

THE ALABAMA VETERAN



Kay Ivey
Governor

Spring 2019

W. Kent Davis
Commissioner



DATES TO REMEMBER

- * Vietnam Veterans Day
March 29, 2019
- * Tax Day
April 15, 2019
- * Easter
April 21, 2019
- * Confederate Memorial Day
April 22, 2019
- * Memorial Day
May 27, 2019

INSIDE THIS EDITION

Fifth Veterans Home Planned	2
Veterans Parking Placard	3
War Vets Receive Medal	4
Holidays at Tut Fann	5
Meet Your VSO	6
Federal VA News	7-8

Commissioner's Corner



W. Kent Davis, the new commissioner of the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs, began his duties on February 19th.

He is in charge of the state-run agency that exists to help honor, provide benefits and resources, and advocate for Alabama's former service members.

Prior to accepting his current position, he served as the chief communication officer for Air University's commander and president at Maxwell AFB. In that role, he served as the director of communication and outreach efforts in support of all Air Force education programs presented by Air University.

"I am absolutely thrilled to serve our great veterans all across Alabama and do all I can to be a voice, and a listener, for our veteran community," he said. "I will work hard each day to ensure the veterans of Alabama are treated with the utmost respect and granted the care they so richly deserve."

Davis brings a wealth of military and private sector experience to the position as well as a developed connection to the veteran community. Davis, a retired rear admiral, began his Navy career as a supply corps officer aboard the battleship U.S.S. Missouri in 1986. In 1992 he became public affairs officer aboard the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln, later transferring to the Navy Office of Information Southeast in Atlanta, U.S. Central Command Headquarters in Tampa, and U.S. Joint Forces Command in Norfolk. He also served early in his military career as an active duty attorney in the US Army Judge Advocate General's (JAG) Corps, serving as Trial Counsel at US Army Reserve Command and Ethics Counsel at US Army Forces Command. Among many other deployments, in 2006 and 2012 he completed lengthy combat zone deployments in conjunction with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He retired from the Navy in October 2016 as Vice Chief of Information at the Pentagon.



cont'd pg 3

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

STATE COMMISSIONER

W. Kent Davis

Wendi Findley—Executive Assistant

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER

Michael E. Northcutt

VETERANS HOME PROGRAMS

Kim Justice—Executive Director

APPEAL & REVIEW DIVISION

Mark Sullivan—Manager

CEMETERY

Tony Ross—Director

FIELD OPERATIONS

Tim Edgil—District I Manager

Rogers Wilson—District II
Manager

Lynda Jenkins—District III
Manager

HEADQUARTERS

RSA Union

100 North Union Street, Suite 850

Montgomery, Alabama 36104

Telephone: (334) 242-5077

Fax: (334) 242-5102

MAILING ADDRESS

Alabama Dept. of Veterans Affairs

PO Box 1509

Montgomery, Alabama 36102-1509

INTERNET WEB ADDRESS

Web: www.va.alabama.gov

E-Mail: adva@va.alabama.gov

Comments concerning this
newsletter may be directed to the
attention of:

Belinda Bazinet

Public Information Officer

E-mail: belinda.bazinet@va.alabama.gov

New Veterans Home Planned

At the 2018 October board meeting, the State Board of Veterans Affairs unanimously voted to proceed with a plan to build a fifth state veterans home in Alabama.

Last year, the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs (ADVA) hired Public Consulting Group, Inc. (PCG), an experienced professional firm, to conduct a feasibility study for the long-term health care needs in the state. The group researched the size of the veteran population, where the veterans are concentrated and what their needs are today, as well as the projection to 2045 and beyond.

The study projected that 1,440 veterans would require a nursing home bed by 2045. Currently, there are 704 beds in Alabama's four veterans homes, leaving a 736 veteran nursing home bed deficit. Projected demand will continue to significantly exceed the current total number of veteran home beds.

PCG recommended that a new veterans home be built, with 150-175 skilled nursing beds. This number of beds will keep the ADVA within its maximum allotted veterans nursing home beds of 1,007 in the state.

Southeast Alabama, which includes Barbour, Butler, Coffee, Covington, Crenshaw, Dale, Geneva, Henry, Houston and Pike counties, was the first choice for the new home's location. At present there are no ADVA homes or VA Medical Centers with veteran nursing home beds in this region. Nearly all areas within its boundaries are beyond a 60-minute drive time from a state veterans home.

Now, ADVA must apply for a federal VA construction grant for the home. The VA has a 65 percent match program that provides states with a funding mechanism for building skilled nursing centers, but the state has to provide 35 percent of the necessary funds.

Currently the ADVA has homes providing nursing home level care and care for veterans with dementia and similar memory care needs in Alexander City, Huntsville, Bay Minette and Pell City. The home in Pell City, the newest, also provides assisted living-type care. It opened in 2012.

"The process for site selection will be announced soon," Commissioner Kent Davis said. "That will mark another major step forward in our efforts to ensure that Alabama is honoring and taking care of our veterans and providing the best long-term care and services they've earned and deserve."

Commissioner's Corner cont'd

A native of Montgomery, he graduated from Louisiana State University and has a law degree from Georgia State University. A former editor-in-chief of the Georgia State Law Review, he has published numerous scholarly pieces in legal journals, college textbooks, and defense publications.

“Our veterans and their families can face significant challenges, and it is our responsibility to ensure that they have access to the resources and tools they need,” Davis said. “Our veterans have worked to ensure that

we continue enjoying the freedoms we are blessed to have day-in and day-out, and it is important that we honor them by ensuring support is there for them when they need it the most.”

Davis has already outlined several topics that he would like to focus on in the coming months. “We have a superb Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs,” he noted. “Any changes will be evolutionary in nature, but I think we can improve the way we communicate with the great veterans of our

state. There have been so many recent changes in federal and state benefits that we will do all we can to disseminate information on those changes, including an improved department website and more robust partnerships with our stakeholders.”

Davis also noted that he will focus on professional development of the agency’s personnel, customer service, and tackling sensitive issues such as suicides, homelessness, and justice system challenges among veterans.

Veteran Parking Placard Available

Certain veterans are now eligible to park in designated military parking places across the state.

The Alabama Legislature enacted a law, sponsored by State Rep. Barry Moore, which allows a person who meets the military service and award requirements to be issued a windshield placard displaying an appropriate military honor or veteran status.

Veterans must submit an application to the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs which includes satisfactory proof that he or she has been awarded the Medal of Honor, Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, Bronze Star, Purple Heart, Legion of Valor or was a prisoner of war.

“More and more businesses are setting aside special parking spaces

reserved for military veterans who were wounded, taken prisoner, or presented a medal for valor in defense of our country,” Moore said. “It is unconscionable to think that someone who does not fall under these categories would park in a space reserved for our nation’s heroes, but it happens quite often. This new law will ensure that those who display such blatant disrespect will be punished appropriately.”

The bill makes it unlawful for a person to park in these designated military places without the distinctive placard or a qualifying veteran’s license plate denoting their status.

For more information on the placards or any veterans benefit, visit your local veterans service office.



Korean War Veterans Receive Medals

More than 80 Alabama Korean War veterans were honored by the Republic of Korea in a ceremony at the Troy Montgomery Davis Theatre on November 16th. The Ambassador for Peace medal is an expression of appreciation from the Korean government to the American service men and women who fought for that country's freedom during the Korean War.

"The Korean War is often called the 'forgotten war,' but I can guarantee that the Korean people have not forgotten you. Korea has not forgotten the soldiers who sit here today," Young-jun Kim, Consul General of the Republic of Korea in Atlanta, said. "Korea has not forgotten the soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice so that our country could grow, thrive, and help other nations as they once helped us. And Korea has not forgotten the 700 men and women from Alabama who lost their lives in Korea."

It was a very special moment when Korean War veterans received their medals, a moment that brought back a lot of memories from their time overseas.

"It feels great. I feel great about it," said William Sharp from Dickinson. "After they say we were the 'Forgotten War,' today we are not."

"I really appreciate it," said Clanton resident Early Popwell. "It's wonderful to be recognized by the South Korean people. I appreciate every one of them."

The medal, awarded to those who served between June 1950 and July 1953, or who participated in UN peacekeeping operations after the war, was in gratitude for veterans' sacrifice in reestablishing the freedom and democracy of the nation, according to the official proclamation by the Republic of Korea.

"They earned it," said Michael Northcutt, acting commissioner of the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs. He said it is important to recognize all veterans, but to pay specific attention to the Korean War because it is often overlooked.

The Korean War began after some 75,000 North Korean soldiers poured into South Korea on June 25, 1950. A United Nations force led by the United States fought for the people of South Korea, while China, assisted by what was then the Soviet Union, fought for the North. The United States never officially declared war. And the war technically never ended.

When the fighting ended in July 1953 with an armistice, an estimated five million soldiers and civilians had died, including more than 700 from Alabama.

The agreement soon created the Korean Demilitarized Zone to separate North and South Korea. While American troops never fired a shot afterward, clashes between both North and South continue to this day.

"You went to Korea so many years ago, but today, Korea has come to you to thank you for their freedom and their country," Mr. Kim concluded.



Holidays at Tut Fann



A volunteer with the Tuskegee Airmen Motorcycle Club of Huntsville shows Charlie Johnson a dance move at the Tut Fann Christmas party.



The Chapman Middle School Choir and Alabama A&M ROTC unit visited the Tut Fann residents on Veterans Day and provided a concert.



Tut Fann residents enjoy Thanksgiving dinner.



Tutt Fann was decked out for Christmas.

Meet Your VSO

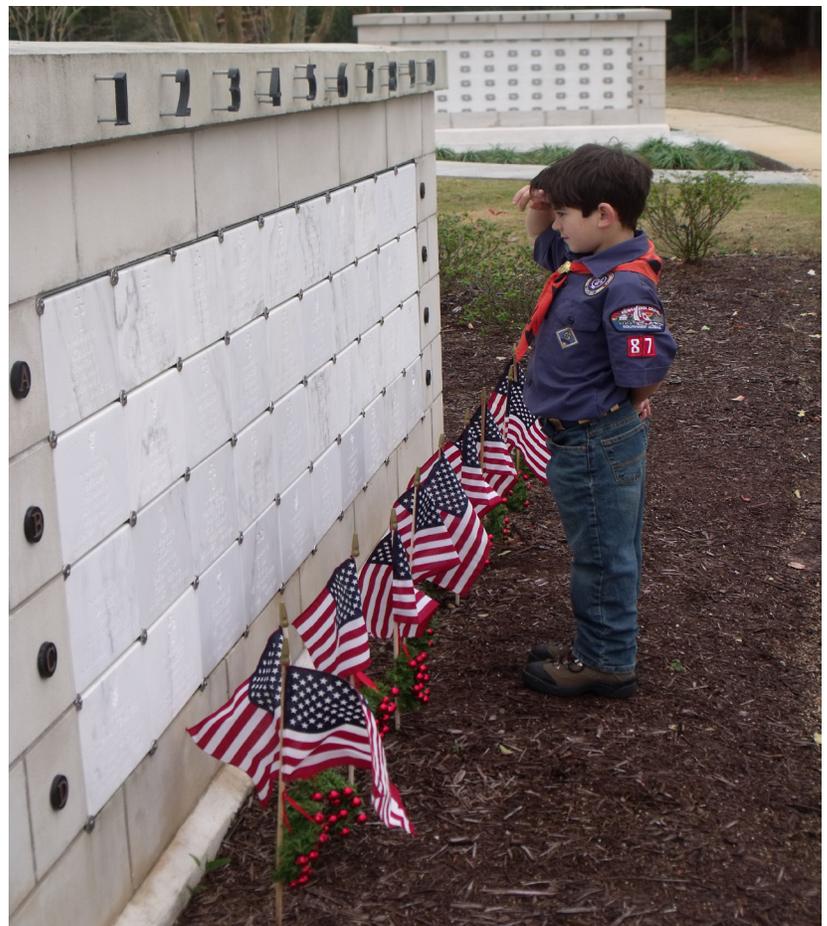


Richard Epps has been the Madison County veterans service officer (VSO) since January 2014.

Prior to taking the VSO position, he served 31 years in the Army, working every military police enlisted leadership position from team leader through battalion command sergeant major. During his military service he was stationed in 22 different locations worldwide to include Egypt, Normandy France, Kosovo, Korea, Germany, Afghanistan, and Alaska.

“As a servant leader, I believe the peak of my career was as a drill sergeant and as the command sergeant major of a military police training company,” he said. “Serving as a VSO allows me to give back to the nation by ensuring our veterans and family members receive the benefits they so richly deserve. I especially enjoy the comradery of working with a great team of professionals who understand the vital role of taking care of our nation’s heroes.”

Porter Buschell, of Troop 87 of Daphne, salutes veterans after placing wreaths at the Alabama State Veterans Memorial Cemetery at Spanish Fort. Friends of the cemetery provided the flag wreaths, which remained in place throughout the holiday season. The wreaths are collected after the first of the year and reused.



President Signs Executive Order to Empower Veterans and End Veteran Suicide

President Donald Trump signed an executive order on March 5 aimed at reducing suicide among veterans.

The Executive Order on a National Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End Veteran Suicide, creates a cabinet-level task force co-chaired by VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. The task force will create a comprehensive public health road map that brings together local government along with the private sector to improve the quality of life for our veterans and turn the tide on the veteran suicide crisis. It will also boost outreach by awarding grants to community programs, and aim to better coordinate research on suicide across agencies.

“To every veteran, I want you to know that you have

an entire nation of more than 300 million people behind you. You will never ever be forgotten, we are with you all the way,” the president said at the signing ceremony. “Supporting veterans in distress is a critical priority for our entire administration.”

The plan will include prioritizing related research, encouraging collaboration with the private sector and developing a proposal to offer grants to state and local governments to support efforts to prevent veteran suicide.

Suicide among veterans continues to be higher than the rest of the population, and younger veterans are particularly at risk. According to the latest VA data, 20 veterans die by suicide every day; the rate of suicide among veterans ages 18 to 34 has significantly increased.

VA Enacts New Rules for Aid, Attendance Benefits

The Veterans Administration (VA) has put in place new rules in order to qualify for Aid and Attendance or Pension benefits. The VA has talked about changing the rules for a number of years, and had actually published proposed rules in 2015 only to withdraw them after a large number of unfavorable comments. The recently published rules went into effect on October 18, 2018.

The Veterans Administration has a multitude of benefits available to veterans. Many have heard of the benefits to pay for higher education costs, provide life insurance, or the ability to receive health care through the VA. However, when a young person is discharged from the service, they tend to ignore the benefit that could help with medical costs once one is 60 years old or disabled. This is different from “compensation” which can be available for those with a service connected injury. The benefit for older veterans is called “pension” or Aid and Attendance, and for those who meet the eligibility requirements, the result is tax free funds to help pay for care. It is a little known benefit; nevertheless the VA decided to change the rules of eligibility in order to “maintain the integrity of the pension program,” and to respond to Government Accountability Office recommendations.

The veteran, or his or her surviving spouse, must meet some basic requirements under the new and old rules. The veteran on whose service record the eligibility requirements are being based must have served at least

one day during wartime (per dates set by Congress), served at least 90 days, and have been other than dishonorably discharged. Evidence of the service record and discharge date must be presented. The purpose of the benefit is to replace income that the veteran and/or the surviving spouse is using to pay for care. A good example is to help pay for care in personal care/assisted living facility.

The key to qualifying for the pension benefit is eligibility. Beyond the eligibility requirements mentioned above, the updated regulations add some requirements that did not exist before. There is a net worth requirement that is equal to the maximum Community Spouse Resource Allowance if one were applying for Medicaid (\$123,600 in 2018). This gives clarity to the amount that the veteran applicant may keep and still qualify. This net worth amount applies to both spouses and sometimes to a dependent adult child, and includes assets and income other than the primary residence and family transportation vehicles. There is a “look back” period of 36 months for transfers after October 18, 2018, and a penalty is imposed starting the month after the transfer for less than fair market value is made. The penalty is not to exceed five years. The penalty is calculated on the amount of the transfer in excess of the “net worth.” There are significant restrictions on transfers to trusts and annuities. Adding owners to accounts will no longer work as strategy to reduce net worth.

VA Modernizing Veterans Claims Processing

The Department of Veterans Affairs announced that it has achieved a milestone in moving from its old paper records processing system to a new electronic one designed to expedite the claims decision process for veterans.

The VA removed more than 7.8 million paper files from 60 locations in fewer than 22 months, enabling rapid scanning into VA's electronic claims processing system by multiple third-party vendors. The agency says this will lead to faster claims decisions for the veterans waiting on them by moving from a cumbersome, paper-intensive process to an efficient, electronic process — resulting in a faster, more accurate and transparent claims process.

“Improving the delivery of benefits and services to Veterans is central to our mission,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “This significant effort will not only improve VA's claims process, it will also lead to quicker decisions for veterans because millions more records will be available electronically.”

In 2013, VA began removing paper records from its regional offices to save space and taxpayer money. The effort expanded in 2016 when the agency launched the File Bank Extraction initiative. This initiative removed more than 1.7 million paper claims files across 59 VA locations and contributed to reduced claims processing time by establishing more electronic records.

In Nov. 2017, the VA began extracting nearly 6.1 million paper records held within the Records Control Division (RCD) of the Records Management Center (RMC) in St. Louis. The 6.1 million paper records extracted from the RCD are temporarily stored in a secure facility certified by the National Archives and Records Administration where they are inventoried, prioritized and sent to multiple VA vendors for rapid scanning into VA's Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS).

Records removed during File Bank Extraction will also be scanned and uploaded to VBMS.

VA Announces New Veterans Health API

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recently launched its first Health Application Programming Interface (API) that will power the next generation of Blue Button features by enabling veterans to interact with their own personal health data within innovative mobile and web-based apps.

Sponsored by the White House Office of American Innovation, the forum brought together senior health care leaders from both the public and private sectors.

Health APIs will also support new clinician-focused applications, and can also serve as a foundation for data sharing between health systems to support veteran care.

“We are excited to announce this advancement in the way we deliver services,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “Healthcare data interoperability plays a key role in all four of VA's top priorities, from implementing the MISSION Act and modernizing our electronic health record, to transforming our business systems and delivering better customer service. VA is proud to serve as a leader and example in this field.”

Consistent with VA's Open API Pledge, the Health API conforms to the Argonaut Fast Healthcare Interoperability Resources (FHIR) API standards. VA believes that open FHIR-based APIs are an essential component in a modern interoperability strategy, and that government and industry must collaborate to expand available FHIR resources and its use.

VA is committed to leveraging APIs to accelerate creation of transformational digital tools to support veterans as they engage with VA's core health, benefits and memorial services. Since launching its Lighthouse API Management Platform in March, VA has delivered a developer portal, a Benefits Intake API and a Facilities API.

VA continues to provide veteran patients easy digital access to their own health care data. Since the launch of the Blue Button product in 2010, more than 2 million veterans have downloaded over 32 million personal health data files from the VA's patient portal.

For more information on the Veterans Health API, please visit <https://developer.va.gov>.