



VBA TODAY

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VONAPP DIRECT CONNECT ENABLES YOU TO ADD DEPENDENTS, CHANGE MARITAL STATUS & MORE

Veterans with premium eBenefits accounts, who need to make changes to their marital status, dependents or school verifications, can now do so through eBenefits by using Veterans On Line Application (VONAPP) Direct Connect.

The new tool uses a wizard feature that asks a series of questions to complete the application to add or change dependency. The wizard essentially replaces the paper versions of VA Form 21-686c, Declaration of Status of Dependents, and VA Form 21-674, Request for Approval of School Attendance.

“VONAPP Direct Connect changes the way claims are accepted by VA and allows us to truly transform into a 21st century organization,” said Robert Reynolds, Director of the Benefits Assistance Service for the Veterans Benefits Administration. “By utilizing an interview-style process for applications, it will make it easier for our Veterans to submit

their information without worrying if they have chosen the right form or not. They simply answer the questions, while VONAPP Direct Connect walks them through the process.”

Veterans who have a 30 percent or higher disability rating can access VONAPP Direct Connect to change or modify their dependency benefit. Veterans meeting this criteria, may use the wizard to:

- (1) Update marital status: report marriage, divorce, separation or a deceased spouse.
- (2) Add a biological child, step-child, or legally adopted child as a dependent
- (3) Submit a request for approval of school attendance for dependents between the ages of 18-23.

After logging on to their eBenefits account, Veterans can access the wizard by selecting the “Apply for Veterans’ Benefits Online” under the “Apply for Benefits” tab and then

[See VONAPP, page 2](#)

Happy New Year

As we say good-bye to 2011 and ring in 2012, VBA wants to say thank you to our Servicemembers, Veterans, their families, and survivors who have sacrificed so much for our freedom. We proudly welcome home from Iraq our brave men and women who participated in Operation New Dawn and pledge to do our utmost to ensure they have complete access to all available benefits and services we provide, which they earned with their service.

In 2012 we look forward to providing new online services within the eBenefits Portal such as VONAPP Direct Connect. We welcome new challenges in 2012 as we continue to strive to meet VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki’s goal of ending homelessness among our nation’s Veterans. In 2011, Veterans’ homelessness was reduced by 12 percent in comparison to a 2 percent decrease among all homeless individuals.

Through expanded outreach and greater access, VBA will continue our momentum.

As our New Year’s resolution, VBA will increase access to VA benefits and services. We will strive to reduce Veterans’ homelessness. We will better communicate with our clients what we are doing to eliminate the backlog while improving quality. We cannot do this alone and plan to work closely with our partners within the Veterans’ Service Organizations and with you as well.



You are here →

1 →

We are here to help you find your way →

Thank you for your service. Now let us serve you. →



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs



VONAPP (Continued from last page)

select “Manage Dependents.” From this point forward, simply follow the prompts. Be sure to provide all of the requested information. As a final step, Veterans can upload documents that support their claim. Currently, the portal supports documents with .jpg, .jpeg, .txt, .tif and .pdf extensions.

Veterans, who do not have electronic copies of their supporting documentation have 30 days from submission to upload the documents. If after 30 days the Veteran has not uploaded all documents, the Veteran will need to resubmit the dependency claim.

Once a Veteran provides all updated information, and uploads documents, the wizard reviews the application for completeness. If information is missing, or an error is found, an error message will appear, prompting a change. Be sure to address all error messages, and once

they are corrected, click the “Save and Continue” button. If no errors were found, click the “Save and Continue” button, which completes the process.

Online submissions are first received by the St. Paul Regional Office, and will initially be reviewed there before claims are sent to the Veteran’s regional office of jurisdiction. Information is updated in the system on the first business day following submission.

Veterans who submit claims through VONAPP Direct Conect will receive a confirmation number once the claim is successfully received. Veterans can view and/or print dependency claims, as well as track them through the VONAPP Direct Connect application. ★★☆☆

“VONAPP Direct Connect changes the way claims are accepted by VA and allows us to truly transform into a 21st Century Organization.”



Veterans On Line Application (VONAPP) Help Guide

ISSUE:

If the user selects the back button in the browser to navigate from the Final Review page back to the Dependent Summary page, the user may see non-edited Child Dependent status’ changed to “Update Pending” when no changes have been made.

WORKAROUND:

This is a display issue. The user can still continue and submit the application.

ISSUE:

In Internet Explorer 7, a user may be unable to select an item from the drop-down list.

WORKAROUND:

Microsoft’s latest security patch has introduced a bug into IE7 in certain configurations. You may still select items in a drop-down list by navigating the list with the arrow keys on your keyboard. Alternate solutions include updating your local IE7 to a more current version, updating your local IE7 with the Microsoft hotfix, or accessing the online application with another browser, such as FireFox .

ISSUE:

If the child was marked as not living with the Veteran and a guardian was entered, the user cannot delete a dependent child that has a status of “Update Pending” in the Dependent Summary.

WORKAROUND:

In order to remove the child, the application must be deleted and a new one started.





ADDITIONAL HELP AVAILABLE THROUGH STATE BENEFITS

The Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) offers a wide range of benefits to Veterans, Servicemembers, their families and survivors. States also have their own departments of Veterans affairs that offer benefits to those who have served their country.

“Many Veterans don’t know about state-level benefits,” said Linda Schwartz, Commissioner of Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs. “States can augment the assistance provided by VA.”

Each state offers its own array of benefits, as well as access to Veterans Service Officers, and in some cases County Veterans Service Officers. Veterans Service Officers and County Veterans Service Officers are accredited by VA to assist Veterans develop their claims for benefits.

“States have offered benefits to Veterans long before there was a federal Department of Veteran Affairs. Here in Connecticut the first state home for Veterans opened in 1863,” Ms. Schwartz said.

There are a few benefits offered by most states. Some amount of property tax exemption is common. Some states offer a full exemption to all Veterans, while others restrict the exemption to disabled Veterans or totally disabled Veterans. Some states extend property tax exemptions to Veterans’ survivors as well. A few states even offer special deductions on state income taxes to active-duty military and Veterans.

Many states offer special license plates to Veterans. States may reduce or waive fees, or a portion of the

proceeds may go to support Veteran programs. Likewise, totally disabled Veterans automatically qualify for handicapped license plates at most departments of motor vehicles.

Veterans and active-duty military may receive reduced fees, or even have fees completely waived for campgrounds, hunting and fishing licenses, and entrance to state fairs and state parks.

Employment is another area where many states offer assistance either through Veterans preference for state employment, or by having dedicated Veterans’ employment specialists available to assist Veterans with their job search. Veterans can access employment specialists through a state’s employment office, which is also a valuable resource for information on upcoming job fairs and other employment networking opportunities.

A noticeable trend in state-level VA benefits is the establishment of programs for women Veterans. As the number of women Veterans increase, states become more aware of how they can better serve women Veterans and are expanding outreach to women Veterans. Many states host annual conferences targeting women Veterans, offering a range of workshops, networking opportunities, and benefits information. Information about these events may be located on the state’s web page.

“State benefits are a reflection of what states want to invest in Veterans,” Ms. Schwartz said.

Some states offer education,



Eric K. Shinseki, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, speaks to the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA).

retirement homes, and burial benefits. Each state has its own program, but Veterans can find out what benefits are available in their state by visiting their state’s Veterans affairs website.

Veterans can also use the eBenefits portal’s [“Benefits by State”](#) page that provides links to each state office. Each state has its own webpage on the portal where state benefits are listed by topic. The topics provide a brief overview of benefits, as well as a link to the state’s webpage where you can find a comprehensive explanation. Access to state web pages is also available through the main VA website on the [State Veterans Affairs](#) page.





GULF WAR PRESUMPTIVE CONDITIONS

Operation Desert Storm began Jan. 16, 1991 with an air war. The United States and allied planes flew more than 100,000 sorties and dropped in excess of 88,500 tons of bombs.

The ground war followed, beginning February 24, and lasted a mere 100 hours before a cease fire was ordered to end hostilities. Although the war was of short duration, the cleanup efforts in the region continued until the close of 1995.

Some of the [hazards](#) Servicemen and women may have been exposed to during Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm include burn pits, chemical and biological warfare agents, oil well fires, smoke and petroleum, pesticides, pyridostigmine bromide (anti-nerve agent) and vaccinations.

Veterans who served in the Gulf War – which includes those Veterans who

served in the Gulf from Aug. 2, 1990 through the current conflict in Iraq – may be eligible for compensation. VA presumes that an undiagnosed illness or certain medically unexplained chronic multisymptom illnesses existing for 6 months or more are related to Gulf War service.

This means Gulf War Veterans who meet these criteria do not need to prove a connection between their military service and the undiagnosed illnesses or medically unexplained chronic multisymptom illness in order to receive disability compensation.

These [illnesses](#) include: chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, functional gastrointestinal disorders, and undiagnosed illness. These presumptive [illnesses](#) must have appeared during active duty in the [Southwest Asia theater of military operations](#), or by December 31, 2016, and be at least 10 percent disabling.

VA also recognizes [nine infectious](#)

[diseases](#) as presumptive to military service in the Southwest Asia theater of operations and Afghanistan during the Gulf War. The diseases are Malaria, Brucellosis, Campylobacter Jejuni, Coxiella Burnetii (Q Fever), Mycobacterium Tuberculosis, Nontyphoid Salmonella, Shigella, Visceral Leishmaniasis and West Nile Virus.

VA offers eligible Veterans a free [Gulf War Registry health exam](#). The registry data helps VA understand the health effects of service in the Gulf region and respond more effectively to the health needs of Veterans. It also provides a means of keeping Veterans informed of possible long-term health problems.

Surviving spouses, dependent children and dependent parents of Gulf War Veterans who died as a result of illnesses related to their service may be eligible for [survivor benefits](#). ★★☆☆





VA Extends the Period to Presume Service Connection for Gulf War Veterans

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki announced the publication of an interim final rule in the Federal Register which extends the period allowing VA to presume service connection for disabilities due to undiagnosed illnesses, medically unexplained chronic multi-symptom illnesses, and other diseases suffered by Veterans who served in the Southwest Asia Theater of Operations during the Gulf War.

VA is amending 38 CFR 3.317 to extend the presumption period from Dec. 31, 2011, to Dec. 31, 2016. The amendment is necessary to permit VA to continue to presume service connection for disabilities associated with Southwest Asia military service that began on or after the start of the first Gulf War on Aug. 2, 1990, through the conflict in Iraq. For non-presumptive conditions, a Veteran is required to provide medical evidence to establish an actual connection between military service in Southwest Asia and his or her illness. Veterans can contact their nearest VA regional office, or call 1-800-827-1000 for more information about applying for compensation benefits associated with service in the Gulf. ★★☆☆



TWO NEW VA HOME LOAN PROGRAMS AIMED AT HOMELESSNESS VETERANS

The Veterans Benefits Administration's Loan Guaranty Service recently unveiled two new programs that offer homeless Veterans and non-profit organizations that serve homeless Veterans the opportunity to purchase VA-acquired properties at a discounted price.

The Homeless Shelter Program (HSP) offers VA-acquired properties at a discounted price to qualified non-profit organizations that provide shelter to homeless Veterans.

Non-profits can acquire properties with an immediate 20 percent discount for the first two months following the listing of the property, a 50 percent discount during the third month, and a 75 percent discount thereafter. VA has assisted non-profit organizations in acquiring 225 properties since the program's inception 21 years ago.

The two new homeless assistance programs that VA has launched are the Properties Available to Nonprofits and Veterans (PANV) program and the Distressed Homes Initiative (DHI). The PANV program is very

similar to the HSP already offered by VA, but with one very important difference. The PANV program allows Veterans currently assisted by VA for homelessness to purchase VA-acquired properties at similar terms offered to non-profit organizations under the HSP.

DHI offers VA properties that require extensive repairs to qualified non-profits and Veterans at discounted prices based on the length of time the property has been on the market. An immediate discount of 50 percent is available during the first two months following property listing, increasing to 75 percent during the third month, and 90 percent thereafter.

"We increased the discount for all programs to improve non-profits' and homeless Veterans' access to safe, affordable housing," said Mike Frueh, acting director of VA's Loan Guaranty Service. "VA is currently working with three major banks in designing a similar program for their own acquired properties. Their programs aren't ready yet, but should be available in the near future."

Purchasing VA-acquired properties using one of these programs can be done with cash, or by financing either with a private lender or through VA. Currently, VA offers a four percent interest rate on its acquired property loans. However, VA will reduce the interest rate to 3 percent for non-profits and two percent for Veteran purchasers. Thus, a \$200,000 property purchased at a 90 percent discount and financed through VA would result in a monthly payment of just \$85.00. This amount is only the principal and interest on the loan; it does not include property taxes, which would have to be paid as well.

Properties purchased under this program must be used to provide shelter, transitional, or permanent housing for homeless Veterans or Veterans at risk for homelessness for a minimum of three years.

Non-profit organizations and homeless Veterans who are interested in these programs should contact their [local Regional Loan Center](#) for complete information. Handbooks and fact sheets on the new programs will be available soon. ★★☆☆





44TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE TET OFFENSIVE

January 30 marks the 44th anniversary of the Tet Offensive, one of the largest military offensives launched during the Vietnam War. Considered by some to be the turning point in U.S. policy regarding hostilities in Vietnam, both sides used Tet as an opportunity to claim victory against their enemy.

By all accounts, the communist forces were beaten; however, the encounter severely shook the American public's trust in both military and political leaders. The U.S. government believed the communist forces could not mount a comprehensive strike against the U.S. and its allies, yet they did. The communist forces devised and implemented an attack that required months of logistical planning and coordination.

The communists believed the Tet Offensive would weaken the South Vietnamese government by creating a crisis in confidence among its citizens, who would change allegiance. Designed to be implemented in three waves, the first assault consisted of a massive attack on cities and towns across the length of South Vietnam. Although, initially surprised, American Forces and its allies were able to resist the advancing forces, and by daybreak most of the communist forces had been pushed back. The fighting continued for the next 58 days, with the heaviest action seen in the Battle of Hue. Although American and Allied Forces ultimately prevailed, 4,129 allied lives were lost, with another 19,295 wounded, and 604 missing in action.

The second phase of the offensive

began May 5, 1968 and lasted 39 days. Saigon was included as a target in this phase, but intelligence operations were aware of the imminent attack, removing the element of surprise. American and Allied Forces drove the communists out of the city by May 12, only to have the communists launch a second attack May 25, which was also unsuccessful. In a last ditch effort, communist forces launched the final phase of the Tet Offensive Aug 17, 1968. It ended after 13 days of fighting.

The Tet Offensive was a watershed in the Vietnam War. Despite the fact that U.S. and Allied Forces were victorious, the American public became disillusioned with its leaders and the progress of the war effort, ultimately resulting in a change in official U.S. policy. ★★☆☆

REMINDER NO TIME LIMIT ON AGENT ORANGE PRESUMPTIVE CONDITIONS

VA recognizes 14 conditions as [presumptive](#) to Agent Orange exposure. The most recent additions to the list of presumptive conditions are ischemic heart disease, Parkinson's disease, hairy cell leukemia and other chronic B-cell leukemias. Eligible Vietnam Veterans, or their survivors, can file a claim for compensation for these newly added conditions using the [Fast Track](#) web portal. Other conditions presumed related to Agent Orange include: acute and subacute peripheral neuropathy; AL amyloidosis; chloracne (or similar acneform disease); diabetes mellitus (type 2); Hodgkin's disease; multiple myeloma; non-hodgkin's lymphoma; porphyria cutanea tarda; prostate cancer; respiratory cancers; and soft tissue sarcoma (other than osteosarcoma; chondrosarcoma; kaposi's sarcoma, or mesothelioma).

Potentially eligible Veterans include those who were stationed or visited Vietnam or its inland waterways between Jan 9, 1962 and May 7, 1975; exposed to Agent Orange along the demilitarized zone in Korea between April 1, 1968 and August 31, 1971; or exposed to herbicide tests or [storage at military bases](#) within and outside of the United States. [Navy Veterans who served aboard certain U.S. Navy and Coast Guard ships](#) that operated in Vietnam are also potentially eligible.

VA may authorize up to a year of retroactive benefits on new claims for the newest three presumptive conditions if the Veteran can show that he or she experienced one of those conditions since August 31, 2010, the date of the regulatory change. ★★☆☆





CHECK YOUR NEW 2012 COMPENSATION OR PENSION RATE ONLINE WITH EBENEFITS

Effective January 1, Veterans, their families and survivors will receive a 3.6 percent cost-of-living adjustment to their compensation and pension benefits.

"I encourage Veterans, their families and their survivors to sign up for eBenefits so they can see online the amount COLA will change their benefit," said Under Secretary for Benefits Allison A. Hickey. "The popular eBenefits website recently crossed the one million mark in registrations."

Under federal law, cost-of-living adjustments to VA's compensation and pension rates are tied to the consumer price index and are the same percentage as for Social Security benefits. The Social Security Administration recently announced a 3.6 percent cost-of-living adjustment would be made to Social Security benefits in 2012. The consumer price index has not risen since 2008 when the last Social Security increase occurred.



Veterans currently receiving disability payments from VA can check their new 2012 compensation or pension rate online at [eBenefits](http://www.ebenefits.va.gov), the joint Department of Defense/VA web portal that allows Servicemembers and Veterans to file and track claims and find information about various benefits.

The My eBenefits portal offers a wealth of information on DoD and VA benefits, as well as links to state Veteran Affairs offices. A premium (level 2) account is required to take full advantage of all of the features My eBenefits has to offer. Premium level account holders can register for automated messages notifying them

of benefits they may be eligible for that are triggered by life events, such as marriage or separation from service. Premium level account holders can also access claim specific information regarding pending claims, payment history and generate Benefit letters, Civil Service Preference and Commissary Privilege letters, among other things.

The site also continues to consolidate access to other VA and DoD systems through the portal, recently incorporating a gateway to vocational rehabilitation benefits under VA's VetSuccess program.

Web access to information and benefits management tools for Servicemembers, Veterans and their families is part of VA's lifetime engagement strategy, from an individual's entry into the military through the twilight years in civilian life as a Veteran. This online effort is being accomplished with a close collaborative partnership with DoD. ★★☆☆

