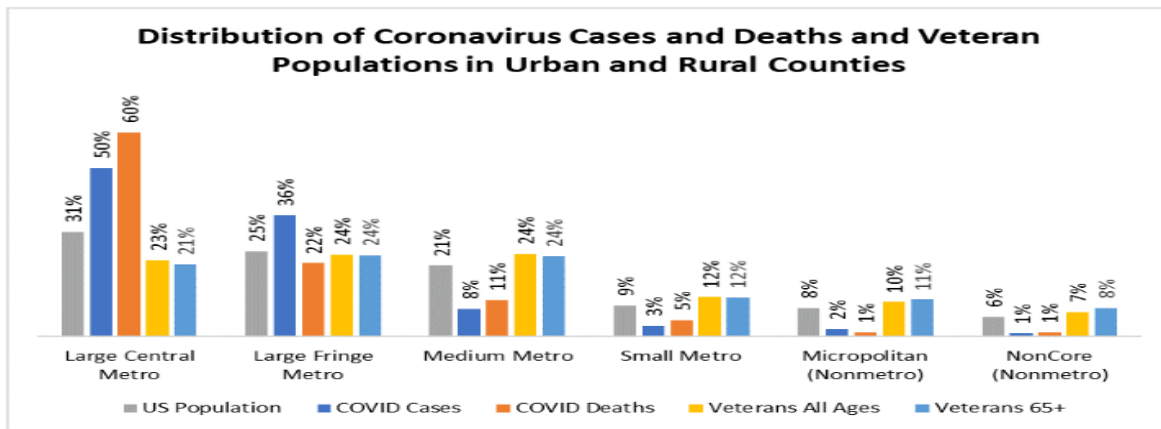




AFSA Retiree and Veteran Affairs Newsletter

- NEW OHE INFORMATION BRIEF: CORONAVIRUS IN RURAL AND URBAN AREAS: IMPLICATIONS FOR VETERANS



Sources: Johns Hopkins CSSE 2019 Novel Coronavirus COVID-19 Data Repository, CDC Wonder, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics Veteran Population Estimates.

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. Risk of infection with COVID-19 is higher for people who are close contacts of someone known to have COVID-19, for example healthcare workers, or household members.

- GET YOUR BENEFITS VIRTUALLY

Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) continues to provide Veterans with benefits and services while shifting to a virtual environment in response to the Coronavirus. Many in-person services are already available over the phone or online, and VBA is expanding the use of existing technologies to remain accessible to Veterans, service members, and their families.

- Your GI Bill Benefits Are Safe

VA will continue to pay GI Bill benefits regardless of the change from resident to online training to slow the spread of Coronavirus. Students will continue to receive the same monthly housing allowance payments until December 21, 2020, or until their normal school resumes.

- COMPENSATION AND PENSION (C&P) EXAMINATIONS

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is providing information about utilizing alternatives to in-person Compensation and Pension (C&P) examinations during the COVID-19 pandemic to support social distancing and the safety and health of Veterans and clinicians. VBA will continue to complete as many examinations as possible using virtual means that do not involve a face-to-face examination. This message is intended to advise you about the change and provide guidance and resources.

What are C&P Examinations?

C&P examinations are forensic examinations used to gather evidence used by VBA claims processors in making decisions on Veterans' claims for disability compensation and pension benefits. C&P exams are scheduled when the evidence already in the Veteran's record does not contain all the information needed to make a decision on the claim.

Disability Benefits Questionnaires, or DBQs, are standardized forms used by clinicians when performing C&P exams. The purpose of a DBQ is to ensure the clinician performing the exam captures and records all the information needed by VBA claims processors to make a decision. For many years, both Veterans Health Administration (VHA) clinicians and VBA contract vendors have conducted C&P examinations using DBQs. In FY19, VBA completed about 65 percent of the more than 1.6 million examination requests generated by regional office claims processors.

What are options for conducting C&P Examinations?

The C&P exam process most familiar to most people is the in-person appointment where the Veteran physically reports to the medical provider's office. For some disabilities, in-person examinations are required and cannot be completed through an alternate method.

C&P examinations can also be completed using a process called Acceptable Clinical Evidence (ACE) examinations. ACE examinations can occur after a medical provider reviews the evidence of record and determines that the evidence is sufficient to complete a DBQ without an in-person examination. Sometimes, the examiner may need to call the Veteran and ask for clarification or ask the Veteran to answer some questions. Frequently, the ACE examination can be completed without telephone interaction with the Veteran.

A third way of completing C&P examinations is through video or tele-C&P examinations. Tele-C&P examinations are suitable for the completion of some DBQ types, most commonly for mental health conditions. Tele-C&P examinations enable the Veteran to remain in his or her home and teleconference with the medical provider so the provider can see and speak to the Veteran.

Why has VA decided to suspend the in-person examination option?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, VA recognizes the value of social distancing and the need to reduce the amount of face-to-face contact. On April 2, 2020, the VHA temporarily discontinued performing C&P exams in order to prioritize resources for essential and critically needed health care services in this emergency. This directive also eliminate in-person examinations except in urgent care situations and reduces the number of people entering VHA facilities in order to protect employees and patients. VHA will conduct some C&P examinations through tele-exams and ACE where possible. Out of an abundance of caution for Veterans and medical providers, VBA is similarly suspending in-person C&P examinations until further notice and will continue to conduct C&P exams through ACE and Tele-C&P, when possible.

What can I do to assist with my claim?

Make sure your current private medical records are part of your VA claims file. The Department of Veterans Affairs encourages all Veterans to submit their private medical records for consideration during the processing of their benefits claim. VA values evidence from your private treatment providers because they are familiar with your medical history, often over a long period of time. VA appreciates the trusted and special relationship between private treatment providers and their Veteran/patients.

Key methods that private medical records can be submitted are as follows:

- Veteran/Private treatment provider can send medical records directly to the Department of Veterans Affairs, Claims Intake Center, P.O. Box 4444, Janesville, WI., 53547-4444 or submit to VA regional office.
- VA will request your private medical records for you if you submit signed a VA Form 21-4142 and VA Form 21-4142a. You must complete and submit both of these documents.
- Private treatment records can be uploaded as part of an on-line submission of a claim at <https://www.va.gov/disability/how-to-file-claim/>.

Resources:

We encourage all Veterans to work with an accredited representative for assistance in completing claims for VA benefits. The accredited representative can help guide the Veteran in submitting applicable medical records for consideration on his or her claim. A list of accredited organizations can be found on the Office of General Counsel site at this link: Search the VA Office of the General Counsel's list.

Questions on Claims?

- You can start and continue to file claims with no delay.
- How to start or continue a claim
- File a claim online at <https://www.va.gov/disability/how-to-file-claim/> or <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/>
- Fax a claim to VA's Centralized Mail hub at (844) 531-7818
- Submit completed applications by paper mail
- For individuals who need more assistance, VBA offers robust resources through the National Call Center (NCC) at 1-800-827-1000.

Intent to file a claim

- Faxing or mailing a completed VA Form 21-0966
- Calling the NCC at 1-800-827-1000 or Veterans Service Center
- Starting a claim online, or asking a Veterans Service Organization (VSO) to complete one on a claimant's behalf

- VA RESEARCH REVEALS CIRCUMSTANCES THAT CAN LEAD TO HOMELESSNESS AMONG WOMEN VETERANS

VA provides a full range of programs and services to help Veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness secure stable housing and achieve independence. These resources are vital for all Veterans, especially women: Homelessness among female Veterans increased by 2% between 2018 and 2019, while homelessness among male Veterans declined by 3% during the same period.

Although women Veterans make up 10% of the Veteran population, their numbers have nearly doubled in the past decade, making them the fastest-growing segment of the Veteran population. VA research found that women Veterans are more than twice as likely to become homeless as women who did not serve in the military. Additionally, 1–2% of all women Veterans and 13–15% of women Veterans living in poverty will experience homelessness over the course of a year.

When a team of VHA researchers asked women Veterans experiencing homelessness to describe their “downward spiral” into homelessness, the experience of trauma before, during, and after military services was a common theme. Childhood adversity, substance abuse, relationship termination, military sexual trauma (MST), intimate partner violence (IPV), medical problems, a PTSD diagnosis, and unemployment were all associated with women Veterans’ experience of housing instability.

Homelessness for women Veterans may look different than it does for men. While men are more frequently on their own when homeless, women are more often accompanied by dependents. Men also are more likely to access emergency shelters or shorter-term transitional housing—programs often geared specifically for males. Women, however, tend to access VA homeless programs such as Supportive Services for Veteran Families and Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing. In addition to helping to prevent or rapidly end homelessness among Veterans and ensure long-term stable housing, these programs offer the flexibility that women need to ensure the welfare of their children and families. Women also may double-up with friends or family members, making it difficult to identify them as experiencing homelessness.

One way VA identifies Veterans who are experiencing or who are at risk of homelessness is to ask them questions about their housing when they present for outpatient care. Responses to these questions reveal that women Veterans both experience housing instability and access VA’s homeless programs more frequently than male Veterans.

Safe, affordable, and functionally adequate housing is an important platform from which Veterans are able to accomplish their goals, including supporting family and other relationships, attaining and maintaining employment, and addressing their healthcare needs.

Since 2009, when the White House and the Secretary of the VA announced the goal of ending Veteran homelessness, the number and types of services intended to prevent and end housing instability among Veterans have grown. This has led to a 50% reduction in the number of Veterans experiencing homelessness on any given day.

Further developments

VA continues to develop and implement innovative refinements to its homeless programs to address challenges to housing stability, such as limited or non-existent affordable housing in some communities, Veterans’ needs for longer-term housing subsidies, and the lack of social support. Further, research is ongoing to learn about the needs of women Veterans experiencing or at risk of housing instability and the best methods to address those needs.

By contacting their local VAMC or the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans, women Veterans can be immediately directed to programs and services that will provide them with the assistance and support they need to find or remain in a place they can call home. <https://www.va.gov/homeless/nationalcallcenter.asp>

- ARE YOU GETTING VA'S TEXT MESSAGES? VA IS TEXTING HEALTH CARE UPDATES AND REMINDERS

VA is sending text messages to its 7+ million Veterans enrolled in VA health care. The texts deliver VA's latest information, resources and guidance. VA's next wide-scale VEText message will be on how Veterans can access virtual mental care.

Update Your Contact Information Now

If you are not receiving these important updates, it's possible that VA doesn't have your updated contact information. Login to VA.gov to view your profile, make any updates, and select your notification preferences—such as receiving VEText text messages on important information from VA. For more detailed instructions, see Veterans can now update their contact information online.

<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/50992/veterans-can-now-update-contact-information-online/>

- VETERANS AND FAMILY MEMBERS AIM HIGHER FOR CONTINUED EDUCATION WITH A NEW AFSA MEMBERSHIP

AFSA has partnered together with Columbia Southern University to provide a sponsored One-Course Scholarship (**Over a \$700 value. Plus Registration Fee-Waiver and Books at No Cost!**) for all military veterans/retirees and family members.

This Is A Continued Educational Opportunity For Those Who Have Borne The Battle!

AFSA is honored to help Military Veterans/Retirees and their Family Members on their journey to reach higher educational goals. Join AFSA now to participate. Membership will be validated before scholarship is awarded. Participants must enroll in the CSU College course within six months of joining the AFSA. Visit our website at www.hqafsa.org/edconnect

- ARE YOU A VETERAN IN CRISIS OR CONCERNED ABOUT ONE?

Did you know that VA offers same day services in Primary Care and Mental Health at 172 VA Medical Centers across the country? Contact the Veterans Crisis Line (1-800-273-8255 and press 1, Chat, or Text 838255.)