April 2, 2018

VETERANS
MONTHLY INFORMATION PACKAGE

FLAGLER COUNTY

DAVID LYDON
County Veterans Service Officer

ERIC FLORES FEBLES
VSO/Assistant

PHONE: (386) 313-4014; FAX: (386) 313-4114;
Email: DLydon@flaglercounty.org

Feel free to make copies and distribute throughout your organization.
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 19, 2018

VA Open Application Programming Interface Pledge Gains Momentum to Shape a New Direction for Health Care

WASHINGTON — Today the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced that to further accelerate the benefits of the VA Open Application Programming Interface (API) pledge, Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs David Shulkin has asked Dr. Rasu Shrestha, chief innovation officer at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, to lead the initiative.

“I am excited to see this vision become a reality, and am actively seeking other health-care systems to join our pledge, and ask developers to take part in our Lighthouse Lab, so we can shape a new direction for health care together,” Shulkin said.

Shulkin announced the pledge March 9 at the annual Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society Conference in Las Vegas, where 11 health-care providers initially signed up to partner with VA. To date, several additional institutions have expressed interest in joining the pledge.

The API pledge encourages health-care providers to commit to work collaboratively with VA to increase the mapping pace of health data to industry standards, including the current and future versions of Fast Healthcare Interoperability Resources (FHIR).

Considered the “front door” to VA’s vast data stores, Lighthouse is the department’s application programming interface management platform, and functions similar to a waiter’s role in a restaurant — the critical link communicating orders to the “kitchen.” For VA, the kitchen is the system that will prepare the order then deliver it back to the waiter, or API.

The coalition effort includes key stakeholders across the industry to elevate electronic health record (EHR) interoperability and realize the potential of the Open API Pledge to accelerate the design, testing and implementation of the Argonaut Project implementation guides of the FHIR API.

Shrestha added, “There is no moment greater than now for the industry to step up and make their voices heard to push towards real and meaningful interoperability. This is an important moment for the private sector to answer the Secretary’s call and work with our vendors to make information flow and use as freely accessible as possible to make care safer and better for Veterans.”

Pledges will meet for the first roundtable discussion in April and commit to working with VA and standards community to implement the existing Argonaut implementation guides. The organizations will participate in testing draft specifications for scheduling, clinical notes, questionnaire and encounters, as well as implement access standards for Veterans, clinicians and the care teams that serve them.

Stephen Klasko, president and CEO of Thomas Jefferson University and Jefferson Health and current pledgee, said, “Just as our Veterans deserve the best technology when they are defending our country, they deserve the best health-care technology when they return. Dr. Shulkin’s leadership in assembling the open API pledge is not only important for Veterans but is an important first step in creating seamless electronic records for all U.S. citizens.”

###
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 13, 2018

VA to Conduct In-depth Internal Review of Existing Canine Research Projects

WASHINGTON — Today the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced the Office of Research and Development (ORD) of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) extended its commitment to reduce future research on canines by initiating a rapid, in-depth internal review of existing canine research projects.

An external group will review these recommendations and provide VA with guiding principles for future canine research to assure benefits to Veterans.

“We understand that this is a sensitive issue,” said VA Secretary David Shulkin, “We look forward to a time when research involving canines is no longer necessary to advance the health of our Veterans and are taking action to hasten that day, but until then, the agency has a duty to do everything in its power to develop new treatments to preserve and restore our Veterans’ health.”

Animal research at VA is strictly controlled and monitored with accountability mechanisms in place that comply with the same regulations and standards that university programs, state, private and military organizations use. In the past 20 years, VA use of canines in research has been reduced significantly and continues to be reduced, as much as possible. It is important to note that of thousands of VA research projects, fewer than 15 currently involve canines.

VA has always required medical relevance and justification for canine use, and in late 2017, VA instituted a policy that no new canine research would begin without approval of both, the Chief Research and Development Officer and the VA Secretary. As a result, new canine studies have not been initiated, and two new studies were required to use alternative models instead of canines. VA is now reviewing existing studies using canines to determine whether the use of canines in these studies should be phased out in advance of their original end dates.

In addition, when canines are the only viable models, VA is proactively contacting the principal investigators leading these studies, requesting they develop plans to establish alternative models. VA intends to fund development of canine alternatives, which will reduce the need for canine research within VA.

###
VA and U.S. Digital Service Launch New Web Tool to Help Veterans Track their Benefits Appeals

WASHINGTON — Today the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the U.S Digital Service announced their launch of an improved Appeals Status tool to increase transparency and enable Veterans to track the progress of their benefits claims appeals.

“It’s important that our Veterans have the opportunity to track their appeals process in a timely and efficient manner,” said VA Secretary David Shulkin. “For the first time ever, Veterans can see their place on the Board of Veterans’ Appeals’ docket, including the number of appeals that are ahead of them.”

The tool, which went live March 21 on VA’s Vets.gov website, will allow Veterans to access detailed information about the status of their benefits appeals and will include alerts about needed actions, as well as estimates of how long each step of the process takes.

Some Veterans who have previewed the new tool said it had given them hope and helped them understand that the process might take longer than expected.

###
Rear Adm. Ronny L. Jackson, the personal physician to President Donald Trump, was not his first choice to replace fired VA Secretary Dr. David Shulkin, the White House said Thursday.

"The president did have some early individuals that he was looking at but continuously went back to Dr. Jackson to fulfill this role as VA secretary," White House deputy press secretary Lindsay Walters told reporters.

She said Trump "ultimately decided that his [Jackson's] health care experience, his distinguished career in the medical profession, was something that would be beneficial at the VA."

Walters added that Trump "has full confidence in Admiral Jackson" to fulfill the demanding job at the Department of Veterans Affairs despite his lack of experience in running large organizations.
Walters did not name the others who were considered to head the VA, but they reportedly included Toby Cosgrove, former head of the $8 billion Cleveland Clinic health care system, and Pete Hegseth, an Army National Guard veteran of Iraq, former head of the advocacy group Concerned Veterans of America and co-host of the weekend "Fox & Friends" program.

Cosgrove, a Vietnam veteran, was among those invited in 2016 to Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida to be interviewed for the VA post before Trump settled on Shulkin, a holdover from the Obama administration.

Others who were under consideration as VA secretary included former Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Florida, who had been chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee; retired Army Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg; Michael Kussman, a former VA undersecretary of health; and Leo Mackay Jr., a former VA deputy secretary who is now senior vice president at Lockheed Martin Corp., The Associated Press reported.

The surprise announcement of his nomination Wednesday afternoon, his status as a relative unknown on Capitol Hill, and the ongoing turmoil at the VA indicate Jackson will have little in the way of a honeymoon period if he is confirmed by the Senate.

Shulkin wasn't even out the door when Jackson faced a barrage of conflicting demands from the White House, Congress and the major Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs).

The immediate concern is the upcoming decision by the VA to award a contract that could run up to $10 billion and is aimed at finally giving the agency electronic health records. There are also the perennial disagreements on what to do about benefits, wait times, suicides, PTSD, corruption, caregivers and the crumbling infrastructure at VA hospitals.

However, at the top of Jackson's to-do list is reaching a final resolution on the extension and expansion of the Veterans Choice Program, which allows vets to opt for private health care.

Proponents, including Trump, see Choice as guaranteeing that vets get the best health care available; opponents, including the VSOs, see overreliance on Choice as threatening the core mission of VA as the primary provider and payer for the care of nine million vets annually.

In leaving, Shulkin sidestepped the scandal over his travel expenses. He portrayed himself as the victim of palace intrigues hatched by White House political appointees advocating the full "privatization" of VA health care.

In an op-ed for The New York Times, Shulkin wrote that the political appointees, at the White House and within the VA, "saw me as an obstacle to privatization who had to be removed."
"That is because I am convinced that privatization is a political issue aimed at rewarding select people and companies with profits, even if it undermines care for veterans," he said.

In testimony to the House Veterans Affairs Committee earlier this month, Shulkin warned that the Choice program could run out of money as early as June.

Sen. Johnny Isakson, R-Georgia, chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, had co-sponsored a bill that would have extended Choice while keeping the decision on whether vets could go to private doctors within the VA, but the bill was not included in the $1.3 billion omnibus spending package signed by Trump last week.

Isakson has pledged to renew his efforts on Choice when Congress returns after the Easter recess. In a statement Thursday, he also hinted at the conflicts with the White House by heaping praise on Shulkin and pointing to improvements at the VA in the past year.

Shulkin "has made a tremendous impact toward improving the lives of veterans," Isakson said. "He has been instrumental in all that we have accomplished in the last year, and I thank Dr. Shulkin for his dedicated service to our country and our veterans."

As for Jackson's nomination, Isakson said, "I look forward to meeting Admiral Jackson and learning more about him."

If confirmed by the Senate, Jackson, who has little administrative experience and none in running an organization such as the VA, could be expected to rely on the insider knowledge of the No. 2 at the agency, Deputy VA Secretary Thomas Bowman. The VA, the largest healthcare system in the United States, has 370,000 employees and a budget of nearly $200 billion.

However, Bowman, a retired Marine colonel and military attorney, has already been targeted for removal by Jake Leinenkugel, a former brewery company executive and now a senior White House adviser on veterans issues.

In December, Leinenkugel wrote in an email to Camilo Sandoval, a political appointee at the VA, that they should lobby for the ousters of both Shulkin and Bowman. The email was first reported by The Washington Post and later obtained by Military.com.

Isakson and the VSOs came to the defense of Bowman, a long-time former staffer on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.
"Tom Bowman is a veteran and a patriot, a public servant and a good man," Isakson said in a statement. "If this is true, it will be a mistake, and I am deeply disappointed in the president. Veterans will suffer because of this decision if it's true."

The VSOs have partly blamed the moves against Shulkin and Bowman, and the efforts at privatization, on the work of the advocacy group Concerned Veterans for America, which is funded by the conservative Koch brothers organization.

In a statement, CVA's executive director, Dan Caldwell, said that Shulkin "made significant headway in reforming the department, but ultimately became a distraction from the important task of improving health care for our veterans."

Without mentioning Choice, Caldwell said, "Congress needs to continue work with the president to pass legislation that will give veterans more health care options and better access to care through the VA."

In a statement, Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said of Choice that "much more work remains to improve the Veterans Choice Program and ensure our nation's heroes have access to the best possible services."

"Let me be very clear: none of us committed to reform wants to privatize care. We simply believe the VA must put the needs of veterans first, and ensure they receive timely, quality and uncompromised health care, whether that's in the VA or in the community," McCain said.

Sen. Jack Reed, D-Rhode Island, ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said, "I admire Dr. Jackson's service to the nation, but I don't know if he is the right person to lead the VA.

"One thing is clear -- the Trump administration seems to devolve further into turmoil by the day," Reed said. "I hope the level of dysfunction that has engulfed other parts of the administration does not impact the care that our veterans receive."

-- Richard Sisk can be reached at Richard.Sisk@Military.com.
President Donald Trump will soon award the Medal of Honor posthumously to an Army lieutenant who directed artillery fire from an exposed position for three hours while fending off "fanatical German infantrymen" during a 1945 battle near Houssen, France.

Garlin Murl Conner, then a first lieutenant, will be the third service member to be awarded the military's highest combat award since Trump took office. According to a White House statement released Thursday, Conner's widow, Pauline Lyda Wells Conner, and other families will be present at the medal ceremony. The date for the ceremony has yet to be announced.

In January 1945, Conner was serving as an intelligence officer with Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, according to information released by the White House.

"Then-First Lieutenant Conner voluntarily left his position of relative safety to place himself in a better position to direct artillery fire onto the assaulting enemy infantry and armor," the White
House announcement said. "He remained in an exposed position, which was 30 yards ahead of the defending force, for a period of three hours."

During that time, enemy soldiers came within five yards of him and he was constantly at risk from friendly artillery shells, the announcement states.

Despite all that, "he continued to direct the fire of friendly artillery, which ultimately repelled the assaulting enemy elements."

Conner survived the battle and would be discharged from the Army on June 22, 1945.

He had first entered the service as an enlisted soldier in 1941, according to released information, and would ultimately participate in an amphibious assault landing on French Morocco and serve in combat operations in Italy and elsewhere in continental Europe.

He received a battlefield commission in June 1944 and became a lieutenant.

Trump’s announcement comes a day after the Lexington Herald-Leader of Lexington, Kentucky, reported that Pauline Conner, 88, had received a call from Trump notifying her of the award.

According to the publication, Conner was a native of Clinton County, Kentucky. He died at age 79 in 1998, the outlet reported.

According to a report from the Army Board for Correction of Military Records reviewed by Military.com, Conner had received an astounding four Silver Stars, one Bronze star and three Purple Hearts during his brief but intense Army career. He also received the Distinguished Service Cross, according to the report.

The Distinguished Service Cross was awarded for the Jan. 24, 1945, act of heroism now being recognized with the Medal of Honor. The citation for that award, posted by the Military Times Hall of Valor, is striking in its dramatic description of the fight.

"First Lieutenant Conner ran 400 yards through the impact area of an intense concentration of enemy artillery fire to direct friendly artillery on a force of six Mark VI tanks and tank destroyers, followed by 600 fanatical German infantrymen, which was assaulting in full fury the spearhead position held by his battalion," the citation reads.

According to the citation, Conner unspooled telephone wire to set up an observation post, which he then bravely manned for hours of fighting.
"He was individually credited with stopping more than 150 Germans, destroying all the tanks, and completely disintegrating the powerful enemy assault force and preventing heavy loss of life in his own outfit," the citation reads. "First Lieutenant Conner's intrepid actions, personal bravery and zealous devotion to duty exemplify the highest traditions of the military forces of the United States and reflect great credit upon himself, the 3d Infantry Division, and the United States Army."

The Herald-Leader reported Conner had twice been rejected for the Medal of Honor, in 1997 and 2000, by an Army review board. But in 2015, according to the report, the Board of Correction for Military Records decided Conner's actions deserved a recommendation for the award.

Trump has previously awarded two Medals of Honor. On July 31, 2017, he presented the award to James McCloughan, a 71-year-old former Army medic who served in Vietnam; and on Oct. 23, he presented the medal to another Vietnam Army medic, 70-year-old Gary Michael Rose.

Trump has also approved the Medal of Honor for a Marine who served in Vietnam, John L. Canley. A date for that presentation has yet to be announced.

*Editor's Note: This story has been updated to correct the number of Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts Conner was awarded for actions during World War II.*
Mailing of New Veteran ID Cards Delayed

Mar 16, 2018

This article by Amy Bushatz originally appeared on Military.com, the premier resource for the military and veteran community.

Veterans waiting for their new ID card to arrive by mail won’t see it until at least April, officials announced in an email this week.

The free ID cards, available to honorably discharged veterans of all eras through the Department of Veterans Affairs website, were to be mailed in early March, VA officials told Military.com in January.

An email update sent March 13, however, announced that "printing and mailing for approved ID cards will begin in April."
The printing delay was caused by the review process, which must "ensure that a valid form of identification and image was provided," Curt Cashour, a VA spokesman, said in an email.

"VA is currently working with a print vendor to validate printed ID card samples, and we expect to complete this process soon so approved cards can be printed and mailed as soon as possible," he wrote.

Cards can also be downloaded and printed from Vets.gov. Almost 65,000 veterans had applied for the card as of March 13, Cashour said -- about 50,000 new applications since late January.

The shipping delay is the latest in a series of errors since the cards' original rollout in late November.

The online application appeared to face major technical problems immediately after opening, and the VA in early December suspended new applications, instead posting a message asking veterans to submit an email address to receive updates. Applications opened again in late January.

The card program, which was ordered by Congress in 2015, is meant to give veterans a way to show proof of service to businesses and others without carrying their DD-214 discharge paperwork. It is not meant to replace other forms of military or veteran ID and does not serve as proof of qualification for any federal program. Veterans are not required to get the ID.

Veterans continue to encounter errors while applying for the card, according to feedback sent by veterans to Military.com. Some vets reported problems with the system accepting their service records, while others who reached out to VA officials for support were met with confusion.

"I even called President Trump's hotline for veterans and they forwarded my concern to a Dr. David J. Shulkin, the Secretary of the VA," one veteran wrote this week in an email to Military.com. "I heard back from a person in the VA and he told me that they have nothing to do with the new identification cards. They only deal with the identification cards for veterans that are getting medical coverage through the VA."

Other articles by Military.com:

VA Concierge for Care Initiative
What Can You Buy With a VA Loan?
Special Circumstances for VA Loans

There are No Comment(s)
News Articles, HealthBenefits, Read, ALL, 2018
Comments RSS
Veterans Groups Oppose Legislation Loosening Restrictions on For-Profit Schools

A Republican sponsored bill winding its way through Congress is drawing heat from veterans groups who say it is a giveaway to for-profit predatory schools that take advantage of veterans, and scam taxpayers out of billions in federal funds.

The "Promoting Real Opportunity, Success, and Prosperity through Education Reform" known as the Prosper Act -- H.R.4508 -- is a 542 page reauthorization of the Higher Education Act which legislates everything from student financial aid to fraternities and sororities on campus.

Organizations like the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Student Veterans of America, Veterans Education Success and the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, as well as groups made up of State Colleges, Financial Aid Administrators and consumer groups oppose several of the provisions in the bill.
"It's a great bill for bad schools," Will Hubbard, vice president of government affairs at Student Veterans of America, said on Twitter.
One thing that veterans groups are up in arms about is language in the bill that eliminates regulations put in place by the previous administration that required colleges to prove graduates were actually being prepared for the workplace. The so-called "gainful employment rule" stops federal aid to schools that consistently graduate students who are unprepared to enter the workforce, or have no job skills and end up with large student debt and meager income.

This law was put into place after some high profile schools were found to be graduating students with massive student loans who couldn't find jobs. Some schools counted numerous graduates as working "in their field" when they were not. For example, one graduate who majored in healthcare administration worked as a server at a restaurant, while another who majored in business administration working as a car salesman.

The Trump administration, in keeping with its campaign promise to cut regulations, launched an overhaul of that rule in response to complaints from for-profit colleges. The PROSPER Act, however, eliminates the rule outright and bars the government from issuing new regulations related to measuring the effectiveness of any school's vocational or degree programs. Another sticking point in the new bill is the so-called 90-10 rule. This is a rather complicated regulation that basically says colleges cannot get more than 90 percent of their revenue from federal student aid. But since GI Bill money doesn't count as federal financial aid under this rule, theoretically a college could get more than 90 percent of all its money from the federal government. Think about that for a second - a college getting more than 90 percent of its money from tax dollars. Pretty sweet deal.

I know from researching colleges that most of them have a crazy sticker price, but they say things like "75 percent of our students qualify for financial aid." That means many colleges artificially inflate their costs, and take a big chunk of taxpayer dollars for each student, ending up charging most students far less than the sticker price.

That means the 90-10 rule makes veterans especially sought after as prospective students. They can be charged the full price and don't count against the 90 percent cap on federal aid. Some private schools have taken in hundreds of millions of dollars in GI Bill money in recent years. Veterans' groups have been pushing Congress for years to eliminate the loophole and count GI Bill money as federal money. They say schools are more competitive and accountable if they don't rely on tax dollars for so much of their operating budget, and they don't target veterans as sources of easy money that can be used to skew the numbers.

But this bill goes in the opposite direction, eliminating the 90-10 regulation for good. Some recruiters apparently do. Related to this is another provision of the law, eliminating the ban on bonuses to college recruiters. Current federal law bars colleges from paying bonuses to recruiters based on the number of students they can enroll.

In the past, some for-profit schools have come under fire for hiring bikini-clad female recruiters to attend on-base events targeting military members, telling people with multiple felony convictions that they "are a perfect fit for a law-enforcement career," or inflating graduation rates, and job placement numbers to name just a few actions.
This bill wipes out the previous ban on schools paying recruiters a bonus for how many new students they can get to enroll. Veterans groups say that opens the door for more fraud, waste and abuse of the system. Some of us believed everything the military recruiter told us, some of us knew better -- and apparently this new law assumes all veterans know not to believe everything a recruiter, be it a military or college recruiter, tells them. Are private schools really that bad -- are veterans really that gullible? Apparently Congress thought so when it passed the Forever GI Bill.

That law had a provision in it that allowed veterans who were affected by private schools that shut down, either by going out of business or having their accreditation withdrawn, to get their GI Bill reinstated. Apparently this was a big enough problem to make it into law, and enough veterans were taken by shady deals in the past.

Hopefully today's veterans are smarter because if veteran groups are correct, if this bill makes it into law, many bad schools will be back to their old tricks of making a quick buck by taking advantage of veterans.

Related Topics Military Advantage GI Bill
© Copyright 2018 Military.com. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.
When Shelly Holcomb of Boiling Springs flew back home from Vietnam in 1971 after serving two years in the Army Nurse Corps, she was told not by to wear her uniform when she got off the plane.

U.S. Army veteran Jay Howard of Greenville, who also served in Vietnam for two years, also said he was told not to wear his uniform when he arrived home at Fort Lewis in Washington in 1972.

That's because service members were aware that the American public opposed the war and that they would be the subject of protests and ridicule. But Holcomb and Howard said they weren't greeted by protesters, nor did they give much thought to what kind of welcome they'd receive.

"We were just glad to get back home," Howard said.
On Thursday, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs officially welcomed them and about 30 others at a ceremony at the University of South Carolina Upstate Readiness Center.

Pins were presented by Leanne Weldin, director of the VA's Columbia regional office and an Army veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"When I returned home from convoy, a Vietnam veteran was there," Weldin said, wiping back tears. "This is to show the kind of welcome he never received."

America's direct involvement in Vietnam started in March 1965 as the first Marines landed in Da Nang, followed by the first large-scale battles against the North Vietnamese Army in the Ia Drang Valley in November of that year.

When the final troops were airlifted out in May 1975, the war's death toll included 58,307 Americans. The United States also saw 30,000 injured and tens of thousands disabled.

Today there are an estimated 7 million Vietnam-era veterans and 9 million families of veterans. Roughly 7,500 women served in Vietnam, eight of whom were killed and 800 missing in action.

Thursday, each veteran received a pin commemorating their bravery, courage, integrity, patriotism and sacrifices. The pin included a message on the back, "A Grateful Nation Thanks and Honors You," along with the recipient's name.

The ceremony also included a table with an empty chair, signifying the fallen heroes of the war.

"Remember, all of you who served with them," said U.S. Army veteran Yolanda Lomax, who works with the VA. "They have not forgotten you."

Marine veteran Ronnie Harrison, also a VA employee, said his federal agency is there to serve all veterans.

"It is you who have paved the way for all of us," he said. "We will service your claim with conviction, with integrity. We hope when you leave here you will look at the VA as a totally different institution."

Several veterans said they were glad to be recognized, and a bit surprised that the turnout was not larger.

"I wish more people could have come," said retired helicopter pilot Charlie Dowling of Glendale, who came to apply for benefits due to possible Agent Orange exposure. He said he served in Vietnam in 1962-63.
Nathaniel Cooper of Columbia, who was an Army medic with the 25th Infantry Division, said he thought the recognition Thursday was "very appropriate."

The ceremony coincided with a tumultuous week for the VA. President Donald Trump fired embattled Veterans Affairs Secretary David Chulkin and nominated Ronny L. Jackson, an active-duty rear admiral in the Navy, to replace him.

Weldin said regardless of who ends up in charge in Washington, her mission in South Carolina remains the same.

"We've gotten increasing budgets under the two most recent administrations," she said. "There are 360,000 employees in Veterans Affairs. We have 7,000 in South Carolina. We appreciate the leadership (in Washington), but our employees are here. We continue regardless of who's in leadership. We just keep marching."

Weldin said veterans can find out more information about their benefits by visiting VA.gov or Vets.gov, or by calling 800-827-1000.

(c)2018 the Spartanburg Herald-Journal (Spartanburg, S.C.)

Visit the Spartanburg Herald-Journal (Spartanburg, S.C.) at www.GoUpstate.com

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

This article is written by Bob Montgomery from Spartanburg Herald-Journal and was legally licensed via the Tribune Content Agency through the NewsCred publisher network. Please direct all licensing questions to legal@newscred.com.
Op-Ed: Many Veterans Still Excluded from Critical VA Services

Delphine Metcalf-Foster is the national commander of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) and a disabled U.S. Army veteran of the Gulf War. She served as caregiver to her husband, also a disabled Army veteran.

Our nation's veterans put their lives on the line to defend and protect the American people, and we owe it to them and their families to ensure they receive the care and support they earned.

Unfortunately, many ill and injured veterans of World War II, the Vietnam War, Korean War and Gulf Wars -- as well as their caregivers -- are being excluded from a range of critical Department of Veterans Affairs support services.

Since 2010, veterans injured after Sept. 11, 2001, have been eligible for benefits and support through the VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers -- to include respite care, access to health insurance, a modest stipend and home health training. But veterans of past generations are ineligible for the program, all because of an arbitrary date.
The Disabled American Veterans had pushed hard and advocated for inclusion of a provision expanding eligibility of this program to veterans of all eras in the omnibus spending package released in late March. Unfortunately, the provision did not make it into the final bill that Congress enacted.

I personally know the sacrifice caregivers make. When my husband Jimmy -- who was also an Army veteran -- developed Alzheimer's and dementia, I was suddenly thrust into the role of caregiver. I did my best to give him the support he needed, but I also had to work full-time because we had limited resources.

As much as I wanted to keep my soldier home, his condition worsened. I grew older, and soon his care was too much for me to handle. I was forced to move Jimmy to a nursing facility, where he lived out the remainder of his days.

If Jimmy had served after 9/11, we may have been eligible for comprehensive VA caregiver assistance. He could have spent the rest of his life where he belonged -- at home, with me.

Sadly, my story is not unique.

Veteran caregivers often live a life of immense, though humble, self-sacrifice. Many must halt their careers, forgo educational pursuits and set aside personal goals to provide the care needed to a loved one seriously injured in the line of duty.

Caregivers rarely put their own needs first and, in many cases, they themselves experience a decline in physical and emotional health as they tirelessly see to the needs of their veteran.

A 2017 DAV study confirms these troubling statistics. Almost 80 percent of caregivers who received no federal support said they had suffered negative impacts on their health, career, financial security and family relationships.

It's true that our post-9/11 veterans need and deserve access to the VA's caregiver support program, and it has done so much to ease the strains and stresses that come with caregiving.

But tens of thousands of veterans of previous wars and their caregivers have been going it alone - - with little to no outside help or support -- for decades. As the veterans age, their illnesses and injuries often worsen. Meanwhile, their caregivers grow older and their ability to care for their loved one may diminish too.
We firmly believe that no matter when a service-connected injury occurred, veterans have earned the right to equal care and benefits. A single date on the calendar should not determine how much support a seriously disabled veteran receives.

For too many of our nation's veterans, the restrictive post-9/11 eligibility criteria for the VA's caregiver program has meant a life of insult added to serious injury. They and their caregivers have incurred unnecessary emotional and financial hardships on top of life-altering disabilities, and that is simply unjust.

This was a historic opportunity to incorporate a much-needed, long-awaited reform policy that would have dramatically improved the quality of life of our nation's veterans and their caregivers. But we cannot let our foot off the gas as we drive toward this important goal.

We must do better by our veterans, and we call on Congress and the Trump administration to do what is right and what is fair by supporting expansion of caregiver benefits and support services to all generations of severely injured veterans.

-- *The opinions expressed in this op-ed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Military.com. If you would like to submit your own commentary, please send your article to opinions@military.com for consideration.*
Breaking Rocks: 'Correctional Custody Unit 2.0' Coming Soon to Okinawa

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa -- The Marine Corps is calling on an old friend to help rehabilitate Marines guilty of minor behavioral infractions.

A new and improved version of the Correctional Custody Unit -- dubbed "CCU 2.0" -- is set to open May 2 at Camp Hansen, Okinawa. It is a penal institution and program that provides intensive training -- such as combat fitness, educational coursework, formal uniform inspections, values-based relapse prevention and hard labor -- to give commanders an alternative to discharging undeveloped or immature service members who get in trouble.

While Marine officials were careful to say that the program does not include manual labor, part of the fitness requirements will see flak jacket-clad Marines pulverizing rocks with sledge hammers in the Okinawa heat.
The correctional units last operated in the United States and on Okinawa in 2004 when they were de-established due to "operational commitments" in support of operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. Marine officials hope bringing back the revamped CCUs will cut down on administrative separations and help Marines finish their enlistments honorably.

"The program has historically been an option to assist commanders with managing minor military offences for salvageable service members," Marine spokesman 1st Lt. Edward Pingel, deputy director of Marine Corps Installations Pacific's Communication Strategy and Operations, wrote in a statement to Stars and Stripes. "All military branches have utilized this program in the past as a preventative measure for administrative separation and understanding that mistakes young service members make do not define what they are capable of accomplishing in the future."

The CCU program started in 1979 but became prevalent in the mid-1990s, around the time one was founded at Camp Hansen, Marine officials said. The Marine Corps hubs of Camp Lejeune and Camp Pendleton also had correctional units.

The CCUs were operated based on manpower, and due to mission requirements for staff, there were periods when the units were not in operation, Marine officials said. They were all shut down permanently in 2004 "solely due to staffing shortages," while the U.S. military was preoccupied in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The decision to bring the CCUs back was made by Marine Corps leadership and staff who recognized that the maturation process, or "transformation" to becoming a Marine, does not end with the completion of boot camp, Marine officials on Okinawa said.

A Headquarters Marine Corps study showed that from 2010 to 2012, 33.6 percent of Marines receiving one or more nonjudicial punishments also received administrative separations before the end of their service.

"It is imperative that our Marines sustain the transformation they received during basic training," Brig. Gen. Paul Rock Jr., command general for MCIPAC, said in a statement. "The new curriculum is designed to re-instill the values and high standards for which we as Marines are known."
Both Rock and III Marine Expeditionary Force commander Lt. Gen. Lawrence Nicholson supported the CCU 2.0 proposal, Marine officials said. In February, Headquarters Marine Corps approved restarting the program on Okinawa.

The second iteration of the CCU at Camp Hansen -- which will be housed in existing facilities using existing staff -- was slated to open Feb. 14, but was moved back to add more classes from the Training and Education Command and the revised Battle Skills Test program, MCIPAC brig commander Chief Warrant Officer 3 Brian Sheppard said in a statement to Stars and Stripes.

Participants are called "awardees" and spend either seven or 30 days under the constant watch and critique of a senior watch stander and assigned watch standers, Marine officials said. Each awardee receives an individual dorm room that includes a bed, a sink, water fountain and toilet.

The Marines and sailors in the initial operating phase will come from Marine Corps commands in Japan and will participate in instruction and training at classrooms and common areas at the MCIPAC brig and facilities at Camp Hansen. The program can accommodate 32 service members at a time.

The curriculum is "designed to foster leadership and decision making abilities" and includes battle survival skills, Marine programs called "Thinking for Change" and "Prime for Life," as well as a core-values refresher among other courses, Marine officials said.

"CCU 2.0 will rebuild damaged cohesion, self-worth, and Esprit-de-Corps, and will do so in a sustainable fashion - ensuring awardees are put back on track, with the tools to stay on track," Sheppard said. "Awardees will be primed to complete their military service enriched by the internalization of our Corps' ethos, ideals and values."

Sheppard said it's a misconception that manual labor is part of the program, despite the Marine Corps releasing photos showing Marines breaking rocks during a demonstration in January.

"All physical activities during this program are commensurate with field training exercises and combat conditioning conducted by the general Marine Corps population on a daily basis."
Marine officials said the decision to bring back the CCUs was not in response to any previous high-profile crimes or incidents.

Marine officials said the program was extremely effective on Okinawa in the past, and they are hoping to replicate that success.

"The focus of the program is rehabilitation, not punishment," Pingel wrote. "It provides intensive training and education designed to instill positive and sustained behavioral change."
Attention

H.S. Seniors: Receive Your Military Service Honor Cord

Ceremony at
VFW Post 8696
47 Old Kings Rd N, Palm Coast
April 24, 2018 (Tuesday) 6:30 PM
RSVP (386) 313-4042 - Dave