

NEWS AND NOTES FOR FLORIDA VETERANS

Veterans Service Center, VA Regional Office
St. Petersburg, FL

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The "News and Notes for Florida Veterans" is published monthly by the Veterans Service Center, VA Regional Office, St. Petersburg, Florida, to provide information on VA benefit programs to veterans and dependents in Florida. The material presented does not have the effect of laws or regulations. Please send questions or comments on this newsletter to Veterans Service Center, ATTN: "News and Notes," PO Box 1437, St. Petersburg, FL 33731. We do not have the resources to maintain a mailing list for distribution to individuals; however this newsletter is available on the St. Petersburg VA Regional Office web site at www.vba.va.gov/ro/south/spete.

THE 2008 EDITION OF FEDERAL BENEFITS FOR VETERANS AND DEPENDENTS is now available for download from the Internet as a PDF. The popular booklet describing benefits and services available to veterans and their dependents is available at http://www.va.gov/OPA/vadocs/current_benefits.asp.

The book is being printed and should be available in printed form in 3 to 4 weeks. Copies may be ordered by telephone by calling the U.S. Government Printing Office at 866-512-1800; on line at bookstore.gpo.gov; or by mail to U.S. Government Printing Office, PO Box 979050, St. Louis MO 63197-9000. The cost is \$5.00 per copy or \$100.00 for a pack of 25 copies.

THE VA HEALTH REVENUE SERVICE NUMBER IS 1-866-793-4591. This is the billing department for VA medical facilities, and may be called by veterans who have questions about their bills or balances owed to the hospital.

MORE EDUCATION BENEFITS COMING TO RESERVISTS, GUARDSMEN (VA News Release)
WASHINGTON – Some members of the National Guard and the Reserves who serve on active duty will see a significant increase in their VA educational benefits. Under new provisions, members who accumulate three years on active duty, regardless of breaks in service, may be eligible for the maximum payment under the Reserve Education Assistance Program (REAP). Previously, reservists and guardsmen had to serve two continuous years on active duty to receive the highest payment. The new eligibility rules are retroactive to October, 1, 2007. The top payment under REAP is currently \$880.80 per month.

The new law, part of the "National Defense Authorization Act," also expands the period of eligibility for certain Guard and Reserve members who complete their service obligation before separation from the selected reserve. Members meeting these criteria may be eligible to use REAP benefits for a period of ten years following discharge. Benefits typically end upon separation for members who do not complete their full, obligated service.

Additionally, some REAP-eligible National Guard and Reserve members may now make an extra contribution to the Department of Defense to increase their monthly benefit rates. Service members receive an additional \$5 per month for each \$20 contributed. With the maximum \$600 contribution, this option can add up to \$5,400 to a member's total 36-month education benefit package.

Beginning on October 1, 2008, participants in REAP and the Montgomery GI Bill program for the Selected Reserve who pursue non-degree programs lasting less than two years may also be eligible to receive accelerated payments.

During FY 2007, more than 60,000 National Guardsmen and reservists were paid under REAP, more than 41,000 were paid under the Montgomery GI Bill program for the Selected Reserves, and approximately 344,000 participants were paid under the Montgomery GI Bill for active-duty members.

For more information on changes to VA's GI Bill benefits, go to www.GIBILL.va.gov or contact VA directly at 1-888-GIBILL1 (or 1-888-442-4551).

SOUTH FLORIDA VA NATIONAL CEMETERY OFFICIALLY DEDICATED (VA News Release)
WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) held a dedication ceremony to officially open VA's 125th national cemetery, the South Florida VA National Cemetery in Lake Worth. The ceremony, which included remarks by Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. James B. Peake, was attended by Rep. Ron Klein and VA Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs William F. Tuerk. The dedication plaque was unveiled and military honors were performed by a joint service firing detail, ending with the playing of Taps.

The 313-acre site is in Palm Beach County along Route 441 between Lantana Road and Boynton Beach Boulevard. Nearly 400,000 veterans and their families live within the service area of the national cemetery.

Burials began in April 2007 in a 15-acre area that includes 1,708 plots for casketed remains and approximately 4,000 plots for cremated remains. When the first phase of development is completed, the cemetery will provide 14,000 casket sites, 3,000 columbarium niches and 9,500 in-ground niches. Construction will include other infrastructure elements, including administration and maintenance buildings, and a public assembly area.

Information on VA burial benefits can be obtained from national cemetery offices, from the Internet at <http://www.cem.va.gov> or by calling VA regional offices toll-free at 1-800-827-1000. For information on the South Florida VA National Cemetery, call the cemetery office at (561) 649-6489.

VA HAS ADDED 20 NEW VET CENTERS (VA News Release) PHILADELPHIA –An expansion by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) of its Vet Centers, which provide readjustment counseling and outreach services to returning combat veterans, is well ahead of schedule. 2008 will see a permanent increase in the number of Vet Centers, as the remaining facilities are brought on line to reach a record 232 Vet Centers by the end of the year.

The community-based Vet Centers are a key component of VA's mental health program, providing veterans with mental health screening and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) counseling, along with help for family members dealing with bereavement and loved ones with PTSD.

In Florida, new Vet Centers are in **Ft. Myers, Gainesville** and **Melbourne**. In Ft. Myers the new Vet Center is providing services in a temporary location.

Vet Centers provide counseling on employment, plus services on family issues, education and outreach, to combat veterans and their families. Vet Centers are staffed by small teams of professional counselors, outreach specialists and other specialists, many of who are combat veterans themselves.

VA's Vet Centers have hired 100 combat veterans back from Iraq and Afghanistan as outreach specialists, often placing them near military processing stations, to brief servicemen and women leaving the military about VA benefits. These outreach specialists meet with returning veterans, work through family assistance centers and visit military installations to carry the message that VA will be there for the troops and family members after discharge.

IMPORTANT DATES IN APRIL

April 1 payments for March due

April 7 last day to input change of address or establish direct deposit on compensation and pension awards in time for the 05-01-2008 payments

April 18 last day to change or cancel direct deposit on compensation and pension awards in time for the 05-01-2008 payments

VA FACILITIES ADDRESSES AND TELEPHONE NUMBERS:

VA Regional Office, St. Petersburg - PO Box 1437, St. Petersburg, FL 33731 **1-800-827-1000**

Regional Processing Office, Atlanta, GA (education claims) - PO Box 100022, Decatur, GA 30031-7022 **1-888-GIBILL1 (442-4551)**
Telephone number for Chapter 30 self-verifications **1-877-823-2378**

Veterans Health Administration Toll-Free Hotline (medical care) - **1-877-222-8387**

VA EFT Information Hotline (electronic funds transfer - direct deposit) **1-877-838-2778**

VA Insurance Center, Philadelphia (VA Insurance) - PO Box 42954, Philadelphia, PA 19101 **1-800-669-8477**

VA Health Administration Center (CHAMPVA and Spina Bifida health care) -
CHAMPVA inquiries: PO Box 65023, Denver, CO 80206-5023
CHAMPVA claims: PO Box 65024, Denver, CO 80206-5024
Spina Bifida inquiries and claims: PO Box 65025, Denver, CO 80206-5025 **1-800-733-8387**

Foreign Medical Program Office (medical treatment abroad) -
PO Box 65021, Denver, CO 80206-5021 **303-331-7590**

National Cemeteries

10,000 Bay Pines Blvd N, Bay Pines FL **727-398-9426**
6502 SW 102nd Ave, Bushnell FL 33513 **352-793-7740**
6501 S State Rd 7, Lake Worth, FL 33467 **561-649-6489**
Naval Air Station, Pensacola FL **850-453-4108/4846**
9810 State Hwy 72, Sarasota FL **877-861-9840**

National Cemetery Administration Office of Memorial Programs (headstones and markers) - 5109 Russell Rd Quantico VA 22134-3903 **1-800-697-6947**

Loan Guaranty Eligibility Center (certificates of eligibility) PO Box 20729, Winston-Salem, NC 27120 **1-888-244-6711**

Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) Unit - Chicago VA Regional Office **1-800-829-4833**

INTERNET SITES OF INTEREST:

VA Web Site: **www.va.gov**

VA Web Automated Reference Materials System (WARMS) **www.warms.vba.va.gov**

Property Management (sale of VA-repossessed homes): **www.ocwen.com**

Florida Dept of Veterans Affairs: **www.floridavets.org**

St. Pete Regional Office: **www.vba.va.gov/ro/south/spete**