



AFSA Retiree and Veteran Affairs Newsletter

- AFSA POW-MIA WEEK AND NATIONAL POW-MIA RECOGNITION DAY

Many Americans across the United States pause to remember the sacrifices and service of those who were prisoners of war (POW), as well as those who are missing in action (MIA), and their families. All military installations fly the National League of Families' POW/MIA flag, which symbolizes the nation's remembrance of those who were imprisoned while serving in conflicts and those who remain missing.

AFSA's POW-MIA Week for 2021 is next week, 12-18 September. AFSA is encouraging chapters to participate in local POW-MIA activities in your area or even host a POW-MIA event. In the United States, National POW/MIA Recognition Day is observed on the third Friday in September. It honors those who were prisoners of war (POWs) and those who are still missing in action (MIA) this year the National POW-MIA Recognition Day is Friday, 17 September. Please take time to remember those comrades in arms that are still unaccounted for or prisoners of war and their families.

- AIR FORCE RETIREES PART OF 'FAMILY ETHIC' ENSURING EXCELLENCE, STRENGTH, CONTINUITY

It's an article of faith that the United States Air Force's "family ethic" is a major reason our service is the best in the world, why it succeeds, endures and excels everywhere, everyday across our far flung enterprise. From the Air Force's first day 74 years ago, spouses, siblings, and extended family have stepped in, stepped up and served whenever the need arose.

Air Force retirees – all 685,000 of you – are a critical part of that family fabric too. Our retirees' histories and service are impressive. Your work and contributions are worthy of praise and your continued contributions are vital to the missions and excellence that define our Air Force. We are duty bound to recognize and celebrate your service just as we praise contributions from your families, both immediate and extended.

Simply put, Air Force retirees are key players that keep the Air Force of today ready and primed for any mission, anytime, anywhere. Your experiences, the stories you share, and your volunteer work have long been a powerful "secret weapon" that helps us recruit and retain Airmen. You help us remember and use "best practices" and you set an example for all of us to follow.

I see it everywhere I go and almost every day. Visit almost any Air Force installation and you can find retired Airmen stepping up to make our Air Force better. You're serving as volunteers at our Retiree Activities Offices,

Clinics, and other facilities lending a hand where you can. You're serving as mentors to currently serving Airmen by offering guidance, sharing lessons learned, and just sharing "war stories" that give us a glimpse of the past. As Air Force retirees, you are powerful ambassadors outside the gate. You may not be wearing the uniform or live near a military installation, but you still represent our Air Force in communities worldwide. Whether that means speaking at local schools, supporting your communities or just being good neighbors, as retirees you are constantly telling the Air Force story through your words and actions. And how we treat our retirees is a reflection of how the Air Force will treat our nation's sons and daughters.

In short, retirees are the "connective tissue" that binds our Air Force family of yesteryear to the force of today and the one building for tomorrow. Our Air Force retirees provide continuity and knowledge, experience and authenticity. All of that is needed for us to succeed going forward. We are indebted to you. Our retirees deserve our support and respect as valued members of the Air Force family. To all our Air Force retirees no matter where you are, I thank you and salute you. ---- Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr.

- AFGHANISTAN: LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

You are not alone! Veterans may question the meaning of their service or whether it was worth the sacrifices they made. They may feel more moral distress about experiences they had during their service. It's normal to feel this way. Talk with your friends and families, reach out to battle buddies, connect with a peer-to-peer network, or sign up for mental health services. Click on the link below to view a list of resources available to all Veterans.

The VA Health Care System (VAHCS) offers a wide variety of mental health services for all of our Veterans struggling with the events that are currently happening because of Afghanistan. We offer same day access to mental health services in our Mental Health Clinics located across our VA campuses. Veterans that walk into our Mental Health Clinic with needs for mental health care will be assessed and provided services, support, and access to future appointments

Veterans, their families, and friend can access the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 and then press 1 to get somebody on the line. Any Veteran, regardless of their eligibility or if they are enrolled in VA care, who is in crisis and needs support can call this number. Remember resources are available right now.

- EDUCATION AND TRAINING BENEFITS UPDATE

Did you know that your Veterans Readiness & Employment (VR&E) benefits no longer affect the limit on your GI Bill benefits? This means that using VR&E benefits for a full 48 months won't stop you from also being able to use your GI Bill benefits, which pay for 36 months of college, the standard length of a four-year degree. Learn more about your VA education and training benefits!

For veterans and service members, you may receive Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) (Formerly known as Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment) services to help with job training, employment accommodations, resume development, and job seeking skills coaching. Other services may be provided to assist Veterans and Service members in starting their own businesses or independent living services for those who are severely disabled and unable to work in traditional employment. To learn more about the VR&E program visit: <https://www.benefits.va.gov/vocrehab/>

- SUICIDE PREVENTION AWARENESS MONTH

September is recognized a Suicide Prevention Month. Suicide is a national public health concern that affects all Am Reach Out is the VA's theme for Suicide Prevention Month.

The Reach Out campaign focuses on increasing knowledge about what Veterans and their loved ones can do now to help prevent suicide later. This campaign reminds Veterans that while big life moments—like transitioning from the military, starting a job, retiring from a job, ending a relationship, or raising kids—can be overwhelming, they don't have to go through them alone. They can take a moment to reach out and ask for help. The campaign also emphasizes that Veteran supporters can proactively reach out to the Veterans in their lives to provide support during life challenges.

Suicide prevention is everyone's business. You can play a vital role in suicide prevention by reaching out to someone who is exhibiting warning signs of crisis or suicide risk and by showing your support. Helping someone feel included can make a big difference during a challenging time. Special training is not required to approach the subject of suicide, and asking others about suicide does not lead them to have suicidal thoughts. In fact, research tells us that asking others the question gives them permission to talk about their thoughts and feelings. No matter how casually or jokingly stated, comments about emotional distress, crisis, or suicide should always be taken seriously. Someone who talks about suicide, or who shares concerning images on social media, provides others with an opportunity to intervene before suicidal behavior occurs.

If you are experiencing a crisis and want to talk with someone, you can contact the Veterans Crisis Line, it is available 24/7/365. Crisis Line responders are available at 1(800) 273-8255 Option 1; via chat at <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/>; or via text message at 838255.

- MY HEALTHVET ACCOUNTS CHANGED

On September 1, 2021, the My HealtheVet Advanced account was discontinued. All My HealtheVet Advanced account users are encouraged to upgrade their accounts to Premium. If you currently have an Advanced account and do not upgrade to Premium, your account will revert to a Basic account. If that occurs, you will lose access to the pharmacy features, including the ability to request and track your VA prescription refills.

If your account is reverted to Basic, you will not have to re-register for a new MyHealtheVet account. Your self-entered data is available, and you can upgrade to Premium at any time. You can easily upgrade to a Premium account in person, online, or via VA Video Connect appointment. Upgrade information is also available on Upgrade to Premium Account at <https://www.myhealth.va.gov/mhv-portal-web/upgrade-your-my-healthevet-advanced-account-to-premium>, or by contacting the SAVAHCS MyHealtheVet Coordinator at 520-792-1450 extension 1-6889.

- 6 IN 10 RETIREES HAVE INCORRECT INFORMATION IN DEERS

When TRICARE officials tried reaching a group of retirees with critical information recently, more than 6 out of 10 had incorrect information in DEERS. To maintain medical benefits and receive crucial health care and benefit communications, retirees and surviving spouses must maintain accurate information in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System.

Beneficiaries need to update their information in DEERS so that health care teams can contact people with critical healthcare and appointment information; vital authorizations; claims; and enrollment information. Retirees and surviving spouses enrolled in any TRICARE plan need to update DEERS as soon as possible anytime they move, change contact information, or experience a qualifying life event such as:

- Change in sponsor's status
- Having a baby or adopting
- There is a change in a student's full-time enrollment status
- Becoming eligible for Medicare
- Death of sponsor or family member
- Marriage or divorce

For a more extensive list of qualifying events, visit the TRICARE website. Besides notifying DEERS, beneficiaries should also notify their regional contractor. To learn how to update DEERS, visit <https://www.TRICARE.mil/DEERS> or call 800-538-9552 (TTY/TDD: 1-866-363-2883); fax updates to 800-336-4416 (primary) or 502-335-9980

- VA PRODUCES INFORMATIONAL WELCOME KIT FOR VETERANS

Veterans oftentimes receive information about the Department of Veterans Affairs in a fragmented way. This can create confusion and a disjointed experience for veterans and their families as they attempt to understand and access VA's many different services and benefits. VA officials have produced the VA Welcome Kit to specifically address this challenge. Since assuming his current duties in February, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis R. McDonough has added customer experience principles to VA's longstanding "I CARE" (integrity, commitment, advocacy, respect and excellence) core values.

In support of the Secretary's intent, the VA's Veterans Experience Office under the direction of Chief Experience Officer John W. Boerstler, produces the VA Welcome Kit each year and distributes it in conjunction with Veterans Day. The product is specifically designed to make it easier for U.S. service members, veterans, family members, caregivers and survivors to understand the many different benefits and services offered by VA.

"Veterans remain at the center of every decision we make. It is the responsibility of every [VA] employee to deliver exceptional outcomes and experiences," said McDonough. "Our individual and organizational commitment to delivering exceptional experiences in our service delivery continues." The VA Welcome Kit provides pertinent information and helps overcome the natural apprehension most people experience when interacting with a large, complex organization like VA for the first time. It is written in an easy-to-understand and concise manner and includes information on popular VA benefits, including applying for VA health care, a disability rating, education benefits, etc. The welcome kit highlights key benefits and services available that can positively impact quality of life, and explains how and where to go to access those benefits and services.

The VA Welcome Kit also includes handy one-page (front and back) Quick Start Guides focused on specific topics of interest to people that has been validated through empirical and anecdotal field research. The welcome kit is regularly updated online as new information becomes available. The kit can be downloaded and printed directly from the website <https://www.va.gov/welcome-kit/>

- PENSION BENEFITS FOR SURVIVING SPOUSES

If you're the surviving spouse or child of a deceased wartime Veteran, you may be eligible for VA's Survivor Pension. Find out how you can apply for tax-free pension payments as part of the program. A VA Survivors Pension offers monthly payments to qualified surviving spouses and unmarried dependent children of wartime Veterans who meet certain income and net worth limits set by Congress.

You may be eligible for this benefit if you haven't remarried after the Veteran's death, and if the deceased Veteran didn't receive a dishonorable discharge and their service meets at least one of the requirements listed below.

At least one of these must be true. The Veteran:

- Entered active duty on or before September 7, 1980, and served at least 90 days on active military service, with at least 1 day during a covered wartime period, or
- Entered active duty after September 7, 1980, and served at least 24 months or the full period for which they were called or ordered to active duty (with some exceptions), with at least 1 day during a covered wartime period or
- Was an officer and started on active duty after October 16, 1981, and hadn't previously served on active duty for at least 24 months

And this must be true for you:

- Your yearly family income and net worth meet certain limits set by Congress. Your net worth equals the value of everything you own (except your house, your car, and most home furnishings), minus any debt you owe.

Am I eligible for a VA Survivors Pension as the child of a deceased wartime Veteran?

You may be eligible for this benefit if you're unmarried and you meet at least one of the requirements listed below. At least one of these must be true:

- You're under age 18, or
- You're under age 23 and attending a VA-approved school, or
- You're unable to care for yourself due to a disability that happened before age 18

Need more information? Visit: <https://www.va.gov/pension/survivors-pension/>

- VOLUNTEER TO HONOR AMERICA'S FALLEN FOR THE NATIONAL DAY OF SERVICE ON FRIDAY, SEPT 10TH

Most events begin at 10 a.m., with the exception of Quantico, Alexandria, Culpeper and Baltimore National Cemeteries, which begin at 9 a.m.

Upon arrival at the national cemetery, volunteers are asked to assemble at the main flagpole for a brief ceremony followed by instructions about national cemetery protocols and headstone cleaning.

A special feature to the event is the ability for volunteers to post tributes and photos on VA's Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) <https://www.vlm.cem.va.gov/>

Volunteers interested in cleaning headstones at national cemeteries can sign up for the National Day of Service event to be held in 65 locations Sept. 10.

- DFAS ANNOUNCES STATUS NOTIFICATION SYSTEM

Defense Finance and Accounting Service officials recently announced an improvement for retirees and Survivor Benefit Plan annuitants. DFAS is rolling out the use of status notifications to keep customers in the loop as forms or documents they submit move through the retired pay or annuitant pay processing cycles.

Status notifications are a three-step process that updates customers when DFAS receives forms or documents for processing by mail or fax, or in some specific cases, through AskDFAS. Customers will receive separate status notifications when their form or document is:

- Received and queued in the DFAS work system
- Assigned to be worked
- Completed, with either a notification that processing is complete or a notification that DFAS is sending a request for additional information.

To be eligible to receive status notifications, customers should ensure their email address is available and updated in myPay. To add or ensure an email address is up-to-date, visit myPay. The first rollout of status notifications involved submissions related to the Survivor Benefit Plan, including the DD 2656-6 for SBP changes and the DD 2656-7 SBP annuity startup form, as well as school certifications, the direct deposit form-SF 1199, and change of address requests. These were followed by requests related to federal tax changes (for retirees or annuitants), state tax changes (for retirees) and the designation of beneficiary for arrears of pay. Status notifications for additional categories of requests will be added throughout the coming year.

Watch for more information on status notifications and other improvements from DFAS on the DFAS retired & annuitant pay website

- AFSA CHAPLAIN FACEBOOK PAGE

Have a question, need an AFSA prayer, need a prayer for you or your family, need some advice or advocacy, then visit and like the AFSA Chaplain Facebook Page at: <https://www.facebook.com/AFSAInspiration>

- 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.)

- AFSA MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

AFSA MEMBERSHIP is open to all: UNIFORMED SERVICES: Active Duty, Guard, Reserve, Retired and Veteran Military Members (Joint Services Enlisted and Commissioned Officers), Public Health Services (PHS), and National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) personnel; FAMILY MEMBERS of Uniformed Service Members, and ASSOCIATE MEMBERS: DoD Civilians, Civil Air Patrol, JROTC, Mission Partners/Sponsors and all Military Supporters. Visit: www.hqafsa.org for more information and to join.