

THE ALABAMA VETERAN

Kay Ivey
Governor

Spring 2020

W. Kent Davis
Commissioner



DATES TO REMEMBER

- * Easter
April 12, 2020
- * Administrative Professionals Day
April 22, 2020
- * Mother's Day
May 10, 2020
- * Memorial Day
May 25, 2020
- * Father's Day
June 21, 2020

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Charles White, a Navy veteran, celebrated his 105th birthday on March 19th.

Commissioner's Corner



I want to use this column to talk to you about a couple of items that are not pleasant.

Of course, all of you have heard about the coronavirus disease, known as COVID-19, that is causing illness around the world. Fortunately, we are ready. While the risk is real, the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs (ADVA) is prepared and remains vigilant in taking the proper precautions. We're doing all we can to make sure everyone—veterans home residents, families, visitors, staff and anyone else—stays as safe as possible during this situation.

The ADVA is monitoring state and national reports concerning the impact COVID-19 is having on the general population and has implemented measures for protecting employees as well as the residents of Alabama's state veterans homes. Since all ADVA offices will be closed to the public through at least April 17th, remember to limit or avoid close personal contact with others to avoid the spreading of sickness. Also remember to wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.

Information regarding ADVA's response to the COVID-19 crisis is posted to the department's website at www.va.alabama.gov. For more information about coronavirus, please visit <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>.

I also wanted to give you an update on veterans suicide. As you probably know, the veteran suicide rate in Alabama is higher than any other comparison group (including other Southern states). We are intent on tackling this crisis and have several initiatives in the works.

The Task Force on Veterans Suicide has already begun to implement suicide prevention efforts. The Task Force is focusing on initiatives which have the greatest probability of reducing the number of suicides among Alabama's veterans.

We are also involved in the Governor's Challenge, which is a call to action for employing suicide prevention best practices and policies state-wide. Participation in this initiative allows us to implement best policies and practices to advance our suicide prevention efforts.

We are committed to helping effectively develop a way to reduce the rate and number of veteran suicides. You can help. If you know of a veteran having thoughts of suicide, encourage that person to contact the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 and press 1, text 838255, or chat online at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat.

Finally, I'd like to remind everyone that the 2020 census is now ongoing. The census is critically important for our state's future and only takes a few minutes to fill out. For ease in participating, simply have your assigned census number and log in to <https://my2020census.gov/> to complete it. Thanks.

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Chambers County Veterans Service Office Opens



The Greater Valley Area Chamber of Commerce hosted a ribbon cutting for the Chambers County Veterans Service Office on February 20.

There's a new place for veterans and their families to turn to in Chambers County. Veterans in that area no longer need to drive to another county to learn about their benefits or to meet with a Veterans Service Officer (VSO).

The new office, located on the second floor of the Chambers County Courthouse Lanett Annex, will advocate for vets and their families. "Many vets don't know about the benefits they have earned by just being in the military. We are basically the liaison between the veteran and the VA," Rogers Wilson, district manager, said. "The VSO will make sure they receive the support, benefits and recognition they earned as service members."

Chambers was one of 17 counties that lost their VSO during spending cutbacks. The Lanett office is the first of 10 new offices to reopen around the state. It will only be open on Tuesdays and Thursdays until a VSO is hired and trained.

"This is such a wonderful day for Chambers County; the reopening of our VA services office is a bright beginning for the 2020 year," State Representative Debbie Wood said. "Our veterans have provided protection while placing their lives and careers on hold. Often, we say to a veteran that we appreciate their service. Opening this office reaffirms that we have not forgotten their sacrifice and we are committed to providing the necessary resources to assist their lives."

State Representative Bob Fincher was also on hand for the ribbon cutting. "This office is a wonderful thing; there are no more deserving people than our veterans because they have sacrificed so much for this country," he said. "I hope this office is used by many people for many years to come."

Commissioner Kent Davis said that there are around 2,400 veterans in Chambers County and those numbers are expected to rise a little bit. "We are here to serve veterans and we are so proud to be back."

VEAC Delivers Special Services to Veterans/Families

More than 800 veterans, family members, caregivers and survivors received special services during the annual Veterans Experience Action Center (VEAC) held at Montgomery's Cramton Bowl Multiplex in February.

The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs (ADVA) teamed up with the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to assist veterans with answers—and sometimes resolutions—regarding their benefits and healthcare. State, local and other federal agencies collaborated to provide information on housing, insurance, health care, employment, bereavement and

mental health counseling. A mobile Vet Center was also on standby for those veterans making a transition back into civilian life.

"The Montgomery VEAC gave the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs the opportunity to partner with the VA, state agencies, community service providers and veteran service organizations in providing resources, services and information directly to veterans and their family members," ADVA Commissioner Kent Davis said.

The ADVA assisted 25 veterans and filed 15 first-time claims which many veterans found useful. Russell County veterans service officer (VSO) David Sharpe filed a claim for Birmingham resident Sammie Bibb.

Bibb spent eight years in the Marine Corps and deployed to Kuwait and Iraq during Desert Shield/Desert Storm. He has several service-related medical issues that came from those deployments.

"My experience was great. I came in just to get information on how to file a claim," he said. "I was able to file my claim today. I can go home



John and Loretta Gass receive help with a claim.

now and feel that I accomplished something."

Amy veteran John Gass and his wife Loretta drove about four hours from Bryant, Alabama, to sign up for VA benefits. "She (Butler County VSO Tammie Rice) actually got the claim started and was very helpful and extremely nice. Now all we have to do is wait and see what happens," he said. "This is a really good thing they have going here. We learned a lot. There was a lot of good information for veterans and worth the drive down."

Davis said more outreach events are planned for other parts of the state to bring services and resources to veterans and their families.



David Sharpe assists Sammie Bibb with a claim.

**FOR THE LOVE OF ALABAMA,
TAKE YOUR CENSUS.**

Starting in March, every household in the United States will be asked to participate in the census. By responding to the census, you're helping to make sure your tax dollars return to your community to support programs impacting housing, education, transportation, employment, health care, and public policy.

Since the census only happens once a decade, it is important to make sure you're counted!

Couple an example of a life well lived

Lonnie Neely was born on July 17, 1918, the last year of World War I. Woodrow Wilson was the president and the Spanish flu pandemic swept the world.

He grew up in Scooba, Mississippi, just a few miles west of the Alabama border. Clara, his wife of 82 years, grew up just a couple of miles from him. Clara was 18 when her mom and stepfather planned to move to Alabama.

“Times were different back then. When you farmed the land, you had to give the owner the first of everything you raised—first corn, first bale of cotton, first of everything you picked,” Clara said. “My stepfather got tired of giving everything to the man and never having anything. He could never get out of debt.”

Someone had a big truck and moved people to other properties. “They [Clara’s parents] had to run off by night, because they couldn’t let the owner [of the land know] that they were moving,” Lonnie said.

Lonnie, who was 19 at the time, and Clara knew they couldn’t be separated. “She was about to leave me, and I couldn’t let her go. She would be too far from me,” he said. “I asked her mom and stepfather for her, but they didn’t want to give her up, so I stole her by night.”

The pair rode a mule a couple of miles down the road in frigid winter weather. “It was a cold night. Icicles stood up out of the ground,” Lonnie said. “We rode to the preacher’s house and got married.”

They married on Dec. 6, 1937—the day before her family was due to move. “My stepdaddy wasn’t happy because he already had a job for me working in a kitchen,” Clara said. “But my Momma, she just wanted us to be happy.”

Lonnie was drafted in 1944 and went to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, for training. He then traveled to Fort Benning, Georgia, for follow-on training in 1945. “That’s when they bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the war ended. And that gave me a



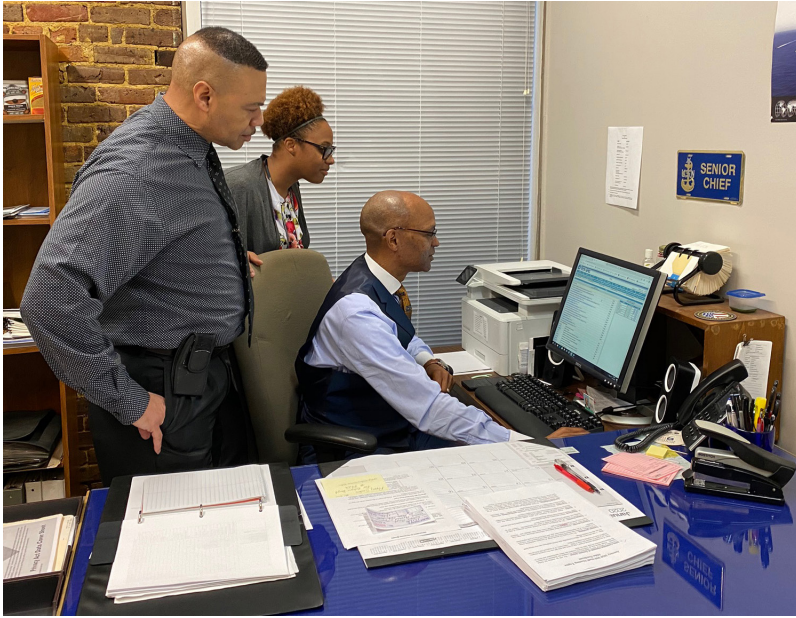
chance to get back home,” Lonnie said. “I didn’t get to go overseas. I asked for a discharge and they gave me an honorable discharge in 1945. I got to come back to my family and get back to farming.”

After the war, Lonnie and Clara lived in Scooba for several years before moving to Gordo in 1949 and eventually to Tuscaloosa in 1963. He started working at the Central Foundry in the 1950s and continued working there for 25 years. That’s when he retired, at the age of 62.

The Neely’s visit the Tuscaloosa County Veterans Service Office regularly to fill out papers or to find out about different VA benefits. “They always help us out. They helped get hearing aids, glasses, stuff like that,” Clara said.

“The Neely’s are some of my favorite clients. They are always so pleasant and hilarious, just the sweetest people I have ever met. They bring such joy whenever they come in and it is such a blessing to be in their presence,” Eric Ervin, Tuscaloosa County veterans service officer, said. “I look forward to seeing them and enjoy talking with them about their life’s journey together and they always oblige me. Both are still very youthful at heart and their love for each other is obvious. They are an example of a life well lived and what a marriage is all about. They are the county’s Grandparents!”

Meet Your VSO



Eric Ervin (seated), Rodney Stephens and Amarin Gunn work hard to get Tuscaloosa County veterans receive state and federal benefits.

When Tuscaloosa veterans need assistance, they visit the local Veterans Service Office (VSO).

The three-person office of Eric Ervin, Rodney Stephens and Amari Gunn work hard to get veterans any available state or federal veteran benefit. Ervin, a retired senior chief petty officer, began as the VSO in June 2013. Assistant VSO Stephens began working in 2017 after retiring as a master sergeant from the Air Force. Gunn came to work as an administrative support assistant four years ago.

“The cohesiveness amongst my staff and co-workers presents a great working environment and atmosphere,” Ervin said. Gunn said that getting along with your co-workers is very important to doing the job. “I love getting up in the morning and getting ready for work,” she said. “We’re like family; we joke around and have a good time every day while also supporting each other and helping out whenever asked.”

The office makes contact—in person and by phone—with hundreds of veterans or family members per month. “The veterans don’t necessarily have different

needs, but the nature of their disabilities is often different,” Ervin said. “Many of the older Vietnam and Korean War veterans typically have disabilities consistent with Agent Orange whereas Post 9-11 veterans experience more physical disabilities and PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder].”

Stephens and Gunn agree that veterans share common needs. “We have vets that have issues due to asbestos or the Camp Lejeune water contamination,” Gunn said. “But no matter what generation or war they fought in, a lot of them have PTSD that they deal with.”

Ervin and Stephens enjoy being able to assist veterans and dependents with obtaining the benefits that they are entitled to and seeing the appreciation from them when their benefits are granted and received. “It’s very rewarding when our clients call

or stop by the office just to say thank you for helping them receive their benefits,” Stephens said. “Some even see you in public and express their gratitude.”

Gunn also enjoys helping the veterans. “I have always loved helping people and to be able to do that on a daily basis is so rewarding,” she said. “We have veterans or their dependents that will come into the office literally in tears stressed out not knowing what to do and I take pride in knowing that I can help in some way.”

The three enjoy meeting the veterans and sharing stories about their time in the military. “I enjoy listening to the WWII vets and their stories. My grandfather was a WWII vet so to hear him and so many others talk about the war is always interesting to me,” Gunn said. “To hear them talk about what they saw and experienced and the things they had to do to survive puts everything in perspective. It makes you realize just how blessed we are to have brave men and women who were willing to put their life on the line for us. Our freedom is something we should never take for granted and I’m just thankful for their service.”

Troy Fraternity “Walks Hard”

Members of Troy University’s Alpha Tau Omega Fraternity spent Spring Break walking to raise money and awareness for the wounded warriors and Jeep Sullivan’s Wounded Warrior Outdoor Adventures.

Walk Hard is a six-day, 128.3-mile charity hike from Troy to Panama City Beach, Florida. The fraternity raised \$61,000 for combat wounded veterans and their families to have the opportunity to enjoy the great outdoors. Jeep Sullivan orchestrates extravagant hunting and fishing trips for physically, emotionally, or psychologically wounded veterans in an effort to heal them and share the gospel with them.

Joshua Marvin, a junior communications major, served as the walk’s assistant director. “My experience walking last year really expanded my mind and interest in veterans’ affairs because it became incredibly personal for me to meet wounded warriors through

Jeep Sullivan,” he said. “This cause has gone above and beyond the call to come alongside these brave individuals. Walking felt like the least I could do, but leading and orchestrating the walk with the director was an added bonus for me to give.”

This was Austin McClellan’s, a junior majoring in exercise science, second year doing Walk Hard. “Though every step of the walk becomes a bigger burden, it cannot compare to the joy that comes with knowing how many lives are being changed by this cause,” he said. “Proverbs 3:27 says ‘Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is your power to act.’ I am honored and inspired by these words to once again be able to take part in giving back to those who have so generously sacrificed for my freedom. Walk Hard represents so much more than just a philanthropy, it represents the belief that we should give as generously as possible when we are blessed with the ability to do so.”



Members of Troy University’s Alpha Tau Omega Fraternity prepare to walk for wounded warriors and Jeep Sullivan’s Wounded Warrior Outdoor Adventures.

Justin Thomas, a political science sophomore, also walked for the second year. “I made the decision to walk again because it’s the least that I can do to sacrifice six days out of my year in order to raise support for veterans who go through more pain every single day for the rest of their lives!” he said. “They’ve given so much in order to ensure this country remains free. Our country simply isn’t doing enough to thank or support them, which is why I will continue to walk.”

Thomas didn’t have too many problems with his feet but did mention that he endured some intense joint/muscle pain and struggled through the stomach bug during the walk. About half of the group also suffered with the bug. “I learned just how far we are able to push our bodies when we set our minds to something,” he continued. “I mainly want the public to know that even though Walk Hard does get a lot of publicity and

attention, the REAL heroes are the men and women who have put their lives on the line to serve this great country.”

Mary-Gates Allen documented the walk through video and photos (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBZ91E73_jzM_M3JRDZ4Kgw). “Being behind the camera, you’re really forced to make sure you see and capture every single detail. I see the agonizing faces of the walkers, the wounds and sores on their feet, but most importantly I see the look of genuine gratitude and thankfulness on the faces of the warriors,” she said. “It’s hard to video that final day when my own camera is getting drenched in tears! I am so thankful for ATO, for Walk Hard, and for the warriors who fought for each of us.”



Left to right: Logan Wilson and Austin McClellan take a break at the Florida state line.



Nelson Ortiz gets help stretching during the walk.

Fun at the Veterans Homes



Top left: Henry Burgess, from the William F. Green State Veterans Home, gives his wish list to Santa.

Top right: Curtis Shelton, a resident of the Colonel Robert L. Howard State Veterans Home, receives a gift.

Above: A group of Bill Nichols State Veterans Home residents visits with Molly the Miniature Horse.

Right: Bill Nichols State Veterans Home crowned Louie Pharr and Betty Campbell the Valentine king and queen.