



Federal Update for January 27 - 31 2014



From the Office of Congressman Tim Walz

On Wednesday, 15 January 2014, there was a reported breach of information security with the eBenefits website that is run by the Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Congressman Walz has inquired about this incident with VA. VA has stated that it was not a hacking incident, rather a software defect. VA is conducting an independent review of the incident to find out what took place that caused this to occur. VA will keep Rep. Walz's office apprised of the findings from the independent investigation.

Initial estimates indicated up to 5,351 out of eBenefits' 3.38 million total users may have been impacted by the software defect; however, a final determination on the number affected will be issued by the VA's independent Data Breach Core Team when its review is completed. To learn whether your eBenefits information may have been compromised, you can call the VA directly at 1.800.827.1000.

VA Offers \$600 Million in Funding to Support Services for Homeless Veteran Families

WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has announced the availability of up to approximately \$600 million in grants for non-profit organizations and consumer cooperatives that serve very low-income Veteran families occupying permanent housing through the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program.

“Those who have served our Nation should never find themselves on the streets, living without hope,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. “These grants play a critical role in addressing Veteran homelessness by assisting our vital

partners at the local level in their efforts. We are making good progress towards our goal to end Veterans' homelessness, but we still have work to do."

The SSVF program is designed to assist very low-income Veteran families who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless. The program employs a housing first model, an approach which centers on providing homeless Veterans with permanent housing quickly and then providing VA health care, benefits and services as needed.

Required services include outreach, case management, assistance in obtaining VA benefits, and providing or coordinating efforts to obtain needed entitlements and other community services. Grantees secure a broad range of other services for participants, including legal assistance; credit counseling; housing counseling; assisting participants in understanding leases, securing utilities, and coordinating moving arrangements; providing representative payee services concerning rent and utilities when needed; and serving as an advocate for the Veteran when mediating with property owners on issues related to locating or retaining housing. Grantees also offer temporary financial assistance that provides short-term assistance with rent, moving expenses, security and utility deposits, child care, transportation, utility costs, and emergency expenses.

VA announced the availability of funds today through a Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) via the Federal Register. VA is offering \$300 million in FY 2014 funds and \$300 million in FY 2015 funds, subject to available appropriations. VA will make award decisions based on a national competition.

In FY 2013, VA awarded approximately \$300 million in SSVF grants for operations beginning in FY 2014. VA is focusing up to \$300 million in surge funding on 76 high priority continuums of care in an unprecedented effort to end Veterans' homelessness in these communities. In FY 2013, funding from the SSVF program served over 39,000 Veterans and over 62,000 participants (i.e., Veterans and their family members).

In November, VA and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced the results of the 2013 Point-in-Time Estimates of Homelessness, which was prepared by HUD. The report estimated there were 57,849 homeless Veterans on a single night in January in the United States, an eight percent decline since 2012 and a 24 percent decline since 2010.

The SSVF program is authorized by 38 U.S.C. 2044. VA implements the program by regulations in 38 CFR part 62. More information about the program can be found at www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf.asp.

Federal Agencies Partner to Protect Veterans, Service Members and their Families Using GI Bill Education Benefits

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Departments of Veterans Affairs, Defense, Education and Justice, along with the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and the Federal Trade Commission announced today the launch of a new online complaint system designed to collect feedback from veterans, service members and their families who are experiencing problems with educational institutions receiving funding from Federal military and veterans educational benefits programs, including benefits programs provided by the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the DoD Military Tuition Assistance Program.

The centralized online reporting system is designed for veterans, service members and eligible dependents to report negative experiences with educational institutions; and gives the federal government the information needed to identify and address unfair, deceptive, and misleading practices and ensure high quality academic and student support services are available for veterans, service members, and their families.

“The online complaint system empowers veterans and their dependents and provides them a direct line to VA and our partner agencies,” said Allison A. Hickey, Under Secretary for Benefits, Department of Veterans Affairs. “The feedback we receive from veterans, service members and their families will help us strengthen enforcement of the ‘Principles of Excellence’ for institutions of higher learning serving veterans and their families to ensure students are receiving the education benefits they have earned and deserve.”

"Our service members and their families now have an easier and efficient way to provide feedback on their civilian educational experiences, which will ensure we have the right information to identify and address any negative practices," said Jessica Wright, Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.

Students can submit a complaint if they believe their school is failing to follow the Principles of Excellence, (i.e. unfair recruiting practices, credit transfer or change in degree requirements) through the centralized online reporting system accessed via the [Department of Defense](#) and [GI Bill](#) websites. When feedback is received, agencies will contact the school on behalf of the student and work toward a resolution. Complaints and their resolution will be forwarded to the Federal Trade Commission Consumer Sentinel Network, accessible by over 650 federal, state and local law enforcement agencies for use in enhancing and coordinating law enforcement investigations.

Executive Order 13607, signed April 27, 2012, addresses reports of unfair, deceptive or misleading behavior toward Veterans, service members and their families pursuing higher education and directs agencies to establish, implement and promote compliance with “Principles of Excellence” for educational institutions receiving funding from Federal military and veterans educational benefits programs for America’s veterans, service members and eligible dependents, including preventing abusive and deceptive recruiting practices. The new online complaint system is one of a range of tools being implemented by the federal government to ensure that service members, veterans and eligible dependents have access to meaningful information about the cost and quality of educational institutions.

Automation Speeds Benefits Processing for Post-9/11 GI Bill Students

WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) decreased the time it takes to process requests for GI Bill benefits for returning students by nearly 50 percent compared to fiscal year 2012. VA attributes the faster process in large part to improved claims automation that uses rules-based, industry-standard technologies to deliver Veterans’ benefits.

“We are happy to report that our students are seeing a reduction in the amount of time it takes to process their education claims thanks to an automated, digital process making it easier for Veterans, Servicemembers and their families to attend post-secondary education and enroll for continuing semesters,” said Under Secretary for Benefits Allison A. Hickey. “This automation has not only improved

education benefits processing, it has allowed us to shift resources to other priorities, like improving timeliness of disability compensation decisions. It's a great example of how technology is helping us to transform the way we do business and better serve Veterans."

The Post-9/11 GI Bill builds on the great legacy of the original GI Bill, giving Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans and their families the opportunity to reach their educational goals, find a good job and improve their lives. The automation technology, part of VA's Post-9/11GI Bill processing system called "Long Term Solution" (LTS), was implemented in September 2012. This technology has more than 1,700 calculations and rules that support benefits delivery for eligible Veterans, Servicemembers, and dependents. Up to six distinct payments per beneficiary can be calculated automatically per term, including: housing, books and supplies stipend, tuition and fees and Yellow Ribbon payments. In addition, a variety of different types of education and training programs are supported by the automated technology, including: graduate, undergraduate, non-college degree, correspondence, licensing and certification, apprenticeship and on-the-job training.

The improvement in timeliness was achieved despite a 27 percent increase in incoming education claims – 3.4 million in fiscal year 2013 compared to 2.7 million the prior year. Currently, VA is processing initial claims for new students in an average of less than 20 days, and supplemental claims for returning students in less than 8 days, down from 33 days and 16 days respectively since LTS was first fielded.

VA has provided more than \$35.6 billion in Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit payments to over 1.1 million Veterans, Servicemembers, and their families, and to the universities, colleges, and trade schools they attend. In 2014, VA will continue to improve education benefits delivery, through additional automation, tracking of beneficiary graduation rates, and the release of new tools to help beneficiaries best utilize VA education benefits, including the Choosing a School Guide, and CareerScope.