



## AFSA Retiree and Veteran Affairs Newsletter

### - SOLID START: A PROGRAM HELPS VETERANS TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE

Historically, military mental health services have lacked in crucial areas of care. However, thanks to new measures taken by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to better serve veterans with mental illnesses or other mental health issues, it's safe to say that there are substantial changes coming to military mental health care.

Solid Start is a program in which VA employees reach out to veterans who have recently been discharged. The goal of this program is to look out for returning veterans' mental health needs by attempting to make contact with them three times during their first year home. In addition, while one of the goals of this program is to help address military veterans' mental health issues, that is not the only benefit of this new service for veterans.

The Solid Start program connects veterans with military mental health services, but it also provides further logistical support during this transition period. Returning home from service can be hard, and oftentimes veterans feel unsure of what they're "supposed" to do next. For that reason, the VA can put veterans in contact with employment agencies, home loan services, health care providers, and other organizations that help veterans get their feet under them.

The emphasis on reaching veterans during their first year is due to the veterans' mental health issues that can arise during this transition. For many returning veterans, they've spent a number of years developing skills that might not feel applicable in civilian life. This can be frustrating, and particularly during the coronavirus pandemic, it can lead to financial concerns. This increase in stress can worsen a military veteran's mental health issues, and in some cases, it may even lead to a substance use disorder. These risks are increased in veterans who have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), particularly because they may not have been diagnosed so soon after returning home. Lawmakers have praised Solid Start as an important resource for veterans with mental illness who may otherwise be susceptible to addiction or suicide. That's why House legislators have passed legislation to require annual reports on Solid Start's effectiveness, to ensure that the program continues to do its important work.

This is great news for veterans with mental health issues. By continuing this military mental health service, the VA is helping veterans have an easier transition back to civilian life, and in the more severe cases, they are saving veterans' lives from unchecked mental illness and addiction.

For questions about VA Solid Start visit <https://benefits.va.gov/transition/solid-start.asp> or call the toll-free hotline at 1-800-827-0611.

## - AFSA PROFESSIONAL AIRMEN'S CONFERENCE & INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION

Get ready for Orlando -- in July? Mark your calendars now... as we'd really love to see you in person! We are certainly hopeful that we are going to be able to gather and meet in person this coming July. The dates are 24-29 July 2021! Please start making your plans now to attend and we'll see you there!



## - LOOKIING FOR NEW PERSPECTIVES ON COMBATTING SUICIDE

The Air Force is planning to create a working group on mental health and resiliency this year as part of its longstanding effort to combat suicide in its ranks.

The Air Force has struggled in recent years to stem an alarming increase in deaths by suicide. In 2019, 136 airmen took their own lives, about one-third more than in the previous year. In addition, preliminary statistics in 2020 were equally concerning. In September, Chief of Staff Gen. Charles "CQ" Brown told reporters that 98 airmen had so far died by suicide in 2020, about as many as had died by that point in 2019.

The Defense Department also reported a 14 percent spike in deaths by suicide, among service members of all branches, from April to June in 2020, during the early months of the pandemic. In an October interview, Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force JoAnne Bass said the issue of suicide prevention is a top priority for her, and is talked about each day in her office.

The working group will bring together all officials who are involved with building resiliency among airmen and families, Bass said. It will review how the Air Force builds resiliency, as well as issues involving the mental health culture, and how it can improve policies and procedures. Bass said the group also would include airmen who have been directly affected by resiliency issues, and can provide firsthand examples of where gaps in the system exist and must be fixed.

## - VA ADAPTING TO MEET WOMEN VETERANS' NEEDS

Just 20 years ago, VA served a little more than 150,000 women Veterans. This was before 9/11, an event that prompted so many American men and women to enlist and defend their country. Today, VA is serving more than 740,000 women Veterans. That's more than four times as many women coming to VA for the health care and benefits they earned through their service.

This dramatic growth is a welcome sign that opportunities are opening up for women in the armed forces more than ever before. It also represents a challenge for VA, which needs to evolve to meet the needs of these women patriots. The good news is that thanks to your hard work, VA is meeting this challenge by making sure we have the capacity to care for every woman who walks through our doors.

We have at least two women's health care providers at each of our health care facilities who provide gynecology, maternity, specialty care and mental health services for women. We are using our modernized electronic health record to more closely track breast and reproductive care in order to produce better health care outcomes for women. We are also reducing and eliminating gender disparities in areas like chronic disease management and prevention.

As a result, our latest outpatient surveys show that 83.8% of women trust the care they receive at VA. That trust reflects your ongoing commitment to making sure VA serves anyone who served this nation. There is another kind of trust we need to instill at VA: trust that women will be treated with the respect they have earned. But we are making important progress here as well.

As soon as he took the job in 2018, Secretary Wilkie understood the importance of making sure all our women Veterans feel safe and comfortable here. VA has made it clear that this not a boy's club, and that there is no tolerance for sexual harassment, assault or any other behavior that creates a hostile environment for women.

We have backed up that policy with action that has been supported by VA staff across the country. We have trained staff on our collective responsibility to serve women Veterans, stressed the importance of taking sexual harassment incidents seriously, committed resources aimed at preventing these incidents from happening, and pushed for the thorough investigation of these incidents when they do occur.

In 2019, VA established a Harassment and Assault Policy and Reporting Task Force to strengthen efforts to crack down on assault and harassment, and boost reporting procedures. Many of you participated in 2019's Stand Up to Stop Harassment Now campaign, which encouraged patients, staff, visitors and volunteers to intervene whenever possible and report harassment to supervisors.

Moreover, a council of experts within VA was established to ensure our efforts to keep women Veterans safe were strategically aligned and as strong as possible. VA also launched a database on sexual assault incident reporting that will help VA track and analyze sexual assault and harassment, and give us the information we need to target our efforts to reduce these incidents further. The Center for Women Veterans has amplified these messages to Veterans and staff through its "I Am Not Invisible" campaigns, new employee orientation sessions, outreach sessions with minority women Veterans, and more widely on social media.

When someone puts on the uniform, it doesn't matter if they're a man or a woman. What matters is that that person loves this country so much they are compelled to defend it, and that should compel us to do our very best to give them the respect and compassion they have earned when they arrive at VA.

## **- VA TO BEGIN COVID-19 VACCINATIONS**

VA will begin Moderna and Pfizer COVID-19 vaccinations this week at 128 additional sites. On Dec. 18, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued an Emergency Use Authorization of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine, which is the second COVID-19 vaccine to be authorized.

“Having a second COVID-19 vaccine will enable us to reach more facilities and vaccinate more health care personnel and Veterans in additional parts of the country,” said VA Secretary Robert L. Wilkie. “We continue to implement our COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Plan and are grateful to be one step closer to seeing the end of this pandemic.”

Per Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations, VA will continue to vaccinate health care personnel, as well as community living center and spinal cord unit residents. As vaccine supplies increase, VA’s ultimate goal is to offer COVID-19 vaccinations to all Veterans and employees who want to be vaccinated.

## - VETERANS — AVOID COVID-19 VACCINE SCAMS

Now that the COVID-19 vaccine is becoming available, scammers are calling, texting and emailing Veterans with promises of vaccine availability and early access to vaccines. These promises are lies. The people sending these messages are identity thieves. They are after your sensitive personal information, such as your Social Security Number, and your money. How can you know if the message you receive about a vaccine is a real VA message or a scam? Here are some tips on how to avoid scams and how to tell the difference.

**Here’s How VA Will Contact You:** VA is beginning contact with Veterans to offer and administer COVID-19 vaccinations. You can sign up for vaccine updates by visiting <https://www.va.gov/health-care/covid-19-vaccine/stay-informed>. This is a valid and reliable source of information about VA’s COVID-19 vaccine response. Plus, individual VA medical facilities will start contacting Veterans about the vaccine. Outreach will most likely come through the VA.gov website, VEText, MyHealtheVet or VA emails. VA may also reach out to you via the US Postal Service through letters and postcards.

**Scams To Look Out For:** COVID-19 vaccine scams come in many forms: emails, website traps, texts and phone calls. Here are the top vaccine scams the FBI warns about:

- Payment to be added to a vaccine waitlist.
- Ads, websites, texts, phone calls and emails offering early access to the vaccine for a fee.
- Emails or phone calls from people claiming to work at a medical center or insurance company offering the vaccine but requiring personal medical details to check eligibility.
- Messages, calls or emails claiming that the government is requiring you to get the vaccine.
- Ads on social media for the vaccine.
- Avoid all these types of outreach and do not engage with the scammer at all.

## - SERIES HIGHLIGHTS DESERT STORM VETERANS FOR 30TH ANNIVERSARY



In January 1991, members from all five military branches joined a coalition to push out Saddam Hussein’s forces from Kuwait for Operation Desert Storm.

During January 2021, VA will profile these Veterans in a series of stories for Desert Storm’s 30th anniversary.

More than 2.2 million U.S. service members served during the era and an estimated 694,550 deployed to the Gulf.

There are an estimated 1.68 million Veterans from that era are still alive.

During January, these stories will feature Veteran experiences from a wide range of perspectives. Army and Marine Veterans tell about battles on the ground. Air Force Veterans share about their experiences in the air. Navy and Coast Guard Veterans tell about their experiences at sea. These stories will include print and video stories. The coverage starts Jan. 1.

Veterans will also provide their perspective on the legacy of Operation Desert Storm. From the first war covered on cable news to a joint service campaign that overwhelmed the opposition, Veterans will share how the war forever changed the U.S. military. The coverage will include both individual stories and overall pieces, including an interview with Army Veteran Colin Powell, who served as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during Desert Storm.

Veterans can also learn about VA research and VA's Gulf War Registry Health Exam. This program alerts Veterans to possible long-term health problems that may be related to environmental exposures during their military service. **Where To View:** People can view content at a special Desert Storm website at <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/30-years-desert-storm/>.

### **- KEEP YOUR DEERS INFORMATION UPDATED**

Did you know that not keeping your family's information current in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS) could delay their access to health care? Errors can also cause delays with your claims and the delivery of your prescriptions.

### **- DISCOVER FAMILY BENEFITS**

If you're the spouse or dependent child of a Veteran or Service member, you may qualify for certain benefits like health care, life insurance, and money to help pay for school or training. Find out which VA benefits you may qualify for and how to access them visit at [www.va.gov/family-member-benefits/](http://www.va.gov/family-member-benefits/)

Some of these benefits include: Health Care, Education & Training, Home Loan Programs, Life Insurance Options, Burial Benefits, Survivors Pensions, Compensation of Surviving Spouse & Dependents, Family Caregivers, VA Fiduciary Program, Fisher House Program, Coaching into Care and much more.

### **- 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.

### **- 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.)