a claim online at www.va.gov.

Women Veterans can contact a Women Veterans Program Manager at any VAMC or learn more about benefits and services online at www.publichealth.va.gov/womenshealth.

Representatives of Veterans service organizations and County Veterans Service Officers are very helpful to Veterans seeking disability compensation.

State Directors of VA are experts in providing VA assistance to Veterans and their families. For a listing of benefits by state and how to locate these experts go to www.nasdva.net.

For additional Federal benefit information, see VA's Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents booklet. It is updated annually to reflect changes in law and policies. It is available online at www.va.gov/opa/publications/benefits_book.asp.

Active-duty military personnel with questions or concerns about service in Southwest Asia (including Operations Desert Storm, Desert Shield, Enduring Freedom, and Iraqi Freedom) should contact their commanding officer or call the Department of Defense (DoD) Deployment Health Clinical Center at **1-800-796-9699** for information. DoD also offers the "Direct Veterans Hotline," with the toll free number **1-800-497-6261**.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10 News Briefs

As of July 2010, about 1,100 private and public colleges and universities have signed on with VA for the program.

A new feature includes the ability for Veterans to transfer the tuition benefit to spouses or children. A spouse, for example, can use the benefit for up to 15 years after the Servicemember leaves active duty.

For eligibility information and other details go to www.gibill.va.gov/GI_Bill_Info/CH33/Yellow_Ribbon.htm.

Funding Your College Education - Help from the U.S. Department of Education

Veterans who wish to begin or continue their education can find an excellent overview of Federal Student Aid Programs on the Department of Education's Web site at www.FederalStudentAid.ed.gov. This site covers Federal student aid eligibility,

applying for assistance, Montgomery GI Bill benefits, and other important topics.

For questions not addressed on the Web site, Veterans may call **1-800-4-FED-AID (1-800-433-3243)** or TTY **1-800-730-8913**.

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is the first step in the financial aid process. Use it to apply for Federal student financial aid, such as Pell grants, student loans, and college work-study. For online instructions on how to complete the FAFSA, visit <http://studentaid.ed.gov/completestafsa>.

If questions cannot be answered through Federal Student Aid customer service then Veterans may contact the Federal Student Aid Office of the Ombudsman. To contact the Ombudsman, visit www.ombudsman.ed.gov. Those without Internet access may call **1-877-557-2575** or **202-377-3800**.

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INFORMATION FOR VETERANS WHO
SERVED IN IRAQ & AFGHANISTAN,
AND THEIR FAMILIES
December 2010

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