

# THE ALABAMA VETERAN

Kay Ivey  
Governor

Winter 2020

W. Kent Davis  
Commissioner



## DATES TO REMEMBER

- \* MLK Day  
January 20, 2020
- \* Groundhog Day  
February 2, 2020
- \* Valentine's Day  
February 14, 2020
- \* President's Day  
February 17, 2020
- \* St. Patrick's Day  
March 17, 2020
- \* Vietnam Veterans Day  
March 29, 2020

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## Commissioner's Corner



Happy New Year and best wishes as we enter a new year of promise, hope and aspirations for veterans.

The vision for the fifth veterans home is closer to reality after the State Board of Veterans Affairs (SBVA) selected a site in Enterprise as the location on January 3rd.

In early 2018, our department hired Public Consulting Group, Inc. (PCG) to conduct a feasibility study for the long-term veteran healthcare needs in the state. Currently, there are 704 beds in Alabama's four veterans homes. The maximum number of state veterans home beds is based on 38 CFR § 59.40 (which sets Alabama's maximum beds at 1,007).

Based on the study's findings, PCG identified the Wiregrass Region as an underserved area for providing skilled-care exclusively for veterans. The consulting firm recommended locating a 150–175 skilled-care bed facility in the region.

The veterans homes committee reviewed 12 site proposals submitted by jurisdictions in the Wiregrass Region based on five factors—favorability of the plot of land proposed; transportation accessibility; workforce availability; specialized healthcare services within proximity of the site; and additional factors identified by the proposer. They voted to recommend Enterprise as the site for the new veterans home. The SBVA then unanimously voted to accept the veterans homes committee's recommendation.

The site is on 108 donated acres between U.S. 84 and Alabama 167. Coffee County was identified as having the largest veteran population projections in the Feasibility Study, while other counties show a reduction in the veteran population.

The cost estimate for the construction of new veterans home is approximately \$60 million. In April 2019, the department applied for a federal grant that would pay 65 percent of the construction cost. The state will commit to the required 35 percent match with existing funds.

The project will take around three years to complete, so we expect to open the new veterans home sometime in 2023. In addition to taking the next steps to open the new veterans home, 2020 promises more projects, including completion of major renovations on our existing homes in Huntsville and Bay Minette, further work by the state task force on veteran suicides, and the opening of 10 additional veterans service offices.

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, your job is important to this department. I commend all of you and encourage you to continue providing the same quality service to our deserving veterans in the upcoming year.

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## Veterans Experience Action Center Coming to Montgomery

The U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Montgomery VA Regional Office is hosting a Veterans Experience Action Center from 9 a.m. – 3 p.m., February 5, 2020 at The Multiplex at Cramton Bowl, 220 Hall Street, in Montgomery.

The Veterans Experience Action Center (VEAC) is for veterans, families, survivors and caregivers who have questions concerning their VA claims, appeals and healthcare. There will be Veterans Service Officers, Veterans Health Administrators and Veterans Benefits Administrators to assist with claims and healthcare concerns.

Veterans who have a current VA claim, would like to file a new claim, have issues with VA healthcare; would like to apply

for entrance into the VA healthcare system, or just have questions regarding VA benefits are encouraged to attend.

VEACs have been held in a multitude of states with overwhelming positive response from veterans. This will be the first event held in Alabama. The VEAC is intended to provide a forum for veterans and dependents to engage VA and community service providers personally and receive one-on-one service to address any and all issues the veteran, family member, caregiver or survivor may have.

The event will include other community and organizational services and support for veterans, families, survivors and caregivers. Some of the collaborating partners for this event include the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs, American Red Cross, and County Veterans Services from several surrounding counties.



WWII veterans from the William F. Green State Veterans Home in Bay Minette visited the WWII Museum in New Orleans in November. Standing: Donald Salls, Joseph Perrymon, Joseph Smazik, Rufus Wingate and Henry Burgess. In wheel chairs: Charles Parker, Joseph McCoy, Fred Walters and Welton Hance.



## VSO Takes Disabled Veterans Quail Hunting



**B**rian Foshee, Covington County veterans service officer, was given the opportunity to take two disabled veterans—Lanny Combs and Domenic Sasser—quail hunting.

Warren Maddox, Foshee's cousin and a disabled Army veteran, is president of a nonprofit organization called Ultimate Experience Outdoors (UXO). UXO, a nationwide organization that is broken down into geographic regions, provides outdoor adventure opportunities to service members, veterans, Gold

Star families, first responders and disabled or less fortunate children.

"Warren contacted me and told me that he had a local (Covington County) hunt. He had two open spots if I had veterans that would like to participate," he said. "I reached out to Lanny and Domenic and they took me up on the offer."

The veterans hunted all day and netted around 35 birds, Foshee said. "They ate some of the birds for lunch and took some home," he said. "We all had a wonderful time and the veterans really enjoyed themselves."



Mark Sullivan and Stephanie Allen assisted veterans and their family members during the Chattahoochee Valley Veterans Experience Action Center event November 14-15 at Columbus State Community College.

Veterans from Alabama and Georgia took advantage of access to community outreach services to include applying for VA healthcare and filing claims for pension and disability compensation benefits.



# Veterans Suicide Task Force Holds Productive Meeting

While suicide is a nationwide epidemic, the rate for veterans is 1.5 times higher than that of nonveterans, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

The suicide problem seems to affect Alabama more than other states. In 2017—the latest year for which data is available—124 Alabama veterans took their own lives, a rate of 33 per 100,000 people. The VA said that rate is higher than the national average for veterans (31) and higher than Alabama's population rate (22). Alabama's veteran suicide rate is also nine percent higher than other southern states.

The problem is probably worse than the numbers show because suicide is often under-reported. Coroners usually do not classify death as suicides if there is some doubt because of the stigma and loss of benefits to survivors.

In 2019, the Alabama Legislature passed a joint resolution, sponsored by State Rep. Neil Rafferty (D-Birmingham), creating the Alabama Task Force on Veterans Suicide. That new nine-member task force will investigate what is causing the elevated rate of suicide among Alabama's veterans and figure out how to prevent more vets from taking their own lives.

The task force held their first meeting in early December. Two nationally recognized experts on veteran suicide and effective community-based prevention programs provided a baseline understanding of the state of research and practice on the complex issue of veteran suicide. Dr. Joe Currier, veteran suicide advisor, discussed suicide fundamentals such as terms used for those contemplating suicide. He also highlighted the risk factors and red flags for suicide.

Dr. Karl Hammer, veteran research advisor, discussed Operation Deep Dive, a four-year research study that examines the potential causes involved in suicides among military veterans. A collaboration partners

America's Warrior Partnership, the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, and University of Alabama researchers to investigate potential factors of veteran suicide.

"This first workshop was productive and encouraging. The task force members, supported by a hand-selected group of true subject matter experts, and the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs leadership and staff, met to learn, listen, and share ideas," Paulette Risher, task force chair and chief executive officer of Still Serving Veterans, said. "Participants gained a better understanding of each member's background and why they are willing to serve in this important work."

During the workshop, the task force identified key stakeholders and prioritized a set of "Guiding Principles" to provide focus and direction for future efforts. These principles will help the task force develop concrete actions that can be implemented to turn the tide on veteran suicide.

"My sensing is that every person in attendance, many veterans themselves, are fully committed to helping Alabama demonstrate our genuine concern and commitment to our citizens who have worn, or are wearing the cloth of the nation," Risher stated. "It is such an honor to help guide this effort. This is clearly work of the head and the heart."

The task force will continue developing ideas over the coming months. It will have two years to complete its investigation and determine what steps to take to address the problem and report those findings to the state legislature.

Veterans in crisis, or someone concerned about one, can call the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 and press 1 to talk to someone. Text the Veterans Crisis Line at 838255 or visit [VeteransCrisisLine.net](http://VeteransCrisisLine.net).



Jon Doolittle, Fayette County Veteran Service Officer, won the ugliest Christmas sweater contest at the District I training meeting in December.

## Meet Your VSO

**P**eggy Marquart has been the Lauderdale County veterans service officer (VSO) for three years. She was promoted to the VSO position after serving as an administrative support assistant for 11 years.

Marquart served in the Air Force for 30 years, first as an administrative specialist and the last 16 years as a First Sergeant. Her most interesting assignment was a 1998 deployment to Eskan Village AFB in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in support of Operation Southern Watch. "I was considered the Chief Enlisted Manager for the base and got to interact with multinational military personnel. I also experienced firsthand what it was like for the Saudi women when they left the confines of their homes," she said. "When I went off base, I had to wear an abaya [long black long-sleeved robe] over my other clothes with a scarf covering my hair. This was extremely uncomfortable especially in the 110 plus degree heat. If I did not follow the rules I could have been arrested by the Saudi religious police and put in jail. That assignment made me appreciate the freedom I had as an American citizen in my own country."

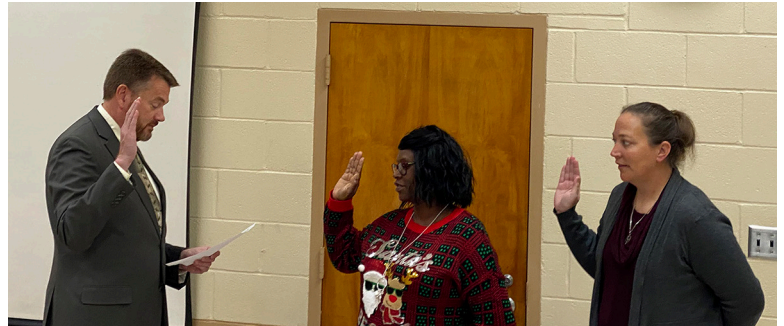
Her office sees an average of about 500 people a month. She said that a VSO is expected to be a "fountain" of all knowledge when it comes to anything related to Veterans Affairs. Veteran service officers receive training and have access to the latest forms needed to file a claim. "When someone files a claim themselves, I feel like they are going at it blind," she said. "They may end up being denied a claim because of how they worded what benefit they were seeking or not supplying documents to back up their claim."



Peggy Marquart helps Melinda Bowers with a claim after Richard Knight, a Vietnam veteran, brought her in to the office.

Marquart's favorite part of being a VSO is getting to meet people who shaped American history with their military service. "I get to meet soldiers who braved the terrible winter at the Battle of Bulge during WWII; the Marines at the Chosin Reservoir in the Korean War; door gunners hanging out the side of choppers in the Vietnam War; and returning military from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan," she said. "They all have a unique story to tell."

She said the most rewarding aspect of her job is when someone she filed a claim for who has tried for years to get their benefits finally get the compensation they deserve. She has seen people get over \$300,000 in retro pay and it makes her very happy.



(Left) Natasha Sanks, Russell County's administrative support assistant, received her 25-year pin from Commissioner Kent Davis at the District III training.

(Above) Assistant veterans service officers Robbie Ray, Dale County, and Christine Click, Mobile County, were administered the Oath of Office by Commissioner Davis.



# Hundred-Year-Old WWII Vet Enjoys Challenges

**R**omay Davis was born in Virginia more than 100 years ago, on Oct. 29, 1919.

Following graduation from high school, she went to work for the civil service in Washington D.C. “The war had just started when I started working in the Treasury Department making dollar bills and some bonds,” she said. “I worked until 1942 and then joined the Army.”

Her five brothers had gone off to war, so Davis asked her mother if she could join as well. “My mother was open-minded and told me that ‘the world is bad but you know what to do. I’ll be here when you come back.’”

She signed up for the Women’s Army Corps and went to Des Moines, Iowa, for basic training. “I enjoyed the challenges of basic training; that’s probably why I’m such a wild one,” she said. “It was an experience that I had not anticipated. I learned to drive all the vehicles that I would drive in the motor pool.”

Next, she traveled to Camp Breckenridge in Kentucky where she continued training for overseas duty. “I drove for the motor pool, but I played a lot too. I played games and did other things whenever I had a chance to get away from work,” she said. “I also had a pet and carried my crochet with me wherever I went. People thought it was strange for me to be playing with my puppy and crocheting with a uniform on.”

When it was time to go overseas, Davis boarded a ship for the trip across the Atlantic Ocean. “We were on a big passenger ship that was converted to a liberty ship. I will never forget that trip,” she said. “Twice our ship almost capsized when they would turn quickly to dodge the torpedoes. We heard the ship screech, and you would think the ship was coming apart.”

The waves of the ocean also made the trek across of ocean unforgettable. “The waves would come, and the ship would lurch to the side, seemingly like it would continue going over. We were holding on for dear life and barrels were rolling around,” she said. “The waves seemed to be a mile high and we were on top of the wave. It was like all the water was in the air and the sea was angry. It was definitely an experience.”

She was on the ship for about six weeks before arriving at her duty station in Paris. She worked for the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion and drove a truck to deliver mail to troops. The postal battalion, whose motto was “No Mail, Low Morale,” was the first and only all black female unit to be deployed overseas



during the war. The unit sorted and routed mail for millions of American service members and civilians.

In addition to delivering mail, Davis also drove the officers wherever they needed to go. “I enjoyed driving around Paris and the rest of France. The mountain roads were kind of treacherous (no side rails), but I learned to drive them,” she said. “It was a challenge, but I liked that kind of challenge.”

When the war was over, she transferred to England. “The war had just finished, but the results of the war were everywhere; lots of scars and rubble,” she said. “It was very interesting to meet the people and the children though. I used to go to dinner with a family who had a little boy about seven years old. He was drawing and he taught me how to draw a duck. I have loved to draw ever since.”

Upon returning home in 1945, she tried to go to medical school but was denied because she was considered too old at 26. So, she went into design, then set off on a career path in fashion, designing clothes for children. She worked as a designer in New York for 30 years.

She traveled the world before “retiring” in 1983. It was then that she moved to Montgomery with her husband. “We went to Winn Dixie one day, and I didn’t like the way the shelves looked, so I talked to the manager,” she said. “He told me that I was welcome to do something about it. So, I went to work arranging the shelves.”

Today, Davis is still driving to work five days a week. Medical problems have made it tougher lately, but her mother taught her to never give up. “I told my boss that I was going to retire in December. He said to work as long as I want to,” she said. “Because of my medical problems, I’m not sure how long I want to. I’ll retire again someday.”



## Christmas at the Veterans Homes



(Left) Curtis Shelton, from Robert L. Howard, prepares to open a gift.

(Right) Maj. Gen. Robert Rasch, Redstone Arsenal, visited with veterans Harold Lane and Roger Connell during a Christmas Gala at Tut Fann. Approximately 80 guests visited with the veterans; the majority were officers and soldiers stationed at Redstone.



(Left) A group of Bill Nichols residents visited with Molly the miniature horse during the holidays.

(Right) Henry Burgess, from William F. Green, tells Santa what he wants for Christmas.



# VA Video Series Teaches Veterans How to Use New Tool When Filing Disability Claims Online

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is transforming the way veterans learn about and apply for benefits earned, through a new video tutorial completed in October highlighting the digital Disability Compensation Benefits Claims tool released earlier this year.

Built with Veterans, for Veterans—an iterative development process that incorporates user testing and human-centered design principles—the tool is now available allowing Veterans with previously filed claims to have more control over submissions and represents an innovative leap forward in VA services.

“The Disability Compensation Benefits Claim tool lessens the administrative and paperwork burden for Veterans, and shortens the processing timeline for benefits claims,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “This innovative tool, along with the companion tutorial video series, represents VA’s commitment to providing Veterans quality service through digital transformation.”

The accompanying five-part video tutorial series is accessible on VA’s Office of Information and Technology (OIT) YouTube page. The tutorials describe steps Veterans can follow to complete disability compensation claims applications online using the new digital tool. The videos feature:

- An overview of the online tool’s user-friendly platform, and its efficient functionality that streamlines the claims submission process.
- Log-in instructions for starting the process of filing a disability benefits claim, and how Veterans can track existing disability compensation claims.
- Instructions on how the tool automatically checks the Veteran’s record to find out if there is an active intent to file date already pending.

Visit the [full tutorial series](#) for instructions.

## DoD Expanding Access to Commissaries, Military Exchanges and Recreation Facilities

The Department of Defense (DoD) is expanding commissary, military exchange, and morale, welfare, and recreation (MWR) retail privileges on U.S. military installations as specified in the Purple Heart and Disabled Veterans Equal Access Act of 2018, included in the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019.

Starting Jan. 1, 2020, access will expand to include all veterans with service-connected disabilities, veterans who are Purple Heart recipients, veterans who are former prisoners of war, and individuals approved and designated as the primary family caregivers of eligible veterans under the Department of Veterans Affairs Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers. While this expansion will extend eligibility to over 4.1 million new patrons, the Department expects little to no impact on current patrons in most locations. There may be some impact in areas with a high cost of living, but the Department is preparing to accommodate all new patrons.

“These new privileges recognize the service and sacrifice of these veterans and those that care for them,”

A.T. Johnston, deputy assistant secretary of defense for Military Community and Family Policy, said. “If you or someone you know might be eligible for these privileges, share the message,” Johnston said. “Please help us ensure these veterans and caregivers receive the privileges they’ve been granted.”

New patrons eligible solely under this authority should be aware that the law requires the DoD charge them a small user fee to offset the increased expense incurred by the Department of the Treasury for processing commercial credit or debit cards used for purchases at commissary stores.

The DoD is finalizing the details for these new privileges with the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Homeland Security and the Treasury. Information will be announced soon regarding installation access and the authentication process for these privileges.

To learn more about the commissary, military exchange and MWR expansion, visit <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Factsheets/expanding-access-fact-sheet.pdf>.