



## AFSA Retiree and Veteran Affairs Newsletter



### Happy Holidays AFSA!

#### - THANKFUL AND JOYOUS SEASON:

This is the time of year that we should reflect on all the wonderful things that we have been blessed with and be thankful for the freedoms we enjoy thanks to the men and women such as you.

As a child, the holidays always seemed to bring anticipation of wonder and awe. Not merely for whatever Santa thought I deserved but also for the magic of celebrating the birth of Jesus. Churches set up living reenactments, standing still through the chill of frost and snow against the glow of soft lights. It seemed a little sad, though wondrous tribute of an event, which literally, changed the world.

Carolers visited the neighborhood spreading joyous harmony of long ago songs, warming themselves with cocoa or hot cider offered in thanks and appreciation. Many times, for a few moments before they moved down the street, they warmed their chilly bodies in your home, temporarily finding pleasure in the warmth of the fireplace or home. They brought us a special feeling to our hearts, not so much of love but a bonding of kindness, thoughtfulness and care of humanity. You felt a part of a much larger picture. Then later when received the gift of love, presented through homemade cookies, pies, candy, and popcorn balls. As you ate these gifts, each bite held a deeper meaning knowing the great time and effort put forth in their design.

Today, it seems we have lost much of the real meaning of the holiday season. Instead of gratitude for whatever gift given us, big or small, store bought or homemade, I see an air of expectation, deserved or not. For every single gift given is a testament of affection, be it elaborate or simple in nature. The gift signifies an act of love, a sign of caring, a gesture of thoughtfulness. Take this time to reflect upon what you want the holiday to represent. How you, deep in your heart, wish to celebrate the season, and then do so. For it is not how elaborate the dinner or how many frivolous gifts you purchase, but the warmth and love which surrounds you; the good will to man that carries meaning during the season and months to come.

I wish you all a very Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! *~~ Dr. Jim Crissinger*

## **- CONDITIONS FOR DISABILITY CLAIMS EXPAND**

VA will begin processing disability claims for asthma, rhinitis and sinusitis on a presumptive basis based on presumed particulate matter exposures during military service in Southwest Asia and certain other areas – if these conditions manifested within 10 years of a qualifying period of military service.

VA conducted the first iteration of a newly formed internal VA process to review scientific evidence to support rulemaking, resulting in the recommendation to consider creation of new presumptions of service connection for respiratory conditions based on VA's evaluation of a National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine report and other evidence.

The process concluded that particulate matter pollution is associated with chronic asthma, rhinitis and sinusitis for Veterans who served in the Southwest Asia theater of operations beginning Aug. 2, 1990 to the present, or Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Syria or Djibouti beginning Sept. 19, 2001 to the present. VA's review also concluded that there was sufficient evidence to presume that these Veterans have been exposed to particulate matter.

"I announced my intent to initiate rulemaking on May 27 to consider adding respiratory conditions to the list of chronic disabilities," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough. "Through this process I determined that the evidence provided was sufficient to establish presumptions of service connection for these three respiratory conditions. This is the right decision, and VA will continue to use a holistic approach in determining toxic exposure presumptives moving forward."

The Southwest Asia theater of operations refers to Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the neutral zone between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Oman, the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea and the airspace above these locations.

VA will conduct outreach to impacted Veterans and survivors to inform them about their eligibility and will provide information on how to apply. Veterans and survivors who believe they may be eligible for the newly established presumptive conditions are encouraged to apply. They should file a VA Form 21-526EZ if applying for the first time or a VA Form 20-0995 if they are reapplying for these conditions. For more information on the new presumptive conditions, visit our website at Airborne Hazards and Burn Pit Exposures – Public Health ([va.gov](http://va.gov)).

## **- YOUR VA BENEFITS ANNUAL INCREASE**

As the cost of living goes up, VA ensures your benefit rates do too. As of December 1, all compensation benefits rates increased by 6% to match adjustments made to Social Security benefits. If you receive VA compensation benefits, take a look at your new rates.

Review 2022 Veterans disability compensation rates. Use our compensation benefits rate tables to find your monthly payment amount. We base your monthly payment amount on your disability rating and details about your dependent family members.

Visit: <https://www.va.gov/disability/compensation-rates> Once there take a few minutes to review the table and determine which disability rating and dependent status applies to you in order to see your specific increase.

## **- IMPORTANT CHANGES TO PUBLIC SERVICE LOAN FORGIVENESS**

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) announced changes to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program. Now, for a limited period of time, borrowers may receive credit for past payments made on loans that would otherwise not qualify for PSLF. Under the new rules, any prior payment made will count as a qualifying payment, regardless of loan type, repayment plan, or whether the payment was made in full or on time. All you need is qualifying employment.

The changes also include making it easier for members of the military to get credit toward forgiveness while they serve, even if the Service member's loans were on a deferment or forbearance rather than in active repayment. This change ensures that members of the military will not need to focus on their student loans while serving our country. More information can be found in this recent press release from ED. Information about PSLF program can be found here. <https://studentaid.gov/manage-loans/forgiveness-cancellation/public-service>

## **- ATTENTION SERVICE MEMBERS: DON'T LET YOUR EDUCATION BENEFITS GO UNUSED!**

You've earned your Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, but maybe you don't need them, thanks to tuition assistance or other education opportunities available to you while on active duty. That doesn't mean your VA education benefits have to go to waste. If eligible, you may be able to transfer all or part of your unused benefits to your spouse or dependent children, through the Transfer of Entitlement (TOE) program. TOE eligibility is determined by the DoD and the request must be made while you are still on active. Now is the perfect time to plan your family's future! To learn more visit: <https://www.benefits.va.gov>

## **- COVID-19 PROVISIONS ENDING & COULD IMPACT YOUR MONTHLY HOUSING ALLOWANCE**

On December 21, 2021, COVID-19 legislation that permits you to receive the Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) at the resident (in person) rate, while taking approved courses converted to online training due to COVID-19 will end.

This means that starting December 22, 2021, you will no longer receive the MHA at the resident (in person) rate for classes taken online. When enrolling for courses after that date or any subsequent term, you will need to enroll in approved resident (in person) classes to continue receiving your MHA at the resident rate. Otherwise, you will receive the online rate (half the national average). To find out more about your MHA rate, visit the GI Bill Comparison Tool. <https://www.va.gov/gi-bill-comparison-tool>

Additionally, many GI Bill programs are not normally approved for online training; they are only approved for resident (in person) training. This is especially true for most Non-College Degree (NCD) programs but is also the case for any non-accredited degree programs. These programs are only currently approved for GI Bill benefits for online training because of the COVID-19 legislation set to end on December 21, 2021. If your program is one that is normally only approved for resident training and is only approved for online training due to the COVID-19 legislation, you will need to return to resident (in person) training after December 21, 2021, if you want to continue receiving GI Bill benefits.

## **- VA HEALTH CARE: WHEN YOU'RE IN, YOU'RE IN**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) operates the largest health care system in the country, with over 1,400 sites of care nationwide. When you become enrolled in the VA health care system, it's for a lifetime. You are instantly and automatically entitled to receive care at any VA location without ever having to register for VA health care benefits again. Learn more at: <https://www.va.gov/health-care/eligibility/>

After you enroll, you can immediately start receiving your health care at a VA facility, or at a later date - the choice is yours. Enrolling in the VA health care system is quick and easy - just complete an online Application for Health Benefits online at: <https://www.va.gov/health-care/how-to-apply/> Need help enrolling? Contact the VA toll free at 1-877-222-VETS (8387).

## **- VA DELAYS IN PRINTING & MAILING NOTIFICATION LETTERS**

Due to supply chain and staffing shortages, the vendor contracted by the Government Publishing Office to provide printing services for the Department of Veterans Affairs is experiencing delays in printing and mailing notification letters to Veterans and claimants. The disruption may impact the ability of some claimants to meet required deadlines via written correspondence with VA.

In response to the mailing delays and to protect the best interest of claimants, the Veterans Benefits Administration is extending their response period by 90-calendar days for claimants with letters dated between July 13, 2021 and Dec. 31, 2021. If a claimant does not reply to a time-limited notification, such as, making an election of benefits or services, or reporting for a scheduled compensation and pension examination, VBA will not take adverse action to deny, reduce or terminate benefits and services unless: 1) the claimant is contacted and there is documentation of their right to respond; 2) the requested information has been received; or 3) the response period has lapsed. VA and GPO are proactively working to quickly address the mailing delays. For questions on this matter, Veterans and claimants can contact VA at 800-827-1000.

## **- SHOW YOUR STRIPES CAMPAIGN TO FOCUS ON VETERANS**

The goal is to encourage Veterans facing challenges – or their family and friends looking out for the wellbeing of a Veteran – to visit [showyourstripes.org](http://showyourstripes.org) for national and local support. The new iHeartRadio Show Your Stripes will offer broad recommendations and relevant resources that have been curated by iHeart in partnership with Dixon Center for Military and Veteran Services, which provides influence, ideas and actions to organizations and individuals wanting Veterans and their families to succeed where they live. The site will serve as a launch pad to other programs serving Veterans today.

“Back in 2013, our military service people were returning from overseas with highly marketable skills and abilities – but they couldn’t find work,” said John Sykes, president of Entertainment Enterprises for iHeartMedia. “With the creation of iHeartRadio Show Your Stripes, we became a conduit to connect returning Veterans with potential employers. Our relaunch of this initiative is designed to help Veterans re-acclimate to life, family and community on all fronts.”

True to the program’s original mission, iHeartRadio Show Your Stripes will celebrate the unique skills and training that make Veterans such valuable leaders and members of communities by sharing stories that

highlight the strength and resilience of our military as they overcome challenges in their quest to reintegrate into civilian life. In collaboration with the VA and MakeTheConnection.net, iHeart will showcase a series of Veteran testimonials via [showyourstripes.org](http://showyourstripes.org) that share unique experiences, challenges and recovery. Additionally, iHeart will also launch a series of original on-air PSAs with Veterans across all areas of service in the coming weeks.

“Veterans and their families may face difficult and unique challenges, some as a result of war trauma,” said David Sutherland, retired Army colonel and chairman of Dixon Center for Military and Veterans Services. “However, just like on the battlefield, we’ve seen our Veterans thrive when they are connected to the right support, at the right place, at the right time – wherever they live. They are amazing people. Get them started and they will shine.” Visit: <https://showyourstripes.org/>

### **- COVID BOOSTER SHOTS NOW AVAILABLE AT VA**

VA Health Care System (VAHCS) is now offering both Moderna and Johnson and Johnson (J&J) booster shots by appointment only, please call (520) 629-4729 to schedule an appointment.

The VA follows all CDC guidance in offering COVID-19 booster shots:

- For individuals who completed a Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna COVID-19 vaccine series, the following groups are eligible for a booster shot at least 6 months after their second dose:
- 65 years and older.
- Age 18+ who live in long-term care settings.
- Age 18+ who have underlying medical conditions.
- Age 18+ who work or live in high-risk settings.
- People 18 years and older are eligible to receive a COVID-19 booster shot at least 2 months after their initial J&J vaccine.

Eligible individuals may choose which vaccine they receive as a booster dose. CDC’s recommendations now allow for this type of mix and match dosing for booster shots.

If you would like additional information on the COVID-19 booster vaccines, please visit the VA COVID-19: vaccines webpage: <https://www.va.gov/health-care/covid-19-vaccine/>, or the VA’s Questions webpage for questions and answers regarding COVID-19 vaccine at: <https://www.va.gov/health-care/covid-19-vaccine/about-covid-19-vaccine/#more-facts-about-covid-19-vacc>

### **- FISCAL YEAR 2022 NDAA PASSES SENATE; MOVES TO PRESIDENT'S DESK FOR SIGNATURE**

Yesterday, the Senate voted 88-11 to approve the Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), sending the must-pass legislation to President Biden's desk after months of delay. However, this mandatory piece of legislation has now been passed by Congress, and awaits the President's signature.

The AFSA Legislative Team led by Matt Schwartzman is still in the process of analyzing the statutory language of the NDAA, and they will report on provisions of support and opposition and provide a summary of all provisions that will have an impact on you and/or your family.

However, key provisions that we know of thus far are as follows:

- Increases military basic pay by 2.7%
- Authorizes the Secretary of Defense to pay a basic needs allowance to a qualified service member
- Increases the allowable parental leave for primary and secondary caregivers, including foster parents
- Expands the in-home childcare pilot program providing financial assistance for in-home childcare
- Establishes an Exceptional Family Member Program Advisory Council to support military families who have members with special needs
- Authorizes \$50.0 million for the purpose of aiding local educational agencies with military dependent students, and \$10.0 million for local educational agencies eligible to receive a payment for children with severe disabilities and \$10 million to local educational agencies determined by the Secretary to have higher concentrations of military children with severe disabilities
- Requires a report by DoD on family size within the military including if BAH accurately assesses the needs of military families moves
- Provides federal employees with two weeks of paid parental bereavement leave
- Requires the military to provide Reserve and National Guard service members incentive and special duty pays at the same rate as their active-duty counterparts
- Establishes a three-year pilot program to provide employment support to the spouses of members of the Armed Forces through a paid fellowship with employers across a variety of industries
- Makes additional changes to previous limitations on the realignment or reduction of military medical manning end strength in light of emerging requirements
- Requires an independent review of the DoD Comprehensive Autism Care Demonstration program to be completed by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine
- Directs the DoD to carry out a pilot to provide direct assistance for mental health appointment scheduling with a reporting requirement to the Armed Services Committee
- Requires DoD to conduct a thorough & independent review of suicide prevention/ response programs
- Directs the DoD to do a report on method to provide housing history statements to service members in DoD-provided housing, currently privatized housing, and economy housing for proof they are good tenants to future landlords/apartments

### **- 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](http://www.hqafsa.org) for more information and to join.