



Federal Update for November 11 - 15, 2013



Backlog of Disability Claims Reduced by 34 Percent since March

WASHINGTON (Nov. 7, 2013) –The Department of Veterans Affairs has made significant progress in reducing the backlog of disability compensation claims – from 611,000 to 400,835 or 34 percent -- since peaking in March. Concurrently, VA improved the accuracy of disability ratings, and provided hundreds of thousands of claims decisions to Veterans who have waited the longest.

“Veterans shouldn’t have to wait for the benefits they’ve earned,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki. “This has never been acceptable, but we are executing our plans and moving in the right direction to meet our 2015 goal of eliminating the backlog. We still have more work to do, but we are making clear progress and no one is more committed than our VBA employees, more than half of whom are Veterans themselves.”

Since the VA launched the initiative to eliminate the oldest claims first, claims processors at the 56 regional offices of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) have been focused on claims that had been waiting longer than one year. As of Nov. 4, VBA has completed 93 percent of these older claims, resulting in over 476,000 decisions for Veterans since the initiative began on April 19. The proportion of claims decisions that resulted in benefits being granted remained on par with historical averages—between 65 and 70 percent.

At the same time, the accuracy of rating decisions has improved. The three-month average for decision accuracy when evaluating a complete claim file is 90 percent -- a 5 percentage point improvement since 2011, and a 7 percentage point improvement since 2010. The three-month average accuracy for rating individual medical conditions inside each claim has climbed three points to 96.7 percent since December 2012.

VBA also directed 20 hours of mandatory overtime per month for claims processors, and worked with the Veterans Health Administration to place VA physicians in regional offices to review medical evidence to help speed decisions. Mandatory overtime was halted during the government shutdown in October, but has been re-established and will continue through Nov. 23. VBA anticipates mandatory overtime to continue in 2014, based on available funding. Optional overtime for claims processors will remain in effect.

“I am grateful to our employees, many who have been working long periods of overtime since May, for their great dedication in helping our Veterans get the benefits they’ve earned,” said Under Secretary for Benefits Allison A. Hickey. “I talk to them every day and they are committed to building on their record-breaking progress, helping transform the VA into a paperless system, and ending the backlog for good.”

In the coming months, VBA will continue its effort on further reducing the backlog, focusing on those claims that have been pending the longest. VBA will also continue to prioritize disability claims for homeless Veterans, those experiencing extreme financial hardship, the terminally ill, former Prisoners of War, Medal of Honor recipients, and Veterans filing Fully Developed Claims (FDC). Filing an electronic FDC is the quickest way for Veterans to receive a decision on their compensation claim (<http://www.benefits.va.gov/fdc/>).

Regardless of the status of their compensation claims, Veterans who have served in combat since Nov. 11, 1998, are eligible for five years of free medical care from VA for most conditions.

Veterans can learn more about disability and other Veterans benefits on the joint Department of Defense/VA web portal *eBenefits* at www.ebenefits.va.gov.

Bipartisan Group Aims to Improve Job Opportunities for Vets

WASHINGTON – As Veterans Day approaches, U.S. Senators Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.), Congressmen Jeff Denham (R-Calif.) and Tim Walz (D-Minn.), Co-Chairs of the Congressional Veterans Jobs Caucus, announced today their

introduction of the United We Stand to Hire Veterans Act, a bipartisan, bicameral bill that would streamline and consolidate duplicative government job portals to better connect current and former members of the Armed Services with employment opportunities.

"We owe everything to those who wore the uniform in defense of our country," Senator Kirk said. "In honor of their sacrifices, we should provide every available resource to help our returning heroes transition to civilian life and enter the workforce. This legislation will make it easier for veterans to take advantage of government employment services with the ultimate goal of getting a high-quality job."

"Our veterans are some of the most disciplined, reliable, hardworking, and dedicated individuals in the world. They are trained to strive for excellence and exceed expectations every day. Their leadership and high-tech skills are unmatched worldwide," Senator Manchin said. "So it makes zero sense that our veterans find it difficult to search for jobs when they return home. That's simply unacceptable. The very least we can do to show our appreciation to our veterans is to help them find jobs. Like I've always said, if you want to help a vet, hire a vet, and this bill is one step toward making it easier for our service men and women to find opportunities for good-paying jobs."

"Those who put their life on the line to preserve opportunity and prosperity for us should be able to take advantage of that same opportunity for prosperity when they get home," Representative Walz said. "This bill will work to cut through bureaucratic red-tape and make it easier for our brave warriors to continue with a career in public service and find good-paying jobs when they get home."

"The best way to honor the hard work and sacrifices our service members make is to ensure that they enter civilian life with a quality job," Representative Denham said. "This bill streamlines the job search process our veterans go through, making it as easy as possible for them to find employment."

Veterans returning home from Afghanistan and Iraq face an unemployment rate that is 3 percent higher than the national average. Today, the Departments of Defense, Labor and Veterans Affairs operate duplicative portals aimed at veterans and servicemembers searching for public and private sector jobs. Combined with

a wealth of resources provided by the private and nonprofit sectors, the lack of a single government portal to connect employers with veterans makes navigating the hiring process difficult for both the job seeker and organizations looking to hire them. No requirement currently exists for government agencies to consolidate these services.

The United We Stand to Hire Veterans Act would require the consolidation of each department's online employment services into a single portal across the federal government within one year of enactment. The basic function of the portal would remain the same: connect veterans and members of the Armed Services with public and private sector employers seeking to hire people with military experience. The portal would also provide other resources to veterans like resume assistance.

Senators Kirk, Manchin and Representatives Denham and Walz, established the bipartisan, bicameral Congressional Veterans Jobs Caucus to shed light on the challenges Active Duty, Reserve and guard members face as they transition to civilian life. The Caucus engages executive branch agencies, educational institutions and the private sector to help identify ways to reduce the unemployment rate of the nation's approximately 21 million veterans.

Walz Lauds New Veterans Clinic in Albert Lea

Albert Lea, MN [11/8/13] – Today, Representative Tim Walz announced that Albert Lea, MN will be home to a new VA community-based outpatient clinic (CBOC) to better serve our nations heroes in southern Minnesota. Walz has been a staunch advocate for the creation of this CBOC in southern Minnesota for years and released the following statement.

“Today has been a long time coming. I could not be more pleased with this announcement. I thank the VA for their data driven decision to put this CBOC here in southern Minnesota. This CBOC will ensure that local veterans will have access to the health care they have earned and deserve.”

Valor Healthcare, Inc (Humana Government Business) of Louisville, KY, has been awarded a \$28.2 million, 5-year contract to operate two new VA community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs) in Albert Lea, MN, and also in Shakopee, MN.

The new clinics will be located at:

Skyline Mall, 1665 West Main Street in Albert Lea, (Freeborn County)

1100 Shakopee Town Center, Shakopee, (Scott County)

The clinics will provide primary care, mental health counseling and telemedicine services. The clinics are expected to open in 2014.

Representative Walz sits on the U.S. House of Representatives Veterans Affairs Committee. He is a 24-year veteran of the Army National Guard and is the highest ranking enlisted soldier to ever serve in Congress.

Walz Applauds Landmark Mental-Health Parity Rule

Mankato, MN [11/8/13] – Today, Representative Tim Walz released the following statement after the Departments of Health and Human Services, Labor and the Treasury jointly issued a final rule increasing parity between mental health/substance use disorder benefits and medical/surgical benefits in group and individual health plans. Walz has long advocated the Administration to issue this final rule.

“I’m pleased the Administration issued this long-overdue rule today. Today’s announcement will put mental health issues on the same playing field as physical ones in the eyes of insurance companies,” Walz said. “While the ruling today is certainly historic, there is more work to be done. I will continue to reach across the aisle and work with anyone who wishes to end stigma and increase access to mental health care for all Americans.”

The final rule issued today implements the Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act, and ensures that health plan features like co-pays, deductibles and visits limits are generally not more restrictive for mental health/substance abuse disorders benefits than they are for medical/surgical benefits.

Today’s action also includes specific additional consumer protections, such as:

- Ensuring that parity applies to intermediate levels of care received in residential treatment or intensive outpatient settings;
- Clarifying the scope of the transparency required by health plans, including the disclosure rights of plan participants, to ensure compliance with the law;
- Clarifying that parity applies to all plan standards, including geographic limits, facility-type limits and network adequacy; and
- Eliminating an exception to the existing parity rule that was determined to be confusing, unnecessary and open to abuse.

One Million Now Benefit from Post-9/11 GI Bill

WASHINGTON (Nov. 8, 2013) – The Department of Veterans Affairs announced today that 1 million Veterans, Servicemembers, and family members have benefited from the Post-9/11 GI Bill since the program’s inception in August 2009.

The Veterans Benefits Administration, which administers the program, has distributed over \$30 billion in the form of tuition and other education-related payments to Veterans, Servicemembers, and their families; and to the universities, colleges, and trade schools they attend.

"This is one of the most important programs helping our Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans reach their educational goals and find a good job," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "We're proud this important benefit is making such a big difference in the lives of so many Veterans and their families."

"Over the next few years, as more than a million service men and women end their military careers and return to civilian life, education will be at the forefront of that transition," said Dr. Jill Biden. "As a community college teacher, I have seen firsthand the qualities our veterans bring to the classroom – dedication, a sense of teamwork, and a commitment to their work. Helping our veterans succeed in the classroom so they can go on to find good jobs to support their families is one important way we can thank them for their service."

Today, VA announced that Steven Ferraro, who is currently attending Middlesex County College, a public community college in Edison, N.J., has been identified as

the 1 millionth Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiary. Ferraro served in the Army from 2003-2013 and deployed to Iraq in 2008 as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. He is the father of three and is majoring in communications.

“I thought it was a great privilege to be the one millionth recipient of the GI Bill,” said Ferraro. “Coming back to college after leaving the military, it was a great stepping stone for me and my family.”

“We are pleased that the Post-9/11 generation of Veterans is taking advantage of this significant benefit program,” said Under Secretary for Benefits Allison A. Hickey. “The scope of the program we’ve administered thus far would fund the undergraduate student bodies of Virginia Tech, Ohio State University, West Virginia University, and University of Florida combined – for eight years.”

The Post-9/11 GI Bill is a comprehensive education benefit created by Congress in 2008. In general, Veterans and Servicemembers who have served on active duty for 90 or more days since Sept. 10, 2001 are eligible. On average, VA processes the initial claims for Post-9/11 GI Bill educational benefits in 23 days.

VA’s new automated processing system, called the Long-Term Solution, uses more than 1,600 business rules to support end-to-end automation of Post-9/11 GI Bill claims, ensuring accurate payments without the need for manual handling, also resulting in quicker processing of education claims.

Servicemembers have the opportunity to transfer the benefit to immediate family members. Legally, GI Bill benefits are tiered based on the number of days served on active duty, giving activated National Guard and Reserve members the same benefits as all other active duty members. These benefits include:

- Up to the full amount of tuition and fees for a state-operated college or university. The Yellow Ribbon Program may provide additional assistance for students attending private institutions or who are charged out-of-state tuition and fees;
- Monthly housing allowance, which is based upon the location of the school; and
- Annual books and supplies stipend of up to \$1,000.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill also provides work-study programs, tutorial assistance and license and certification test reimbursement.

Enacted in 1944, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, known as the "GI Bill of Rights;" recognized that military service was an inherently selfless act which demanded a certain amount of compensation. As a result of the bill, nearly half of the 16 million Veterans of World War II went to school and received an education – helping to rejuvenate the post-war economy and transform not only the lives of Veterans, but the fabric of the nation.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill builds on the same great legacy of the original GI Bill, giving Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans and their families a chance to improve their lives and invest in their future through higher education. For more information on VA education benefits go to <http://www.gibill.va.gov/>

Secretary Shinseki Announces an Additional \$4.9 Million to Help Eliminate Veterans Homelessness

WASHINGTON (Nov. 12, 2013) – The Department of Veterans Affairs announced today that 25 projects in 11 different states will share approximately \$4.9 million in grants to provide enhanced services for homeless Veterans this year. This is in addition to the approximately \$300 million in preventive grants awarded earlier this year through the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program.

“Our local partners have played a vital role in our effort to find, engage, and rescue every homeless Veteran,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. “Until no Veteran has to sleep on our Nation’s streets, we still have work to do.”

As a key component of VA’s plan to eliminate homelessness among Veterans, VA’s Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program funds community agencies that provide services to homeless Veterans. The program promotes the development and provision of supportive housing and services with the goal of helping homeless Veterans achieve residential stability, increase their skill levels and income, and obtain greater self-determination.

On a single night in January 2012, a national count of homeless Veterans totaled 62,619, which was more than 17 percent below the figure for 2009. As part of President Obama's and Secretary Shinseki's plan to eliminate Veteran homelessness in 2015, VA has committed over \$1 billion in fiscal year 2014 to strengthen programs that prevent and treat the many issues that can lead to Veteran homelessness.

VA Approves \$8.8 Million in Grants to Provide Transportation and Renovated Housing for Homeless Veterans

WASHINGTON (Nov. 12, 2013) —The Department of Veterans Affairs has approved \$8.8 million in grants to fund 164 projects in 37 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico to rehabilitate currently operational transitional housing projects and acquire vans to facilitate the transportation needs of homeless Veterans.

“President Obama has made eliminating Veterans’ homelessness a national priority,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. “We want every Veteran who faces homelessness to know that VA is here to help. The Grant and Per Diem Program provides significant assistance to those who need it.”

The grants awarded through the Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program are for currently operational grantees, who will use this funding to rehabilitate their current project locations to enhance safety, security and privacy for the homeless Veterans they serve. Additionally, funding for these organizations to acquire vans will assist homeless Veterans with transportation to medical appointments and employment opportunities, as well as enable grantees to conduct outreach within their communities.

GPD helps close gaps in available housing for the nation's most vulnerable homeless Veterans, including men and women with children, Indian tribal populations, and Veterans with substance use and mental health issues. Community-based programs funded by GPD provide homeless Veterans with

support services and housing. GPD grants are offered annually as funding is available by VA's homeless Veterans programs.

Lisa Pape, National Director of Homeless Programs, which oversees GPD, said "These grant awards are a reinvestment in the community that will strengthen community services around the country so that homeless Veterans have access to safe and secure housing and receive quality support and services.

"The 2013 GPD grant awards represent an ongoing commitment to VA's community partners. These awards will make community-based GPD facilities safer and secure, ensuring that our community partners continue to provide excellent mental health support, employment assistance and job training with the essential component of housing," Pape added. "Whether it is aid in overcoming substance use or finding a job, a community helping hand is exactly what these Veterans need to lead a better quality of life."

Since 2009, homelessness among Veteran has decreased more than 17 percent. As part of President Obama's and Shinseki's five-year plan to eliminate Veteran homelessness by 2015, VA has committed over \$1 billion in fiscal year 2014 to strengthen programs that prevent and treat the many issues that can lead to Veteran homelessness.

More information about VA's homeless programs is available at www.va.gov/homeless. Details about the GPD Program are online at www.va.gov/homeless/GPD.asp.

To help a homeless Veteran or Veteran at risk of homelessness, refer them to the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans, 1-877-4AID-VET, or direct them to www.va.gov/homeless. The hotline connects homeless Veterans, Veterans at risk of becoming homeless and their families with the VA services and benefits they have earned.

VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program: Independent Living Services and Supports Require Stronger Oversight

Why GAO Did This Study

Of the 9,215 veterans who entered the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Independent Living (IL) track within the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program from fiscal years 2008 to 2011, most were male Vietnam era veterans in their 50s or 60s. The most prevalent disabilities among these veterans were post-traumatic stress disorder and tinnitus ("ringing in the ears"). GAO's review of 182 IL cases from fiscal year 2008 shows that VR&E provided a range of IL benefits to veterans; the most common benefits being counseling services and computers. Less common benefits included gym memberships, camping equipment, and a boat. GAO estimates that VR&E spent nearly \$14 million on benefits for veterans entering the IL track in fiscal year 2008--an average of almost \$6,000 per IL veteran.

About 89 percent of fiscal year 2008 IL veterans were considered by VR&E to be "rehabilitated" by the end of fiscal year 2011; that is, generally, to have completed their IL plans. These plans identify each veteran's independent living goals and the benefits VR&E will provide. The remaining 11 percent of cases were either closed for various reasons, such as the veteran declined benefits, or were still active. Rehabilitation rates across regions varied from 49 to 100 percent, and regions with larger IL caseloads generally rehabilitated a greater percentage of IL veterans. On average, IL plans nationwide were completed in 384 days; however, completion times varied by region, from 150 to 895 days.

GAO identified four key areas where VR&E's oversight was limited. First, some regions may not be complying with certain case management requirements. For instance, while VR&E is required to coordinate with the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) on IL benefits, VR&E counselors have difficulty obtaining timely responses from VHA. This has resulted in delayed benefits or VR&E providing the benefits instead of VHA. Second, VR&E does not systematically monitor regional variation in IL caseloads and benefits provided. Instead, it has relied on its quality assurance reviews and ad hoc studies, but these are limited in scope. Third, VR&E's policies for approving IL expenditures may not be appropriate as regions were permitted to purchase a range of items without Central Office approval, some of which were costly or questionable. In one case GAO reviewed, Central Office review was not required for expenditures of \$17,500 for a boat, motor, trailer, and the boat's shipping, among other items. Finally, VR&E's case management system does not collect information on IL costs

and the types of benefits purchased. VR&E also lacks accurate data on the number of IL veterans served. While the law currently allows up to 2,700 veterans to enter the IL track annually, data used to monitor the cap are based on the number of IL plans developed, not on the number of individual veterans admitted. Since veterans can have more than one IL plan in a fiscal year, one veteran could be counted multiple times towards the cap. VA plans to make modifications to its case management system to address this, but officials noted that it could take up to 3 years to obtain funding for this project.

What GAO Found

The IL track--one of five tracks within VA's VR&E program--provides a range of non-employment related benefits to help veterans with service-connected disabilities live more independently when employment is not considered feasible at the time they enter the VR&E program. These benefits can include counseling, assistive devices, and other services or equipment. This testimony is based on GAO's report issued in June 2013, and describes (1) the characteristics of veterans in the IL track, and the types and costs of benefits provided; (2) the extent to which their IL plans were completed, and the time it took to complete them; and (3) the extent to which the IL track has been administered appropriately and consistently across regional offices.

GAO analyzed VA administrative data from fiscal years 2008 to 2011, and reviewed a random, generalizable sample of 182 veterans who entered the IL track in fiscal year 2008. In addition, GAO visited five VA regional offices; interviewed agency officials and staff; and reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and agency policies, procedures, studies, and other documentation.

What GAO Recommends

In its June 2013 report, GAO recommended that VR&E explore options to enhance coordination with VHA, strengthen its oversight of the IL track, and reassess its policy for approving benefits. VA agreed with these recommendations.

VA Offers Dental Insurance Program

WASHINGTON (Nov. 15, 2013) – VA is partnering with Delta Dental and MetLife to allow eligible Veterans, plus family members receiving care under the Civilian

Health and Medical Program (CHAMPVA), to purchase affordable dental insurance beginning Nov. 15, VA officials announced today.

“VA continues to explore innovative ways to help Veterans get access to the care and services they have earned and deserve,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. “This new dental program is another example of VA creating partnerships with the private sector to deliver a range of high-quality care at an affordable cost, for our Nation’s Veterans.”

More than 8 million Veterans who are enrolled in VA health care can choose to purchase one of the offered dental plans. This three-year pilot has been designed for Veterans with no dental coverage, or those eligible for VA dental care who would like to purchase additional coverage. Participation will not affect entitlement to VA dental services and treatment.

There are no eligibility limitations based on service-connected disability rating or enrollment priority assignment. People interested in participating may complete an application online through Delta Dental, www.deltadentalvadip.org, or MetLife, www.metlife.com/vadip beginning Nov. 15. Coverage for this new dental insurance will begin Jan. 1, 2014, and will be available throughout the United States and its territories.

Also eligible for the new benefits are nearly 400,000 spouses and dependent children who are reimbursed for most medical expenses under VA’s CHAMPVA program. Generally, CHAMPVA participants are spouses, survivors or dependent children of Veterans officially rated as “permanently and totally” disabled by a service-connected condition.

Dental services under the new program vary by plan and include diagnostic, preventive, surgical, emergency and endodontic/restorative treatment. Enrollment in the VA Dental Insurance Plan (VADIP) is voluntary. Participants are responsible for all premiums, which range from \$8.65 to \$52.90 per month for individual plans. Copayments and other charges may apply.

Historically VA’s free dental services have gone to Veterans with dental problems connected to a medical condition that’s officially certified as “service connected.” Free dental services will continue for those Veterans.

For more information on VADIP, visit www.va.gov/healthbenefits/vadip, or contact Delta Dental at 1-855-370-3303 or MetLife at 1-888-310-1681. Veterans who are not enrolled in the VA health care system can apply at any time by visiting www.va.gov/healthbenefits/enroll, calling 1-877-222-VETS (8387) or visiting their local VA health care facility.