



**Federal Update
for
August 31 – Sept. 4, 2015**



DEERS Missing SSN's ► IRS Could Fine 450,000 Households

About 430,000 military households that are missing Social Security numbers in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System could be forced to pay fines to the Internal Revenue Service if they don't update their information by January. Troops were notified about the missing information through letters sent by DEERS starting 13 AUG. Social Security numbers are either missing or unverified for about 484,000 military dependents, Defense Department officials said. The Pentagon is required to report healthcare coverage given to service members and their dependents as part of the Affordable Care Act beginning this year. But to do so, they need to have each dependent's SSN verified in the system, the letter said. "The IRS will collect fees from individuals who don't have minimum essential coverage," it states. "TRICARE verifies and reports minimal essential coverage status based on DEERS records."

Social Security numbers are not required for DEERS registration. For example, military child dependents often do not have their Social Security numbers in DEERS because their parents register them in the system as infants before the card is issued. Parents must return to DEERS later with the Social Security number to update the system -- a task that is often overlooked. Fees for not holding the required minimum health care coverage depend on income and household size. All TRICARE enrolled active-duty service members and retirees meet the coverage minimums, provided all their dependents' Social Security numbers are up-to-date in DEERS. Those covered under purchased Reserve Select, Reserve Retiree and TRICARE Young Adult also meet the requirement.

TRICARE beneficiaries who had minimum essential coverage for any part of 2015 will be sent IRS Form 1095-C or 1095-B by Jan. 31, 2016, which will be needed to complete their 2015 tax returns, officials said. Troops mailing addresses, email addresses, phone numbers and the name and birth dates of dependents can be confirmed online. Social Security numbers must be added or verified in person at a military ID office. Military spouses can update the information in DEERS on their service members' behalf if they have a valid special Power of Attorney. [Source: NAUS Weekly Update | August 28, 2015 ++]

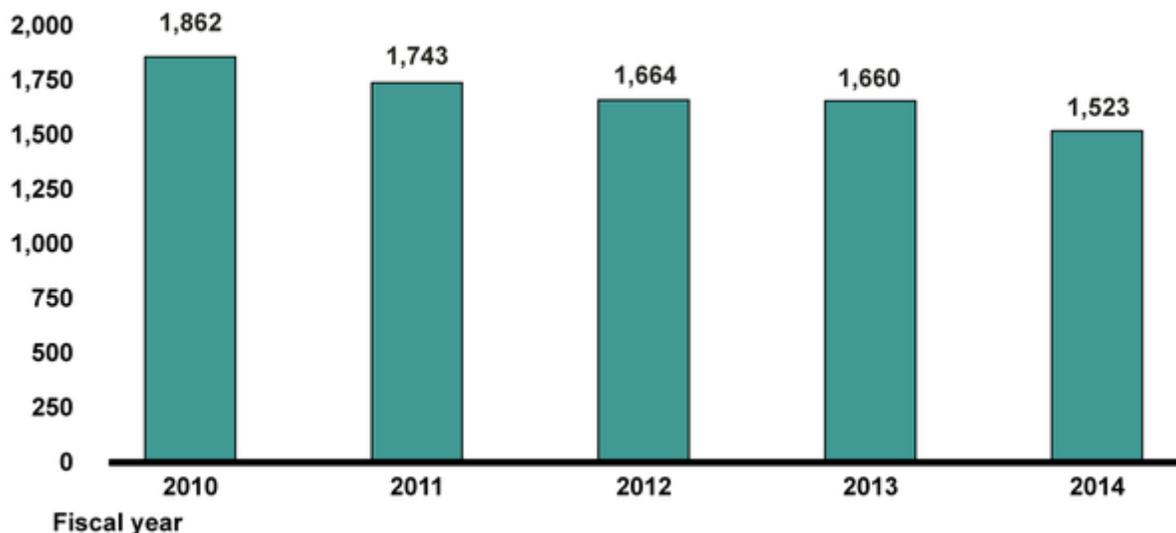
VA Health Care: Actions Needed to Assess Decrease in Root Cause Analyses of Adverse Events

What GAO Found

To address adverse events, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers (VAMC) completed 18 percent fewer root cause analyses (RCA) in fiscal year 2014 compared to fiscal year 2010, and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has not analyzed the reasons for the decrease. VHA's National Center for Patient Safety (NCPS) officials told GAO they were aware of the decrease, but were not certain why the number of completed RCAs had decreased over time, especially in light of a 7 percent increase in reports of adverse events over the same time period. NCPS officials suggested several potential factors that could contribute to the decrease, including VAMCs' use of processes other than RCAs to address adverse events. However, NCPS is unaware of how many VAMCs use these other processes or their results. VHA's lack of analysis is inconsistent with federal internal control standards which state that agencies should compare data to analyze relationships and take appropriate actions. Because NCPS has not conducted an analysis of the relationship between the decrease in RCAs and possible contributing factors, it is unclear whether the decrease indicates a negative trend in patient safety at VAMCs or a positive one. In addition, without understanding the extent to which VAMCs use alternative processes and their results, NCPS has limited awareness of what VAMCs are doing to address the root causes of adverse events.

RCA's Completed at VAMCs, Fiscal Years 2010 through 2014

Number of RCAs



Source: Veterans Health Administration. | GAO-15-643

NCPS oversees the RCA process by monitoring VAMC compliance, and develops system-wide patient safety initiatives informed by RCA data. NCPS monitors each VAMC's compliance with requirements by reviewing RCA database information and conducting site visits. NCPS uses RCA information to inform system-wide patient safety initiatives, such as Patient Safety Alerts and

Advisories—urgent notifications sent to VAMCs that describe a safety issue and include instructions and due dates for implementing actions to prevent recurrence.

Why GAO Did This Study

Adverse events are incidents that pose a risk of injury to a patient as the result of a medical intervention or the lack of an appropriate intervention. VAMCs use the RCA process to identify and evaluate systems or processes that caused an adverse event, recommend changes to prevent the event's recurrence, and determine whether implemented changes were effective. GAO was asked to review VA's processes and procedures for responding to adverse events. In this report, GAO examined (1) the extent to which VAMCs used the RCA process to respond to adverse events and (2) how VHA oversees the RCA process and uses information from the process to make system-wide improvements. To conduct this work, GAO reviewed VHA policy and guidance documents, analyzed VHA data on RCAs completed from fiscal years 2010 through 2014, and interviewed officials from NCPS—the VHA office responsible for monitoring RCA data. GAO also analyzed local RCA data and interviewed officials from four VAMCs selected to provide variation in factors such as complexity and location.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA (1) analyze the declining number of completed RCAs, including identifying the contributing factors and taking appropriate actions, and (2) determine the extent to which VAMCs are using alternative processes to address adverse events, and collect information on their results. VA concurred with GAO's recommendations.



Senator Jon Tester (MT) and Representative Chellie Pingree (ME) introduced companion bills (H.R. 1607 and S. 865) that would improve the disability compensation evaluation procedure of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for veterans with mental health conditions related to military sexual trauma.

The bills would add authority to presume trauma occurred on the basis of new criteria that connects sexual trauma and subsequent mental health challenges, enabling these veterans to receive appropriate benefits. These bills are important because so many survivors of military sexual trauma historically were disproportionately denied any recognition by VA of their injuries during military service. Please ask your elected officials to support and work for passage of these important measures.

As always, thank you for your grassroots support and advocacy to enable us to move helpful legislation through Congress.

DoD 2016 Budget Update ► No Budget for Entire Year? Perhaps

Most people assume Congress will likely not pass a budget before the fiscal year ends Sept. 30, but sources are telling Defense News that lawmakers are considering the "nearly unprecedented step" of operating for all of fiscal 2016 without a new budget. If Congress does decide to proceed under a continuing resolution, it will create major problems in the Pentagon and defense industry. For example, Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James warned Monday that 50 Air Force programs would be disrupted if a budget is not passed this fall. "All around that would be a bad deal and we need to get a full-up appropriation and full-up authorization passed at roughly the president's budget level," she said.

Continuing resolutions, or CRs, have become commonplace. They have been utilized each year since 2009 until Congress has managed to pass a new budget. But they are troublesome. Mike Waite, the NGAUS legislative director, explained that a continuing resolution uses spending levels from the previous year until a new budget is passed. "This means no new programs, including new equipment purchases," he said. "And Guardsmen can't attend schools that weren't budgeted in the previous fiscal year."

A year-long continuing resolution would provide the Pentagon with \$35 billion less than it requested. Adm. Jon Greenert, the chief naval officer, told Defense News that a CR that stretches into the second quarter of the fiscal year or beyond would impact ship and aircraft building. Congress is now on recess, but returns to the capital 8 SEP. It will likely be unable to pass a budget before the end of the month, so a CR is almost certain. Waite said all government agencies are affected, not just defense. He said, "No one thinks that a CR is a good way to run the country." [Source: NGAUS Washington report | August 25, 2015 ++]

DoD 2016 Budget Update ► Washington Congressmen Predictions

Speaking at a forum at Joint Base Lewis-McChord last week, two members of Congress predicted there will be diminished spending for the military, tight restrictions on how Congress allows the Pentagon to respond to budget cuts, and more political stalemates that could lead to government shutdowns. Rep. Adam Smith (D-WA) who is the Ranking Member (top ranking Democrat) of the House Armed Services Committee, said that not only is the defense budget being reduced, but it is being reduced in an extremely unpredictable manner. Smith's remarks come after he voted against the defense budget last May for the first time in his 18 years in Congress. He also said he is concerned that Congress has blocked proposals by the Department of Defense to cut troop benefits and certain weapons programs.

Smith said he favors a new Base Realignment and Closure commission to study which military bases are no longer needed and should be shut down. Without another round of base closures,

Smith said that DoD will be forced to keep installations open that it doesn't need and then will take money out of maintenance and training in order to pay for keeping those bases. Ultimately, he said, he is concerned about maintaining military readiness. Rep. Denny Heck (D-WA), who is not a member of the Armed Services Committee but who has a large military community in his district, predicted the differences in Congress over the way money was added to the defense budget from a fund that was supposed to be used only for war related expenses would ultimately result in a government shutdown.

What concerns TREA about these remarks is that Rep. Smith believes cuts need to be made in military readiness in order to maintain readiness. We believe that is the absolute wrong way to go about maintaining troop readiness. If we are to maintain the all-volunteer force, promises made to military personnel must be kept. We are totally opposed to the idea that so many in Congress seem to have that the budget must be balanced on the backs of military people. While Rep. Smith is in the minority in the House of Representatives, there are many others in both parties who agree with him on that. [Source: TREA News for the Enlisted | August 24, 2015 ++]

Defense Health Agency Update ► Decreasing Military Personnel Costs

TRICARE beneficiaries are doing more than their fair share to decrease military personnel costs. Last year alone, beneficiaries were responsible for 80 percent of the savings achieved by the Defense Health Agency (DHA). Singling out beneficiaries instead of cutting costs within the DoD continues to be the fiscal answer for the Pentagon and for some members of Congress, who are poised to increase TRICARE fees in this year's defense bill. Over the past five years, military beneficiaries have shouldered the majority of DoD's cost cutting initiatives:

- **TRICARE fee increases:** Since 2011, TRICARE Prime annual fees and copays have increased 20 percent. Although automatic annual fee increases are now indexed to cost of living adjustments, Congress initially implemented a "one-time catch-up".
- **Pharmacy copay increases:** Pharmacy copays vary by class, but beneficiaries now pay 60 percent more for their medicine than they did in 2011.
- **Home Delivery Program:** In 2013, Congress forced TRICARE for Life beneficiaries to refill most maintenance medications by mail order. Imposition of this mandate restricted choice for beneficiaries and reaped huge savings for DoD. Home delivery saved DoD \$215 million in 2014 alone. In October, the Home Delivery Program expands to active duty family members and retirees under age 65.
- **Reduction in TRICARE Prime Service Areas:** In 2013, changes to regional TRICARE contracts reduced Prime Service Areas to a 40-mile radius from Military Treatment Facilities. Over 180,000 Prime enrollees were transferred into TRICARE Standard. Although Congress passed a one-time exception a year after implementation, tens of thousands of beneficiaries were affected.

The majority of DoD's savings have been on the backs of beneficiaries. When the department actually finds ways to cut costs, savings are not passed on to the beneficiary. For example, DoD negotiated federal pricing for pharmaceuticals, and recouped more than \$1.3 billion in refunds from overpayments. Isn't it strange that, despite DoD paying less for medications, beneficiaries continue to pay more? In this year's defense budget, if DoD has its way, pharmacy copays could triple over the next decade. The Bottom Line: Military beneficiaries continue to pay more and get less. Congress needs to look at other ways to save money before raiding beneficiaries' wallets. [Source: MOAA Leg UP | Mike Hayden | August 21, 2015 ++]

POW/MIA Update ► Korean/Cold War Annual Briefing

Government officials from the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) met with more than 300 family members of servicemen who went missing during past conflicts at the Korean/Cold War annual briefings Aug. 13-14, 2015, in Washington, D.C. At this meeting, representatives from the U.S. government's personnel accounting community briefed family members on the government's efforts to account for their loved ones, to include briefings on government policy, remains recovery operations and methods of identifying remains. As family members stood to tell their stories during the morning remembrance ceremony, it was clear that whether it was a wife, grandson or granddaughter, niece or nephew, or even a son or daughter, each had similar memories to share. Losing a family member is always difficult, and some families wait years for closure.

Mary McClung, the daughter of Marine Corps Master Sgt. William J. McClung III, who was also a World War II veteran, stated that the Korean/Cold War annual meeting gives families a place to get information and share a common bond. "When I lost my father I was three years old," said Mary McClung. "It has been difficult to grow up without a father, but luckily my mother was great. She remarried a great man, and I had family surrounding me." Family members, like McClung, gain knowledge about their lost loved ones and are provided the opportunity to discuss their specific cases with analysts. McClung stated that she was very curious about her father's loss and began to attend government briefings as an adult to obtain detailed information surrounding his case.

Today, more than 7,900 service members are still missing from the Korean and Cold Wars. Many families of these service members attend these annual briefings each year in hopes of receiving additional information about their lost loved ones and what the government is doing to bring them home. As the meeting continued, Mr. Michael Linnington, who recently has been appointed the first Director of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, conveyed his remarks. "This is the most important mission I have had in 35 years," said Mr. Linnington. "This is about families and providing information to families." The accounting community conducts six to eight briefings a year throughout the U.S. and the meetings are designed to provide updated information to family members on their missing loved ones' cases. McClung has been attending this briefing for the past 13 years, she stated. Since 1995, DPAA and the personnel accounting community partners have briefed more than 26,000 family members, just like

McClung, on the U.S. government's effort to account for their lost loved ones. "I don't know if they will ever find him, but I sure hope so," said McClung. [Source: DPAA External Communications | August 21, 2015 ++]

POW/MIA Recoveries

"Keeping the Promise", "Fulfill their Trust" and "No one left behind" are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II (73,515) Korean War (7,841), Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,627), 1991 Gulf War (5), and Libya (1). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home. For a listing of all personnel accounted for since 2007 refer to <http://www.dpaa.mil/> and click on 'Our Missing'. If you wish to provide information about an American missing in action from any conflict or have an inquiry about MIAs, contact:

- Mail: Public Affairs Office, 2300 Defense Pentagon, Washington, D.C. 20301-2300, Attn: External Affairs
- Call: Phone: (703) 699-1420
- Message: Fill out form on <http://www.dpaa.mil/Contact/ContactUs.aspx>

Vietnam

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 21 AUG that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, missing from the Vietnam War, who was identified earlier this year will be buried with full military honors. Army Maj. Dale W. Richardson, 28, of Mount Sterling, Ill., will be buried Aug. 29, in Mountain View, Ark.

Richardson was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 34th Armor Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, and was the passenger aboard an UH-1H Iroquois (Huey) helicopter that was en route to Fire Support Base Katum, South Vietnam, when it was diverted due to bad weather. After flying into Cambodian airspace, the aircraft came under heavy enemy ground fire, causing the pilot to make an emergency landing in Kampong Cham Province, Cambodia. The Huey's four crewmen and its four passengers survived the landing. One crewman was able to evade being captured by enemy forces and later returned to friendly lines. The other three crewmen and one passenger were captured. Two of the captured crewmen were released by the Vietnamese in 1973, and the remains of the other two captured men were returned to U.S. control in the 1980s and identified. Richardson died at the site of the crash during a fire fight with enemy forces. His remains were not recovered after the fire fight.

From 1992 through 2008, joint U.S. / Kingdom of Cambodia (K.O.C.) teams investigated the site without success. On Feb. 18, 2009, a joint team interviewed witnesses in the Memot District of Cambodia who claimed to have information on the loss. The witnesses identified a possible burial site for the unaccounted for servicemen. The team excavated the burial site but was unsuccessful locating the remains. From Jan. 16, 2010 to March 11, 2011, joint U.S. / K.O.C. teams excavated the area, but were unsuccessful recovering the crewman's remains. In February 2012, another joint U.S. / K.O.C. team re-interviewed two of the witnesses. The witnesses identified a secondary burial site near the previously excavated site. The team excavated the secondary burial site and recovered human remains and military gear from a single grave. In the identification of Richardson, scientists from DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) analyzed circumstantial evidence and used forensic identification tools, to include mitochondrial DNA, which matched his sister. Today there are 1,627 American service members that are still unaccounted for from the Vietnam War.

Korea

Korean War MIA Identified: The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced the identification of remains belonging to Army Sgt. Christopher Y. Vars, of Amherst, N.H., who was assigned to Company E, 9th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division, when he died fighting at North Korea's Chosin Reservoir on Nov. 29, 1950. He will be buried with full military honors on a date and at a location yet to be announced.

Korean War MIA Identified: The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced on 9 AUG the identification of remains belonging to Sgt. Wilson Meckley, Jr. U.S. Army Company A, 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division. Sgt. Meckley was lost on December 2, 1950 in North Korea.

World War II

None [Source: <http://www.dpaa.mil> | August 30, 2015 ++]

VA Claims Backlog Update ► First Time Ever Under 100,000

In late AUG, VA reduced the disability claims backlog to 98,535. Allison Hickey, VA's Under Secretary for Benefits, said this is the lowest it has ever been in VA's history, and it represents an 84-percent reduction from its peak of 611,000 claims in March 2013. But this milestone is also personal. I am a Veteran, my husband is a Veteran, and I have countless friends and family members who are Veterans. I came to the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) four years ago knowing there was no more noble mission than to care for Veterans, Servicemembers, their families and Survivors. On day one, I knew that demand for compensation and other VA benefits was exploding. The backlog of claims older than 125 days was over half a million and climbing, and the claims inventory was nearly 800,000 and rising. Veterans were waiting too long for their disability claim decisions, and that wasn't right.

In 2009, VA set a goal to process claims in an average of 125 days. Shortly after my arrival at VBA in 2011, we set in motion the Transformation Plan – a series of people, process, and technology initiatives that, when integrated, would bring the backlog down. Today’s numbers are a reflection of the success of this plan.

It hasn’t only been personal to me. It’s been personal to all VBA employees – 53 percent of whom are Veterans themselves and many more are family members of Veterans—and to Veterans Health Administration physicians and staff and IT colleagues who have gone above and beyond to provide you with the medical examinations needed to support your claims. It was through the efforts of these employees, our team members and partners that we were able to achieve such a dramatic reduction in the backlog, without sacrificing quality: claims-based quality has risen from 83 percent at the start of transformation to 91 percent today – and holding strong – and on the eight separate quality categories measured within a claim, employees are making the correct decision more than 98% of the time. With the help of the Congress, our partners in Veterans Service Organizations state and county Veterans service departments, and the support of our Labor partners:

- We are on track to complete nearly 1.4 million claims this fiscal year – exceeding 1 million claims for the fifth year in a row, and setting a new historical record.
- We’re expediting your claims – thanks to you and our VSO partners, nearly half of the claims we receive are Fully Developed Claims – and today, Veterans with a pending claim have been waiting, on average, 105 days for a claim decision, 177 days less than the March 2013 peak of 282 days.
- We’ve completed nearly 75 percent more non-rating work than before transformation – and we’ve already completed more non-rating work this year than we did in all of last year. Most non-rating claims are filed after receiving a rating claim decision that opened access to other VA benefits and services, such as adding dependents.
- Our appeals rate has remained in the historical average range of 10 to 12 percent amidst our increased production – volume went up, because we decided more claims. When you work a record setting number of claims, volume goes up. There are only two ways to best tackle appeals – legislative reform or more full-time employees authorized by Congress.

As you can see, many people had a hand in personally helping VA reach this backlog milestone. But I know it’s most personal to each and every one of you. We (VA) changed for you. We streamlined our processes; we moved out of antiquated systems; we got away from thousands of tons of paper; we met you online so that you could access us wherever and whenever you needed; and many of you changed right along with us. You’ve embraced new things like filing Fully Developed Claims and using standardized forms. Your teamwork with us as we implemented these changes was significant, and we thank you for doing your part in making VA better for every Veteran.

For the fastest processing, your evidence should be submitted as early as possible in the claims process, but we will always consider additional evidence or new medical conditions you add—no matter how late in the claims process you add that material. We take seriously our legal duty to assist you in fully developing your claim, but there are some instances where your personal circumstances—and our legal duty to assist you – may cause it to take more than 125 days to process your claim:

- If you add a new disability to a claim you already submitted to us or submit new, additional evidence for an already submitted claim.
- If you are unable to make scheduled medical exams for personal reasons, such as travel, living overseas, medical issues, etc.
- If VA identifies additional disabilities while we are processing your claim that are related to your service-connected disabilities that you did not claim.
- If VA identifies additional entitlements, such as adapted housing benefits or additional monetary benefits if you are unable to achieve employment as a result of severe service-connected disabilities, we will still complete your claim but these entitlements may take longer than 125 days.

We anticipate that these categories will only account for approximately 10 percent of all claims we receive – the vast majority of your claims will be decided in 125 days. These situations do not mean we will stop striving to give you the best possible service, or that we no longer need your support. Far from it!

As we mark this important milestone in our history, we commit to you that we will continue our efforts to improve; we will never waiver in our dedication to providing the best possible service to you, your families, and your Survivors. With our success in reducing the backlog through transformation, we have called on our VSO partners and the Congress to support us in ensuring we continue to receive the resources and legislative authorities we need to build upon our improvements – especially for non-rating and appeals work. I need you to echo that call. We are not done. We will continue to work tirelessly on your behalf. Above all, I thank you for your service to our country – for you are our inspiration every day. [Source: VAntage Point | Allison Hickey | August 24, 2015++]

Blue Water Claims Update ► Veterans Advocacy Hits VA "Betrayal"

The Department of Veterans Affairs recently issued a revision to its manual defining what areas can be considered for the presumption of Agent Orange exposure. This revision specifically excludes the crews of ships that entered the major bays and harbors of Vietnam, including Navy personnel who were exposed to Agent Orange in Da Nang, Nha Trang, Vung Tau and Cam Ranh Bay. The provision was issued in response to a court order from the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims decision entitled *Gray v. McDonald*, which found the old regulation to be

improper and ordering the VA to re-write it. Military-Veterans Advocacy Executive Director Commander John B. Wells, USN (Retired), described the new regulation as a "betrayal." "It does not change their old rule," Wells said. "It merely restates it with language that is just as irrational."

The new regulation comes on the heels of a meeting between Wells and VA Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson, which occurred last month. The meeting was arranged as a result of Congressional pressure open a dialogue on Gray and the entire Blue Water Navy issue. During that meeting, Wells showed evidence of the Agent Orange infiltration into the bays, harbors and territorial seas of the Republic of Vietnam. The meeting also included the discussion of a report confirming the presence of the Agent Orange dioxin in the bottom sediment of Nha Trang Harbor.

Several scientific studies have shown that the process used to distill potable water from salt water, for crew use, did not remove the dioxin, and actually enriched it. "These folks got a straight shot into their drinking water." Wells said. "Studies conducted for the Australian Department of Veterans Affairs and confirmed by the United States' Institute of Medicine have proven that. Yet the bureaucrats at the VA refuse to accept the fact that they were wrong." Australia has granted the presumption of exposure to their shipboard veterans since 2003. "Sloan Gibson promised me that the VA would keep in contact with us and consult with us," Wells continued. "That never happened." Wells noted that a similar promise of contribution made in January of 2012 by then VA Chief of Staff John Gingrich never materialized either. "We tried to give the VA the benefit of the doubt but, as usual, they disappointed us." In an e-mail to Gibson, Wells wrote: "While I had hoped that our meeting would result in a partnership, the fact that it did not was not completely unexpected. Like most veterans, I am used to being disappointed by the VA. Working with you, I believe we could have resolved this matter. Instead, we now have to pursue other avenues. But our mission is to work for the veterans and we will continue to do that."

Wells, who served as a Chief Engineer on several Navy ships, is a retired surface warfare officer. He is now an attorney practicing military and veterans law. He is recognized nationally as the subject matter expert on the Blue Water Navy matter. In contrast, Wells noted that at the meeting with Gibson the Deputy Secretary conceded that the people he had working the issue had no surface ship experience. "The lack of nautical experience is evident in the new regulation and as well as previous VA statements on the matter," Wells said.

Wells promised continued pressure in Congress and the courts. HR 969, which would expand the presumption of exposure to the territorial seas, is pending in the House Veterans Affairs Committee with 264 co-sponsors. The Companion Senate bill, S 681, has 20 co-sponsors. The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee has held one hearing on May 13, and is expected to hold another when Congress reconvenes. Currently litigation is pending before the United States Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit and the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. Wells, an attorney whose practice focuses on military matters, is based in Slidell, Louisiana, near New

Orleans. For more information about MVA, refer to www.MilitaryVeteransAdvocacy.org or <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Military-Veterans-Advocacy-Inc/1379899502270588?fref=ts>. [Source: MVA Press Release | John B. Wells | August 13, 2015 ++]

VA Claim Filing Update ► Reapply for Denied PTSD Claims

Military veterans receive multiple benefits following their service, but officials say some don't realize they can reapply for benefits that were previously denied. The Department of Veterans Affairs is spreading the word throughout their offices around the country that veterans who have had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder claims denied, particularly military sexual trauma, can and should reapply for disability. The VA health system reports one in 100 men and one in 5 women have experienced sexual abuse while serving in the military. In the past, if a veteran wanted to file for PTSD disability for sexual abuse, a report or evidence had to be on record of the abuse. If not, the VA had to legally throw out the disability claim. Now the VA is reminding veterans that changes in the law say a new sexual abuse investigation can be made, even if sexual assault was not reported during their active duty.

It's an attempt to get more veterans the benefits they deserve from serving our country. And as Hancock County Veterans Services director Nichole Coleman says, a second look at a denied claim could help. "Often times, what happens when a veteran applies for disability and they are denied, you feel kind of betrayed, and often times don't look at it any further," said Coleman. "If you don't have an expert helping you, you don't know what to look for to potentially give the VA the opportunity to grant you that disability. And that's what we're here for." Veteran services can also help grant veterans counseling alone, if they did not want to file for disability. [Source: Toledo News Now | Jon Monk | August 14, 2015 ++]

VA/DoD Online Service Tops 5 Million Users

WASHINGTON – Participation in the joint Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DoD) *eBenefits* website topped five million users this week, two months ahead of schedule. VA established an agency priority goal of reaching five million eBenefits users by the end of fiscal year 2015. VA achieved this early milestone through aggressive outreach efforts and with the support of DoD and its Veterans Service Organization partners.

"Veterans are encouraged to enroll in eBenefits and file their claims online through this one-stop shop for benefits-related tools and information," said Under Secretary for Benefits Allison Hickey. "We have already implemented nearly 60 self-service features and we continue to expand eBenefits capabilities to give Veterans and Servicemembers greater flexibility in securing their information."

The number of eBenefits users is a key measure of VA's success in improving Veterans' access to VA benefits and services and is reported on www.performance.gov.

To enroll in *eBenefits*, Veterans and Servicemembers must obtain a DoD Self-Service Logon (DS Logon), which provides access to several Veterans and military benefits resources using a single username and password. The service is free and may be obtained online at www.ebenefits.va.gov or in person at a VA Regional Office.

“The successful collaboration of eBenefits and DS Logon is just one more example of how the DoD and VA are working together to continue bringing current and former Servicemembers secure online access to the benefits they've earned,” said Mary Dixon, Director of Defense Manpower Data Center.

The rapid and continued growth in the utilization of the eBenefits website demonstrates the importance of giving Veterans greater access to information about their own benefits. In addition to filing claims online and checking the status of those claims, Veterans can also message their VA doctor, order prescription drug refills and obtain official military documents through *eBenefits*. More than 7.5 million VA letters have been generated and downloaded by Veterans that show proof of disability, income or Veterans preference used in federal or state government hiring

Veterans Tee Up in Iowa City

National Rehabilitation Event Marks 22 Years of Golf Therapy

IOWA CITY, Iowa – More than 200 Veterans from across the country are set to participate in one of the nation’s top adaptive golf events for blind and disabled Veterans. The National Veterans Training, Exposure, and Experience (TEE) Tournament will kick off in Iowa City on Sept. 7 and run through Sept. 11.

Veterans will golf at several courses in the Iowa City area, including Lake McBride, Kalona Country Club, West Liberty Country Club, Elks Country Club and Blue Top Ridge golf courses. While golf is the featured event, participants also can develop new skills and confidence through participation in other adaptive sports activities including bowling, kayaking, horseback riding, tandem biking, fishing and Frisbee golf.

Participation is open to Veterans with visual impairments and other disabilities receiving care at any VA medical facility. VA research and clinical experience verify that physical activity is important to maintaining good health, speeding recovery and improving overall quality of life. The event is hosted by the Iowa City VA Health Care System, with sponsorship support from Veterans Canteen Service (VCS) and many others. More than 300 volunteers are expected to donate their time and efforts to the event.

For more information visit www.tee.va.gov and follow VA Adaptive Sports on Twitter at @VAAdaptiveSport or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/vaadaptivesports.