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NEWS BRIEFS

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VA Launches Partnership for Non-Government Outreach

The Department of Veterans Affairs has announced a new partnership with non-government organizations, or NGOs, that provide services to veterans, their families and their survivors. The partnership is called the *NGO Gateway Initiative*.

Under the initiative, the VA will work with the Veterans Coalition Incorporated, a non-profit group that was formed by major veterans' service organizations two years ago, to assist non-profit organizations in identifying the unmet needs of veterans, families and survivors at the community level.

The Veterans Coalition and VA will help minimize duplication of effort and confusion among organizations that provide veterans services and will encourage feedback on issues such as physical and mental health, employment, and satisfaction with government programs and benefits that affect veterans.

By tapping into the power and resources of NGOs, the VA can ensure more veterans and their families receive not only VA services, but also other assistance in their communities.

For more information on the NGO Gateway Initiative, the public can call the Veterans Coalition at (703) 408-0122.

VA Assisting Veterans with Health Care Costs

For veterans struggling financially due to a job loss or decreased income, the Department of Veterans Affairs offers an assortment of programs that can relieve the costs of health care or provide care at no cost.

If a veteran's income was ruled too high for VA health care, they may now be able to enter the VA care system based upon a hardship if their current year's income is projected to fall below federal income thresholds due to a job loss, separation from service, or some other financial setback.

Veterans returning from a combat zone are also entitled to five years of free VA care upon their discharge from the military. Each VA medical center in Alabama has an enrollment coordinator available to provide veterans information about the VA's free health care programs.

For more information, call the VA's Health Benefits Service Center at 1-877-222 VETS (8387), or your County Veterans Service Office.

Department of Defense Offers Casualty Assistance Services to Retirees

When a military retiree dies, the next-of-kin should immediately notify the Defense Finance and Accounting Service by calling the DFAS toll free number at 1-800-321-1080.

DFAS will take steps to close the retiree's pay account and mail a survivor benefits packet to the next-of-kin which includes the application forms for survivor benefits. Additionally, the local retired activities office at the nearest military installation is available to render assistance as well as your County Veterans Service Office.

Commissary and Exchange Privileges

Unlimited exchange and commissary store privileges in the United States are available to honorably discharged veterans with service-connected disability rated at 100%, recipients of the Medal of Honor and their dependents, unremarried surviving spouses of members or retired members of the Armed Forces, and reservists and their dependents.

Commissary and exchanges services are available at most military installations in Alabama.

Social Security Retirement Benefits

Social Security laws allow qualified individuals to apply for their Social Security retirement benefits as early as age 62. This applies as well to a veterans spouse or divorced spouse.

Widows, surviving divorced spouses and widowers can also apply at age 60 while disabled surviving spouses or disabled surviving divorced spouses can apply at age 50. Normally when retirement benefits are paid before full retirement age the benefit amount is permanently reduced.

For instance, if your full retirement age is 65, the benefit reduction at age 62 is 20 percent; 13 1/3 percent at age 63 and 6 2/3 percent at 64. To reach an informed decision on when to retire, please contact your nearest Social Security Administration office for expert counseling and advice