



## **AFSA Retiree and Veteran Affairs Newsletter**

### **- IMPORTANT UPDATES ON GI BILL**

Earlier this year, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced an effort to modernize the operations of the GI Bill for Veterans, Service members, and their dependents. Referred to as the Digital GI Bill (DGIB), this transformation will improve the user experience, provide faster and easier access to benefits, cut claims processing times, and enhance VA's tools to aid Veterans in their educational and career goals. Watch the [DGIB Intro](#) video to see what's in store for your GI Bill experience.

For the most recent updates to your benefits, be sure to check out our [Isakson and Roe Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020](#) webpage. Be sure to add [Veteransbenefits@messages.va.gov](mailto:Veteransbenefits@messages.va.gov) to your contacts list to ensure that you receive important updates for VA and share with other Veterans and GI Bill beneficiaries, too!

### **- 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 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.

### **- FREE SELF DEVELOPMENT ECOURSE NOW AVAILABLE FROM TRAVIS MANION FOUNDATION**

A free self-development eCourse is now available from the Travis Manion Foundation, and its first question asks, Are you thriving?

If not, now's the time to harness your unique qualities to reach your full potential. This is the perfect tool for Veterans looking to create actionable goals to achieve success in their careers and well-being. The course is recommended for those transitioning from military to civilian life, looking to begin a new career or any number of life changes big or small. This opportunity is available for all at no cost.

Studies show that people who intentionally use their strongest character strengths every day increase their well-being, improve their satisfaction at work and are better positioned to thrive. In completing the course, you will gain insight into your unique strengths, find fulfillment and learn how to more effectively connect with others. Access this free course now and take on challenges ahead with a deepened sense of purpose.

#### *What to expect*

Begin the Leading With Your Strengths course by clicking the button below. You will be directed to log in to or create your free Spartan Development Center account. After you log in, you will be automatically redirected to register for the course. Once registered, the eCourse takes about an hour to complete. You'll be on your way to thriving in no time.

Additional information about the Foundation can be found at [www.travismanion.org](http://www.travismanion.org).

### **- COVID-19 DEBT RELIEF EXPIRING SOON**

COVID-19 Debt Relief Expiring – If you have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and have a VA debt, VA is offering help until September 30, 2021. To provide relief for Veterans, during the COVID-19 pandemic, VA paused collection on all VA benefit debts created between April 1, 2020, and September 30, 2021. VA also offered a pause on collection and repayment plans for debts created before April 1, 2020.

If you continue to face financial hardship and need assistance with repaying your VA debt after September 30, 2021, you can find out how to request help by visiting the [Manage your VA debt](#) webpage.

### **- NEED HELP UNDERSTANDING YOUR CERTIFICATE OF ELIGIBILITY OR AWARD LETTER**

Your Certificate of Eligibility (COE) and your Award Letters are two of the most important documents you get from VA about your GI Bill benefits and lay out what benefits you will receive, so it's important to understand what they mean for you. To help you, VA has created a step-by-step explanation of the common sections and pieces of information contained on both and what they mean. This is a reference you can use whenever you want to understand something on one of the documents.

For help understanding your COE, view the [guide to your Certificate of Eligibility](#) Learn more about your Award letter with the [guide to your Award Letter](#).

### **- AMERICAN FORCES TRAVEL PRIVILEGES EXTENDED TO ELIGIBLE VETERANS**

The Department of Defense announced today a policy change to the current shopping privileges on the American Forces Travel website. As directed by acting Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and

Readiness Virginia S. Penrod in a memo signed April 12, 2021, the department will extend online access to the website to honorably discharged veterans of the uniformed services.

On average, customers save 35-40% compared to commercial travel pricing by using AFT. This includes discounted rates on hotels (up to 60%), airfare, rental cars, vacation packages, event tickets, and cruises.

“Sixteen million veterans will now be able to access the American Forces Travel website, joining the 10 million active duty, Guard and reserve service members, family members, DOD civilians, and other patrons who are already receiving the benefit,” said Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy Patricia “Patty” Montes Barron. “We are committed to providing quality-of-life programs to our military community, which includes our honorably discharged veterans.”

The change will not affect access for existing patrons, and the increased customer base will allow AFT to negotiate better prices for its customers.

AFT launched in 2019 as the only official joint service morale, welfare, and recreation leisure travel website exclusively for DOD patrons. In addition to improving access to DOD’s MWR benefits, every booking on American Forces Travel generates revenue to support critical quality-of-life programs for service members and families.

To access the exclusive military discount pricing on travel products, visit the American Forces Travel website. Proof of eligibility is required.

#### *About Military Community and Family Policy*

Military Community and Family Policy is directly responsible for establishing and overseeing quality-of-life policies and programs that help our service members, their families and survivors be well and mission-ready. Military OneSource is the gateway to programs and services that support the everyday needs of the 5.2 million service members and immediate family members of the military community. These DOD services can be accessed 24/7/365 around the world.

### **- VA EXPANDS AGENT ORANGE CONDITIONS**

VA's list of presumptive conditions related to Agent Orange exposure has expanded to include Parkinsonism, bladder cancer, and hypothyroidism. Previously denied herbicide exposure claims will be reexamined. If you're a Vietnam Veteran or an eligible survivor with health problems potentially caused by Agent Orange exposure during military service, you may be eligible for disability compensation

Veterans who meet the following criteria are eligible for Agent Orange disability benefits:

A medical record of having been diagnosed with an Agent Orange-related illness or condition, AND any of the following:

- Service in Vietnam for any length of time between January 9, 1962 and May 7, 1975, OR;
- Service in or near the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) for any length of time between September 1, 1967 and August 31, 1971, OR;
- Service aboard a U.S. military vessel that entered the inland waterways of Vietnam, OR;

- Service aboard a vessel operating not more than 12 nautical miles seaward of the demarcation line of the waters of Vietnam and Cambodia (c.f. Public Law 116-23, the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019), OR;
- Exposure to herbicides in a location other than Vietnam or the DMZ, such as by loading, transporting, or storing them while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces.

Certain veterans who operated from Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) bases near U-Tapao, Ubon, Nakhon Phanom, Udorn, Takhli, Korat, and Don Muang, near the airbase perimeter anytime between February 28, 1961 and May 7, 1975 may qualify.

You can read the full set of eligibility requirements at: <https://www.va.gov/disability/eligibility/hazardous-materials-exposure/agent-orange/>

## **- VA SPECIALLY ADAPTED HOUSING PROGRAM & GRANTS**

The Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) program offers grants to service members and

Veterans with certain severe service-connected disabilities. The grants assist with building, remodeling or purchasing an adapted home.

### *What Is a Specially Adapted Housing Grant?*

The Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) grant helps disabled Veterans and service members enjoy barrier-free living. One example is a wheelchair accessible home. This can provide independent living that might not otherwise be possible.

The current maximum grant amount is \$100,896. It must be used for the purpose of constructing or modifying a home to meet adaptive needs. The maximum grant amount adjusts annually, so please visit the website

<https://www.benefits.va.gov/homeloans/adaptedhousing.asp>

Veterans and service members with specific service-connected disabilities may be eligible. You must be entitled to disability compensation due to:

- Loss or loss of use of both legs
  - o Unable to move around without the aid of braces, crutches, canes or a wheelchair
- Blindness in both eyes with 20/200 visual acuity or less in the better eye with use of a corrective lens
- Loss or loss of use of one leg, and:
  - o Residuals of organic disease or injury OR
  - o Loss or loss of use of one arm, affecting balance and ability to move without aid
- Loss or loss of use of both arms at or above the elbows
- Severe burn injury

### *What Is a Special Housing Adaptation Grant?*

The Special Housing Adaptation (SHA) grant can be used to increase your mobility throughout your residence. The current maximum grant amount is \$20,215. For more information visit the website below.

Please visit [www.benefits.va.gov/](http://www.benefits.va.gov/) to learn more about this program and grants.

## **- BE INVOLVED IN YOUR HEALTH CARE: ASK ABOUT LOW BLOOD SUGARS**

The VA Healthy Living message from the National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention is 'Ask About Low Blood Sugars'

If you have diabetes, talk with your health care team about selecting a safe and effective blood glucose target range that is based upon your goals, and lifestyle.

If you don't have diabetes, you can always consult with your health care team on safe blood sugar levels and also the warning signs of diabetes.

For more information on low blood sugars, please visit the National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Be Involved in Your Health Care: "Ask About Low Blood Sugars" webpage at [https://www.prevention.va.gov/MPT/2021/July\\_2021.asp](https://www.prevention.va.gov/MPT/2021/July_2021.asp)

## **- BRIDGE MY RETURN OPENS TO SPOUSES, CAREGIVERS**

Bridge My Return (BMR) is now open to military and Veteran spouses and caregivers to help them find meaningful employment.

Military spouses often make personal career sacrifices to follow their service member's military career. These may include moves every 2-3 years, postings to remote duty stations with limited career opportunities, or multiple deployments of their service member, effectively leaving them as single parents.

Today, the military spouse unemployment rate sits at a staggering 38%, according to a recent U.S. Chamber of Commerce Hiring Our Heroes study. The national rate stands at 5.9%.

What is BMR doing to improve the situation?

### *Leveraging Technology*

Bridge My Return software uses a skills-to-skills matching algorithm to circumvent skills misunderstanding and prevent pigeonholing. BMR members build a profile, which takes about 20-30 minutes to complete. For service members, BMR has mapped skills to their MOS. They select the skills BMR suggests for that military job and indicate their skill level.

But the MOS obviously does not apply to the military spouse. So, BMR has created an MSO (Military Spouse Orientation), which summarizes and presents skills many military spouses have in common, such as service orientation, social perceptiveness, time management, coordination, critical thinking, monitoring and active listening.

Jobseekers then select other skills from a skills bank – skills picked up over the course of a career. In one person's case, she would include management of financial resources, negotiation, management of people, leadership, influencing and complex problem solving to name a few. She would then be matched to positions requiring those skills – jobs and careers with a wide array of military-ready employers ready to hire.

### *Educating Employers*

Being military-ready means being military-spouse-ready.

As we see it, most recruiters view the military spouse resume like any other resume. They shouldn't. It must be viewed through a different lens. We educate them on how to do so. BMR's training curriculum includes helping organizations understand these nuances so they're able to see the whole person.

Today, the trend towards work-from-home jobs is game-changing for military spouses, Veteran spouses and caregivers. In some companies, every job can be done from home. A great example of this is Origin8, a tech startup. They plan to hire up to 600 Veterans and spouses over the next two years via the BMR platform – all from home, all with flexible hours. And all perfect for spouses and caregivers.

The combination of job-matching technology, employer education and the national push for better work-life balance is a killer combo that rapidly changes the narrative.

Let's create the energy for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Military spouses, Veteran spouses and caregivers (and, of course, Veterans, too) can get started here.

Interested employers please contact BMR for more information at [info@bridgemyreturn.com](mailto:info@bridgemyreturn.com) or visit the website: [www.bridgemyreturn.com](http://www.bridgemyreturn.com) for more information.

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

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

Get ready for Vegas Baby!—Mark your calendars now and plan on attending the AFSA Professional Airmen's Conference & International Convention next August from 6-10 at the Tropicana Hotel. In Las Vegas Please start making your plans now to attend and we'll see you there!