FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 21, 2018

Secretary Wilkie: VA not affected in the event of partial government shutdown

WASHINGTON – In light of the possibility of a partial federal government shutdown, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Robert Wilkie released the following statement:

“Thanks to the leadership of President Trump and Congress, VA is fully funded for fiscal year 2019, and in the event of a partial government shutdown, all VA operations will continue unimpeded.

“We thank the president and Congress for their commitment to our nation’s heroes in funding VA, and stand ready to provide all of the VA benefits and services our Veterans have earned.”

###
VA and the American Physical Therapy Association form partnership to support Veterans’ health

WASHINGTON — Today, the U.S Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced that it recently established a partnership with the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) to promote and support Veterans by providing new physical therapy resources.

The partnership coordinates strengths of both organizations to benefit all Veterans and their families, physical therapists (PT) and physical therapist assistants by helping to raise awareness of physical therapy and create new employment and practice opportunities.

“Physical therapy is an important resource for improving Veterans’ health and well-being,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “This new agreement allows both organizations to develop additional best practices in treatment of Veterans in both the federal and private sector. We look forward to the positive outcomes of this partnership.”

The agreement will use VA and APTA resources to promote nonpharmacological treatment options for pain, VA’s suicide prevention efforts, utilization of VA’s Adaptive Sports Grants Program and physical therapists’ participation in VA’s National Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events.

VA employs over 3,500 physical therapists and PT assistants, and offers the largest Physical Therapy Residency Program in the nation.

APTA represents more than 100,000 physical therapists, PT assistants and students of physical therapy nationwide. Its mission is to advance the profession of physical therapy and to improve the health of society.

For more information visit: www.va.gov or https://www.apta.org/.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 28, 2018

VA partners with The Independence Fund to help prevent Veteran suicide

Operation Resiliency will connect Veterans, caregivers with education and support systems

WASHINGTON — Earlier this month, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced its partnership with The Independence Fund to provide wellness and mental health education to Veterans, caregivers and families.

VA and The Independence Fund will collaborate on suicide prevention initiatives to connect Veterans with care and support before they reach a crisis point.

“Every Veteran suicide is a tragedy, and our goal is to prevent suicide among all Veterans nationwide — even those who do not seek care within our health system,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “The Independence Fund is an important ally to reach Veterans on this top clinical priority for VA, as well caregivers and their families.”

The two organizations will work together on Operation Resiliency to encourage Veterans to take part in suicide prevention initiatives. This includes a 2019 retreat that will bring together at-risk Veterans who served in the same unit during deployments.

Founded in 2007, The Independence Fund empowers the nation's severely wounded, injured or ill Veterans to overcome physical, mental and emotional wounds incurred in the line of duty. It has a goal of improving the lives of both Veterans and their families through the organization’s mobility, caregiver, adaptive sports, and advocacy programs, while also bridging the gap of unmet needs of Veterans’ caregivers. The Fund works to give Veterans the best mobility device options available, as well as promote their mental and physical health.

Suicide is a national public health issue that affects communities everywhere. VA is engaging communities nationwide to deliver care and support to Veterans where they live, work and thrive. Partnerships such as this with The Independence Fund are an important part of VA’s National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide.

Veterans who are in crisis or having thoughts of suicide, and those who know a Veteran in crisis, can call the Veteran & Military Crisis Line for confidential support 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Call 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, send a text message to 838255 or chat online at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat.

Reporters covering Veteran mental health issues can visit ReportingOnSuicide.org for important guidance on how to communicate about suicide.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 28, 2018

VA awards Community Care Network contracts to increase health care access

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) awarded contracts Dec. 28 to manage provider networks for Regions 1, 2 and 3 of VA’s new Community Care Network (CCN), the department’s direct link with community providers that will ensure VA provides the right care at the right time to Veterans.

“These contract awards reflect our ongoing commitment to increasing Veterans’ access to care,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “As part of VA’s modernization efforts, we designed the new network based on feedback from Veterans and other stakeholders, along with lessons learned from the Veterans Choice Program. We are confident this new network will greatly improve customer service for Veterans and timeliness of payments to community providers.”

The network will be the standard contract vehicle allowing VA to purchase care for Veterans from community health care providers using industry-standard approaches and guidelines in support of the VA MISSION Act of 2018 to administer services and manage the network to its full potential. VA will provide care coordination under this new contract. TriWest Healthcare Alliance has expanded its network to support Veteran and provider care coordination across the nation until CCN is fully implemented.

Contracts were awarded to the following firm:
• Region 1 – Optum Public Sector Solutions, Inc.
• Region 2 – Optum Public Sector Solutions, Inc.
• Region 3 – Optum Public Sector Solutions, Inc.

The contract award for Region 4 is expected by early April 2019. Contract award for Regions 5 and 6 are expected by end of calendar year 2019.


Region 2 covers Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin.

Region 3 will serve Veterans in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, Tennessee and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

VA is committed to delivering efficient, safe, timely and quality health care to all Veterans across the nation.

###
VA Provides $1 Million in Funding for Florida Veterans Support Line

DECEMBER 12, 2018

TAMPA, Fla. – To enhance veteran suicide prevention efforts, the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs (FDVA) announced today that the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay (Crisis Center) has received a $1 million contract from the VA to enhance services provided to Florida veterans through the Florida Veterans Support Line (1-844-MyFLVet).

“This new collaboration with the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay and the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs will play a vital role in our suicide prevention efforts,” said Dr. Miguel LaPuz, VA Sunshine Healthcare Network (VISN 8) Director. “Connecting veterans who are experiencing an emotional or mental health crisis with certified veteran counselors at 2-1-1 Centers across Florida can and will save lives.”

The funding provides necessary resources to place veteran resource management staff and Veteran Peer Care Coordinators at local, non-profit organizations throughout Florida who answer calls from the Florida Veterans Support Line. Funding also provides technical assistance to those
local organizations. Through veteran resource management staff, a database of VA and Non-VA community resources helpful to veterans will be created and maintained through this project. Veteran Peer Care Coordinators provide follow-up, short-term support to veterans who call 1-844-MyFLVet and 2-1-1. These veteran peers are able to easily relate to veteran callers because of similar life experiences that are unique to the veteran community.

“Peer to Peer support is proven to be extremely effective in connecting veterans to the network of help they need and deserve. By talking with a fellow veteran, these men and women have the opportunity to work with someone who has walked a mile in their shoes. Because of this, there is already a baseline of trust established as we work to help the veteran,” said Clara Reynolds, President & CEO of the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay.

The VA funding provides the next step in implementing a model of care for Florida’s veterans modeled after the peer function of the national Veterans Crisis Line (1-800-273-8255 and press 1) and innovated for statewide use by the Crisis Center. The Crisis Center first launched the Florida Veterans Support Line in 2014 as a five-county pilot program. The Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs was instrumental in the launch of the program and continues to provide support in facilitating inter-agency collaboration for 1-844-MyFLVet.

In late 2017, the Florida Veterans Support Line expanded from the five-county pilot stage to being answered statewide through a network of local agencies who answer calls to 2-1-1. The Crisis Center is in the final stages of securing additional, necessary funding to further enhance services provided by the Florida Veterans Support Line.

“This is a heartfelt, collaborative effort among government and private entities to reduce the number of veteran suicides in our state through intervention and education,” said Glenn Sutphin, executive director of the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs. “Our goal is to bring awareness that we all have a hand to play in crisis intervention to tackle a very real public health challenge. The formal collaboration announced today will help save lives.”
This is the last edition of the Action Corps Weekly for 2018. The next edition will be on Jan. 4, 2019.

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1. Secretary of Defense Resigns: Secretary of Defense James Mattis announced yesterday that he will be stepping down from his position at the end of February. His resignation comes in the wake of an announcement by the administration to completely withdraw U.S. forces from Syria, and to reduce troop numbers in Afghanistan by approximately half. “Secretary Mattis, who received the VFW’s Dwight D. Eisenhower Award in 2015, has ensured America’s military remains the best, that our intelligence resources remain clear-eyed, and that our elected officials hear the unvarnished truth,” said VFW National Commander B.J. Lawrence. “In his short, two-year hitch at the Pentagon, he’s restored military readiness, built a more lethal force, changed the department’s business practices to get more bang for the buck, strengthened overseas alliances, and took care of our troops and their families. This great American made things happen, and on behalf of the entire VFW family, I salute him for his near five decades of dedicated service to our nation.” Read the resignation letter.

2. Utah Senator Stops Blue Water Navy Bill: An objection by Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah) to passing H.R. 299, the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2018, by unanimous consent on the Senate floor Wednesday has effectively doomed any chance of the bill being passed in the 115th Congress. Lee now joins Sen. Mike Enzi (R-Wyo.), who objected last week due to the bill’s overall cost. Lee’s objection was because he wants to wait and see more sufficient evidence. “We don’t need more sick veterans to prove sufficient evidence,” said VFW National Commander B.J. Lawrence. “Agent Orange made Vietnam veterans sick, and science agrees that there isn’t any reason to treat so-called Blue Water Navy veterans any different than their peers who served ashore or on the inland waterways of Vietnam,” he said. “What both senators have done is fail thousands of veterans — many of whom reside in their home states. Their obstruction to this bill’s passage forsakes our nation’s promise to take care of those who were injured or made ill due to their military service. Their objections put cost above faithful and
honorable service.” Read more. The VFW is again calling on all members and advocates to demand that the Senate pass H.R. 299 before the end of the year. Make your voices heard.

3. Blue Water Navy Bill Press Conference: The VFW showed up in force to a Blue Water Navy Bill press conference in the Cannon House Office Building yesterday. House VA Committee Chairman Dr. Phil Roe (R-Tenn.) and incoming Chairman Mark Takano (D-Calif.) hosted the bipartisan event to urge the Senate to pass H.R. 299, The Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act 2018, which the House passed unanimously 382-0 back in June, has been held up twice in the Senate over the past two weeks by Sen. Mike Enzi (R-Wyo.) and Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah), who either objected to the bill’s cost or wanted to wait for more sufficient evidence. VFW Legislative Director Carlos Fuentes said, “If America can’t afford to take care of her veterans, then America should quit creating us.” Watch the press conference.

4. End of 115th Congress Legislative Roundup: While the Senate failed to pass the VFW-supported Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act, Congress was able to send several VFW-supported bills to the president before it concluded the 115th Congress. This includes S. 2248, a miniature omnibus package, which improves programs for homelessness veterans, transition assistance, veteran-owned small businesses, student veterans, and also includes the SIT-REP Act, which would protect student veterans from penalties due to delayed GI Bill payments. Congress also passed the VFW-supported S. 3777, Forever GI Bill Housing Payment Fulfillment Act of 2018, which will require VA to set up a team to plan and schedule dates for when student veterans who were impacted by GI Bill payment problems will receive their corrected housing payments. The VFW is also glad Congress passed S. 3661, which requires DOD to conduct a program to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of WWII and support programs sponsored by veterans organizations and local governments, and S. 2679, Veterans Small Business Enhancement Act, which enables veteran-owned small businesses to participate in the Federal Surplus Property Donation Program.

All bills that were not passed this year must be re-introduced in the 116th Congress. The VFW applauds efforts of the 115th Congress to improve the quality of life of veterans, service members, and their families and survivors. More than two dozen VFW-supported bills have been enacted into law over the past two years, or are awaiting the president’s signature. Among them are: the Forever GI Bill, which removes the 15-year use-or-lose window for veterans discharged after January 2013, grants full eligibility to all Purple Heart recipients, adds additional months of eligibility for veterans pursuing STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) degrees, and restores benefits to veterans whose schools abruptly closed. The VA MISSION Act expands caregiver benefits to pre-9/11 veterans, consolidates access to private sector doctors into one simplified and improved program. The VA MISSION Act also improves the VA’s ability to hire and retain high quality health care professionals, and established a process to evaluate and improve VA facilities across the country. The Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act improves accountability at the VA and protects the rights of whistleblowers. The Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act ensures veterans receive faster decisions on their claims appeals, easier to understand rating decisions, new claims resolution options at VA Regional Offices, and hiring more staff to oversee claims appeals. The VFW will work to make certain its 2019 Legislative Priority Goals are reflected in bills that are reintroduced and passed in the 116th Congress.
5. Secretary of VA Testifies on State of VA: On Wednesday, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie testified before a joint hearing of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans’ Affairs. The VFW thanks Secretary Wilkie for reaffirming that VA will make whole all veterans who were impacted by issues with the implementation of the Forever GI Bill. He also discussed how VA health care has improved in recent years and responded to recent stories regarding Veterans Choice Program spending, mishandling of the caregiver program, and suicide prevention. The hearing focused on implementation of the landmark and VFW-supported VA MISSION Act of 2018. Members of the committees and the VFW’s written statement expressed concerns with VA’s lack of transparency, which can impede its ability to ensure veterans have timely access to the high-quality care they have earned. Watch the hearing. Read the VFW’s testimony.

6. Temporary Moratorium on Discharges Issued for the Caregiver Program: In response to the high number of veterans being wrongfully discharged from the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers, known as the Caregiver Program, VA has announced it will temporarily halt discharges and decreases in level for current enrollees. Veterans are still able to apply and those wishing to leave the program may continue to do so. Learn more about the VA Caregiver Program.

7. Survey Shows Increased Trust from Veterans in VA Hospitals: Between fall 2017 and September 2018, VA surveyed more than 1.6 million veterans regarding their trust of VA health care. Eighty-six percent of veterans indicated they trust VA, which is a 2.4 percent increase. Veterans expressed concerns with access to specialty care, lack of parking and long wait times to receive medications. Learn more about the VA customer experience feedback survey.

8. DPAA Year in Review: This past week, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) released its annual report which provides an overview of the past year’s accomplishments and missions. In FY18, the agency accounted for 203 formerly missing service members, which is the highest yearly total reached to date, and made substantial progress in identifying remains who were previously accounted for as a part of group burials. Broken down by conflict, 10 were accounted for from the Vietnam War, 37 from the Korean War, and 156 from World War II. Read the report.

9. MIA Update: This week, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced 36 new identifications, including 20 from the USS Oklahoma. Returning home with full military honors are:

-- Air Force Col. Richard A. Kibbey, was a member of Detachment 5, 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron. On Feb. 6, 1967, he, along with three others, were aboard a HH-3E helicopter on a rescue and recovery mission over North Vietnam. After rescuing the pilot of a downed aircraft, Kibbey’s helicopter was hit by enemy ground fire resulting in an internal explosion and crash. Kibbey was subsequently reported missing in action. Interment services are pending. Read about Kibbey.

-- Army Sgt. 1st Class James L. Boyce was a member of Company K, 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division, engaged in combat operations against the North Korean People’s Army south of Chonui, South Korea. Boyce could not be accounted for and was declared missing in action on July 11, 1950. Interment services are pending. Read about Boyce.
Army Cpl. Frederick E. Coons was a member of Company A, 1st Battalion, 34th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division. On July 29, 1950, Coons was declared missing action in the vicinity of Geochang, South Gyeongsang Province, South Korea, when he couldn’t be accounted for after a unit withdrawal action to set up a roadblock against North Korean Forces. Interment services are pending. Read about Coons.

Army Pfc. William H. Jones was a member of Company E, 2nd Battalion, 24th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, engaged in attacks against the Chinese People’s Volunteer Forces near Pakchon, North Korea. On Nov. 26, 1950, after his unit made a fighting withdrawal, he could not be accounted for and was reported missing in action. Interment services are pending. Read about Jones.

Army Pfc. George L. Spangenberg was a member of Company E, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division. He was reported missing in action on Nov. 2, 1950, following a battle in Unsan, North Korea. Spangenberg’s name was never included on lists of American soldiers being held as prisoners of war by the Korean People’s Army or the Chinese People’s Volunteer Forces and no returned American prisoners of war had any information on his status. Based on a lack of information regarding his status, he was declared deceased on Dec. 21, 1953. Interment services are pending. Read about Spangenberg.

Army Pfc. James P. Shaw was a member of Company G, 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, when enemy forces invaded the regiment’s positions and forced them to withdraw in North Korea. During the withdrawal, U.S. forces were under constant heavy enemy pressure and were hampered by icy roads and heavy equipment. Shaw was reported missing following an engagement which lasted through the night on Dec. 3, 1950. On June 23, 1951, he was declared deceased. Interment services are pending. Read about Shaw.

Army Air Forces Sgt. Vernon L. Hamilton was a member of the 642nd Bombardment Squadron, 409th Bombardment Group, 9th Bombardment Division, 9th Air Force. On March 23, 1945, he was aboard an A-26B, when the aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft fire and went missing during a combat mission from Couvron, France to Dülmen, Germany. Hamilton, his pilot, 2nd Lt. Lynn W. Hadfield, and the other crewman, Sgt. John Kalausich, had been participating in the interdiction campaign to obstruct German troop movements in preparation for the Allied crossing of the Rhine River. Interment services are pending. Read about Hamilton.

Army Air Forces 2nd Lt. Lynn W. Hadfield was a member of the 642nd Bombardment Squadron, 409th Bombardment Group, 9th Bombardment Division, 9th Air Force. On March 23, 1945, he was aboard an A-26B, when the aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft fire and went missing during a combat mission from Couvron, France to Dülmen, Germany. Hadfield, and his two crewmen, Sgt. Vernon Hamilton and Sgt. John Kalausich, had been participating in the interdiction campaign to obstruct German troop movements in preparation for the Allied crossing of the Rhine River. Interment services are pending. Read about Hadfield.

Army Air Forces 2nd Lt. Hulen A. Leinweber was a member of 40th Fighter Squadron, 35th Fighter Group. On June 10, 1945, the P-51 aircraft he was piloting was reportedly struck by anti-aircraft fire, causing the right wing to break off. Leinweber’s aircraft crashed just south of Ilap village, in Infugao Province, Republic of the Philippines. The American Graves Registration Service searched the area south of Ilap village, locating wreckage but recovering no remains. In October 1947, Leinweber’s remains were declared non-recoverable. Interment services are pending. Read about Leinweber.

Army Air Forces 2nd Lt. James R. Lord was a member of the 66th Fighter Squadron, 57th Fighter Group, 12th Tactical Air Command, 12th Air Force. On Aug. 10, 1944, the P-47D
aircraft he was piloting crashed due to a navigational error a mile off the coast of Anghione, Corsica. No witnesses reported seeing any parachute sightings. Interment services are pending. Read about Lord.

-- Army Pvt. William A. Boegli was a member of Company L, 332nd Infantry Regiment, 81st Infantry Division, invading Angaur Island in the Palau Island chain. After Boegli’s regiment successfully captured Red Beach on the northeastern shore, they pushed westward across the island. On Sept. 30, 1944, Boegli was killed while attempting to lead a group of litter bearers to evacuate wounded servicemen. His remains were not recovered following the war. Interment services are pending. Read about Boegli.

-- Marine Corps Reserve Pfc. Nicholas J. Gojmerac was a member of Company Q, 4th Raider Battalion, 1st Marine Raider Regiment, when his unit assaulted a Japanese stronghold at Bairoko Harbor, New Georgia Island, Solomon Islands. He was reported missing in action on July 20, 1943, after he was last seen crawling through heavy fire to provide medical care to an injured Marine while he was mortally wounded himself. Interment services are pending. Read about Gojmerac.

-- Navy Reserve Pharmacist’s Mate 3rd Class William H. Blancheri was a member of Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force, which landed against stiff Japanese resistance on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll of the Gilbert Islands. Over several days of intense fighting at Tarawa, approximately 1,000 Marines and Sailors were killed and more than 2,000 were wounded. Blancheri died on the first day of the battle, Nov. 20, 1943. Interment services are pending. Read about Blancheri.

-- Marine Corps Pfc. Michael L. Salerno was a member of Company K, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force, which landed against stiff Japanese resistance on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll of the Gilbert Islands. Over several days of intense fighting at Tarawa, approximately 1,000 Marines and sailors were killed and more than 2,000 were wounded. Salerno died on the first day of the battle, Nov. 20, 1943. Interment services are pending. Read about Salerno.

-- Marine Corps Reserve Pvt. Fred E. Freet was assigned to Company F, 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines, 2nd Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force, which landed against stiff Japanese resistance on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll of the Gilbert Islands. Over several days of intense fighting at Tarawa, approximately 1,000 Marines and sailors were killed and more than 2,000 were wounded. Freet died on the first day of the battle, Nov. 20, 1943. Interment services are pending. Read about Freet.

-- USS Oklahoma: The following personnel were stationed aboard the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The battleship sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including:

-- Navy Seaman 2nd Class Wilbur C. Barrett. Interment services are pending. Read about Barrett.

-- Navy Storekeeper 2nd Class Gerald L. Clayton. Interment services are pending. Read about Clayton.

-- Navy Storekeeper 1st Class John W. Craig. Interment services are pending. Read about Craig.

-- Navy Fireman 3rd Class Warren H. Crim. Interment services are pending. Read about Crim.

-- Navy Musician 2nd Class Francis E. Dick. Interment services are pending. Read about Dick.
-- Navy Seaman 2nd Class George T. George. Interment services are pending. Read about George.
-- Navy Seaman 2nd Class Charles C. Gomez. Interment services are pending. Read about Gomez.
-- Navy Fireman 1st Class Claude O. Gowey. Interment services are pending. Read about Gowey.
-- Navy Seaman 1st Class Daniel L. Guisinger. Interment services are pending. Read about Guisinger.
-- Navy Seaman 1st Class Robert W. Headington. Interment services are pending. Read about Headington.
-- Navy Seaman 2nd Class Challis R. James. Interment services are pending. Read about James.
-- Navy Seaman 1st Class Wesley V. Jordan. Interment services are pending. Read about Jordan.
-- Navy Radioman 3rd Class Howard V. Keffer. Interment services are pending. Read about Keffer.
-- Navy Seaman 2nd Class Joe M. Kelley. Interment services are pending. Read about Kelly.
-- Navy Fireman 1st Class Elmer D. Nail. Interment services are pending. Read about Nail.
-- Navy Fireman 1st Class Frank E. Nicoles. Interment services are pending. Read about Nicoles.
-- Navy Storekeeper 3rd Class Eli Olsen. Interment services are pending. Read about Olsen.
-- Navy Fireman 1st Class Millard C. Pace. Interment services are pending. Read about Pace.
-- Navy Electrician’s Mate 3rd Class Merle A. Smith. Interment services are pending. Read about Smith.
-- Navy Reserve Fireman 1st Class Lewis F. Tindall. Interment services are pending. Read about Tindall.


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.
MOAA’s 2019 Key Goals: Don’t Let TRICARE For Life Become a Target

MOAA's top legislative goals for 2019 will be featured in an upcoming edition of Military Officer magazine, which is available to MOAA Life and Premium members. Here’s a preview of one key issue; see the links below for the rest, including ways you can make your voice heard.

The Goal: Prevent disproportional TRICARE fee increases.

Background: The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) recently introduced, as a potential option, TRICARE for Life enrollment fees and minimum out-of-pocket requirements as ways the federal budget could escape red ink. Independent of the CBO report (PDF), DoD and Congress have stated retiree health care costs are spiraling out of control, and beneficiaries do not pay enough for their health care. Based on DoD's own data, MOAA knows this is not true - the difference is attributable to rising institutional and readiness costs. Despite that, the report and the ongoing budget pressure have turned TRICARE For Life into a potential target for fee increases to offset readiness or other programs.

MOAA's Stance: Military retirees, through their service and sacrifice, have paid in full for their TRICARE For Life benefits. Congress - not DoD - should determine appropriate TRICARE fees.

Actions: Reverse or significantly decrease the 2018 TRICARE Prime copayment increases for grandfathered/Group-A beneficiaries. Modify fee structure to reduce out-of-pocket costs for successive specialty appointments, such as physical therapy or mental health care. Protect TRICARE For Life as a second payer to Medicare Part B.

[TAKE ACTION: Say NO to New Fees for TRICARE for Life]
More key goals:

- **Ensure any TRICARE reform sustains access to top-quality care.**
- **Sustain military pay comparability with the private sector.**
- **Stop erosion of compensation and non-pay quality-of-life benefits.**
- **End financial penalties for military survivors.**
- **End concurrent receipt penalties for military retirees.**
- **Achieve equity of benefits for Guard and Reserve members with their active duty counterparts.**
- **Strengthen DoD-VA collaboration and services to support wounded warriors and an expanding population of women veterans.**
- **Ensure timely access to service-earned VA benefits.**
- **Protect military and veteran family support programs and policies.**
1,300 disabled vets are getting billed for thousands of dollars ... because VA didn’t check their email

By: Natalie Gross  December 21, 2018

Approximately 1,300 disabled veterans were overpaid thousands of dollars under a Veterans Affairs Department education benefits program last year and now must figure out a way to pay that money back.

Why? Mostly because staff at VA regional offices didn’t check emails, a recent investigation by the VA Office of Inspector General has found.

The overpayments happened during the 2016-2017 academic year under the VA’s second-largest education program, Dependents’ Educational Assistance, which pays up to $1,224 for schooling per month to spouses and children of totally and permanently disabled veterans or deceased service members.

Veterans who are 100 percent service disabled are eligible to receive monthly stipends of $266 for each college-aged child they have in school as part of their disability check from the VA. But these benefits cannot overlap with DEA.

Yet, in it at least 70 percent of cases during the 2016-17 school year, they did, in large part because emails from veterans claim examiners were going unread at many VA regional offices. Now, vets who were overpaid owe VA a total of $4.5 million for the department’s mistake — an average of more than $3,400 each.

This represents “a hardship for seriously disabled veterans,” the report states. In its review of all 58 VA regional offices, Office of Inspector General auditors found that as of May 2018, 25 had an approximate total of 4,600 unread emails dating back to August 2016. The
majority of these emails, 67 percent, were about DEA benefits and potentially required adjustments to veterans’ claims to keep them from being overpaid.

In interviews recorded in the report, VA staff at seven of these offices said they had not been monitoring mailboxes related to the DEA program before the audit.

For example, a representative from the Oakland, California, office “stated that the mailbox had not been monitored for three years because managers had been reassigned, but not their mailbox monitoring duties.”

Another in Houston said the DEA inbox was “not considered a workload priority” because of other workload targets the office was required to meet, according to the report.

Already, the VA has instituted a new policy requiring regional offices to check DEA-related emails twice a month, Susan Carter, a spokesperson for the agency, said in an email.

Additionally, the VA Office of Field Operations has committed to sending weekly reminders to check the emails to the regional offices and will likely incorporate oversight of this into future site visits, according to the report.

Joe Plenzler, a spokesman for Wounded Warrior Project, said the organization is concerned about the impact these overpayments will have on the affected veterans and plans to work with VA on the department’s plans to remedy the situation.

“We would hope that the VA would avoid any significant disruptions or financial burdens on the recipients,” he said in an email.

Carter said the agency has already identified the veterans who were overpaid and expects to complete all payment adjustments by June 30. Veterans will have several payment options available.

“VA is implementing improvements that will focus on the timely establishment of compensation adjustments, ensuring receipt of DEA program benefit notifications by VA regional office staff, and promptly identifying and rectifying payment duplications,” Carter said.

The inspector general’s report also recommends VA move to an electronic system to better identify when there’s a potential for veterans to get paid out of both programs in order to cut down on overpayments.

If delays continue, the report states, the VA could end up paying another $22.5 million in improper payments over the next five years.
Veterans and their families may be eligible to file taxes absolutely free

The Internal Revenue Service has announced that the nation’s 2016 individual income tax filing season opens Jan. 19, 2016, with more than 150 million tax returns expected to be filed this year.

People will have several extra days to file their tax returns this year. Taxpayers have until Monday, Apr. 18 to file their 2015 tax returns and pay any tax due because of the Emancipation Day holiday in Washington, D.C., falling on Friday, April 15. The IRS expects more than 70 percent of taxpayers to again receive tax refunds this year. Last year, the IRS issued 109 million refunds, with an average refund of $2,797.

Shown below are several ways Veterans and their families have access to free tax preparation and electronic filing services to keep more of their hard earned money.

- IRS’ Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) and Tax Counseling for the Elderly (TCE) programs are available to taxpayers that earned less than $54,000 in 2015. More than 3.7 million tax returns were prepared using these services in 2014. All tax returns completed through VITA are prepared by IRS certified volunteers, so you can feel confident your tax return is accurate. Even better, there are over 12,000 convenient locations across the country. To find the VITA location nearest you, enter your zip code into the easy-to-use VITA/TCE Locater.
- MyFreeTaxes, operating the only free online tax preparation and filing assistance platform available in all 50 states and Washington D.C., who earned $62,000 or less in 2015, allows qualified Veterans, active-duty military, their families and all other qualifying taxpayers to file both a federal and state tax return absolutely free. In addition
to e-filing, MyFreeTaxes also provides in-person help to individuals and families earning $20,000 or less in 2015. For more information, please visit: www.myfreetaxes.com. The MyFreeTaxes initiative is managed by United Way, with the assistance from legacy partners, National Disability Institute and Goodwill Industries International, and is sponsored by the Wal-Mart Foundation.

In addition to free tax preparation and assistance services like VITA, TCE and MyFreeTaxes, there are several other free options qualifying Veterans and military families can use. However, please make note of additional eligibility requirements, and be advised not all are available in your particular location. Read more about each for information on eligibility and availability of services.

- **IRS.gov/FreeFile** serves as a central hub where taxpayers can choose from a variety of industry-leading tax software options in order to prepare and e-file their federal tax returns at no cost. If you earned $62,000 or less last year, you are eligible to choose from among 13 software products. If you earned more, you are still eligible for **Free File Fillable Forms**, the electronic version of IRS paper forms. In fact, more than 70 percent of all taxpayers – 100 million people – are eligible for the software products. Each of the 13 providers has its own special offers, generally based on age, income or state residency. Taxpayers can review each offer or can use the “Help Me” tool to find the tax-filing software they are eligible to use. Free File offers easy-to-use products that ask questions and you supply the answers. The software will find the right forms, tax credits and deductions, and even do the math for you!

- **TurboTax Freedom Edition** – is available to taxpayers with an income of $31,000 or less, or those eligible to claim the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)

- **Second Story TaxAct** – to qualify for free tax preparation, a taxpayer’s income must be $50,000 or less, and the filer must be 58 years old or younger.

- **H&R Block’s Free File** – offers free online assistance for taxpayers who earned $62,000 or less, between 18 and 50 years old as of December 31, 2015.

- **Online Taxes (OLT)** – offers free tax preparation services to taxpayers with an income between $13,000 and $62,000 in 2015.

Now, if you have already filed your taxes and want to know when you will receive your refund, be sure to download the IRS app, **IRS2Go**! This app is available in both English and Spanish and gives taxpayers the ability to check on the status of their tax refund, obtain tax records, find free tax preparation providers, and stay connected with the IRS through social media channels such as **YouTube** and **Twitter**.

Please note that VA does not endorse any of these sites, but brings your attention to them as they have free tax services available specifically for Veterans and their families.

About the author: Richard Keeling is a senior tax analyst at the Internal Revenue Service.
FCC and VA to Combat Illegal Robocalls Targeting Veterans
Veterans Benefits Administration sent this bulletin at 12/14/2018 10:19 AM EST

Dear Veterans and Stakeholders,

The US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) continue to team up to combat illegal robocalls targeting Americans, including Veterans and their families.

Each year, the FCC receives more than 200,000 complaints about unwanted calls. While this may seem like a big number, it pales in comparison to the millions of robocalls being made each day. The calls interrupt dinners and family time; they flood landline and mobile phones. Scam calls frequently solicit money for fake charities, including ones claiming to support America’s Veterans - some even claiming to be VA representatives.

We know that scam activity increases during the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, so the FCC and VA urge you to be vigilant. We offer the following tips to help you avoid unwanted calls and scams.

- Don't answer calls from unknown numbers. Scammers may spoof their caller ID to display a fake number that appears to be local. If you answer such a call, hang up immediately.
- Never give out personal information such as account numbers, Social Security numbers, mother's maiden names, or passwords in response to unexpected or suspicious calls.
- Be sure to set a password for all voice mail accounts to avoid being hacked.
- Register your number on the Do Not Call List to block calls from legitimate telemarketers.
- Ask your phone company about call-blocking tools and services for your landline phone, and check for helpful apps that you can download to your mobile phone.

Please help spread the word about robocall fraud among those who may need assistance particularly those who are frequently targeted by phone scams.

For more information, visit: fcc.gov/robocalls.
Sincerely
Veterans Benefits Administration
When former Army Cpl. Chris Stout saw his fellow veterans struggling with homelessness, he set out to solve the problem by going small -- really small. Tiny, even.

On Veterans Day, 2015, Stout and three other combat vets started the Veterans Community Project (VCP), a non-profit that builds communities of tiny homes, providing a host of services for veterans.

During a 2005 combat tour in Afghanistan Stout was wounded and transitioned back to Kansas City, Missouri. Like many wounded warriors, he struggled with physical and mental injuries. He knew that he felt better when in the company of other veterans and, for a short time, worked as a veteran counselor connecting vets to services they needed. But it wasn't enough.

"I often would use my own money to put up vets in a hotel room," Stout said. "I felt like there must be better way to get vets the services they needed, as well as housing."

With its focus first on the great Kansas City, Missouri area, VCP wants to use the region as the blueprint for achieving similar successes in cities across the United States. Long term, they aspire to eliminate veteran homelessness nationwide.
"We are the place that says 'yes' first and figures everything else out later," Stout said. "We serve anybody who's ever raised their hand to defend our Constitution."

Homelessness is one of the major contributors to the high suicide rate of veterans, he said. According to the latest 2016 Department of Veterans Affairs study, that rate is 22 per day among younger veterans aged 18 to 34.

In the VCP program, veterans get more than just a home; they get a community of like-minded veterans supporting each other.

"It's very much like the barracks lifestyle, except that each veteran has their own home," Stout said. "They're taking care of each other. We also have a community center for them to gather and share camaraderie."

The founders of VCP say on their website they are a team of "connectors, feelers, and doers on a mission to help our kin, our kind. We move with swift, bold action, and will always serve with compassion."

Stout and his partners use their military logistics prowess to ensure that their housing communities are located along convenient bus lines and provide every veteran a free bus pass to allow easy transportation.
"We like to have them say, 'What do you provide?' That way we can ask them, 'What do you need?' And then we can start being the connectors," Stout said. "At least 60 percent of the people that we serve, we're serving them because of a poor transition from the military."

And it's thanks, in part, to his work with that community that he's accumulated a wealth of good advice on how to survive the transition from the military into the civilian world.

Chris Stout's Top 5 Transition Tips
1. Connect with other veterans in your community. They will have learned lessons and have guidance more valuable than a brochure.

2. Ask for assistance before it's too late. When Plan A doesn't pan out, be prepared to execute a Plan B and ask for help pulling yourself out of the hole.

3. You're not alone. You're not the first to struggle with the VA, and you're not the first to struggle with home life. Know that there are people who understand and can help sort it out. Often, when veterans transition, they view it as if they are the only ones traveling this road or the first blazing the trail. That's not the case

4. If you're a veteran, act like one. That means accepting responsibility, be on time, hold yourself accountable, have integrity and do not act entitled.

5. Work as hard as you did while you were in the service each and every day. It doesn't matter what you decide to do when you get out; if you keep the drive, you will be OK.

Master Your Military Transition
Looking for more transition tips? Military.com has you covered. Sign up for a free Military.com membership to have military news, updates, and job resources delivered directly to your inbox.

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84-year-old veteran died after nursing home staff ignored his infected, rotting genitals
By: J.D. Simkins

An 84-year-old U.S. Army veteran’s pressing medical needs were blatantly ignored by a Jacksonville, Florida, nursing home staff last year — and he died shortly after.

York Spratling first checked into Consulate Health Care in December 2016 while suffering from diabetes, his nephew, Derwin Spratling, told the Naples Daily News. The veteran’s health was declining. Walking and feeding himself was a struggle, making living on his own impossibly unrealistic.

Less than three months after being admitted to Consulate Health, Spratling’s condition took a terrible turn for the worse, and on Feb. 24, 2017, he was carried out of the nursing home on a stretcher and rushed to the emergency room.

The ER trip, however, wasn’t the product of diabetic concerns.

Shortly after Spratling’s admission to the hospital, the doctor came into the waiting room to talk to family who had gathered.

There, Derwin Spratling received the shocking news: His uncle needed surgery to remove dead tissue from his genitals, which had been infected with gangrene.

The doctor said “he had never seen anything like that before, especially in this day and age,” Derwin Spratling told the Naples Daily News. “It really freaked us out.”
“Who was taking care of this man?” Spratling’s sister, Lula Price-Brown, asked. “His private area, nobody washed that.”

After the procedure to remove the rotten flesh, Spratling’s condition worsened exponentially.

“It didn’t just happen overnight, but it was quicker than you could imagine,” Derwin said.

Soon after, York Spratling was dead.

State investigators from Florida’s Agency for Health Care Administration, or AHCA, which oversees nursing home regulations, began looking into Spratling’s case in the aftermath of what appeared to be gross mismanagement of a nursing home patient.

The AHCA had already cited the Consulate Health Care nursing home three times in the year leading up to the 84-year-old’s death, with each report pointing to inadequate staffing and an inability to provide even the most basic care for patients, such as bathing or hygiene.

Months before Spratling’s death, an unnamed patient at the same nursing home submitted an alarming complaint to AHCA inspectors, noting, “I have not had a shower in I don’t know how long,” according to the report.

When questioned about Spratling’s case, meanwhile, nursing home staff reportedly told state investigators that the stench emanating from his infection was so bad that it could be smelled from the doorway of his room.

But despite the easily discernible health risk, staff members didn’t document or notify a doctor about the infection until a full five days after first noticing the odor, the report said.

Spratling’s condition was “way past obvious,” Derwin Spratling said. “This is so past obvious that it’s mind-blowing.”

“Everything was about to fall off, it was so rotten,” York Spratling’s brother, Obie, affirmed, as part of an in-depth Naples Daily News investigation into a rash of nursing home malpractice cases throughout Florida.

Following his death, a subsequent report conducted by the Florida Department of Children and Families ruled that Spratling had indeed died due to “inadequate supervision and medical neglect.”

The AHCA, however, reportedly took no action against the facility despite the report’s pointed contents, thus allowing the nursing home’s conditions of patient squalor to persist.

Patient complaints have continued since Spratling’s death, with “neglect and inadequate staffing” principal among them. Eight months after York Spratling was rushed to the emergency room with rotting flesh, another patient told AHCA inspectors, “I wallow around in this bed in my own piss.”

To date, little has been done to rectify the dearth of adequate, humane treatment.
In the state of Florida between 2013 and 2017, 43 cases were opened looking into the deaths of 54 nursing residents, the report said. Each case cited medical negligence or error as the cause of death.

Of those cases, however, the nursing homes in question avoided all repercussions — fines or other penalties — in 32 of them.
More veterans are becoming obese. Are stressful military transitions to blame?

The number of disabled veterans is rising. And so, too, is their weight.

A new study, based on a survey of more than 33,000 post-9/11 service members and veterans, found that 51.7 percent of wounded warriors have a body mass index that qualifies them as obese — up from 48.6 percent two years ago. Of those, 6.2 percent are morbidly obese.

Even more grim? The percentage of vets who are overweight in 2018 is nearly seven times greater than the percentage of those who are not, according to the study released today by Wounded Warrior Project and the nonprofit’s research partner, Westat.

Fewer than half of survey participants, 42 percent, said they exercised at least three times a week, and those who maintained healthy eating habits were also in the minority.

Many listed lack of time, fear of injury and discomfort in social situations as reasons for not working out more. But the report’s authors also link struggles with depression, sleep, stress and the military-to-civilian transition as factors that could be impacting weight gain in the wounded warrior population.

“I think with any type of uncertainty and/or change, there is a heightened sense of stress,” said Melanie Mousseau, metrics director for Wounded Warrior Project. “With stress comes a myriad of other challenges.”

In the study, veterans said the most challenging parts of transitioning out included missing the camaraderie of the military, problems adapting to the civilian workforce and difficulty navigating the red tape at the Defense and Veterans Affairs Departments during the transition process.

“I only feel comfortable in combat,” one veteran wrote. “I do not feel comfortable in civilian life or trust it.”

And another put it this way: “After leaving a structured environment like the military, it’s difficult to be around people without a standard.”
More than 90 percent of the veterans and service members who responded to the Wounded Warrior Project survey between March and May 2018 were enlisted, and 45 percent deployed three or more times during their career.

Sixty-two percent had received a disability rating of 80 percent or higher, and the vast majority of respondents reported that they suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, trouble sleeping, and back, neck or shoulder pain.

While the rate of obesity reported in the study is notably higher than that of the general adult population in the U.S., according to the National Center for Health Statistics, obesity among this group is “compounded by a unique set of issues and circumstances,” Mousseau said.

Diana Thomas, a professor at West Point, said contributing factors to obesity are complex. She pointed to research that has shown a relationship between stress and weight gain, as well as a study which found higher weight gain in people who were once fit.

“Transition to civilian life will no longer have weigh-ins or structured PT. So it is possible that a change in lifestyle leads to a change in structured habits,” she said in an email. “One thing we know is that during physical activity, there is a phenomena called compensation. Basically, we eat more. If this is not reversed when PT stops, then it will lead to weight gain.”

When asked about strategies for combating obesity, especially for a population of veterans dealing with physical and mental limitations, Thomas suggested walking and swimming, which are “low impact exercises.”

And for veterans who struggle to work out because of uneasiness in social situations, she recommends finding a structured workout time with a personal trainer.