



STATE OF ALABAMA
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
P.O. BOX 1509
MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA 36102-1509
TELEPHONE (334) 242-5077
FAX (334) 242-5102



Rear Admiral W. Clyde Marsh, USN, (Ret.)
Commissioner

NEWS BRIEFS

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Contact: Robert Horton
Public Information Officer
(334) 242-5084

VA Secretary Commits to Reducing Delays in Disability Claims

In his first appearance before Congress since becoming Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Eric Shinseki said the VA is looking at a major switch that would phase out paper processing of VA disability claims.

The VA secretary is moving to reduce the delays in paying veterans' disability claims through an all-electronic claim's system that could speed up the process. Shinseki told the House Veterans Affairs Committee that technology is needed to ensure timely and accurate decisions for veterans claims.

To help reduce the backlog of claims now, the VA will hire 1,100 more staff this year to deal with the backlog of cases that typically take six months to process. The secretary said his objective is to phase out the paper process for VA claims by 2012.

President Nominates Illinois VA Director for VA Assistant Secretary

President Barack Obama has nominated Tammy Duckworth, director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, to be the Assistant Secretary of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

As assistant secretary, Duckworth will direct VA's public affairs, internal communications and intergovernmental relations that includes the VA's homeless program, consumer affairs and special rehabilitative services.

In addition to leading the Illinois VA department, Duckworth is a major in the Illinois Army National Guard. As a pilot flying combat missions in 2004, she suffered serious injuries when her Blackhawk helicopter was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade, losing both legs and partial use of one arm.

VA Secretary Shinseki said Duckworth brings significant talent, leadership and personal experience to VA's important work.

Hardship Veterans Outreach

VA's Medical Care Hardship program is designed to help veterans qualify for VA enrollment for health care services if a veteran has had a recent change in their income.

Veterans with a significant loss of income can apply for cost-free VA health care enrollment by contacting their County Veterans Service Office, or by calling the VA's Health Benefits Service Center at 1-877-222 VETS (8387).

Dates of Vietnam Era Established for VA Benefits Purposes

Certain U. S. Department of Veteran Affairs financial benefit and medical care programs require wartime service. The Vietnam Era dates, for VA financial benefits purposes, for veterans who actually served in the War Theater are from February 28, 1961 through May 7, 1975.

For Herbicide Exposure financial benefits, veterans who served in Vietnam between January 9, 1962 and May 7, 1975 are presumed to have been exposed to Agent Orange and other herbicides. For veterans who did not serve in the Vietnam War Theater, the Vietnam Era for financial benefit purposes is from August 5, 1964 to May 7, 1975.

For assistance in obtaining benefits or general information, please visit or call your County Veterans Service Office.

VA Offers Student Work-Study Allowance Program

Qualified students who are members of the Selected Reserve and are participating in the Montgomery G. I. Bill Program, known as Chapter 106, may qualify for participation in the Work-Study Allowance Program. A veteran

enrolled at a rate of $\frac{3}{4}$ time or greater in a college degree, vocational or professional program, may qualify.

Participants are paid in advance and normally work under the supervision of a VA employee. For further information on this program, please contact the VA Regional Office at 1-800-827-1000.

Donate Part of Income Tax Refund to State Veterans' Homes Program

Anyone filing an Alabama State Income Tax who is receiving a refund may donate as little as \$1 or more for the State Veterans Home Program.

This state tax refund contribution is used to provide the broadest scope of medical and supporting services which is possible to our deserving veterans who are residents in Alabama's three Veterans Homes in Huntsville, Alexander City and Bay Minette.

Your contributions will be greatly appreciated for this worthy cause.