



AFSA Retiree and Veteran Affairs Newsletter

- NATIONAL VIETNAM WAR VETERANS DAY – 29 March 22

National Vietnam War Veterans Day is a day to thank and honor Vietnam veterans and their families for their service and sacrifice. Installations are encouraged to plan events, social media posts, articles, etc. to tell the stories of Air Force Vietnam veterans and their families. Commanders are also highly encouraged to work with the Military/Airman & Family Readiness Center to identify if any surviving family members of Vietnam veterans are supported by the installation and invite them to participate or contribute to any planned commemoration activities.

- FREE TRAINING PROGRAM OFFERS PATH TO TECH CAREERS

Veterans and their spouses are eligible for free training programs offered by NPower. NPower's program has served more than 1,600 Veterans and military spouses with free tech training, professional development, social and mental health support, assistance navigating VA benefits, paid learning opportunities and job placements – all for aiding participants into a successful career in tech.

Finding meaningful employment after leaving the military is one of the most important steps in a service member's transition to civilian life. Despite possessing a myriad of valuable skills, nearly 50% of Veterans leave the military without job prospects.

Technology jobs are in high demand and competition for tech workers will remain strong in 2022. Veterans are well positioned to meet this demand. Veterans often possess sharp technical skills and have experience with complex equipment. The military prepares individuals to operate in fast-paced environments, and they do so with teamwork and an ability to apply problem solving to any issue.

NPower classes

- Classes are available twice per year: spring and fall
- Spring 2022 classes begin February 21, and applications are due before then
- Participating cities: Baltimore, Dallas, Jersey City, Newark, Los Angeles*, San Jose
- Who is eligible:
 - Military Veterans and military spouses that are located in or near the following U.S. cities:
 - Baltimore, Dallas, Los Angeles*, Newark, San Francisco
 - While training is currently virtual, applicants must live in the above cities for in-person professional development and job placements

- Over 21 years of age
- Transitioning active-duty service member/honorably discharged/member of the Guard or Reserve
- Legally authorized to work in the U.S.

How to apply: visit: <https://www.npower.org/apply-2022/>

- VA DISABILITY AND SSDI, CAN VETERANS COLLECT BOTH?

Veterans may be eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), in conjunction with, or as an alternative to VA disability payments. They may also use the Medicaid and Medicare health benefits that come with SSI/SSDI to supplement VA health services.

The definition of disability and application process is different for SSA and VA disability benefits, and Veterans may begin receiving SSA benefits while they are waiting on a VA benefit decision.

Definition of Disability

VA Benefits

For service-connected disability benefits through the VA, the applicant must show that they have a disabling condition that was “incurred or aggravated by their military service.” (Source: “Federal Benefits for Veterans, Dependents and Survivors,” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016 Edition). The compensation rates are paid on a graduated scale, based on the degree of a Veteran’s disability, ranging from 10 to 100 percent, in 10 percent increments. Pensions, or non-service connected disability payments, require that Veterans served in a wartime period, have limited resources and assets, and have a discharge other than dishonorable (among other factors).

SSA Benefits

Alternatively, the definition of disability for SSI/SSDI does not require the Veteran’s disability to be linked to their military service, does not take into account a Veteran’s discharge status, and does not pay on a graduated scale. For SSI/SSDI, the Veteran needs to show:

Evidence of a physical or mental health condition, which results in functional impairments that limit their ability to work at a substantial gainful level (quantified as \$1,350/month in 2022). That the disabling condition has lasted, or is expected to last, for 12 months or end in death.

SSA Expedited Processing for Veterans

Veterans may qualify for programs from SSA that expedite disability decisions:

- 100% Permanent and Total Veterans Initiative

In March 2014, SSA introduced a new initiative to expedite the processing of applications from Veterans who have a 100% Permanent and Total (P&T) disability rating from the VA. To receive expedited processing, Veterans should identify themselves as a “Veteran rated 100% P&T” when initiating the SSI/SSDI application, and should provide the VA rating notification letter to SSA.

- Wounded Warriors

Veterans who received disabling mental or physical health injuries while on active duty on or after October 1, 2001 are eligible for expedited SSI/SSDI application processing. The injury does not need to have occurred during combat operations. When initiating the SSI/SSDI application, Veterans should inform SSA that their injury occurred while on active duty.

More information about SSA expedited processing go to the Social Security Administration's Veterans page.

Accessing VA Health Records

Veterans can access and manage their VA health records and documents on VA.gov. This is done by linking either their My HealtheVet account or their benefits account. To access the VA Blue Button, Veterans must meet all of the requirements listed below.

Veterans must be:

- Enrolled in VA health care, and
- Registered as a patient in a VA health facility
- Veterans must also have one of these free accounts:
 - An Advanced or Premium My HealtheVet account, or
 - A Premium DS Logon account (used for e-benefits and milConnect), or
 - A verified ID.me account that can be created on VA.gov

How VA Disability Benefits Impact Social Security Payments

Veterans who receive VA disability benefits may also receive SSA benefits, depending on the amount received from the VA and if they are approved for SSI or SSDI.

SSI

Since SSI is a needs-based program, additional income from VA benefits will affect the cash benefit amount. SSA classifies VA benefits as “unearned income,” since it does not come from paid employment. As such, it will be deducted dollar for dollar from the SSI federal payment amount, after a general exclusion of \$20. All SSI recipients are eligible for this exclusion, where the first \$20 of earned or unearned income is not counted against their SSI payment.

- URGENT CARE AVAILABLE UNDER TRICARE PLANS

Most TRICARE beneficiaries can go to an urgent care center whenever they need to, but you just want to be sure to check out and follow the urgent care rules for your health plan. “Urgent care might be an option for you if you don’t believe you have an emergency,” said Dr. Stacy Usher, lead nurse of clinical oversight and integration for the TRICARE Health Plan. “Urgent medical conditions are usually ones that aren’t considered emergencies but still require professional medical attention within 24 hours. Examples might include a small cut that might need stitches, a fever, or a sprained ankle.”

Emergency care means care for an illness or injury that threatens your life, limb, sight, or safety. If you reasonably believe you have an emergency, always call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room. If you have questions about your injury or illness, you can call the Military Health System Nurse Advice Line. Nurses are available 24/7 to help you find the care you need. People in the United States, Guam or Puerto Rico can call 800-874-2273 and choose option 1.

Different health plans have different rules for getting urgent care. These rules depend on your status. If you're a retiree or retiree family member in TRICARE Prime or TRICARE Select, you can get urgent care from any TRICARE-authorized urgent care center without a referral. You should see a TRICARE network provider to avoid more out-of-pocket costs. For details about all the network and non-network costs for urgent care, you can choose your health plan and your status on the TRICARE Costs page to see your current costs

- PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE DISABILITY RATING SCHEDULE

VA proposed changes to the VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities (VASRD) specifically pertaining to the respiratory, auditory, and mental disorders body systems. The changes would incorporate medical advancements for treating certain disabilities and modern medical knowledge to more accurately compensate Veterans.

VASRD is used to determine the appropriate level of compensation for each service-connected disability based on the severity of the condition as documented by supporting medical evidence. VA is in the process of updating all the body systems in the VASRD to reflect modern evaluative criteria based on advancements in medical terminology, diagnostics and treatment.

On Feb. 15, the Veterans Benefits Administration will publish proposed rules in the Federal Register regarding changes to the regulations for the two body systems: respiratory system; ear, nose and throat conditions, and auditory disorders; and mental disorders. Veterans and the public will have 60 days to comment on these proposed rules.

Since these are proposed changes, they will not affect evaluations of any Veteran currently receiving compensation for an impacted disability. Instead, this is an opportunity for Veterans and the public to comment on these proposed changes over the next 60 days. VA will consider the comments received and address them in a subsequent final rule which may make these changes effective.

Some of the proposed changes include modernizing the evaluation criteria for sleep apnea by evaluating it based on the symptoms' responsiveness to treatment. If symptoms are fully treated by a CPAP machine or other treatment, a Veteran would be rated at 0% and not receive compensation; VA will award progressively higher percentage evaluations based upon how symptomatic the condition remains after treatment. This will bring the rating criteria for sleep apnea more closely in line with the stated purpose of the rating schedule, which is to provide evaluations based upon average impairment of earning capacity.

For respiratory conditions such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), the proposed rules would slightly lower the requirements for a 100% rating. For tinnitus, the proposed changes would recognize that symptom within the Veteran's broader ailment and provide service-connected compensation for tinnitus through the disease to which it is attributed.

The proposed rules for mental health conditions would increase the minimum disability rating from 0% to 10%. The rule would get rid of a dated part of VASRD that prevents a Veteran from getting a 100% rating for a mental health condition if they are able to work.

VA will ensure Veterans get the compensation they need and deserve, especially when it comes to mental disorders. Under the proposed changes, VA plans to use new evaluation criteria to more accurately capture the different domains of impairment caused by mental disabilities and provide more adequate compensation for financial losses experienced by Veterans with service-connected mental disorders.

Rather than assigning an evaluation based on the number and type of symptoms present, these changes would evaluate mental disorders based on how impactful the disability is across five domains of impairment: Cognition, interpersonal interactions and relationships, task completion, life activities and navigating environments, and self-care.

Veterans, their caregivers and other partners can read the proposed rules for themselves on the Federal Register and are welcome to provide feedback.

- 87 FR 8474 – Schedule for Rating Disabilities: Ear, Nose, Throat, and Audiology Disabilities; Special Provisions Regarding Evaluation of Respiratory Conditions; Schedule for Rating Disabilities-Respiratory System – Content Details – 2022-02049.
- 87 FR 8498 – Schedule for Rating Disabilities: Mental Disorders – Content Details – 2022-02051.

Once again, there will be no change to any Veteran’s current rating based on these proposed changes. When the proposed changes are finalized, Veterans who currently receive compensation for a service-connected condition can apply for increased compensation. Additionally, even if a Veteran’s symptoms no longer warrant the current evaluation they have based on the finalized changes, no reductions shall be made unless an improvement in the Veteran’s disability is shown to have occurred based on the last schedule used to assign their evaluation.

- SERVING WOMEN VETERANS

Women served in the United States Military as early as the Revolutionary War. Since then, women of all ages, ranks, and levels of authority have entered every branch of service, made significant contributions, and suffered the same sacrifices as men. As a woman with military service, you may qualify for a wide range of benefits offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

VA Benefits

Women Veterans may be eligible for a wide-variety of benefits available to all U.S. military Veterans. VA benefits include disability compensation, pension, education and training, health care, home loans, insurance, vocational rehabilitation and employment, and burial. See our Veterans page for an overview of the benefits available to all Veterans.

The following sections provide information about VA benefits and programs specifically for Women Veterans.

VA Benefits and Programs for Women Veterans

VA's Center for Women Veterans monitors and coordinates VA's administration of benefit services and programs for women Veterans. The Center advocates for a cultural transformation that recognizes the service and contributions of women Veterans and women in the military, and also raises awareness of the responsibility to treat women Veterans with dignity and respect.

There are Women Veteran Coordinator (WVCs) located in every regional office who function as the primary contact for women Veterans. WVCs provide specific information and comprehensive assistance to women Veterans, their dependents, and beneficiaries concerning VA benefits and related non-VA benefits. They may assist you in the claims intake, development, and processing of military sexual and personal trauma claims.

At each VA medical center nationwide, a Women Veterans Program Manager (WVPM) is designated to advise and advocate for women Veterans. The WVPM can help coordinate all the services you may need, from primary care to specialized care for chronic conditions or reproductive health. Woman Veterans who are interested in receiving care at VA should contact the nearest VA Medical Center and ask for the WVPM.

VA has special services available to help women who experienced military sexual trauma (MST), including free, confidential counseling and treatment for mental and physical health conditions related to MST. You do not need to have a service-connected disability or injury, and may be able to receive this benefit even if you are not eligible for other VA care. You do not need to have reported the incidents when they happened or have other documentation that they occurred in order to receive MST services.

Learn more about the Women Veterans Programs at www.benefits.va.gov/persona/veteran-women.asp

- SPECIAL COVID RULES END SOON

Starting June 2, 2022, you will no longer receive your Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) at the resident (in person) rate for classes taken online if the COVID benefit protections were affecting you. This is because the legislation that permits you to receive MHA at the resident (in person) rate while taking courses converted to online training due to COVID-19 will end on June 1, 2022. When enrolling in summer or any subsequent term, you will need to enroll in approved resident (in person) classes to continue receiving your MHA at the resident rate.

- VA PROPOSES CERTAIN RARE CANCERS BE ADDED TO PRESUMED SERVICE-CONNECTED LIST

The Department of Veterans Affairs will propose adding certain rare respiratory cancers to the list of presumed service-connected disabilities in relation to military environmental exposure to particulate matter.

When the proposal becomes final, dependents, survivors, and Veterans who had claims previously denied for any of the below respiratory cancers would be encouraged to file a supplemental claim for benefits.

- Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) of the larynx;
- SCC of the trachea;
- Adenocarcinoma of the trachea;
- Salivary gland-type tumors of the trachea;
- Adenosquamous carcinoma of the lung;
- Large cell carcinoma of the lung;
- Salivary gland-type tumors of the lung;
- Sarcomatoid carcinoma of the lung and;
- Typical and atypical carcinoid of the lung.

Any Veteran who had one of these cancers manifest to a degree of 0% or more at any time during or after separation would become eligible for service-connection.

VA intends to focus its rule on the rare respiratory cancers above in Veterans who served any amount of time in the Southwest Asia Theater of operations and other locations. VA will invite and consider public comments as part of this process. The publication date of the federal register will occur in the coming weeks.

Once rulemaking is complete, VA will conduct outreach to impacted veterans and survivors to inform them about potential eligibility.

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.

If you are a Veteran who has been diagnosed with one of these conditions, but have not filed a claim, please notify VA of your intent to file a claim. Visit: <https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5768>

- AFSA INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION & FAMILY REUNION

You are invited to join us in Las Vegas, Nevada 7-11 August 2022 at Tropicana Convention Center

Tropicana Las Vegas® – a DoubleTree by Hilton is located on the south end of the Las Vegas Strip just minutes from the McCarran International airport, major convention centers and top entertainment stadiums including the T-Mobile Arena. With a unique South Beach vibe, the hotel features rooms, suites and luxury villas, a fresh redesign of the 50,000-square-foot casino, several award-winning restaurants including Robert Irvine’s Public House, Glow, a Mandara Spa and fitness center. In addition to the lush Tropicana Pool, there are first-class entertainment acts that include: Legends in Concert, Purple Reign: The Prince Tribute Show, the world-famous Laugh Factory comedy club, featuring Murray the Magician and Rich Little.

Take advantage of our special conference rates

AFSA Members, Exhibitors, sponsors and guests are invited to stay with us at the Tropicana Las Vegas. With rooms starting at \$102 per night. This special rate includes the Resort Charge and is offered three days pre- and three-day post- event for you and your family to enjoy Reunion/Vacation opportunities. Daily Resort Charge includes: Wi-Fi; self-parking; 2 bottles of water per day; 2 for 1 frozen drinks at the Tropicana Pool; 20% off Trips at Zero 1 Off Road Adventures; 20% off Grand Canyon Tours; Glow Spa- \$30 off services over \$140, and 20% off retail products.

- 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.