



VBA TODAY

V E T E R A N S B E N E F I T S A D M I N I S T R A T I O N



Decoration Day

was the original name for Memorial Day, and it was a day to remember all who had died in service to our nation.

The observance began in the 1860s when cities and towns across the country held observances honor the war dead. General John Logan proclaimed the first official Memorial Day on May 5, 1868 in General Order No. 11, and observed on May 30 that same year. On this first observance, flowers were placed on the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery.

Today, Memorial Day is observed on the last Monday in May, a result of the Holiday Act of 1971. Traditional observances of Memorial Day have declined since the passage of the Holiday Act, and in an effort to remind Americans of the importance of the observance Congress passed the National Day of Remembrance resolution in December 2000. The resolution asks each American “To voluntarily and informally observe in their own way a moment of remembrance and respect, pausing from whatever they are doing for a moment of silence or listening to ‘Taps’” at 3:00 p.m. local time on Memorial Day.

SUPPORT SERVICES DIVISION VBA’S UNSUNG HEROES IN THE FIELD

You can’t fight a war without combat troops, and in VA, you can’t process claims without claims processors. However, it’s equally true that without a good support system, even the most well trained front-line troops would be lackluster at best. The Support Service Division (SSD) at each regional office (RO) plays a critical role in serving the Veteran community, but like many organizations that play a supporting role, if everything is running smoothly, no one notices the outstanding job that’s being done.

In years past, regional offices were structured with separate finance and administration divisions. This structure still exists at headquarters, but has completely disappeared in the field. The paradox of this situation is that the merging of the two divisions resulted in an accompanying loss of personnel, while the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) continued to grow. Over the past eight-years, VBA grew by an astounding 40 percent, but the size of the support services community within VBA *decreased eight percent*. More people to support, with fewer resources to do so is rarely a good combination.

The SSD is typically viewed as the office that makes sure the building is in good repair, the janitorial crew keeps things clean, lights work, and everyone has the office supplies he or she needs. However, there’s also the less obvious side to supporting an organization – finance. And, in today’s climate of budget cuts and renewed interest in fiscal responsibility, finance provides the critical function of ensuring ROs are proper stewards of taxpayer dollars.

There are two areas of finance responsibilities in each SSD, local budgeting and program payments. That is, financial activities that flow directly from running an RO, i.e., purchasing supplies, equipment, making travel and payroll payments, etc., and financial activities that directly affect Veterans’ benefits, i.e., processing payments for auto-adaptive equipment, vocational rehabilitation & employment and burial benefits, retroactive and special payments. Local and program finance are further divided into accounting and auditing processes.

Processing financial transactions requires constant attention to detail, and in many cases two employees to satisfy internal controls requirements. This can cause significant challenges for smaller offices, and in some cases may result

(Continued on page 2)

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Buffalo Regional Office Hosts OIF Veteran	3
Benefits in Brief	4
VBA LEADership Training	5
PTSD Coach APP	6

(Continued from page 1)

in SSD requesting process waivers. Moreover, the more thinly the staff is spread over the support services division, the more difficult it is to ensure employees have the training they need to be successful and ultimately advance in the workplace. Historically, lack of training resources was one of the bigger challenges facing support personnel. Supervisors and employees alike have had to rely on training from others within the local support services office for training, and with divisions already being short-staffed, training was typically self-directed.

In 2007, the Financial Management Council (FMC) convinced VBA leadership that the dearth of training for support services staff needed to be addressed, and the FMC's proposal to develop training specific to the needs of regional office SSD employees was adopted. The Office of Resource Management hired Jeanine Gilson to be the VBA Finance National Training Coordinator. She immediately began to develop the training so desperately needed and wanted by finance employees in the field.

Ms. Gilson's strategy was to identify all training areas, and then determine whether the topic was relevant Department wide, or if it was specific to VBA. She reasoned that addressing VA-wide topics first would provide the biggest bang for the buck. She worked in concert with colleagues from the Department and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), and created financial training that benefited all finance employees. With one success under her belt, the next step was to address VBA specific topics.

Curricula for 13 training modules have been developed so far, six are in progress and an additional three topics are on the list for future development. Topics include both internally and externally focused processes, such as using your government purchase card, and processing education benefits payments. The training is available in a va-



Students in rapt attention during the budgeting formulation and execution class held at the Salt Lake City Regional Office.

riety of formats. "In order to maximize my training budget, I utilize distance learning whenever possible and practical. However, I realize that there are some topics – specifically those which require hands-on learning in systems or where the subject matter is particularly complex – where classroom training is the best way to deliver a course. In those

cases, my budget funds the travel expenses for the students to attend these classes," Gilson says.

Although developing financial training is a big job, the larger challenge has been finding adequate numbers of subject matter experts to conduct the training. "The ED&T [education, development & training] staff and leadership have been extremely supportive throughout this initiative. They've always managed to provide the slots I needed in their Instructor Development Course, so that I can field properly educated instructors in my classrooms. Because there have been a number of retirements in the finance community, there aren't many experienced staff remaining who can serve as SMEs or who want to



Jeanine Gilson, VBA Finance National Training Coordinator, conducts a class on finance processes.

instruct. Most of the employees in the lower grades haven't been with VBA very long, and that's now becoming the trend with higher-graded support services employees as well."

Ramifications from dwindling numbers of experienced employees are equally apparent at the local level. Kurt Rau, Chief of the Support Services Division at the Phoenix RO, agrees, "It's difficult to keep good employees in support services because the grades just aren't there. I usually lose them to the service center, because that's where the grades are." He goes on to say, "I don't blame them for leaving, but I'd like to see a career ladder established for support services positions. It would help in retaining good employees, and improve succession planning. The way the grade structure is now, there's no way for an employee to move up through support services at the local level."

One regional office dealt with the conundrum of succession planning by eliminating the division altogether. Faced with the retirement of the support services division chief, and no one within the division who could

(Continued on page 3)

(Continued from page 2)

step into the position even temporarily while the position was being advertised, the Director of the Reno Regional Office eliminated the division, and entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Salt Lake City RO to provide finance support.

The Salt Lake City RO was already supporting to two other VBA offices that were co-located at VA medical centers, and had been provided finance support by VHA. Camille Miller, Budget Officer for the Salt Lake City RO, states, "The process works well once you get used to it. The biggest challenge is having to do everything by e-mail, especially at the end of the fiscal year when you have to close out the books." The Reno office retained all of the administrative duties of support services, and now has one employee who functions as the facility manager, with the additional duties of payroll and financial liaison to Salt Lake City.

While the finance side of the support services has created and implemented a successful training program, the administrative side is still facing challenges. Unlike finance,



there is no training available for the hodge-podge of duties that come under the administrative banner. Facilities management, fleet management for GSA cars, mailroom activities, forms and publications, safety and security all come under the same umbrella of SSD. Many of VBA's policies regarding administrative duties are outdated, with some reaching back to the 1990s. Support services chiefs are typically left to their own good judgment when solving problems in the administration arena.

Support services divisions across VBA are providing critical support to both internal and external customers alike. In spite of the challenges brought on by a shrinking workforce and ever-expanding organization to support, they have managed to hold their own and provide outstanding service. Used to operating in the background, and experts at maximizing limited resources, SSD staffs truly are the heart and soul of each regional office. They are VBA's unsung heroes.

Buffalo RO Host OIF Veteran Mark O'Brien



OIF Veteran Mark O'Brien spoke to the employees of the Buffalo Regional Office on April 14, 2011 about his experiences in Iraq as a Marine, and adjusting to his new role in life as a Veteran. Mark was wounded in Iraq when an armor-piercing round ripped through his vehicle, causing him to lose his right leg and arm. Upon returning home Mark had more than just his physical wounds to recover from. The psychological stress of war had taken its toll. He speaks of the unrelenting replaying of events, over and over again, trying to figure out how things could have been different.

He gave regional office employees a brief glimpse of the arduous journey he has made, and inspired each of them with his candor and faith in the human spirit. Ed Bruning, public affairs officer at the Buffalo office commented, "All employees left the briefing with a sense of pride in their work and a reinvigorated sense of duty to care for those who have served our nation so selflessly." Mr. O'Brien was featured in MSNBC's documentary "Coming Home" that aired this past February. The documentary follows four soldiers who were wounded in Iraq through their recovery journey.



Benefits In Brief

Presumptive Conditions and Service-Disabled Veterans' Life Insurance

Private insurance companies sometimes deem Veterans with service-connected disabilities uninsurable, or they find they are still insurable, but the rates are prohibitive. VA's Service-Disabled Veterans' Insurance (S-DVI) was created to meet the insurance needs of these Veterans.

The S-DVI program provides up to \$10,000 in life insurance coverage to Veterans who meet the following criteria:

- Were released from active duty under other than dishonorable conditions on or after April 25, 1951
- Received a rating for a service-connected disability
- Are in good health except for the service-connected disability
- Applied for S-DVI within two years of being granted service-connection for a new disability

Ischemic heart disease, Parkinson's disease and hairy cell/B cell leukemia have recently been added to the list of presumptive conditions related to Agent Orange exposure. (Presumptive conditions are illnesses or diseases that are presumed to be related to a Veteran's military service if certain conditions are met, typically service in a particular region during a defined timeframe.) Because the above conditions have been added to the list of presumptives for Agent Orange, many Vietnam Veterans who were previously not eligible for S-DVI may now qualify.

Veterans who fall into this category have two years from the date they receive a new service-connected rating (not an increase in an established rating) to apply for this coverage. In addition, if they are approved for a waiver on premiums to their basic S-DVI coverage because they have been deemed to be totally disabled, meaning that their disabilities prevent them from sustaining gainful employment, they may be eligible for an additional \$20,000 of coverage through supplemental S-DVI. However, the premiums for supplemental coverage cannot be waived. The Supplemental S-DVI maximum will increase to \$30,000 on October 1, 2011.

If you would like more information on the S-DVI program, visit <http://www.insurance.va.gov/gli/buying/SDVI.htm>.

Dependents' Education Assistance

The Department of Veterans Affairs provides educational assistance to the spouse or dependent children of Veterans under certain circumstances. One of the following eligibility requirements must be met to receive this benefit.

- The spouse or child of a servicemember or Veteran who died of a service-connected disability, has a permanent and total service-connected disability, or died while such a disability existed.
- The spouse or a child of a servicemember listed for more than 90 days as currently Missing in Action (MIA), captured in the line of duty by a hostile force, or detained or interned by a foreign government or power.
- The spouse or a child of a servicemember who is hospitalized, or is receiving outpatient care or treatment for a disability that is determined to be totally and permanently disabling, incurred or aggravated due to active duty, and for which the servicemember is likely to be discharged from military service.

Benefits must be used within eligibility timeframes. Spouses of Veterans have 10 years from the date they become eligible, or the date of the Veteran's death. Children must be between the ages of 18 and 26 to receive education benefits. Spouses of servicemembers who died while on active duty have 20 years to use their education benefits.

Surviving spouses lose their eligibility if they remarry before age 57, or if they are living with another person who has been held out publicly as their spouse. Eligibility can be regained if the remarriage ends by death, divorce, or they cease living with the other person. Dependent children do not lose educational benefits if the surviving spouse remarries. For more information on Dependents' Education Assistance visit www.gibill.va.gov/benefits/other_programs/dea.html.



eBenefits

**MY GATEWAY
TO BENEFIT
INFORMATION**

www.ebenefits.va.gov

VBA LEADership Training

The Leadership Enhancement and Development (LEAD) program identifies and cultivates future leaders within the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). The selection process for this nine-month program is rigorous, and the 35 positions coveted. Those who make the cut are assigned a formal mentor, participate in developmental shadowing assignments and attend three weeklong sessions of classroom instruction. Participants also work together on team projects, an important part of the training, so much so, that the program culminates with each team conducting a one-hour presentation.

The LEAD program curriculum focuses on instilling the values of being Veteran-centric, results driven and forward looking. Classroom instruction and team projects provide a solid foundation for leadership. But, connecting with Veterans one-on-one is



Alvin Dresser shares his memories with LEAD participant Traci Large

the most important lesson learned during the program. VBA's 2011 LEAD class's trip to the Bay Pines Community Living Center (CLC) in St. Petersburg, FL did just that. VA medical centers across the country have transformed their "nursing homes" into communities where patient-centered care and a

homelike environment signal a major cultural shift in meeting the needs of their residents. The changes are remarkable for both Veteran and staff. Stuart N. Sidell, the lead recreational therapist at the Bay Pines CLC, provided the class with an overview of CLC operations and the purpose behind recreational therapy. He then introduced the LEAD participants to the Veteran residents, and then the games began. Wii bowling, carpet bowling, card games, gardening and bedside interviews are a sampling of the activities available to the residents. Spending the day with the residents of the Bay Pines CLC made an indelible imprint on the hearts and minds of the 2011 LEAD class. As one participant



Becky Lindstrom and Joseph Krepcio engage in a leisurely game of carpet bowling.

said, "The time at the CLC was an opportunity to see the benefits of what we do on a daily basis. I now have a 'face' for each claim I work. This is the greatest lesson plan, getting to spend time with the very folks we serve."

The Chinese have a proverb that says, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." VBA's 2011 LEAD class went fishing at the Bay Pines CLC, and the catch of the day was a renewed passion and dedication for serving those who have served our country.



Left to right: Kirkland Wallace, Gerald Popjoy and Kyle Rogers

PTSD COACH MOBILE APP



PTSD – Is there an App for that? You wouldn't think so, but VA's National Center for PTSD and DoD's National Center for Telehealth and Technology have created a smart phone app that links Veterans with information about PTSD, treatments, and tools to assist in screening and tracking symptoms. The application is not meant to replace therapy, but can be quite useful in assisting Veterans in accessing the care they need to treat PTSD. The features include:

- Reliable information on PTSD and treatments that work
- Tools for screening and tracking your symptoms
- Convenient, easy-to-use skills to help you handle stress symptoms
- Always with you when you need it

The app is currently only available for the iPhone, but PTSD Coach for Android will be released in late spring 2011, and work is continuing on creating a PTSD Family Coach application. For more information, or to download the application visit <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/PTSDcoach.asp>

Veterans Crisis Line

Calling the confidential hotline can help
(800-273-8255 & press 1)



You can connect with us on:



[Facebook](#)



[Twitter](#)



[YouTube](#)



[Flickr](#)

Or find us online at:

<http://vba.va.gov/VBA/>

Retroactive Stop Loss Pay has been Extended

Servicemembers who were involuntarily extended under stop loss between September 11, 2001 and September 30, 2009 are eligible for Retroactive Stop Loss Pay. A claim must be submitted to receive the benefit, which provides \$500 for each month/partial month served while in stop loss status.

The timeframe for submitting a claim for the benefit has been extended several times; currently the deadline for submitting claims is October 21, 2011.

Eligible individuals should visit their service's website to complete the application online. If an eligible individual does not have internet access they should complete Department of Defense form 2944, Claim for Retroactive Stop Loss Payment.

VBA Today is an official publication of the Veterans Benefits Administration. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent that of the Veterans Benefits Administration

810 Vermont Ave, N.W.
Washington, DC 20420

VETERANS
BENEFITS
ADMINISTRATION