

# THE VETERANS MONTHLY



VOLUME 1, ISSUE 7

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DECEMBER 2010

## HELP FOR COMBAT VETERANS RETURNING TO CIVILIAN LIFE

### VET CENTERS PROVIDE HELP NATIONWIDE

Established by Congress in 1979, the Vet Center is a program that was originally created to provide societal readjustment assistance to Vietnam Era Veterans. In response to the Persian Gulf War, eligibility was extended in 1991 to Veterans who served during other periods of post-Vietnam armed conflict. This meant that Veterans involved in combat operations in such places as Panama, Lebanon, Somalia, Kosovo/Bosnia, and the Persian Gulf were now eligible for Vet Center services. In response to pressure to expand the reach of what had by this time come to be recognized as a tremendously successful program, Congress extended eligibility to include WWII and Korean Combat Veterans in 1996.

The Vet Center's mission is to provide combat Veterans with a wide range of counseling, outreach, and referral services designed to help make their post-service readjustment go as smoothly as possible. In 2003, VA Secretary Principi extended Vet Center service eligibility to Veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and all subsequent

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*Bergmann & Moore, LLC provides premium legal services to Veterans and their dependents. While consultations and other services are offered free of charge, fees are charged for representation before VA on the condition that the case is won. Managed by former VA attorneys, Bergmann & Moore, LLC is composed of seasoned attorneys and support staff who are experts at obtaining benefits for their clients. The firm encourages Veterans and their dependents to make full use of the free services available to them through their local Veterans Service Officer and/or Veterans Service Organizations.*



operations in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). To qualify for Vet Center services, you or a family member must have served in a combat zone and earned a combat ribbon.

Interestingly, family members of qualifying Veterans are also eligible for Vet Center services. This feature of the Vet Center's approach demonstrates both the depth of their commitment to helping combat Veterans readjust as well as their understanding of how important it is to properly equip those most intimately involved in the readjustment process. In 2003, VA Secretary Principi authorized Vet Centers to provide grief counseling services to surviving parents, spouses, children and siblings of deceased service members who pass while on active duty.

In addition to counseling Veterans for combat-related trauma, the Vet Center also counsels Veterans who have been sexually traumatized while serving in the military. Counseling for Military Sexual Trauma (MST) is available regardless of the Veterans' gender or era of service. MST counseling may involve individual or group counseling, marital and family counseling, connecting with community agencies, and referral for benefits assistance or substance abuse information. The goal is to help the Veteran learn the skills he or she needs to regain confidence and cope with the emotions associated with MST.

Readjustment counseling is provided at one of the 300 community-based Vet Centers expected to be finished by the end of 2011. These centers are located around the continental United States, Alaska, Hawaii, Guam, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and the Philippines Islands.

Vet Center Contact staff also provide services through Mobile Vet Centers (MVCs). MVCs provide readjustment counseling and benefits information to Veterans across the country. The 50 motorized vehicles that provide the mobile services are large recreational vehicles and are driven to remote rural areas to provide services to Veterans who would otherwise have a great deal of difficulty getting the help they need. MVCs are also equipped to handle a wide range of situations. They have the capacity to provide emergency support in the event of a natural disaster, house a satellite dish that connects to communications and audio-visual equipment, and are equipped with a fax line, phone lines, laptops, encrypted computer lines, and WiFi gear. The value of the MVCs will continue to increase as more Veterans discover the importance of the resources and support provided by Vet Center counselors.

Vet Center staff members are available to talk toll free during normal business hours at (800) 905-4675 (Eastern Time) and (866) 496-8838 (Pacific Time). You can also learn more about their programs and locations at [www.vetcenter.va.gov](http://www.vetcenter.va.gov). ■

## CHRISTMAS WITH THE VETS

Zablocki VA Hospital's 23rd Annual 'Christmas with the Vets' celebration kicked off on December 10th. Started in 1988 by two Vietnam Veterans named Jeff 'Doc' Dentice and Mike Lango, the annual event has grown to become a cherished tradition at the Milwaukee, Wisconsin hospital. Members of local American Legion, VFW, VVA, and other Veteran and civilian organizations volunteer their time and resources to the event to bring a little cheer to the resident Veterans.

Jeff 'Doc' Dentice has single-handedly organized the event since 1996. Under his watchful eye, a number of festive performances have taken place. In 2010 alone, a vocal performance by Nashville artist and World War II Veteran Larry Lee Phillipson, traditional dances by the Trinity Irish Dancers, and even an appearance of jolly old Saint Nicholas himself has the stage for a very merry Christmas.

To learn more, visit [www.war-veterans.org/christmas.htm](http://www.war-veterans.org/christmas.htm)

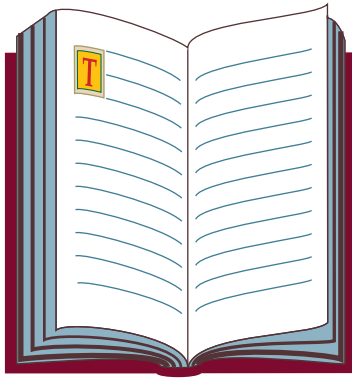


## MEDICAL MINUTE

### DIABETES IN VIETNAM VETERANS

One of the most common and serious chronic diseases in the United States, diabetes directly affects 16 million Americans; 5.4 million of whom are not even aware that they have the disease. Approximately 800,000 people are diagnosed with diabetes each year. The commonness of diabetes has risen steadily in the last half of this century and is expected to continue to rise as the U.S. population ages, as the minority populations most susceptible to type II diabetes grow, and as obesity rates rise.

Vietnam Veterans with type 2 diabetes are eligible for disability compensation from VA based on their presumed exposure to herbicides. If you served on the ground or in the inland waterways of Vietnam and have type 2 diabetes, contact a local VSO to learn about what benefits you may be eligible for. ■



## BOOKS FOR VETERANS

Professor Carmen Garcia Rosado is the author of *Las WACS*. *Las WACS* offers a historical account of the participation of 200 Puerto Rican women who became pioneers when they volunteered their time and energies to the defense of the Allied cause between 1944 and 1946 during the second World War. In this feature, we have the honor of speaking with Professor Carmen Garcia Rosado about her book.

*Q. What motivated you to write Las WACS and what does WACS stand for?*

A. WACS is the English acronym for the Women Army Corps (United States Army). I wrote this book to tell the story of the first 200 Puerto Rican servicewomen to serve in the Second World War. Our participation was a historical event which should have been recognized upon our return to Puerto Rico. However, it was given absolutely no attention at all. There was a collective indifference to our contribution.

*Q. Why did you join the Army at a time when female military service was considered inappropriate?*

A. I did it because I always dreamed of traveling the world. I wanted to visit other countries, improve my English, and gain life experience. On September 12, 1944, I was seventeen years old when a newspaper headline was published that read "Puerto Rican women needed to replace men going out to war." At the time, I was working as an elementary school teacher in a rural school in a suburb named Tejas of the town of Las Piedras.

*Q. You made the decision to join the WAC during War Time when you were 17 years old?*

A. That is correct. The book explains how the 200 Puerto Rican women were selected from over 2,000 applicants. We were educated women and included both married and single doctors, teachers, nurses, and even housewives.

*Q. Did you have military basic training?*

A. We (because I like to talk collectively) received basic training at the military base of Oglethorpe in Georgia, which began on October 15, 1944.

*Q. What was your occupation in the Army?*

A. We worked in several areas, including clerical, medical, transportation, and mail. I was a dental assistant at the General Hospital of the military base. Later, in 1945, the 200 Puerto Rican female soldiers were sent to work in the military post office at General Headquarters in New York. We were all specialists in classifying and examining the correspondence that arrived from war camps overseas.

On the back cover of her book, Professor Rosado says that "this book will discard concepts and misconceptions from the readers mind that have lasted for decades about our participation." In her book, Professor Rosado says that after her return from active duty, she resumed her job as a teacher and, alongside her husband, accomplished her dream of traveling around the world, learning about other cultures, and meeting new people.

The second revised edition of this book (2007) is available only in Spanish. To learn how you can obtain a copy of *Las WACS*, please contact the author at (787) 751-6076. ■



# MILLER TO HEAD HOUSE VA COMMITTEE

Speaker-designate John Boehner recently announced that Congressman Jeff Miller has been elected Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Miller has served Florida's first district for the last ten years and will now lead the committee in charge of supervising VA. This position comes with a large amount of responsibility, as VA is the second largest department in the federal government with a budget of more than \$119 billion and a staff of more than 300,000.

A fiscal conservative, Miller indicates he will focus on issues such as claims backlogs and safety and security breaches. He has also expressed an interest in having VA adopt more efficient practices and subjecting the department to higher levels of oversight.



With more than 110,000 Veteran constituents, Miller's district boasts one of the largest Veteran populations in the United States. As incoming chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee, he has promised to usher in an era of "openness and transparency."

Miller is currently the ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee's Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities. In 2009, he was appointed to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and continues to serve on that committee. What remains in doubt - and indeed what is on the minds of countless Veterans - is his ability to do something about VA's enormous claims backlog which, according to recent estimates, adds more than 100,000 new claims each month.

To learn more, visit [www.jeffmiller.house.gov/](http://www.jeffmiller.house.gov/)

# NEW APPROACH COMBINES SMOKING AND PTSD THERAPIES

New findings released from the Seattle, Washington-based VA Puget Sound Health Care System suggest that Veterans with PTSD related to their military service may have a better chance of breaking their nicotine dependency if the therapy they receive for their PTSD is combined with clinical treatment for smoking.

The research of Dr. Miles McFall and his colleagues found that through combining mental health treatment of PTSD with smoking cessation therapy, Veterans tobacco abstinence rates were higher than the rates of similar Veterans who received smoking cessation treatment and mental health care separately. Dr. McFall's research study involved 943 military-related PTSD patients who were observed for 18 to 48 months between November of 2004 and July of 2009.

People suffering from a mental illness are more likely to depend on nicotine than people without a mental illness. Long considered a mental disorder, PTSD has been found to be strongly connected to smoking and frequent, failed attempts to quit. It is no wonder, then, that nearly half of all PTSD patients in the VA health care system are smokers or use tobacco in some other form.

According to VA, approximately 400,000 Veterans are undergoing treatment for PTSD. The study's PTSD patients who received the combined mental health care and smoking cessation treatment were twice as likely to quit as the patients who were subject to the mental health care and smoking cessation treatment separately. The patients who experienced the combination were also more likely to try and continue to use smoking cessation medications than patients enrolled only in programs designed to help them move past their nicotine addiction.

The study concluded that "post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms for quitters and non-quitters improved" in both groups. According to the authors, "Delivering cessation assistance as part of primary mental health treatment was both more effective than referral and led to greater intensity of treatment utilization, a major factor in treatment effectiveness. Integrated care could be applied to the sizable proportion of smokers among the approximately 400,000 veterans enrolled in VA care for PTSD." ■

To learn more, visit [www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/ptsd101/course-modules/smoking-cessation.asp](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/ptsd101/course-modules/smoking-cessation.asp)

# INITIATIVES FOR FASTER AND EASIER CLAIMS PROCESSING

## UNDER PRESSURE, VA MAKES EFFORTS TO INCREASE SPEED

The VA claims process is very often quite complicated and time-consuming. This past year, however, VA has made efforts to implement a number of significant changes designed to make the VA claims process quicker and easier for individuals submitting claims. While serious doubts remain about VA's ability to actually affect the enormous backlog of claims, here are some of the efforts that have been put forward to address the problem of chronic inefficiency.

- A shortened VA Form 21-526 claims form has been introduced for Veterans applying for the first time to VA for disability compensation or pension benefits. The length of this form, which was originally 23 pages, has been cut in half. The new form is accessible through the VA's website at [www.va.gov/vaforms](http://www.va.gov/vaforms).
- VA has instituted a Fully Developed Claim (FDC) program which was designed to be one of the fastest means to receive a claims decision. The FDC program can be used for original, secondary and increased disability service connection claims. In general, under the FDC program, claimants are responsible for gathering the information, records and documents that will prove their claims and submitting it to the VA. FDC claimants use an even shorter claims form called the VA Form 21-526EZ, available at [www.vba.va.gov/pubs/forms/VBA-21-526EZ-ARE.pdf](http://www.vba.va.gov/pubs/forms/VBA-21-526EZ-ARE.pdf). This website provides guidance and instructions to claimants opting to file their claim under this expedited process. Under this process, the VA will still provide medical examinations or obtain medical opinions if they determine they are necessary to decide the claim.
- A Fast Track claims process was implemented for Veterans submitting claims for three new presumptive conditions (ischemic heart disease, hairy cell leukemia and Parkinson's disease) based on Agent Orange exposure in the Republic of Vietnam or inland waterways. Fast Track is an automated, web-based claims processing system. Veterans applying for benefits on the basis of these presumptive conditions may file online at [www.fasttrack.va.gov](http://www.fasttrack.va.gov).

- The Fast Track processing program implemented with respect to the new presumptive conditions is a precursor to a more comprehensive system to be developed for paperlessly processing other disability and pension claims as well. The VA Regional Office in Providence, Rhode Island was selected as a test site for a paperless claim processing initiative.

- The VA began a major reform of the physicians' guides and automated routines that are supposed to streamline the claims process for injured or ill Veterans. The first three physician questionnaires cover the new presumptive Agent Orange conditions mentioned above. These questionnaires are the first of 79 disability benefits questionnaires that will guide Veterans' personal physicians, as well as VA physicians, in the evaluation of the most frequent medical conditions affecting Veterans. For Veterans who receive their care from private doctors, VA has placed the disability benefits questionnaires on its website ([www.vba.va.gov/disabilityexams](http://www.vba.va.gov/disabilityexams)) with submission instructions for physicians.

- A pilot project was proposed to try and significantly reduce the average time needed to obtain health care records from private physicians through the use of a contractor and the internet. When private medical records support a Veteran's application for benefits (and a release from the Veteran has been provided), a contractor will quickly retrieve the records from the health care provider, scan them into a digital format, and send the material to VA through a secure transmission. The test project is expected to involve about 60,000 records requests among regional benefits offices in Phoenix, Arizona; New York, New York; St. Louis, Missouri; Portland, Oregon; Chicago, Illinois; Anchorage, Alaska; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Jackson, Mississippi.

As Representative Martin Heinrich, a co-sponsor of legislation designed to improve the claims process, has stated: "Few sacrifices are as selfless as those our military service men and women make in defense of our country. . . . By streamlining the claims process, we will be able to compensate our service members in a manner and speed that directly reflects our steadfast commitment to them." Despite the rosy outlook, however, important questions remain unanswered. How many people actually know about these initiatives? When does the pilot program go national? How long until the enormous backlog of claims is reduced? Until these and other questions are answered, it is a safe bet to take these initiatives with a grain of salt. ■

# A HISTORY OF PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS AT VHA

## A BRIEF LOOK AT A VITAL PROFESSION

If you receive your health care from the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), you may receive treatment from a Physician Assistant (PA). People often wonder what a PA is – a doctor, a nurse, or something else? PAs are health professionals who practice medicine under the aegis of a licensed physician. They can deliver a broad range of services that vary by state law, experience, and training, but can include: examinations, diagnosing and treating illnesses, ordering and interpreting tests, providing counseling, assisting in surgery, and prescribing medications. They are certified by the Nation Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants and are state-licensed. U.S. News and World Report included PAs in its list of best careers for 2009. An entry-level PA can earn around \$70,000. Unlike nurse practitioners who are trained under the nursing model, PAs are educated in the medical model, but they spend less time in school than physicians. They are also different from medical assistants, who typically perform administrative and clerical tasks for medical facilities.

The PA profession began in the mid-1960s in response to a shortage of primary care physicians in the U.S. and has its roots in the military. The first class of PAs was composed of former U.S. Navy hospital corpsmen and U.S. Army medics who served in these roles during the Vietnam War. They were then educated and trained to become PAs at the Duke University Medical Center. The program was based in part on the fast-track training of doctors used during World War II.

A recent study published in the Journal of the American Academy of Physician Assistants examined the characteristics of PAs in the VHA using administrative data from the VA Central Office. The lead researchers were Denni Woodmansee, acting director of PA services for VA, and Roderick Hooker, a PA for VA in Texas. The study found that there were 1,878 PAs employed in 153 VA medical centers and many of the 976 VA community-based outpatient clinics; however, the use of PAs across these facilities was irregular. Some locations have no PAs, whereas other regions have very high numbers. The VHA has stated that it is a goal to employ 2,550 PAs by 2018 as part of an overall goal of expansion. However, the study found that 34% of the current PAs are within five years of retirement eligibility. As such, VHA will need to hire more than 200 PAs per year to account

for the large numbers of retiring PAs and expansion goals. The VHA faces competition from the private sector (where PAs are often offered a higher income) in its employment initiative. Strategies for recruitment are being developed, such as repayment of education costs, having retirees return on a part-time basis, and providing PA students exposure to the realities of working in the VHA environment.

The study found that most PAs work full time, 51% are male, the mean age is 49, and 31% have military experience. PAs at the VHA work in medical services, surgery, mental health, and other areas. However, the researchers also found that less than one percent of PAs are in senior administrative roles and suggested that such positions “need to be filled by PAs who can provide a representative voice in organization change and policy decisions.”

While PAs are licensed by a state, the VHA is a federal entity, so individual state PA laws have little bearing on their practice while working for the VHA. This means that a VA facility in a certain state could approve for PAs to perform duties that they would not be authorized to perform in local facilities according to that state’s law. ■

For more information, please visit [www.vapaa.org](http://www.vapaa.org)





# VETERAN EVENTS CALENDAR

HERE IS A LIST OF SOME EXCITING  
EVENTS HAPPENING NATIONWIDE  
THROUGHOUT JANUARY

## **Book Signing with Frank Cox, Author of Lullabies for Lieutenants**

The Marine Shop, Quantico  
300 Potomac Avenue - Quantico, VA 22134  
Telephone: (703) 640-7195  
January 21st, 2011  
[www.mca-marines.org/](http://www.mca-marines.org/)

## **Veterans Outreach and Benefits Fair**

Eddie Hills Fun Cycles  
401 North Scott Avenue - Wichita Falls, TX 76308  
Telephone: (940) 716-8599  
January 22nd, 2011  
[www.texvet.com/event/2011-01/veterans-outreach-and-benefits-fair](http://www.texvet.com/event/2011-01/veterans-outreach-and-benefits-fair)

## **Veterans Services Meeting**

Renville County Government Services Center  
105 South 5th Street, Room 117 - Olivia, MN 56277  
Telephone: (320) 523-3763  
January 26th, 2011  
[www.co.renville.mn.us](http://www.co.renville.mn.us)

## **Veterans Career Opportunity Expo**

LP Field (Tennessee Titans' Stadium)  
1 Titans Way - Nashville, TN 37213  
Telephone: (513) 683-5020  
January 27th, 2011  
[www2.recruitmilitary.com/expos/345-Nashville/employers/information](http://www2.recruitmilitary.com/expos/345-Nashville/employers/information)



# CLAIMS PROCESS ADVICE

## **VA CLAIMS PROCESS 101: PERSONAL HEARINGS**

Personal hearings give Veterans the opportunity to present to VA testimony and other evidence in support of their cases. Personal hearings can either be requested through the VA form 9 or through writing directly to the Board and requesting one. Keep in mind, however, that hearings are not necessary for the adjudication of a claim and are not always warranted.

The two types of personal hearings are: BVA hearings and Regional office (RO) hearings. BVA hearings come in three forms. The first is called a Travel Board hearing and involves visiting locally with officials who have travelled from Washington, D.C. The second involves the Veteran actually travelling to the BVA office in Washington, D.C. The third is accomplished through the use of teleconferencing equipment and allows the Veteran to speak directly to BVA officials in Washington, D.C. RO hearings simply involve meeting with a hearing officer from your regional office. In either case, VA will not pay for any expenses in connection with your hearing.

You must decide whether a BVA or RO hearing is best for your situation. RO hearings can generally be scheduled sooner, as they are largely dependent upon the hearing officer's schedule. BVA hearings, however, are a bit more complicated. The time you will wait for a Travel Board hearing is dependent upon such factors as your docket number, the travel resources available to Board members, and the number of hearing requests coming out of your regional office. The preferred method for an increasingly large number of Veterans is to have the hearing held via teleconference. They are less complicated to arrange and can be scheduled more frequently than the two other forms. Hearings held at the Board's offices in Washington, D.C., will be scheduled for a time close to when BVA will consider the case. Ideally, this will be around three months before the case is reviewed. Talk to your VSO for more information about whether a hearing is in your best interest.

For additional information, please visit [www.vetlawyers.com](http://www.vetlawyers.com)

# VSO SPOTLIGHT

**FREDDIE MCPHAUL, VETERANS SERVICE OFFICER FOR HOKE COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA**



Named for the illustrious Confederate General Robert F. Hoke, Hoke County was formed in 1911 from adjacent Cumberland and Robeson counties. North Carolina's 99th county, Hoke County's government is in Raeford, a beautiful city with a population of around 3,500 residents. In the autumn, Hoke County residents get together for their annual Turkey Festival. The people of Hoke County are well known for their hospitality and strong community bonds.

Website: [www.hokecounty.net/county-departments/vetsvcs](http://www.hokecounty.net/county-departments/vetsvcs)

**Know a VSO who should be honored? Email us at [drohde@vetlawyers.com](mailto:drohde@vetlawyers.com) and we'll feature them in a future issue.**



***Q: How many Veterans do you serve in Hoke County?***

A: I would have to say that I have about 5,500 files in my office on Veterans, but I do believe there are many more who have never sought help from the VA. Since Veterans are required to use the VSO in their own county, my numbers are increasing every day.

***Q: Does each county in North Carolina have a VSO?***

A: I don't think all 100 counties have their own VSO. There are some VSOs that have more than one county to cover, usually the very low populated ones.

***Q: How long have you been a VSO?***

A: I became the Hoke County VSO in June 2009, so I have been here for about a year and a half. The VSO before me retired and the county was looking for someone. I had just returned from contracting for the military and put in my application. After all the interviews were over, I was giving the job and have loved every minute of it.

***Q: What is your favorite part of the job?***

A: I would have to say it would be seeing the Veterans' faces after they have received a good response regarding their claim.

***Q: What is the biggest challenge you face helping Veterans?***

A: I would say it is getting them to trust that the system will work and helping them to understand the rating system.

***Q: What started you down this path?***

A: I have always been a person that loves to help others. After serving as the Commander of VFW Post 7930 for three years, I began to learn about what VSO officers do. I applied what I learned to my own situation and saw the need for someone to work out in the community and inform the older veterans out there that there was help available to them. Once I got them in the system, they encouraged their friends to seek the help they had earned through their service.

***Q: What advice would you give to someone just starting the claims process?***

A: The first thing I would tell them is that they should just take their time and make all of their appointments. If there is anything that they don't understand, they should by all means ask questions. No one knows your body better than you do. ■



[WWW.VETLAWYERS.COM](http://WWW.VETLAWYERS.COM)