

THE ALABAMA VETERAN

Kay Ivey
Governor

Winter 2018

W. Clyde Marsh
Commissioner



DATES TO REMEMBER

- * MLK Day
January 15, 2018
- * Valentine's Day
February 14, 2018
- * President's Day
February 19, 2018
- * St. Patrick's Day
March 17, 2018

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**CAREGIVER
SUPPORT LINE**
1-855-260-3274

VA's Caregiver Support Line assistance is just a quick phone call away. Whether you're in need of immediate assistance or have questions about what services you may be eligible for, give the caring licensed social workers a call.

Commissioner's Corner



Greetings and best wishes as we enter into a new year of promise, hope and aspirations for veterans. The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs (ADVA) is on the front lines along with other state and federal agencies working on sustaining active duty and retired veterans' benefits. We want to ensure that veterans, as well as their eligible dependents, qualify for and receive all benefits to which they are entitled. Our great state of Alabama is a very veteran friendly state, and is working diligently to provide additional benefits to veterans.

Last year, the department provided great care to over 500 residents in our four veterans homes; and built partnerships and programs to reach more Alabama veterans. Our veterans service officers processed over 74,000 pieces of written correspondence incoming and outgoing; assisted with 22,220 claims, and filed 92,860 miscellaneous actions and homeowners benefits. Our claims office prepared for 843 hearings, completed 893 certification requests, handled 1,058 appeals, held 395 hearings and recovered about \$12 million.

Meanwhile, we helped the AlaVetNet grow and mature, building a navigable, collaborative system of support for Alabama veterans and their families. The AlaVetNet website contains useful information—medical care facilities, locations to file veterans claims, and points of contact for an array of services—that are easy to access from the comfort of a home, office or mobile device.

I want to express my appreciation to all of you who serve our veterans and their families. Whether you are in a supervisory role, providing administrative support, or directly helping veterans with claims or education applications, your job is important. I commend all of you and encourage you to continue providing the same quality service to our deserving veterans in the upcoming year.

Those who serve the ADVA are personally and professionally accountable to deliver on America's promise to our veterans through courage, conviction and a belief in the core values of professionalism, integrity, compassion, commitment and teamwork. My charge to the ADVA is to continue to provide the best possible assistance to our veterans and their family members.

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Veterans ID Cards Now Available

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced in November that the application process for the national Veterans Identification Card (VIC) is now available for Veterans—yet another action honoring their service.

This has been mandated through legislation since 2015 to honor Veterans, and the rollout of the ID card fulfills that overdue promise.

Only those Veterans with honorable service will be able to apply for the ID card, which will provide proof of military service, and may be accepted by retailers in lieu of the standard DD-214 form to obtain promotional discounts and other services where offered to Veterans.

“The new Veterans Identification Card provides a safer and more convenient and efficient way for most Veterans to show proof of service,” said VA Secretary Dr. David J. Shulkin. “With the card, Veterans

with honorable service to our nation will no longer need to carry around their paper DD-214s to obtain Veteran discounts and other services.”

The VIC provides a more portable and secure alternative for those who served the minimum obligated time in service, but did not meet the retirement or medical discharge threshold. Veterans who served in the armed forces, including the reserve components, and who have a discharge of honorable or general (under honorable conditions) can request a VIC.

To request a VIC, Veterans must visit vets.gov, click on “Apply for printed veteran ID card” on the bottom left of the page and sign in or create an account.

Veterans who apply for a card should receive it within 60 days and can check delivery status of their cards at vets.gov. A digital version of the VIC will be available online by mid-December.

State Board of Veterans Affairs Welcomes New Members; Elects Officers

Gov. Kay Ivey has appointed three new members to the State Board of Veterans Affairs (SBVA), the governing body of the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs.

Charles Waugh of Phenix City, Matt Gaff of Mobile and Bobby Browne of Anniston, joined 14 other members of the board for a four-year term. Waugh is appointed to the state VA board as a representative

of the American Disabled American Veterans of Alabama. Gaff and Brown will serve as representatives of the American Legion.

In October 2017, the SBVA elected Chad Richmond of Pinson as vice-chairman of the board. He had served as the board’s deputy vice chairman since 2009. The board also elected Don Fisher of Montgomery to serve as the board’s deputy vice-chairperson.

Meet your VSO

Ray Williamson and Vickie Prewett, the Baldwin County veterans service office staff, enjoy helping veterans and having fun. The office is a fun place to be, Williamson said. “The vets come in to crack jokes. We have a good time, but there is a time to be serious.”

Williamson, a former Coast Guard command senior chief, became a veterans service officer (VSO) a little over four years ago. “As a command senior chief and chief of personnel for 24 years, I was in charge of all enlisted people and helped with any need they had,” he said. “That ties into what I do now with the veterans.”

“The military was always like family. I was in a position where I was an advocate,” he said. “My calling in life is to help people. The military has always been a part of our family and this position is like being back with family.”

Prewitt has been a state employee for 34 ½ years, and with the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs for 27 ½ years. An administrative support assistant, Prewitt ran the office and assisted the clients for more than four years. “What we do makes such a difference in the quality of veterans’ lives,” she said.

Lawrence Saltee, a WWII, Korean and Vietnam War veteran, is one such veteran. His son is very appreciative of the service provided. He said that the VSO staff are accommodating and genuinely seem to care, and that means a lot. “Dealing with various government agencies had just been a nightmare and I haven’t always had the help I needed,” he said. “When I contacted the VA everything changed; we sure do appreciate the help that you have been to our dad”

The two serve about 1,100 veterans a month—in person or by



Williamson and Prewitt assist Lawrence Saltee's son with a claim.

phone, letters or email. “Baldwin County is among one of my top four busy offices in the district,” Lynda Jenkins, district manager, said. “Ray and Vickie work well as a team, making sure that all veterans are in and out and yet ensuring that each receives the valuable assistance they are entitled to. They do a great job every day, and are valuable members of our team, which makes District 3 what it is.”

Williamson said that their office motto is the “Tip of the Spear.” They chose the motto because “as advocates for veterans, the tip of the spear is the first thing that goes in. We’re going in to the federal VA to assist the vets; we have to stay sharp so we can get things done,” he said. “We consider ourselves innovators; we come up with ways to get things done. We want to be on the front lines and do things more efficiently and effectively.”

Doing efficient work helped two different Vietnam War widows. Both came in to see if they could qualify for survivor’s pension. After interviewing them and reviewing the death certificates, Williamson was able to determine that they were eligible for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) which provided more money. “Helping out a veteran’s widow is a

pretty awesome experience, especially when they weren’t expecting it.”

The two help a lot of older veterans and do a number of pension claims. “We have quite a few World War II veterans,” Williamson said. “I always count it an honor just to meet one of them.”

Prewitt recalled meeting Malcom, an older veteran. “He came in and wasn’t sure what he would be eligible for. I did get him a pension and it changed the quality of his life. He desperately needed extra income,” she said. “He started bringing in correspondence from other agencies that he couldn’t read and I would read it for him. This went on for several years and then he passed away. I had not met any of his family but when I walked in at the funeral, one of his family members said ‘you must be Malcom’s Vickie. It made that much of an impact on him to just have someone to talk to.’”

“And a lot of times, that is what it is more than anything,” Williamson added. “It’s not always just coming in to file a claim and get money. We have vets to come in just to say ‘hey.’ Just to have someone to talk to.”

If you ever are feeling lonely or sad, just call them. Both Williamson and Prewitt enjoy helping someone else have joy.

Military Veterans Can Update Status on Alabama Drivers License

State Rep. Randall Shedd, chairman of the House Interim Committee on Driver's License Review, joined with members of the panel to announce new, streamlined procedures that allow former members of the military to list their veteran status on Alabama drivers' licenses and non-driver IDs in an expedited manner.

"Numerous discounts and other benefits are available to military veterans who can show proof of their service, but the process of listing that status on Alabama drivers' licenses has long been cumbersome, time-consuming, and overly-complicated," Shedd said. "The new process allows veterans to secure accepted proof of their service

in a faster manner with little to no wait time."

Veterans wishing to have their status noted were previously required to take military documentation, such as a DD-214 form or other proof of military service, to the nearest driver's license examination office, which often resulted in extended wait times as they waited with new drivers taking tests and others seeking assistance.

The streamlined process allows veterans to bypass the exam office and take their documentation directly to their local probate judge's office or satellite license office, which will dramatically reduce wait times and permit their veteran status to be updated in an expedited, timely and convenient manner.

Veterans Supermarket in Florence Helps Connect Former Military to Services



Veterans had the chance to get up to date information on their benefits in mid-November, turning out at the Supermarket of Veterans Benefits event in Florence.

The supermarket is part of a statewide outreach campaign by the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs to help veterans and their families obtain information on state, federal and nongovernmental services that are designed specifically for them. The event was for all service men and women and their families.

The veterans, from all different branches of service and all different military conflicts, said that the event was about more than just learning about options and planning for the future but for also helping each other out. "I came out just to see what services were available

to me," Willie Brown, a disabled veteran's widow, said. "The services provided seemed to take care of everything. I've received a lot of information."

State and federal Veterans Affairs officials, along with other service organizations, provided information on VA programs, health care benefits, claims, counseling and other services, including Social Security, Medicaid and legal services.

In addition to the "Supermarkets", veterans can contact their county veterans service office for information about VA benefits and services. The state VA offices are listed at www.va.state.al.us/vso.htm.



Left: Peggy Marquart, Lauderdale County VSO, provides information to veterans. *Above:* Charlotte Eason, Tuscaloosa County director, explains the application process.

Family Wreath Day at the State Veterans Cemetery



Veterans interred at the Alabama State Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Spanish Fort were remembered in a special ceremony December 16. Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts, Girl Scouts and the Daphne High School ROTC unit placed American Flags adorned with holiday wreaths on the graves of each veteran. The annual event, which is growing in attendance every year, is held to pass on the importance of remembering veterans to the younger generation.

Left: Retired Marine Corps major Mordecai Arnold, a World War II, Korea and Vietnam veteran, receives a salute from Boy Scout Michael Pinkston while Barry Booth looks on. *Right:* Jack Henry Robinson pauses to honor a veteran. (Photos by Joey Butler)



The Troy University Alumni Association recognized U.S. Navy Rear Admiral W. Clyde Marsh as the Distinguished Alumni of the Year during Troy's homecoming celebration on October 28, 2017. The Alumni of the Year award recognizes outstanding professional accomplishments, civic involvement and loyalty and service to Troy University.

Comissioner's Comments, cont'd from page 1

I also realize that we will not be able to make all of our veteran clients happy 100 percent of the time; however, we must be our very best, remain professional, offer available alternatives and be courteous to the fullest extent possible. I challenge everyone to provide information and service with compassion and conviction—providing that service as we would do for our own family. Abraham Lincoln described it best

when he said, “a country that does not honor its heroes will not long endure.” We must remember that the sole existence and purpose of the ADVA is to help Alabama veterans.

With the new year, the ADVA is committed to that purpose as we continue with our mission and journey on behalf of our nation's heroes and veterans.



Cullman County AVSO Candace Reppond, Rep. Robert Aderholt and VSO Darell Brewer attended a ribbon cutting ceremony for the Joint VA and Alabama Department of Public Health Joint Telehealth Program in Cullman. The Telehealth Program is a partnership with local county health departments. Currently, it provides a secure video/diagnostic link between VA Medical Center providers and patients in rural areas.

Circle of Friends

The Bill Nichols State Veterans Home Circle of Friends was developed to promote healthy friendships and to create and reinforce positive social experiences. The Circle brings singers, bakers, guitarist, pianists, the quiet and shy, poets, behavioral and so many more into a close knit setting. They can share stories, showcase special talents or just listen to others.

The Circle began as one large activity but has developed into a daily enjoyment of friends in smaller settings. At anytime and anywhere you can find a Circle of Friends chatting, playing cards, dancing and clapping, exercising, listening to music, playing the piano/guitar, sipping coffee, or just enjoying the fireplace.

The veterans have become each other families and most of all friends. “Friendship isn’t something that you can buy nor can you make,” Mildred Daye said. “I have connected with others in the circle and develop lasting friendship.”

“I have made great friends here and my circle keeps getting bigger and bigger,” Roger Thornton added. Love, respect, encouragement, enjoyment and friendship complete the home’s Circle of Friends.



The memory care unit enjoys veteran led guitar playing in a circle.

Fun at the Homes



Santa paid a visit to Patricia Cummins (top) and John Harrington at the Bill Nichols State Veterans Home before flying off to bring presents to children.



Kenneth Scoggins, the resident Native American at Colonel Howard, is ready to great trick or treaters at the Fall Festival.



Joseph Zellers, one of Colonel Howard's DOM residents, built a replica of a WWII bomber plane. On Veterans Day, he presented the plane to William Massey, another DOM resident, who flew bombing missions in WWII. Mr. Massey has donated the plane back to the facility to be displayed.



William Dearmon hauls in his catch during a William F. Green fishing expedition.

White House VA Hotline Now Fully Staffed and Operational Around the Clock

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced that the White House VA Hotline, first launched in June as part of Pres. Donald J. Trump's commitment to reforming VA, is now fully staffed with live agents working to serve veterans 24-hours a day, 365 days a year.

The hotline, which became 24-hour operational in mid-October, is now staffed by a team consisting of 90 percent veterans or employees who have a veteran family member, and is in response to veterans' requests to talk to agents who could relate to their experiences.

"The White House VA Hotline provides our nation's veterans with a direct, dedicated contact line that allows them to interact with highly trained, live agents to answer their needs and concerns," said VA Secretary David J. Shulkin. "Since the initial launch of the hotline in June, we listened to our veterans, who indicated that they prefer speaking with other veterans and veteran family members, and we adjusted our hiring based on that feedback," added Shulkin.

"We're proud that the hotline is now staffed 24/7 by a team of mostly veterans or veteran family members who have direct knowledge of their particular concerns and can use their experience to address them in the best way possible with the resources of the VA. This

represents a true win-win for Veterans and their loved ones."

Since 24/7 coverage began in October, the hotline has served more than 10,000 callers. Hotline agents answer inquiries, provide directory assistance, document concerns about VA care, benefits and services, and expedite the referral and resolution of those concerns. Agents undergo regular updates and training on VA services based on hotline trends and are assisted by newly implemented tracking software to help VA capture and improve its response, referral and resolution processes to best support veterans.

The hotline can be accessed at 855-948-2311 and is VA's first non-clinical, non-emergency around-the-clock call center. It provides veterans a supplemental option to report issues if they are not being addressed through VA's normal customer service channels.

Agents, located at a VA facility in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, have access to a multitude of resources and contact information to help veterans. The hotline also generates real-time reports to VA experts who can help address the specific issues of veterans as well as make better-informed decisions on where program improvements are needed.

VA Prioritizes Improving Veterans' Access to Pro Bono Legal Services

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), together with the American Bar Association, the Veterans Consortium and National Law School Veterans Clinic Consortium, signed a Memorandum of Agreement in November aimed at improving Veterans' access to free legal services.

Veterans often face stressful legal problems—such as eviction, foreclosure, child support, or drivers' license revocations—that can affect their ability to gain or maintain employment and housing or focus on medical treatment. Legal assistance repeatedly tops the list of homeless Veterans' unmet needs.

"We are encouraging VA Medical Centers and other VA facilities to engage with their local communities to establish legal clinics and Medical

Legal Partnerships to address Veterans' legal needs that threaten their health and well-being," said VA Secretary Dr. David J. Shulkin. "By signing this agreement, we are documenting a shared commitment to better facilitate Veterans' access to legal services."

Currently, VA hosts at least 165 free legal clinics in its VA Medical Centers, Community Based Outpatient Clinics and Vet Centers across the country by partnering with external, legal-service providers, such as local bar associations, legal-aid organizations and law school clinics.

More information on VA's coordination of legal services for Veterans at VA facilities may be found at <https://www.va.gov/OGC/LegalServices.asp>.