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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 13, 2017

VA Prioritizes Improving Veterans’ Access to Pro Bono Legal Services

WASHINGTON — Today, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), together with the American Bar Association, The Veterans Consortium and National Law School Veterans Clinic Consortium, signed a Memorandum of Agreement aimed at improving Veterans’ access to free legal services.

Veterans often face stressful legal problems — such as eviction, foreclosure, child support, or drivers’ license revocations — that can affect their ability to gain or maintain employment and housing or focus on medical treatment. In VA’s annual Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups survey, legal assistance repeatedly tops the list of homeless Veterans’ unmet needs.

“We are encouraging VA Medical Centers and other VA facilities to engage with their local communities to establish legal clinics and Medical Legal Partnerships to address Veterans’ legal needs that threaten their health and well-being,” said VA Secretary Dr. David J. Shulkin. “By signing this agreement, we are documenting a shared commitment to better facilitate Veterans’ access to legal services.”

Currently, VA hosts at least 165 free legal clinics in its VA Medical Centers, Community Based Outpatient Clinics and Vet Centers across the country by partnering with external, legal-service providers, such as local bar associations, legal-aid organizations and law school clinics.

More information on VA’s coordination of legal services for Veterans at VA facilities may be found at https://www.va.gov/OGC/LegalServices.asp.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 29, 2017

VA to Provide Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy to Some Veterans with Chronic PTSD

WASHINGTON — Today, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced it will offer Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy (HBOT) as a treatment option for a small number of Veterans with persistent post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms resistant to standard options.

Providers from the Eastern Oklahoma VA Health Care System and the VA Northern California Health Care System will partner with HBOT providers at the Tulsa Wound Care and Hyperbaric Center at Oklahoma State Medical Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the David Grant Medical Center on Travis Air Force Base, California, respectively, to provide this care.

“There is nothing more important to us than caring for our nation’s Veterans, and that care must include finding different approaches that work best for them,” said VA Secretary Dr. David J. Shulkin. “We have to explore every avenue, particularly for our most medically vulnerable Veterans, and be open to new ideas and strategies for their optimal health and well-being.”

HBOT is a procedure that increases oxygen in the body, under pressure, to encourage healing. Currently, HBOT is commonly used to treat carbon monoxide poisoning, divers’ sickness, enhanced healing of some wound problems, skin grafts, heat burns, crush injuries and other acute health-care issues that involve too little blood flow to a part of the body.

This use of HBOT for treatment of PTSD is considered an “off-label” use and will occur under the supervision of a trained physician. Separately, VA and the Department of Defense are planning a multisite research study to examine more fully the use of HBOT for patients diagnosed with PTSD.

As health-care leaders interested in innovative approaches to care, the VA Center for Compassionate Innovation (CCI) is facilitating use of HBOT for a subset of Veterans who have noticed no decrease of symptoms after receiving at least two evidenced-based treatments. CCI uses innovative approaches to treat conditions where traditional methods have been unsuccessful. VA will monitor the HBOT clinical demonstration project and the HBOT research study to help inform the potential for HBOT usage to treat a larger number of Veterans with PTSD.

For more information about VA’s Center for Compassionate Innovation, go to https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships/.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Nov. 29, 2017

White House VA Hotline Now Fully Staffed and Operational Around the Clock to Serve Nation’s Veterans

WASHINGTON — Today the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced that the White House VA Hotline, first launched in June as part of President Donald J. Trump’s commitment to reforming VA, is now fully staffed with live agents working to serve Veterans 24-hours a day, 365 days a year.

The hotline, which became 24-hour operational in mid-October, is now staffed by a team consisting of 90 percent Veterans or employees who have a Veteran family member, and is in response to Veterans’ requests to talk to agents who could relate to their experiences.

“The White House VA Hotline provides our nation’s Veterans with a direct, dedicated contact line that allows them to interact with highly trained, live agents to answer their needs and concerns,” said VA Secretary David J. Shulkin.

“Since the initial launch of the hotline in June, we listened to our Veterans, who indicated that they prefer speaking with other Veterans and Veteran family members, and we adjusted our hiring based on that feedback,” added Shulkin.

“We’re proud that the hotline is now staffed 24/7 by a team of mostly Veterans or Veteran family members who have direct knowledge of their particular concerns and can use their experience to address them in the best way possible with the resources of the VA. This represents a true win-win for Veterans and their loved ones.”

Since 24/7 coverage began in October, the hotline has served more than 10,000 callers.

Hotline agents answer inquiries, provide directory assistance, document concerns about VA care, benefits and services, and expedite the referral and resolution of those concerns. Agents undergo regular updates and training on VA services based on hotline trends and are assisted by newly implemented tracking software to help VA capture and improve its response, referral and resolution processes to best support Veterans.

The hotline can be accessed at 855-948-2311 and is VA’s first non-clinical, non-emergency around-the-clock call center. It provides Veterans a supplemental option to
report issues if they are not being addressed through VA’s normal customer service channels.

The hotline’s agents are located at a VA facility in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. Agents have access to a multitude of resources and contact information to help Veterans. The hotline also generates real-time reports to VA experts who can help address the specific issues of Veterans as well as make better-informed decisions on where program improvements are needed.

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TALLAHASSEE – Gov. Rick Scott and First Lady Ann Scott joined the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs Nov. 27 to honor 20 inductees to the Florida Veterans’ Hall of Fame. The Florida Veterans’ Hall of Fame recognizes and honors military veterans who have made a significant contribution to the State of Florida through civic, business or public service.

“As a Navy Veteran myself, I’m proud to honor these brave veterans for their courageous service to our great nation,” said Governor Scott. “These inductees worked to better their communities after their military service. Ann and I join all Floridians as we thank these veterans for their service to our state and country.”

Governor Scott and the Cabinet voted unanimously to induct the 20 members of the Class of 2017 into the Hall of Fame during the Oct. 17, 2017 Cabinet Meeting at the Capitol.

“This year’s inductees join a distinguished heritage of patriotic Floridians whose work values and ethics have made a positive impact on the lives of others,” said Glenn Sutphin, executive director of the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs. “Their names will be proudly added to the Florida Veterans’ Hall of Fame Wall in the Florida Capitol.”

Class of 2017 inductees are:
• Harold (Hal) Baumgarten, U.S. Army veteran (deceased) – Jacksonville Beach
• Joseph J. Celli, U.S. Army veteran – Jensen Beach
• Lt. Col. Earle L. Denton, U.S. Army, retired (deceased) – Orlando
• Capt. Dale W. Doss, U.S. Navy, retired – Tallahassee
• John P. Folsom, U.S. Navy veteran – Tallahassee
• Thomas G. Gates, U.S. Air Force veteran – Land O’ Lakes
• Lt. Col. Leo R. Gray, U.S. Air Force Reserve, retired (deceased) – Fort Lauderdale
• Col. Bruce J. Host, U.S. Air Force, retired – Tallahassee
• Richard R. Hunt, U.S. Marine Corps veteran – Floral City
• Brig. Gen. Albin F. Irzyk, U.S. Army, retired – West Palm Beach
• Maj. Albert H. Linden Jr., U.S. Army, retired – Gainesville
• Col. Francis (Len) Loving, U.S. Marine Corps, retired – Jacksonville
• Rodney L. Phillips, U.S. Army veteran – New Smyrna Beach
• 1st Sgt. Thomas S. Rice, U.S. Army, retired – Fort Walton Beach
• George (Ben) Ritter, U.S. Marine Corps veteran – Tampa
• John E. Thrasher, U.S. Army veteran – Tallahassee
• Donald L. Van Beck, U.S. Army veteran – Tavares
• Robert N. White, U.S. Army veteran – Miramar
• Bernard E. Wilson, U.S. Army Air Corps veteran (deceased) – Madison
2018 Florida Legislative Session

The 2018 Florida Legislative Session begins on Jan. 9, 2018 and concludes on March 9, 2018. There are two remaining interim committee weeks scheduled in late 2017 when Senate and House committees are meeting in Tallahassee in preparation of the session. Dates are:

- Nov. 13-17, 2017
- Dec. 4-8, 2017

Veteran-related bills are being introduced and discussed during the interim committee weeks. Bills introduced thus far include:

- **HB 0069** - Annual Sales Tax Holiday for Veterans of the United States Armed Forces (Sponsor: Rep. McGhee)
- **SB 0082** - Alternative Treatment Options for Veterans (Sponsor: Sen. Steube)
- **SB 0100** - Identification Card and Driver License Fees for Veterans (Sponsor: Sen. Steube)
- **SB 0104** - Small Business Financial Assistance (Sponsor: Sen. Garcia)
- **HB 0107** - Veteran Identification (Sponsor, Rep. Combee)
- **HB 0179** - Services for Veterans and Their Families (Sponsor: Rep. Burgess)
- **SB 0206** - Highway Memorial Markers (Sponsor: Sen. Perry)
- **HB 0303** - Alternative Treatment Options for Veterans Pilot Program (Sponsor: Rep. Burgess)
- **SB 0326** - Services for Veterans and their Families (Sponsor: Sen. Young)
- **HB 0327** - Emergency Power for Health Care Facilities (Sponsor: Rep. Richardson)
- **SB 0328** - Veteran Identification (Sponsor: Sen. Baxley)
- **SB 0372** - Post-hurricane Relief for Residents of Health Care Facilities (Sponsor: Sen. Garcia)
- **HB 0403** - Florida Veterans Care Program (Sponsor: Rep. Avila)
- **SB 0440** - Florida Veterans Care Program (Sponsor: Sen. Garcia)
- **HB 0457** - Directional Signs for Veterans’ Facilities (Sponsor: Rep. Jacobs)
- **SB 0460** - Postsecondary Fee Waivers (Sponsor: Sen. Gainer)
Within The American Legion, the Riders is a very popular motorcycle and fund raising program. With the number of veterans in Flagler County and the number motorcycles, it’s time to determine if there is enough interest in forming a Squadron. Please invite any veteran or son/daughter/spouse of a veteran you know that might be interested to attend the informational meeting detailed below. (“Riders” must hold membership in and be in good standing with either The American Legion, American Legion Auxiliary or Sons of The American Legion. Don’t worry if not already a member... there will time to work out the membership details should a Rider squadron be formed later in 2018.)

The January meeting of Post-115 (Flagler County) will feature a guest speaker who will be describing what it would take to form an AL Riders Squadron as a program under our Post. If interested, attend the general meeting of The American Legion, Post 115, to be held on Monday, January 8th, starting at 6 p.m., and held at the VFW 8696 building located at:

47 Old Kings Rd. N., Palm Coast, FL 32137.

More information about The American Legion Riders program can be found at these web sites:

https://www.legion.org/riders

https://www.legion.org/riders/videos

https://www.legion.org/riders/participate

Missed the Jan. 8, 2018 meeting?

Progress in forming a Rider squadron will be posted on Flagler County Post-115’s web site:

http://www.flaglerpost115.org/
November 22, 2017

This week’s issue is being delivered early in observance of the Thanksgiving holiday.

In This Issue:
1. Latest VA Fix Isn’t
2. NDAA Update
3. Recent GI Bill Changes
4. VA Women Veterans Summit Webinars
5. MIA Update

1. Latest VA Fix Isn’t: The VFW is adamantly opposed to the latest congressional attempt to fix the Department of Veterans Affairs. The “fix,” as introduced Tuesday by Rep. Doug Lamborn (R-Colo.), “throws out the idea of acceptable patient wait times and eliminates the requirement of the veteran to ask for VA permission to use civilian medical providers,” according to his press release. The “fix” would also erode the VA health care system by charging veterans for care related to their service-connected wounds, illnesses or injuries. The VFW has conducted multiple surveys that reflect more than 80 percent of veterans who are eligible for VA care choose to use their earned VA care, despite the overwhelming majority having other options, such as employer-sponsored health insurance, the military’s TRICARE plan, or Medicare. Veterans appreciate options, and ultimately they choose whichever health plan best fits their individual circumstances. Having unregulated choice, however, puts the onus on veterans to find their own care — and that needs to be a decision between doctors and their patients, not Washington. A more detailed VFW press release and call to action will be posted on Monday.

2. NDAA Update: Following several weeks of negotiations with the House, the Senate unanimously approved the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for fiscal year 2018 (FY18). In recent months, the VFW has placed significant pressure on Congress to preserve or extend the benefits granted to members of the military, retirees, veterans and their families, such as pay and allowances; TRICARE reform; the Survivor Benefits Plan; the declassification of documents related to toxic exposure; military sexual assault; and benefit parity for certain members of the National Guard and Reserve. The VFW is glad the final bill includes provisions important to VFW members. Specifically, the final bill does not impact the grandfathering of TRICARE enrollment and copayment costs for current retirees. The final bill authorizes more than $692 billion for ongoing and planned defense programs, including $65.7 billion for overseas contingency operations. Despite the bill’s passage, DOD is still operating on a continuing
3. Recent GI Bill Changes: In recent months there have been substantial changes and additions to the GI Bill benefit. One VFW-supported change is the removal of the 15-year use it or lose it cap. The 15-year time limitation to use Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits was eliminated for veterans who left active duty on or after Jan. 1, 2013. Additionally, children who became eligible for the Fry Scholarship on or after Jan. 1, 2013, and all Fry Scholarship-eligible spouses now have the 15-year cap removed as well. The VFW worked tirelessly with Congress and our VSO partners to ensure veterans who were precluded from fully utilizing this important benefit are able to accomplish their post-military educational goals. Learn more about recent GI Bill changes.

4. VA Women Veterans Summit Webinars: In August, Hurricane Harvey forced the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to cancel a majority of the events scheduled for their National Women Veterans Summit held in Houston. Consequently, VA has hosted webinars for discussions and panels that were cancelled. The webinars are available to watch from VA’s website. Topics covered include employment, health care, military sexual trauma, local and federal resources and more. Watch the webinars.

5. MIA Update: The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency has announced identification of remains and burial updates of three American servicemen who had been missing in action from World War II and Korea. Returning home for burial with full military honors are:

-- Army Air Forces 2nd Lt. Donald E. Underwood, 23, of River Rouge, Mich., whose identification was previously announced, will be honored next to his mother’s grave in Flat Rock, Mich., on Nov. 25, followed by a burial at Arlington National Cemetery near Washington, D.C., on Nov. 28. Underwood was a member of the 38th Bombardment Squadron, (Heavy), 30th Bombardment Group. On Jan. 21, 1944, Underwood’s B-24J Liberator was unable to gain altitude and crashed into the water shortly after taking off from Hawkins Field, Helen Island, Tarawa Atoll, Gilbert Islands. All 10 members onboard, including Underwood, were killed. Read about Underwood.

-- Navy Reserve Radioman 2nd Class Julius H.O. Pieper was a member of Landing Ship Tank Number 523 (LST-523) off the coast of Normandy, France, on June 19, 1944. The ship struck an underwater mine and sank, killing Pieper. Pieper's twin brother, Radioman 2nd Class Ludwig J. Pieper, was also killed in the attack, but his remains were recovered after the incident and buried at the Normandy American Cemetery in France. Interment services are pending. Read about Pieper.

-- Army Sgt. Ollie E. Shepard was a member of Company I, 3rd Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division. In late November 1950, his unit was assembled with South Korean soldiers in the 31st Regimental Combat Team on the east side of the Chosin River, North Korea, when his unit was attacked by Chinese forces. Shepard was among more than 1,000 members of the RCT killed or captured in enemy territory and was declared missing on Dec. 3, 1950. Interment services are pending. Read about Shepard.

As always, we want to hear your advocacy stories. To share your stories or photos with us, simply email them directly to vfwac@vfw.org.
St. Johns County Veterans Treatment Court

On November 11, our nation honored our veterans with parades and dedications at monuments. These are important. But we can show our gratitude in no better way than helping those who return from military service live productive and happy lives. The Veterans Treatment Court is dedicated to this goal.

More than 20,000 veterans live in St. Johns County. These men and women sometimes return to the community with life-changing impairments, including post-traumatic stress disorder, brain injury and depression. Sadly, some turn to substance abuse and other destructive behaviors. Crimes such as DUI, domestic violence, and theft can be the result.

Twelve generations of veterans have returned home since our nation’s founding. Until this century, those charged with crimes found themselves in an adversarial relationship with the state they had faithfully served. Destructive cycles of incarceration, homelessness and suicide often followed. As Judge Howard O. McGillin, Jr., who heads the St. Johns County Veterans Treatment Court, notes, these veterans have “not made it all the way home.”

The Veterans Treatment Court is designed to break this cycle, and ensure that justice is accessible and responsive to our veterans in a collaborative, treatment based program. Currently, there are twenty-one participants, with several veterans typically joining at each court hearing, which is held twice a month. Most participants have substance abuse problems. Many have received trauma-related diagnoses. Some were homeless prior to entering Veterans Treatment Court.

Veterans entering the Court experience a team approach, familiar from their military service. The Judge has the role of commanding officer: asking each participant about his or her progress, offering encouragement, and commendation for their achievements. The Judge is also there to address difficulties the participants may have in meeting their goals, and to set them on the right path.

Participants consult with the Veterans Justice Outreach specialist and therapist, and set
up their first therapy appointments. As non-commissioned officers are to the military, these Veterans Administration representatives are the backbone of the program, ensuring that all participants receive the treatment they need. Among the other team members present are the director of St. Johns County Legal Aid, who assists participants with civil legal issues, and the Office of the Public Defender’s attorney assigned to the Court.

Participants are never alone in facing their challenges. Each is assigned a mentor, who is also a veteran, to be their “battle buddy.” Mentors stand by their participant in Court, and are never more than a phone call away.

Life skills and goals, such as education, employment, and finding stable housing, are fostered by all members of the team.

The Veterans Treatment Court is no easy out. Misdemeanor participants meet weekly with the coordinator, while participants with felony cases are supervised by the Department of Corrections officer assigned to the Court. All participants are subject to frequent drug/alcohol screenings. They do community service, and may pay fines and costs. Participants who violate program requirements, such as testing positive on a drug screening, face sanctions, including jail time for serious or repeated infractions.

This is obviously a very different approach from a traditional court. Its benefits to the veteran are evident. However, it also benefits the community at large. Graduates of veterans’ courts are proving to have far lower recidivism rates than defendants processed through traditional courts. The St. Johns County Veterans Treatment Court is approaching its first anniversary. We look forward to continuing to build this valuable service in which our community offers our veterans in the criminal justice system the dignified and effective solution they deserve. At our first graduation, scheduled for January 2018, the Judge will present the graduates with our challenge coin, provided to the program by the St. Johns County Veterans Council. It is engraved “Welcome Home”.

"If you have further questions, please contact Cynthia C. Thompson, St. Johns County Veterans Treatment Court Coordinator at 4010 Lewis Speedway, Suite 275, St. Augustine, Florida 32084, (904) 827-5626", ccthompson@circuit7.org
Yellow Ribbon Flight to Honor Mission

The Yellow Ribbon mission taking Veterans from Lakeland Linder Airport to Washington DC will take place on 11 April 2018.

The mission will be a one day event departing early in the morning and returning that day.

The mission will take place during the Sun ‘n Fun Fly-in. All Veterans who have not participated in a previous Honor Flight or Flight to Honor are eligible.

At the request of numerous veterans of the Vietnam and later eras, we have created options that a veteran may select to participate on the mission.

Option 1. Veteran accompanied by a Guardian. This is primarily for a Veteran requiring physical assistance and/or a Guardian specifically requesting to accompany a particular Veteran. The Guardian donates $450 for the opportunity. No cost to the Veteran.

Option 2. Veteran unaccompanied by a Guardian but sponsored by a family member, employer, organization or friend. The sponsor contributes $250 for a seat on the mission for the Veteran.

Option 3. Veteran unaccompanied by a Guardian sponsors himself or herself and donates $250 for a seat on the mission.

For Option 2 & 3 the Veteran must be physically capable of completing the mission without assistance such as a walker, wheelchair or other mobility device. This does not preclude another veteran accompanying a veteran needing assistance.

Veterans wishing to participate are urged to submit an application as soon as possible. Go to PolkVeteransCouncil.com to download an application.
Happy Holidays to all!

Did you know that all honorably-discharged Veterans may now make on-line purchases from our military service exchanges?

First, you must register with www.VetVerify.org, a shared verification service of the four military exchanges (AAFES, NEXCOM, MCX and CGX) which supports the Veterans online shopping benefit by verifying Veterans who cannot be authenticated by the exchanges alone.

You must scan your DD-214 (member copies 2 thru 8), DD-215 (with corrected discharge status), NGB-22 or DD0256/257, If you do not have a copy of your discharge paperwork, please go to the National Archives to request your service records.

That website is [https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records](https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records)

Once you receive your e-mailed approval, you are ready to shop at:

AAFES [https://www.shopmyexchange.com](https://www.shopmyexchange.com)

NEXCOM [https://www.mynavyexchange.com/](https://www.mynavyexchange.com/)


CGX [https://shopcgx.com/](https://shopcgx.com/)

Legal note: while each exchange will not charge sales tax, current Florida Statutes require the payment of Use Tax on purchases delivered to a Florida address. I have requested the Florida Legislature to enact an amendment to the Statutes allowing Florida Resident Veterans an exemption from Use Tax on such purchases (this benefit is currently afforded actively-serving military stationed in Florida).
We invite active and veteran U.S. military personnel to sign up for our 10% military discount. All you need to do is enroll online once, and the next time you shop, present your MyLowe’s card or give the cashier your phone number.

Plus, in addition to saving 10% on eligible items* in store, you can now take advantage of savings online at Lowes.com.

Enroll today at Lowes.com/Military

*Exclusions apply. See associate or Lowes.com/Military/Terms for terms and conditions.
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