



## AFSA Retiree and Veteran Affairs Newsletter

### - SENATE PASSES BILL ALLOWING VA TO VACCINATE ALL VETERANS, SPOUSES

Recently the Senate unanimously passed a bill Wednesday evening that would order the Department of Veterans Affairs to offer vaccinations to any veteran who wants one, regardless of whether they are enrolled in VA health care.

Under the Saves Lives Act, veterans' spouses and caregivers would also become eligible for vaccines through the VA. The department is currently vaccinating only employees and veterans enrolled in VA health care, as well as some veteran caregivers.

"Vaccines are our best shot at ending this pandemic," said Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont. "Unanimous passage of Saves Lives Act brings us one step closer to our goal of providing free vaccination services to every veteran, spouse, child and caregiver at VA." The legislation would add millions more people to the population that the VA is responsible for vaccinating.

Dr. Richard Stone, the VA's acting undersecretary for health, said at the end of February that the VA had the ability to vaccinate between 350,000 to 600,000 people each week – about double the number it was vaccinating at the time.

The challenge will be allotting the VA enough doses to cover the extra population of veterans, spouses and caregivers, the senators said.

Tester said the VA would need to negotiate with the Department of Health and Human Services to receive more. Their bill urges HHS to allot more vaccines to the VA as the supply chain allows.

"The biggest challenge is getting more vaccines to the VA," Tester said. "I think we need to continue to press, and I think the VA needs to continue to press, whether it's HHS or whoever it is, to get as many vaccines as

If you have not opted in to receive the COVID-9 vaccine, you can sign up at the following link

<https://www.va.gov/health-care/covid-19-vaccine/stay-informed>

### - AFSA 2021 PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT SYMPOSIUM

The AFSA International Convention - Professional Educational Symposium - Professional Development Symposium - Military Conferences is coming up July 24 through the 29, 2021 at the Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek Resort. It is your destination for military support & family fun!

Visit our website @ [www.hqafsa.org](http://www.hqafsa.org) and click on the **AFSAPED21** box on the top menu for more exciting information about the hotel and surrounding area. Hotel reservations are on our website and registration for the Professional Education & Development Symposium and Convention will be forthcoming.

## **- GI BILL BENEFICIARIES**

On January 5, 2021, the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (P.L.116-315) was signed into law. This new law provides for the improvement and/or expansion of various GI Bill programs, including the following provision relating to the Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) program and how it may affect you as a GI Bill beneficiary:

### **Section 4302 EXPANSION OF ELIGIBLE CLASS OF PROVIDERS OF HIGH TECHNOLOGY PROGRAMS OF EDUCATION FOR VETERANS.**

- 1) Expands the VET TEC Program to transitioning Service members who are within 180 days of their separation.
- 2) Eliminates the “2 years in operation” requirement; thereby increasing the number of eligible providers.
- 3) Requires instructors to be “experts” for program approval requirements.
- 4) Increases annual funding for VET TEC from \$15 million to \$45 million per year due to the high demand and usage of the program. This allows VA to provide more student Veterans the chance to gain the high-tech skills sought by today’s top employers.

### **What Do You Need to Do?**

At this time, no action is required from you. We will notify you as soon as funds are available, and VA reopens the application window to eligible Service members and Veterans. We are committed to providing you with regular updates through direct email campaigns, social media and outreach about VA’s effort to implement these new changes.

If you have any questions, please contact the Education Call Center at: 1-888-442-4551 between 8 a.m. and 7 p.m. ET, Monday-Friday. For timely updates about the law, please visit the Isakson and Roe Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 webpage



## **- VETERANS GET UPDATES THROUGH NEW DIGITAL NOTIFICATION FEATURE**

Veterans, their families and caregivers can now receive digital notifications through VANotify, a new paperless platform. While Veterans already receive appointment notifications through VEText, VA sends most notifications via postal mail. With VANotify, Veterans can now receive even more VA notifications by email and text.

Veterans do not have to sign up for VANotify. VA automatically is using it on the back-end to streamline communications to Veterans who receive services from VA, as long as the Veteran's contact information with VA is up to date.

Mail delivery is a slow and expensive process. It can lead to Veterans amassing piles of letters related to their health care, benefits, and other services. Challenges can also arise when Veterans change addresses or do not have easy access to a mailbox. With the launch of VANotify, which was developed using open source software, VA further expands the Department's capability to effortlessly send Veterans emails and texts to support the following functions:

- Confirming Veterans' receipt of benefits applications
- Notifying Veterans of changes to their VA accounts
- Helping Veterans track their VA Pharmacy deliveries

### **Other Uses**

Most recently, VA used the feature to notify Veterans about COVID-19 vaccinations. Over 200,000 Veterans received communications around vaccination planning through VANotify. There are plans to expand the use of VANotify to include:

- Sending monthly SMS notifications about benefit payments
- Sending information about debt acquisition
- Expanding VANotify features to enable push notifications (automated messages sent by VA applications to a user)

VA's investments in digital applications such as the COVID-19 Chatbot, "I am Here" texting solution, the Digital Screener tool, and now VANotify, ensure Veterans have more options and flexibility in accessing the benefits and services they have earned.

### **- MYPAY TWO-FACTOR AUTHENTICATION MANDATORY APRIL 2021**

Since we announced myPay's Two-Factor Authentication last September, more than 400,000 military retirees have included this new layer of online security to their myPay accounts. In late April, two-factor authentication will become mandatory for all myPay users. Users will need to select how to receive the random one-time PIN the first time they log in to myPay after that date.

Simply put, two-factor authentication uses your mobile phone number or email address to provide a means to verify that you are, well, you and not someone who has discovered your myPay Login ID and password.

MyPay accounts are secured with Login IDs and passwords. When an account holder enters this information, a unique one-time PIN is sent to the individual's mobile phone via text message or as an email message to an address contained in the user's myPay profile. Once the one-time PIN is entered on the myPay login screen, access to the account is provided.

The one-time PIN verification code remains valid for 10 minutes so it will be important that the user have access to the mobile phone or email account previously selected by the user to receive the information.

Information on two-factor authentication is available via the Defense Finance and Accounting Service website at <https://www.dfas.mil/mypayinfo/2FA/> There you will also find a link to the two-factor most frequently asked questions that explain the benefits of two-factor authentication and the steps needed to help you meet the new requirements.

Remember, two-factor authentication helps keep your online accounts secure and prevents thieves from stealing your personal and financial information.

## **- FREE VETERAN TRAINING FOR MICROSOFT SOFTWARE AND SYSTEMS ACADEMY**

The Microsoft Software & Systems Academy (MSSA) is offering free Veteran training to military and Veteran community. This free, formal training takes place in some of the technology industry's most in-demand roles. Transitioning service members' and Veterans' experiences often uniquely prepare and qualify them for the skills and security clearances technology companies need.

### **What is the Microsoft Software & Systems Academy (MSSA)?**

MSSA is an industry-leading educational program designed specifically to support members of the military community, including transitioning service members and Veterans, with job skills, training, mentorship and other professional support to successfully transition to a career in technology. Courses and professional networking are offered online, and students can access developed comprehensive learning paths for careers as cloud application developers and server and cloud administrators.

### **What Does the MSSA Program Cover?**

MSSA provides 16-17 weeks of online training for high-demand careers in cloud development or cloud administration. MSSA also offers a Tech Transition Toolkit with simple tips for how you can build a career in technology, including how to create a strong resume, learn "tech lingo" to sound like a pro, set up your virtual workspace, use your virtual professional network to your advantage, and learn lessons from MSSA graduates.

Program graduates have an opportunity to interview for a full-time job at Microsoft. Since MSSA launched in 2013, more than 90% of graduates hired by Microsoft have stayed on the job two years and longer.

MSSA also works with other companies to help them become more "Veteran-ready" rather than just "Veteran-friendly," according to Chris Cortez, vice president of military affairs at Microsoft. Program graduates can interview with one of MSSA's more than 600 hiring partners, many of whom are Fortune 500 companies, to find new career paths in the technology industry.

There is no cost to eligible to the military and Veteran community, including transitioning service members.

### **How to Apply**

To get started, email [MSSAOPS@Microsoft.com](mailto:MSSAOPS@Microsoft.com) for an invite to attend one of the weekly information sessions, a mandatory part of the application process, held every Tuesday at 12:00 and 3:00 (ET) or visit the link: <https://military.microsoft.com/programs/microsoft-software-systems-academy/#pivot-prepare-your-application>

## **SUPPORT THE RETIRED PAY RESTORATION ACT AND DISABLED VETERANS TAX TERMINATION ACT!**

Visit: <https://www.hqafsa.org/takeaction.html?vsrc=%2fCampaigns%2f49490%2fRespond>

### **Issue Background**

For more than 100 years prior to 1999, all disabled military retirees were required to fund their own veterans' disability compensation by forfeiting one dollar of earned retired pay for each dollar received in veterans' disability compensation.

However, in 2003, due to the persistent advocacy efforts over the years by the AFSA and our Coalition partners, military retirees with a service-connected disability of at least 50% have been able to concurrently receive all of their military retirement pay and VA disability compensation without any offset.

Unfortunately, those with disabilities rated below 50% still lose one retirement dollar for each compensation dollar received from the VA. Additionally, if a servicemember's career prematurely concludes due to a medical condition that forces a mandatory early retirement, the servicemember is also subjugated to a dollar-for-dollar reduction in their military retired pay.

Over the past several years, members of both houses of Congress have introduced legislation calling for full CRDP, only to see their legislation dropped before inclusion in the annual defense bill.

### **Where are We Now?**

On February 13, 2021, Congressman Gus Bilirakis introduced H.R.303, the Retired Pay Restoration Act. H.R.303 was referred to the House Committees on Armed Services and Veterans Affairs.

On February 15, 2021, Congressman Sanford D. Bishop Jr. introduced H.R.333, the Disabled Veterans Tax Termination Act. H.R.333 was referred to the House Committees on Armed Services and Veterans Affairs.

### **Legislation Summary**

The Retired Pay Restoration Act and Disabled Veterans Tax Termination Act amend title 10, United States Code, to extend concurrent receipt to veterans with a service-connected disability rating of less than 50% and those who are medically retired with less than twenty years of service.

### **AFSA's Position**

Military retired pay earned by service and sacrifice should not be reduced, under any circumstance, simply because a military retiree is also eligible for veterans' disability compensation awarded for a service-connected disability.

If you have any additional questions about these AFSA supported pieces of legislation, please e-mail our Policy Advisor at [mschwartzman@hqafsa.org](mailto:mschwartzman@hqafsa.org).

## **- EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS**

Are you looking for work and need help? The VA Health Care System (VAHCS) has several employment programs that can help you!

We offer an employment programs informational session on the first Monday of each month at 8:00 a.m. virtually on Microsoft Teams, to join click [HERE](#). If you don't have computer access, you can dial in at 1-872-701-0185 then enter the access code 375 175 460#. If you have questions between the monthly meetings, you can reach out to T.J. Rizzuti at 520-429-8291 or Tim Kness at 520-306-7830 to find out which employment program you may be eligible for.

Thank you for choosing the VAHCS for all your health care needs!

### **PRE-DISCHARGE CLAIMS**

It is to your advantage to submit your disability compensation claim prior to separation, retirement, or release from active duty. Processing times tend to be shorter for claims submitted pre-discharge than after discharge. Pre-discharge programs provide servicemembers with the opportunity to file claims for disability compensation up to 180 days prior to separation or retirement from active duty or full-time National Guard or Reserve duty (Titles 10 and 32).

If you're considering a pre-discharge claim, we encourage you to first contact the veteran service office closest to where you will be separating. The considerations of the military's Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) are quite different than those of the VA. Disability evaluation while in service is primarily determined by assessing potential barriers to worldwide deployment, as opposed to a full evaluation of any post-service lifestyle issues you may face due to a disability.

You can apply for disability compensation through one of the following:

Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) - BDD allows a servicemember to submit a claim for disability compensation 60 to 180 days prior to separation, retirement, or release from active duty. BDD can help you receive VA disability benefits sooner, with a goal of within 60 days after release or discharge.

Quick Start - Quick Start allows a servicemember to submit a claim for disability compensation 1 to 59 days prior to separation, retirement, or release from active duty.

Overseas Intake Sites – Only available at select military installations in Germany and Korea.

### **- AFSA MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION**

Founded in 1961, the Air Force Sergeants Association (AFSA) legislates, advocates and educates America's elected, military and community leaders in support of the quality of life for our 100,000 military members and their families. AFSA continues to work long and hard to ensure the many benefit reductions being proposed are minimized or nullified. Your membership will continue to pay dividends in terms of fair and equitable pay increases, retirement programs, educational benefits, and affordable and available health care.

AFSA MEMBERSHIP is open to all: Visit: [WWW.HQAFSA.org](http://WWW.HQAFSA.org) for more information and to join.

### **- 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.)