



## Veterans Affairs Annual Report 2017

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When I stepped into this position I made the decision that I would be an information provider, not another critic of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). There are a number of qualified journalists who are able to get into the weeds and assess the weaknesses and strengths of the VA and do a great job sharing that important information. My focus has been to provide information that helps current and future Veterans become better aware of their benefits and how to attain them.

The VA has more than 360,000 employees, with the vast majority doing their best to support their customers, the military Veterans of the United States. The variety of VA benefits and the requirements to qualify for them can be overwhelming. Over the past year I have learned much about what the VA provides but still need to learn more. Here is a recap of what I learned this year and shared with the USAWOA membership.

### **Pre-Need Burial Eligibility Program**

In December 2016, the Department of Veterans Affairs – National Cemetery Administration developed a process that will allow personnel to determine if they or their family members are eligible for burial at a national cemetery. It causes great emotional pain for a family to learn, after a Veteran or service member has died, that the member is not eligible for burial in a national cemetery.

The VA has implemented a pre-need eligibility program so that Veterans, spouses and unmarried dependent adult children may better prepare for burial in a VA national cemetery prior to the time of need. Interested individuals may submit VA Form 40-10007, Application for Pre-Need Determination of Eligibility for Burial in a VA National Cemetery.

Submission of a pre-need burial eligibility application does not obli-

gate the Veteran or family member to burial in a VA national cemetery. If you wish to be buried in a national cemetery, do a favor for your family and have it determined now. This is very important for members of the Reserves or National Guard, who have not served on regular active duty or qualified for retirement, to confirm their eligibility for burial in a national cemetery.

### **Suicide Prevention**

Recent studies have indicated that we lose 20 or more Veterans a day to suicide. USAWOA and its partners in The Military Coalition have continually championed legislation to combat this tragedy, such as the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans (SAV) Act (signed into law on 12 February 2015, as featured in the March 2015 *Newsliner*).

An excellent article written by Duane K.L. France, a Veteran and clinical mental health counselor, was published by Task & Purpose on 12 February 2017 and was republished in the March 2017 *Newsliner*. Go back and reread the important message he had to share with how we should respond to a Veteran contemplating suicide.

### **Visit to the Wyoming, MI, VA Health Care Center**

To learn more about the VA and better understand why it is a viable resource for our Veterans, I went to visit the VA Health Care Center in Wyoming, Michigan. I wanted to speak to someone who supports our Veterans on a daily basis. I met with Mrs. Susan Honaker (former US Marine) and Mr. Brian Pegouske (former US Army) and asked them to help me better understand what the VA health care system has to offer Veterans.

I've researched VA information from the website (<https://www.va.gov>) but that isn't the same as talking to those who work with our Veterans. The VA health system

reaches out and provides care and support that a civilian health system doesn't have the ability to do. It provides a level of understanding and compassion for those who have served. The U.S. Veteran can seek health care benefits several ways. They can go directly to a VA Clinic to meet with an Eligibility Representative, they can meet with a Veteran Service Officer (VSO), or they can apply online through [www.VA.gov](http://www.VA.gov).

What is the best route for a Veteran to apply for benefits? That is a personal choice; however, Honaker and Pegouske were strong advocates for having a VSO assist a Veteran through the process. The VSO does not work for the VA and can be a strong advocate for the Veteran. They are an independent resource for the Veteran and work on behalf of various Veteran agencies (i.e., American Legion, VFW, Order of Purple Hearts, local county Veteran's office, etc.).

It is important that the Veteran seeks a VSO who has been formally trained and certified in the application process. They will help the Veteran gather necessary documentation for the application process. They need someone who has the authority and technical skills to interact effectively with the VA.

A VSO is able to deal directly with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to improve the potential for health care benefits to be approved. The VBA will not sanction or support a non-chartered VSO. In the May 2017 *Newsliner*, I go into detail on the VSO program and shared the wisdom of two VSOs from Michigan and their passion to help all Veterans. You don't have to go through the process alone.

### **Veterans Choice Program**

In the June 2017 *Newsliner*, I addressed the Veterans Choice Program. The Veterans Choice Program (VCP) was established as a tempo-

rary program to improve Veterans' access to health care by allowing eligible Veterans to use approved health care providers outside of VA.

VA Secretary David Shulkin is working to have a new Veterans Choice Program developed that will ease Veterans' access to civilian health care. The plan is tentatively labeled as "Choice 2.0." As reported by the *American Legion Magazine* in August 2017, a new Veteran Coordinated Access and Rewarding Experiences (CARE) program is being developed, but it is far from being finalized due to funding and infrastructure challenges within the VA. More to follow on this important health benefit program.

### Disability Compensation

When I need to learn what the VA has to offer I go to its website ([www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov)). This was the route I took when I wrote about disability compensation in the August 2017 Newsliner. Disability compensation is a monthly tax-free benefit paid to Veterans who are at least 10% disabled

because of injuries or diseases that were incurred in or aggravated during active duty, active duty for training, or inactive duty training.

A disability can apply to physical conditions, such as a chronic knee condition, as well as a mental health condition, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This benefit may be awarded when you separate from the military or can be requested years later. **Editor's Note: For those still currently serving, but approaching retirement age, we cannot stress enough the importance of filing your VA disability claim prior to your official retirement date – do NOT wait until you are already out of the door! This is because most if not all of your disabilities will be presumed as service connected, because you are still in the service. Conversely, once you are separated from the service (and the further into retirement you go), the burden increasingly falls on you to prove disabilities are service connected.**

### Veterans Benefits

My articles are just a snapshot of what the VA has to offer. Every Veteran should make the time to review available VA benefits and find out what you qualify for. You **earned** these benefits. The best link I found is <https://explore.VA.gov>. This website is easy to navigate and will help a Veteran quickly see what benefits they may qualify for. The next best thing is to meet with your local Veteran Service Officer (VSO). Work with a real person who is there for you as your personal advocate when struggling through the VA maze.

Thank you for allowing me to share this information. I have learned a lot about the many positive things the VA has to offer and the challenges Veterans go through. It has been an honor and a privilege to address your issues and concerns regarding Veteran benefits and related support programs. 🇺🇸

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