



The Alabama Veteran

"Proudly Serving America's Finest"

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SUMMER 2010

IMPORTANT DATES

- Sept. 12 - 2010 NASDVA Annual Conference
- Sept. 17 - National POW/MIA Recognition Day
- Oct. 1 - SBVA Meeting; ADVA's 65th Anniversary
- Oct. 12 - Columbus Day
- Nov. 11 - Veterans Day
- Nov. 25 - Thanksgiving

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The new POW/MIA license plate is available for pre-order to any Alabama resident with a passenger motor vehicle.



Alabama's new POW/MIA License Plate Available for Pre-Order

Residents of Alabama who own a passenger vehicle now have the opportunity to pre-order the new state license plate that honors those servicemembers missing in action or were prisoners of war. Eligibility for the new license plate does not require military service.

The Alabama Legislature passed a bill in the 2009 legislative session that authorizes the new tag. The bill requires 1,000 preordered tags before they can go into production.

The deadline for the pre-order commitment is May 31, 2011, and is limited to cars, pickup trucks, and motor homes. Commitments to purchase the license plate will not apply to motorcycles. However, the motorcycle license plate will be produced once the 1,000 commitments to purchase the license plate are met.

A portion of the license plate fee will go to the Veterans Assistance Fund, which supports the Alabama Veterans Home Program.

Vietnam War Veterans Now Eligible for High School Diploma

In April, Gov. Bob Riley signed a bill into law that grants a high school diploma to Vietnam War Veterans who did not complete their high school curriculum because of their military service. The diploma is for any Vietnam Veteran who was honorably discharged from service and who attended high school in the State of Alabama immediately prior to entering the military from Nov. 15, 1961 to March 28, 1973.

The measure is an amendment to an existing law that allows for the award of a

high school diploma to WWII and Korean War veterans who did not complete high school because of their service. State Rep. Jack Page of Gadsden, a Vietnam Veteran, sponsored the bill together with the support of the Alabama Departments of Education and Veterans Affairs.

Eligible veterans can apply for the diploma through the principal's office of their former high school, or by contacting the office of the county superintendent of education.

Commissioner's Corner - W. Clyde Marsh



Unity of Effort Essential to Serving America's Finest

It is with exhilaration and great pride that I share a few thoughts with you regarding Alabama Veterans. First, let me thank all veterans across the nation that have carried the sword and shield in defense of our country. I would be remiss if I did not remember to thank those who are still bearing arms and fighting our wars today in distant lands.

Less than three percent of our population raised their right hand and put their lives on the line to preserve our nation's freedoms. But that small percentage, being America's Finest, are doing a magnificent job. Without the brave few, we could not preserve the legacy of our great nation our forefathers started over two hundred year ago for the many.

To those who serve in the county veterans service offices, claims division, veterans homes as well as headquarters staff, you are making progress toward improving conditions for veterans. I challenge you to follow your passion and continue to strive for excellence in being the best veterans' advocate you can be. Keep up the good work, but remember there is still more that needs to be done.

Today, veterans unemployment is among the highest in the nation. The suicide rate among our servicemembers is increasing at an alarming rate. The backlog of veterans claims continues to increase. And across our nation, more than 107,000 veterans are homeless.

Our veterans also bear the brunt of war injuries both visible and invisible that often become disabling and debilitating. Therefore, it is up to us to fill that breach and do everything we possibly can to assist our comrades and honor America's Finest.

We must continue to look for ways to improve our partnership with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, other agencies, and veterans outreach efforts at the grassroots level in order to make a difference for veterans in our state.

At a recent visit to the Birmingham VA Medical Center in June, I had the privilege of meeting with the Honorable Eric Shinseki. The Secretary was impressed with the commitment and services of the VA administrators, health care providers and volunteers he had the opportunity to meet during his tour of the center. I also had the opportunity to pass on to Secretary Shinseki our state's top priorities such as the funding and construction of our fourth state veterans' home and Alabama's first state veterans cemetery.

I do want to take this opportunity to address significant changes in Alabama that affect the new technologies we benefit from today. Primarily, the way we communicate.

Some municipalities in Alabama have passed measures that will restrict the use of handheld communication devices while driving.

Effective September 20, 2010, the following cities and towns in Alabama will have banned texting while driving: Montgomery, Birmingham, Vestavia Hills, Jacksonville, Roanoke, Prattville, Midfield, Lipscomb, Adamsville and Huntsville. Other limitations to such usage may also exist.

During vehicle transit, know and follow the laws in your area and wait until you have reached your next destination before responding to a cell phone call or electronic text message. The most important thing is your personal safety and the safety of others while driving.

In closing, I would like to remind all who serve in the ADVA that we are in the business of public service. I encourage everyone to continue to do their best to help others, strive for excellence, provide service with a smile, and be compassionate to those who have worn our nation's cloth and have sacrificed much for the liberties we enjoy as Americans.

Around the State

Alabama National Cemetery Honors America's Fallen on Memorial Day

A solemn day of remembrance marked the second annual Memorial Day observance that was held at the Alabama National Cemetery in Montevallo on May 31st.

One of the largest Memorial Day programs in Alabama, the ceremony paid tribute to those who have died while serving their country, and honored the veterans who are buried at the national cemetery.

Quincy Whitehead, director of the Alabama National Cemetery, provided welcoming remarks.

"I consider it a great honor and privilege to join you and to pay tribute to those who made the ultimate sacrifice to preserve this land of hopes and dreams. It is with pride and gratitude that we pause on this Memorial Day to remember great and brave Americans, and to recognize their valor and rejoice in the blessings their bravery has secured," said Whitehead.

Retired Navy Rear Admiral W. Clyde Marsh, commissioner of the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs, gave the keynote address. In his remarks, Marsh recalled losing seven Navy aviators, who were part of a coalition task force he commanded during the outset of the Iraq war.

"To lose the precious life of a young man or woman in combat is devastating, and it brings into focus the tremendous sacrifice our servicemembers are willing to make in defense of liberty, peace and prosperity for all Americans," said Marsh.



Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs Commissioner W. Clyde Marsh delivered the keynote address at the Alabama National Cemetery on Memorial Day. (Photo by Marshall Goggins)

During a night reconnaissance mission over the Persian Gulf, two British Sea King helicopters collided, killing everyone on board the aircraft. Six British Airmen and one U.S. Navy pilot under Marsh's command perished in the crash.

Marsh said America must keep a sacred promise to the fallen.

"As a grateful nation, we must promise to return our fallen servicemembers to hallowed grounds with the dignity and honor they deserve; to special places of eternal rest like here at the Alabama National Cemetery. And we should commit ourselves to never leave a veteran behind, in peacetime or in war."

As of Memorial Day, the Alabama National Cemetery had performed 465 burials.

State VA Reaches Out to Victims of Haiti Earthquake

Wanting to do their part to help the victims of the Haiti earthquake, employees from the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs contributed to the relief efforts through personal donations to the American Red Cross (ARC) Relief and Development Fund.

In February, the ADVA staff presented a gift of \$855 to Jackie Buck, CEO of The American Red Cross of Central Alabama.

Monetary donations to the ARC for emergency relief and recovery efforts in Haiti may include: deploying personnel, sending relief supplies and providing financial resources.



Around the State

Alabama to Host 2010 NASDVA Annual Conference

The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs will host the 2010 National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs Conference from September 12-16, 2010, at the Marriott Grand Hotel in Point Clear, Ala. The conference will bring VA directors from all fifty states and territories to Alabama.

The last time the conference was hosted in Alabama was in 1985.

“We are very excited to bring the NASDVA conference back to the great State of Alabama,” said Clyde Marsh, commissioner of the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs. Marsh, who serves as Vice President of NASDVA Southeast Region, offered to host the conference at the Association's 2009 Mid-Winter Conference in Washington, DC.

The conference will include presentations by government agencies and businesses that offer services and programs to veterans and their dependents, and collaboration for best practices among the state VA directors.

Utah State VA Director and NASDVA President Terry Schow will preside over the conference.

State VA Employees Recognized for Service

The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs recognized the outstanding service of department employees during a meeting of the State Board of Veterans Affairs in Montgomery on July 2.

Among those recognized was Henry County Veterans Service Officer Steve Lewis. Lewis was not only recognized as the ADVA's Veterans Service Officer of the Year, but he also received the Alabama Department of Personnel's State Employee of the Year Award. Lewis received the statewide recognition for his service to veterans and to his community.

Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs Commissioner Clyde Marsh also presented the Commissioner's Excellence Award to Mark Sullivan of Alexander City for his work as the department's training manager.

Kathryn Fuller, who serves as the ADVA Representative at the Bill Nichols State Veterans Home in Alexander City, received the Veterans Home “Super Star” of the Year

State Legislature Honors Women in the Military



Alabama Sen. Linda Coleman (center) sponsored the State Legislature's first observance of Women's History Month during a ceremony on March 23, 2010. Joining Sen. Coleman from left to right are: Air Force Maj. Kathryn Brown; Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Shelia Knox; Marine Sgt. Royneka Hood; Army National Guard Chief Warrant Officer Teresa Reeves; Army National Guard Lt. Col. Lea Compton; Marine Sgt. Cindia Fernandez; and Navy Petty Officer First Class Kristina Hatch.



Henry County Veterans Service Officer Steve Lewis (center) is presented the Alabama Employee of the Year Award by Commissioner Clyde Marsh (left) and Assistant Commissioner Mike Northcutt.

Award. Fuller and the home's staff won the prestigious Quality Award from the American Health Care Association and the National Center for Assisted Living for continuous quality improvement in long-term care at the home.

Around the State

AWARDS Continued from page 4

Debra Perry of Greensboro, and Vickie Prewett of Gulf Shores, were both recognized by the department by receiving the Veterans Administrative Support Assistant (ASA) of the Year Award.

Perry, an ASA in the Tuscaloosa County Veterans Service Office, was recognized for her outstanding service to the veterans and their families in the department's second district. Prewett received the award for her work in the Baldwin County Veterans Service Office in Bay Minette.

Receiving the American Legion's 2010 Veterans Service Officer of the Year was Harley Goble. Goble received the award at the American Legion's Annual Conference in Montgomery on June 19 for his leadership as the Madison County Veterans Service Officer.

VA Secretary Visits Alabama Veterans Medical Center

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki received an update on new and existing programs at the Birmingham VA Medical Center during a visit there on June 23.

At a news conference, Shinseki said the VA's three main priorities are: increasing veterans' access to VA health care; reducing the backlog of veterans claims; and ending veterans homelessness in the next five years.



Secretary Shinseki also met with Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs Commissioner W. Clyde Marsh during his visit to the center. Marsh had the opportunity to update the secretary on the progress of Alabama's fourth state veterans home and other ongoing initiatives for Alabama Veterans.

2010 Supermarket of Veterans Benefits held in Mobile



The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs hosted the 2010 Supermarket of Veterans Benefits in Mobile. Shelia Worthington and Willie Moore (left) from the ADVA's Scholarship Division provide assistance.

With one of the largest veterans population in Alabama, Mobile was the site for the 2010 Supermarket of Veterans Benefits that was held at the Spring Hill Recreation Center on June 18, 2010.

After months of planning and coordinating with other participating agencies, the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs hosted the event that provided veterans and their dependents a "one-stop-shop" opportunity for benefits and services.

The event was organized by ADVA District Manager Marshall Smith, County Veterans Service Officer Lynda Jenkins, and staff from the county veterans service office in Mobile. This was the first Supermarket of Veterans Benefits to be held in the area.

The Mobile based VA Community Outpatient Clinic, Gulf Coast Veterans Council, TRICARE, Alabama Career Center and the Small Business Administration were among the more than 20 agencies that took part in the event.

Veterans and their family members received information and

assistance on an array of state and federal programs and services to include VA pension and compensation benefits, long-term care, education and training benefits, career opportunities, health insurance and much more.

Raymond Tolsma of Mobile was among the hundreds of veterans who turned out for the Supermarket of Veterans Benefits. A WWII Veteran who was aboard the USS Maryland at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese's attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941, said he came to the event at the request of his daughter.

"I've always been in good health, so I never used VA benefits. But at my daughter's persistence, I'm here to see if there is anything I might qualify for," said Tolsma.

This was the fifth Supermarket of Veterans Benefits the ADVA has hosted that has served thousands of veterans in Alabama.

News to Use

VA Simplifies Access to Health Care and Benefits for Veterans with PTSD

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki announced a critical step forward in providing an easier process for Veterans seeking health care and disability compensation for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), with the publication of a final regulation in the *Federal Register*.

“This nation has a solemn obligation to the men and women who have honorably served this country and suffer from the often devastating emotional wounds of war,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. “This final regulation goes a long way to ensure that Veterans receive the benefits and services they need.”

By publishing a final regulation in the *Federal Register* to simplify the process for a Veteran to claim service connection for PTSD, VA reduces the evidence needed if the trauma claimed by a Veteran is related to fear of hostile military or terrorist activity and is consistent with the places, types, and circumstances of the Veteran’s service.

This science-based regulation relies on evidence that concluded that a Veteran’s deployment to a

war zone is linked to an increased risk of PTSD

Under the new rule, VA would not require corroboration of a stressor related to fear of hostile military or terrorist activity if a VA doctor confirms that the stressful experience recalled by a Veteran adequately supports a diagnosis of PTSD and the Veteran’s symptoms are related to the claimed stressor.

Previously, claims adjudicators were required to corroborate that a non-combat Veteran actually experienced a stressor related to hostile military activity. This final rule simplifies the development that is required for these cases.

VA expects this rulemaking to decrease the time it takes VA to decide access to care and claims falling under the revised criteria. More than 400,000 Veterans currently receiving compensation benefits are service connected for PTSD. Combined with VA’s shorter claims form, VA’s new streamlined, science-based regulation allows for faster and more accurate decisions that also expedite access to medical care and other benefits for Veterans.

Veterans’ Medallion Ready for Order

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is now offering a bronze medallion to attach to existing, privately purchased headstones or markers, signifying a deceased’s status as a veteran.

The new item can be furnished instead of a traditional government headstone or marker for veterans whose death occurred on or after Nov. 1, 1990, and whose grave in a private cemetery is marked with a

privately purchased headstone or marker.

Under federal law, eligible veterans buried in a private cemetery are entitled to either a government-furnished grave marker or the new medallion, but not both.

Information on VA burial benefits is available at any National Cemetery office, online at www.cem.va.gov, or by calling 1-800-827-1000.

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News to Use

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National Veterans Suicide Prevention Lifeline

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has founded a national suicide prevention hotline to ensure veterans in emotional crisis have free, 24/7 access to trained counselors. To operate the Veterans Hotline, the VA partnered with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Veterans can call the Lifeline number, 1-800-272-TALK (8255), and press "1" to be routed to the Veterans Service Prevention Hotline.

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline currently responds to an average of more than 1,800 calls a day or 54,000 calls per month.

The SAMHSA Lifeline and Veterans Suicide Prevention Hotline provide around-the-clock access to specialized crisis counseling for veterans and their families who are seeking help.

The Lifeline has established sites with the MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube social networks where people can access informa-

tion and help at the following sites:

www.myspace.com/800273TALK; www.facebook.com/800273TALK; www.youtube.com/800273TALK.

Additionally, users who mention "suicide" in their postings to Help.com receive an automatic response about the Lifeline urging them to call 1-800-273-TALK.

The Lifeline also developed an innovative online site, the Lifeline Gallery: Stories of Hope and Recovery, (www.lifeline-gallery.org). The Lifeline Gallery is an interactive website using animated avatars to raise awareness about the effects of suicide. The Gallery provides a safe place for the survivors of people who have died through suicide, suicide attempt survivors, and those in the suicide prevention field to share their stories of hope and recovery through computer-generated avatars.

Over 1/4 million callers have been connected to the VA National Suicide Hotline.

National VA Update

More Than \$3.6 Billion in Post-9/11 GI Bill Benefits Issued

June 22, 2010, marked the 66th Anniversary of the signing of the GI Bill into law. On the special day, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs announced it had issued more than \$3.6 billion in the bill's newest manifestation, the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

Benefit payments under the bill implemented last year have gone to more than 285,000 people and their educational institutions.

On June 22, 1944, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights.

The Veterans Administration - as it was known at that time - was responsible for carrying out the law's key provisions for education and training, loan guaranty for homes, farms or businesses, and unemployment pay.

Before World War II, college and homeownership were, for the most part, unreachable dreams for the average American. Thanks to the GI Bill, millions who would have flooded the job market opted for education instead.

In the peak year of 1947, veterans accounted for 49 percent of

college admission. By the time the original GI Bill ended, July 25, 1956, 7.8 million of the 16 million WWII veterans had participated in an education or training program.

In 1984, former Mississippi Congressman G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery revamped the GI Bill. The Montgomery GI Bill assured that VA home loan guaranty and education programs continued to work for Veterans of the post-Vietnam era.

For more information on the Post-9/11 GI Bill, visit www.gibill.va.gov/.

New Open Government Plan Emphasizes VA's Commitment to Transparency

Supporting President Obama's pledge to make transparency and openness the pillars of good government, the Department of Veterans Affairs has updated its "Open Government Plan," reaffirming VA's commitment to become a leader among federal agencies at applying these principles to achieve its mission of serving veterans.

"Open government, at its core, is about ensuring citizens' access to public information and enabling better engagement and advocacy on behalf of our Veterans," said VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki. "This plan helps us drive transparency, participation and collaboration with our stakeholders—essential to our mission to transform VA into a Veteran-centric, results-oriented, and forward-looking organization.

VA is in the midst of a broad transformation, and the initiatives laid out in the Open Government Plan offer a roadmap to accelerate that positive change. The plan is available on the Internet at www.va.gov/open.

The plan leverages technologies ranging from electronic claims processing to popular social media like Facebook and Twitter in order to enhance services VA provides to Veterans. It also reports on the progress VA has made with its highly successful Innovation Initiative, now in its third phase.

VA Launches Development of New Online Claims System

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs announced plans to develop a fully automated, online system for handling Veterans' disability compensation claims. More than a simple digitization of existing paper-based claims, the new system is part of VA's modernization of the end-to-end processing workflow. Automation will substantially reduce processing time and increase accuracy while simplifying the way that veterans interact with the claims process.

"This new program accelerates our effort to eliminate the claims backlog through automation and modernization of our systems," said VA Secretary Eric Shinseki.

Veterans exposed to herbicides while serving in the Republic of Vietnam who now have B-cell leukemia (hairycell leukemia), Parkinson's disease, or ischemic heart disease are slated to be the first users of the automated system.

The final regulation implementing the presumption of service connection for these three diseases is poised to become effective later this year. While the first use of the new system will be limited to this pending subset of disabilities, usage will expand over time to include claims for other conditions.

VA has awarded a \$9.1 million development contract with IBM. VA estimates the new system will assist as many as 100,000 veterans when implemented in November.



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