



## Federal Update for November 9 - 13, 2015



### *ID key predictors of mental health issues in recently deployed National Guard and Reservists*

by Donnie La Curan in Veteran News

Recently deployed National Guard members and Reservists have returned with a higher prevalence of PTSD, traumatic brain injury, depression and substance abuse compared to active duty soldiers, according to recent data. However, these service members return almost immediately to civilian life without mental health assessments or treatments for these conditions.

A new Geisinger study aims to identify specific genetic risk factors to determine which National Guard and Reservists are at a higher risk of developing these post-discharge conditions in an effort to provide better post-trauma treatment and therapy.

Led by Joseph Boscarino, Ph.D., M.P.H., senior scientist with the Geisinger Center for Health Research, with assistance from Geisinger doctors and researchers – including Thomas Urosevich, OD, MS, a recently deployed U.S. Army Reserve Officer – the study is the first to look at mental health and substance abuse risk factors in the National Guard and Reservists seen in non-Veterans Affairs healthcare facilities.

“Generally we’ve found that individuals with ‘at risk’ genes are more likely to develop PTSD, depression and substance abuse especially when associated with a higher exposure to traumatic events or greater exposure to childhood adversity,” Boscarino explained.

The Pennsylvania National Guard, in particular, has seen over 35,000 deployments in support of the Global War on Terror. In addition to being one of the top ten employers in Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania National Guard is one of the nation’s largest Guard units, with armories and air bases in 90 Pennsylvania communities.

Boscarino advocates screening National Guard and Reservists for genetic factors and believes it may lead to better post-trauma treatments through genetic counseling. The study will leverage Geisinger’s highly developed electronic health record (EHR) along with scores of in-depth, diagnostic interviews.

Boscarino leads a national team – including investigators at Kent State and Tulane universities – that has developed a highly successful tool for predicting PTSD following traumatic incidents. This team has been collaborating since the World Trade Center attacks in New York City in 2001, and has over 50 research publications.

“Until now, there hasn’t been an easy-to-use tool to help clinicians rapidly identify PTSD in patients in routine practice or after a traumatic event,” said Boscarino, a U.S. Army combat veteran himself. “We think we now have a basic tool that can quickly identify PTSD cases and facilitate appropriate therapy. I wish my generation of warfighters had these tools available when we returned from Vietnam. Because we didn’t, that is why I have been pursuing this research for the past 35 years.”

The study is funded through a Community Partners in Mental Health Research Award No. W81XWH-15-1-0506, by the Department of Defense, Defense Health Program, Psychological Health/Traumatic Brain Injury Research Program. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and may not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

SOURCE Geisinger Health System

## ***Veterans Day Deals and Discounts***

by Donnie La Curan in Discounts

Military.com is showcasing Veterans Day Discounts again this year with a list of over 50 restaurants, retailers and travel and recreation organizations seeking to show their appreciation for service members, veterans, retirees, and their families.

Applebee’s and Chili’s are both offering a free entree from a special menu on Nov. 11 for veterans and active duty personnel. Cheeseburger in Paradise is offering a free burger with fries and participating IHOP restaurants are offering veterans and active duty military free “Red, White and Blue pancakes” from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Texas Roadhouse locations nationwide will offer veterans a free lunch on Nov. 11 from 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. The offer is good for active duty, retired or former U.S. military. And Uno Pizzeria & Grill is offering veterans and active military a free entree or individual pizza with an “entree or pizza purchase of equal or greater value on Nov. 11.”

Retailers are also celebrating Veterans Day with discounts. Alfred Angelo is offering military brides a free wedding gown on Veterans Day (an appointment to the store must be made for Nov. 11 to qualify.) Between Nov. 8 and Nov. 15, veterans and active duty personnel receive an additional 10 percent off the lowest advertised price of any automotive service at Tires Plus; and on Nov. 11 Great Clips customers can get a free haircut card to give to their favorite veteran and veterans can receive a free haircut as well.

Travel and Recreation Discounts include several popular destinations. Colonial Williamsburg is offering active duty military, reservists, retirees, veterans, and their direct dependents free admission from Nov. 6 to Nov. 11. The Harley-Davidson Museum is offering free admission to active military, veterans and their families on Nov. 7, 8, and 11; and Knott's Berry Farm is offering free admission for veterans and active duty military personnel and one guest, as well as 6 additional tickets for a discounted price from November 1, 2015 to December 20, 2015. Veterans and military personnel should keep in mind that most businesses require proof of military service, which can include a Veterans Administration Universal Access Card, Military I.D., DD-214 (discharge papers), Veterans Service Organization Card (VSO's include groups like the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, and the American Legion), or in some cases businesses will accept a picture of the veteran in uniform.

Veterans are encouraged to read the offers carefully as some discounts are offered in the days before Veterans Day such as McCormick and Schmick's, which offers a complimentary entree from a special menu to veterans on Sunday, Nov. 8.

Additionally, not all franchise locations participate in their national chain's Veterans Day programs –customers are encouraged to contact their nearest establishment to make sure they are willing to honor the discount at that location.

SOURCE Military.com

## ***VA and PenFed Foundation Work Together to Prevent Veteran Homelessness***

WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is teaming up with the Pentagon Federal Credit Union Foundation (PenFed Foundation) to strengthen efforts to prevent Veteran homelessness. This new partnership will expand the PenFed Foundation's existing Military Heroes Fund Emergency Assistance Program to include all Veterans. Previously, the program was available only to Veterans of the Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) conflicts.

Through this partnership, the PenFed Foundation and VA will work together to provide emergency financial assistance for Veterans who are experiencing unexpected financial setbacks and are at risk of becoming homeless. The foundation will be able to provide emergency financial assistance for Veterans in need of one-time payments for back utilities, creditors, security deposits, and rental deposits. To date, the PenFed Foundation's Military Heroes Fund has already provided more than \$4 million in assistance to Veterans.

As a part of the partnership, Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Homeless Program staff will connect Veterans who are facing overdue or arrearage payments to the PenFed Foundation for emergency financial assistance. This partnership and pledge embodies the mission of MyVA,

launched last year to reorient VA around the needs of Veterans by collaborating with Veterans, employees, private industry, nonprofits, and other stakeholders.

“VA’s new partnership with the PenFed Foundation will greatly benefit Veterans who are facing overdue bills and are at risk for homelessness,” said VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald. “As we work with local communities throughout the Nation to help them end Veteran homelessness, partnerships like these are critical to ensuring we are doing everything possible to support Veterans who may be facing financial hardship and are at risk of losing their homes. Whether through their Military Heroes Fund or their support of the Defenders Lodge, the PenFed Foundation has shown they are dedicated to improving the lives of Veterans and we are proud to call them a partner.”

We are absolutely right to hold up our military service members as American heroes,” said PenFed Foundation President and CEO James Schenck. “Anyone, who at one time or another, wrote a blank check made payable to the United States of America – for an amount of up to and including their own life has paid their citizenship dues in full, as far as I’m concerned. It’s up to the rest of us to ensure that when these heroes need heroes, someone is there to answer the call.”

For more information about VA’s homeless initiatives, visit <http://www.va.gov/homeless/>. For more information about the PenFed Foundation’s programs supporting Veterans, visit [http://www.pentagonfoundation.org/site/PageServer?pagename=heroes\\_index](http://www.pentagonfoundation.org/site/PageServer?pagename=heroes_index).

## ***VA Benefits: Increasing Outreach and Measuring Outcomes Would Improve the Post-9/11 GI Bill On-the-Job Training and Apprenticeship Programs***

### **What GAO Found**

Veterans surveyed and interviewed by GAO said the on-the-job training (OJT) and apprenticeship programs offered under the Post-9/11 GI Bill—the largest education benefit program overseen by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)—have helped them transition to civilian life, though program data show relatively few veterans have participated. Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits were initially available only for higher education, but in 2011 provisions were enacted that expanded benefits to cover OJT and apprenticeship. Many veterans GAO interviewed (21 of 28) said that the supplemental income the programs provided helped them offset income losses they experienced when leaving the military. About half of the veterans responding to GAO’s survey (80 of 156) reported that the program allowed them to use their GI Bill benefits even though college was not a good fit for them. Since OJT and apprenticeship benefits became available in 2011, about 27,000 of the 1.2 million veterans who have received Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits have participated in these programs.

VA primarily provides information about the OJT and apprenticeship programs through mandatory briefings for transitioning servicemembers and on its website. While VA's outreach efforts include some information on these programs, VA's mandatory briefings and web resources generally emphasize higher education and lack sufficient detail for veterans to reasonably understand how to use their GI Bill benefits for OJT and apprenticeships. State officials GAO surveyed reported conducting outreach in a variety of ways, such as attending job fairs and speaking to veterans groups. Without more outreach, veterans who could benefit from these programs may not learn about them.

Key challenges faced by veterans and employers using these programs include lack of awareness and administrative burdens, according to state officials, veterans, and employers GAO surveyed. Most state officials surveyed (39 of 44) reported that lack of awareness about the programs is a primary challenge they face in facilitating veteran and employer participation. Further, over half of state officials surveyed (24 of 42) cited challenges related to VA's current paper-based payment processing system, which requires employers to fax or mail monthly forms to VA in order for a veteran to receive benefits. In addition, 11 of the 15 employers and apprenticeship sponsors GAO interviewed said the process is burdensome or inefficient, and 6 of the 28 veterans GAO interviewed said their benefits have sometimes been delayed. VA is developing a new data system, but it may not be implemented until 2017 at the earliest, according to VA officials, and administrative challenges in the interim could hinder program participation.

Little is known about the performance of VA's Post-9/11 GI Bill OJT and apprenticeship programs because VA does not measure program outcomes, such as whether participants retain employment after completing the program. Absent such information, GAO examined Department of Labor (DOL) outcome data for its related OJT and apprenticeship programs, which indicate the potential for positive outcomes for these training models. Standards for internal control call for establishing and reviewing performance measures to allow an agency to evaluate relevant data and take appropriate actions. Without such measures, VA is limited in its ability to assess its programs.

### **Why GAO Did This Study**

As the military draws down its forces, many veterans will enter the civilian workforce and may seek educational and training opportunities to further their transition into civilian jobs. Because pursuing a higher education degree may not be the best path for some veterans, the Post-9/11 GI Bill OJT and apprenticeship programs provide alternative opportunities. GAO was asked to review these programs.

This report examines (1) how selected veterans and employers used the programs and how widely they have been used; (2) to what extent VA and states have taken steps to inform veterans and employers about these programs; (3) what challenges, if any, veterans and employers have faced in using them; and (4) to what extent VA has assessed the performance of its programs. GAO analyzed VA program data as of March 2015 and DOL program data from

2013 and 2014, and assessed outreach materials. GAO also surveyed officials in all 44 states overseeing VA's programs; conducted non-generalizable surveys of randomly selected veterans and employers; and interviewed veterans and employers in two states selected for variation in veteran population and type of state agency.

### **What GAO Recommends**

GAO recommends that VA improve outreach, ease administrative challenges, and establish outcome measures for its OJT and apprenticeship programs. VA agreed with GAO's conclusions and concurred with all three recommendations.

## ***VA To Hold 2015 Small Business Engagement in Pittsburgh***

WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), in collaboration with other federal agencies and partners, will sponsor the 5th annual National Veterans Small Business Engagement (NVSBE), November 17–19, 2015, at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center in Pittsburgh, PA.

This premier event for Veteran-Owned Small Businesses is expected to attract as many as 3,000 attendees, offering the chance to learn from federal and commercial procurement decision makers the most effective ways to compete for and win federal contracts. More than 400 exhibitors and 25 government agencies will also participate in the event. The 2015 theme, *ACCESS*, is focused on promoting and supporting Veteran-Owned Small Businesses' access to economic opportunities.

“VA is committed to providing opportunities to Veteran-Owned Small Businesses, and this event is evidence of that commitment,” said VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald. “The NVSBE demonstrates our commitment by offering Veteran business owners the tools they need to thrive in the federal marketplace. We want to do all that we can to help our Veterans be successful.”

NVSBE provides Veteran-Owned Small Businesses and Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Businesses opportunities to connect with procurement decision makers, program specialists, and contracting experts from the federal and commercial marketplace. As the largest gathering of Veteran businesses in the country, this event is the ideal platform for Veteran entrepreneurs to make the connections necessary to succeed in today's contracting environment. In fiscal year 2014, nearly a quarter of VA's contracts were awarded to Veteran-owned small businesses. According to survey results from last year's Small Business Engagement event, 96 percent of small businesses reported making valuable connections; 75 percent reported attendance providing the highest return on investment compared with other engagements; and most agreed that the event met or exceeded their expectations.

“One of the greatest challenges for small business owners is to connect with decision makers who can help them grow their businesses,” said Thomas J. Leney, Executive Director of VA’s Small and Veteran Business Programs. “NVSBE provides small businesses a solution to meet that challenge.”