



AFSA Retiree and Veteran Affairs Newsletter

- AFSA LEGISLATIVE SURVEY

Help Us Help You by participating in our 2020 AFSA Legislative Survey. Your thoughts and comments help us learn more about you and your specific needs. The shared information helps to guide us as we legislate, advocate and educate for improved quality of life benefits on your behalf.

Visit AFSA to learn more about our global association and its local community impact.

-- AFSA IS QUALITY OF LIFE --

Click the link below to participate in the survey:

https://www.votervoice.net/BroadcastLinks/XHzvOzXw11LD06Uj_cy4Kg

- HAPPY HOLIDAYS

Your AFSA Retired and Veterans Team along with AFSA International Executive Council and AFSA Headquarters Staff wishes each and every person a very happy and festive holiday season. We hope your holidays are filled with joy and happiness. We ask that you keep our brothers and sisters (as well as their families and loved ones) who are serving in harm's way or serving overseas in your thoughts and prayers this holiday season and remember the sacrifices they are making and you have made for our great country.

- MONTHLY HOUSING ALLOWANCE (MHA) RULES WERE IMPLEMENTED 1 DEC 2019

On December 1, updates went live in VA's education claims processing systems and all Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) rates will now be processed in accordance with new MHA rules.

This means that starting in December; you may see your MHA rate change depending on how you are impacted. Your MHA may change based on where you physically attend the majority of your classes.

Previously, you were paid MHA based on the location of the main or branch campus of the school where enrolled. Now, MHA is based on the campus location where you physically attend the majority of your classes.

Your MHA rate may change based on the date you first used your entitlement. Based on the date you first used your entitlement; your MHA rate will fall into one of three categories.

If your first time ever using the Post 9/11 GI Bill was prior to January 1, 2018, you will continue to receive the VA MHA rate.

- If your first time using the Post 9/11 GI Bill was between January 1, 2018 and July 31, 2018, you will receive the VA MHA rate for Academic Year 2017-2018 until the DoD BAH rate for an E-5 with dependents rate exceeds this rate.
- If your first time using the Post-9/11 GI Bill was on or after August 1, 2018, your MHA rate could go down by as much as \$89/month on December 1 to align with DoD rates.
- After you begin receiving the correct MHA, your base rate may be impacted by enrollment changes such as annual rate adjustments, change in credit hours, or changing programs or locations.

Estimate Your MHA

The best way to determine MHA rate is to check the GI Bill Comparison Tool. This tool provides MHA rates for main, branch campuses and extension campuses. Follow the steps below to receive an estimate of your MHA.

- Search and select your school's main campus from the list.
- Scroll down to "Where will you take the majority of your classes?"
- Select "Other Location" or "An Extension Campus."
- Enter the zip code of the other location or select the location from the drop down.

Please note: If you were overpaid or underpaid because of these changes, you will not have to appeal or apply for a corrected payment. VA will work with your school to determine any underpayment or over-payment, and issue payments. You will receive a letter to inform you of whether you were overpaid, underpaid or not impacted.

Learn more about how these changes may impact you by reviewing the Monthly Housing Allowance Student Guide and take a look at our MHA Rate Change infographic.

If you have additional questions, call the Education Call Center at 1-888-GI-BILL-1 (1-888-442-4551). For students outside the U.S., call 001-918-781-5678.

- NEW VIDEO SERIES TEACHES VETERANS HOW TO FILE DISABILITY CLAIMS ONLINE

VA is transforming the way Veterans learn about and apply for compensation benefits through a new video tutorial highlighting the digital Disability Compensation Benefits Claims tool, released earlier this year.

Built with Veterans, for Veterans, the Disability Compensation Benefits Claims tool is a development process that incorporates user testing and human-centered design principles. The tool gives Veterans more control over claims submission and represents an innovative leap forward in VA services.

"The Disability Compensation Benefits Claim tool lessens the administrative and paperwork burden for Veterans, and shortens the processing timeline for benefits claims," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "This innovative tool, along with the companion tutorial video series, represents VA's commitment to providing Veterans quality service through digital transformation."

The accompanying five-part video tutorial series is accessible on VA's Office of Information and Technology (OIT) YouTube page. The tutorials describe steps Veterans can follow to complete disability compensation claims applications online using the new digital tool. The videos feature:

- An overview of the online tool's user-friendly platform, and its efficient functionality that streamlines the claims submission process.

- Log-in instructions for starting the process of filing a disability benefits claim, and how Veterans can track existing disability compensation claims.
- Instructions on how the tool automatically checks the Veteran's record to find out if there is an active intent to file date already pending.

Visit: <https://www.youtube.com/user/DeptVetAffairsOIT/>

- VA, DOD GO LIVE ON EXPANDED COMMISSARY, EXCHANGE AND MWR ACCESS

The Defense Department recently announced expanded Commissary, Military Service Exchange and MWR access Jan. 1 and established a standard for physical access to military installations.

A few days ago, the DoD and VA held a Facebook LIVE event to discuss implementation of the Purple Heart and Disabled Veterans Equal Access Act of 2018 and to answer questions from Veterans and their families.

Q: Are we going to be limited to what we can purchase at the commissary or exchange?

A: There are no limitations to purchases for eligible Veterans and caregivers

Q: What if a Veteran has a VA health card and qualify for care but are not service connected? Do they qualify?

A: In order to qualify for this benefit, a veteran must have been awarded a Purple Heart, the Medal of Honor, a former prisoner of war or have a service-connected disability rating as determined by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Q: When will the VA issue letters of eligibility?

A: for in-person access, the VHIC will be the only acceptable credential for documenting Veteran eligibility. Veterans who are not enrolled in or are not eligible to enroll in VA health care, or who are enrolled in VA health care, but do not possess a VHIC will not have access to DoD and Coast Guard installations for in-person commissary, exchange, and MWR retail privileges, but will have full access to online exchanges and American Forces Travel.

VA will only issue letters of eligibility for caregivers. Those will be issued in December.

Visit <https://www.va.gov/healthbenefits/vhic> for information regarding eligibility for the VHIC and the application process.

For full VHIC eligibility information requirements visit: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/68479/veterans-need-vhic-for-in-person-commissary-military-exchange-and-mwr-access/>

- VA MISSION ACT: ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ABOUT VA'S URGENT CARE BENEFIT

Have a sore throat, earache, or strained muscle? Then consider contacting your VA facility or using the community urgent care benefit available to eligible Veterans under the MISSION Act. VA facilities across the country offer same-day primary care and mental health services, and many offer additional services as well.

With the new community urgent care benefit, eligible Veterans can also visit a local walk-in retail health clinic or urgent care center that is part of VA's contracted network. Urgent care providers treat non-emergent symptoms or conditions such as ear infections, minor burns, and mild skin infections.

If you believe your life or health is in danger, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away!

To be eligible for the urgent care benefit, you must be enrolled in the VA health care system and have received care from VA (either in a VA facility or a community provider) within the past 24 months. To check eligibility, contact your local VA medical facility or call 1-833-4VETNOW (1-833-483-8669).

Eligible Veterans can receive urgent care from an urgent care provider in VA's contracted network without prior authorization from VA.

Top 10 Frequently Asked Questions:

1. How do I find the nearest in-network community urgent care provider? Use VA's Facility Locator at <https://www.va.gov/find-locations/> and click on the VA-approved urgent care locations and pharmacies near you. There are currently two types of urgent care network locations: walk-in retail health clinics and urgent care centers. Seek care at a retail location for an uncomplicated illness such as a sore throat. Visit an urgent location for more pressing illnesses or injuries requiring services such as splinting, casting, or wound treatment.
2. What do I do when I arrive at an urgent care location? What type of identification will I be asked to show? There is no identification card needed for VA's urgent care benefit. When you arrive, verify they are part of VA's contracted network, complete the intake form, and tell the provider you would like to use your VA urgent care benefit. The provider will check your eligibility. Both Veterans and providers can call 1-833-4VETNOW (1-833-483-8669) to confirm eligibility. Veterans can call 1-866-620-2071 for other issues related to the urgent care benefit.
3. Does urgent care cost anything? No, you do not have to pay anything at the time of the visit. If you owe a copayment, VA will send you a bill. Copayments are \$30, but your liability will depend on your assigned priority group and the number of times you have used your urgent care benefit in a calendar year. Learn more about urgent care copayments.
4. How does prescription medication work for urgent care? VA will pay for or fill prescriptions for urgent care. For routine prescription medication longer than a 14-day supply, the prescription must be submitted to VA to be filled. Before filling the prescription, VA will verify the urgent care visit. If there are issues with filling your prescription, call 1-866-620-2071.
5. There are no urgent care clinics in my area. What do I do? Contact your local VA medical facility to discuss options. Same-day primary and mental health services are available at all VA medical centers. In addition, VA continues to expand its contracted network of urgent care providers so that most Veterans are within a 30-minute drive time from their home to a network urgent care/retail location.
6. If there are no in-network urgent care facilities nearby, can I visit an Emergency Department (ED) instead? If you are having difficulties receiving urgent care services, contact your local VA medical facility. Same-day primary and mental health services are available at all VA medical centers. If you believe, your

life or health is in danger, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department immediately. Please note that VA can only pay for a Veteran's emergency care under certain conditions.

7. Can I use the in-network urgent care provider at my local pharmacy as my primary care provider (PCP)? No. Urgent care is not a replacement for services your PCP offers. Use urgent care for treating minor, non-emergent illnesses and injuries. The urgent care benefit does not cover preventive health care offered by your primary care physician. Always consider talking with or seeing your PCP if you are concerned that the urgent care provider will not understand the complexities of your medical history or medications.

8. How do I know if I need urgent care or emergency care? Urgent care is for non-life-threatening illnesses or injuries such as strep throat, pink eye, or a strained muscle. Emergency care is for an injury, illness, or symptom so severe that a prudent layperson reasonably believes that delay in seeking immediate medical attention would be hazardous to life or health. Such life-threatening major illnesses or injuries could include severe chest pain, seizures, loss of awareness, heavy uncontrollable breathing, or severe burns. For emergency care, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away. Please note that VA can only pay for a Veteran's emergency care under certain conditions.

9. What if I arrive at an in-network urgent care location and have difficulty receiving care? Call 866-620-2071 or your local VA medical facility.

10. How do I get a free flu shot? Veterans can receive a flu shot at their local VA medical facility or from any Walgreens location, paid for by VA. Veterans can also receive a flu shot, paid for by VA, at an in-network urgent care location, but it must be administered in conjunction with a condition requiring urgent care.

Resource: https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/programs/veterans/Urgent_Care.asp

- VETERANS AND FAMILY MEMBERS AIM HIGHER FOR CONTINUED EDUCATION WITH A NEW AFSA MEMBERSHIP

AFSA has partnered together with Columbia Southern University to provide a sponsored One-Course Scholarship (**Over a \$700 value. Plus Registration Fee-Waiver and Books at No Cost!**) for all military veterans/retirees and family members.

This Is A Continued Educational Opportunity For Those Who Have Borne The Battle!

AFSA is honored to help Military Veterans/Retirees and their Family Members on their journey to reach higher educational goals. Join AFSA now to participate. Membership will be validated before scholarship is awarded. Participants must enroll in the CSU College course within six months of joining the AFSA. Visit our website at www.hqafsa.org/edconnect

- 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.)



'A Day That Will Live in Infamy'

'Twas The Night Before Christmas'

'Twas the night before Christmas, he lived all alone, in a one bedroom house made of plaster and stone.

I had come down the chimney with presents to give, and to see just who in this home did live.

I looked all about, a strange sight I did see, no tinsel, no presents, not even a tree.

No stocking by mantle, just boots filled with sand, on the wall hung pictures of far distant lands.

With medals and badges, awards of all kinds, a sober thought came through my mind.

For this house was different, it was dark and dreary; I found the home of a soldier, once I could see clearly.

The soldier lay sleeping, silent, alone, curled up on the floor in this one bedroom home.

The face was so gentle, the room in such disorder, not how I pictured a United States Soldier.

Was this the hero of whom I'd just read? Curled up on a poncho, the floor for a bed?

I realized the families that I saw this night, owed their lives to these soldiers who were willing to fight.

Soon round the world, the children would play, and grownups would celebrate a bright Christmas day.

They all enjoyed freedom each month of the year, because of the soldiers, like the one lying here.

I couldn't help wonder how many lay alone, on a cold Christmas eve in a land far from home.

The very thought brought a tear to my eye, I dropped to my knees and started to cry.

The soldier awakened and I heard a rough voice, "Santa don't cry, this life is my choice;

I fight for freedom; I don't ask for more, my life is my god, my country, my corps."

The soldier rolled over and drifted to sleep, I couldn't control it, I continued to weep.

I kept watch for hours, so silent and still and we both shivered from the cold night's chill.

I didn't want to leave on that cold, dark, night, this guardian of honor so willing to fight.

Then the soldier rolled over, with a voice soft and pure, whispered, "carry on Santa, its Christmas day, all is secure."

One look at my watch, and I knew he was right. "Merry Christmas my friend, and to all a good night."

This poem was originally entitled, "Merry Christmas My Friend" and was written and published in Leatherneck Magazine in December 1991. The true author Lance Corporal James M. Schmidt wrote this back in 1986. It was originally typed and posted on the door of the gym at the Marine Barracks 8th & I, Washington, DC. Then, Battalion Commander, Colonel D.J. Myers found the poem, copied it and posted it through the battalion and in the Marine Corps Gazette, that was distributed Corp wide and then published in Leatherneck Magazine in December 1991. Now you know the rest of the story.

I've been sharing this with friends and family ever since the early 1990's, when I came across it serving in Kuwait.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year...