



THE ALABAMA VETERAN

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ADVA
NEWSLETTER

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COMMISSIONER'S CORNER



As Commissioner of the Alabama Department of Veterans' Affairs, I have the privilege of leading an incredible organization whose mission is to honor the sacrifices made for our country by Alabama's veterans.

We are now several months into battling the COVID-19 pandemic. The safety of our veteran population has been the top priority of the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs. During the last several months, the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs implemented many steps to help protect our veterans and staff.

I am proud of the dedication and selfless service by our health care professionals in our veteran's homes during these trying times, as they have worked tirelessly to provide the highest standards of care to our veterans.

This month, the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs celebrated 75 years of serving the state's brave men and women who have answered the call of duty and devoted their lives to serving their country. Through the challenges of an unprecedented national crisis, the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs has opened seven new veterans service offices across the state in 2020.

After months of strict visitation restrictions at our state veteran's homes, we have developed plans to resume resident visits that meet federal guidelines and the criteria of Governor Ivey's Safer at Home Amendment for long-term care facilities. Long-awaited indoor and outdoor visitation is now available to families through a scheduling process, with restrictions to meet federal and state guidelines.

Our veterans homes administrators and health care professionals have been working diligently behind the scenes to help make these visits a reality, and I'm proud of their efforts. More visits will be scheduled in the coming days and weeks.

I also wanted to give you an update on our veterans suicide initiative. The veteran suicide rate in Alabama is higher than any other comparison group. We are striving to tackle 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 focuses on initiatives that have the most significant probability of reducing suicides among Alabama veterans. We are also involved in the Governor's Challenge, a call to action for employing suicide prevention best practices and policies statewide. We are committed to effectively developing 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

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ADVA OPENS VETERANS SERVICE OFFICES ACROSS STATE



This year, despite an unprecedented national pandemic crisis, the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs (ADVA) opened Veterans Service Offices in Chambers, Chilton, Clay, Crenshaw, Henry, Lawrence, and Winston counties. The offices will provide services for the nearly 400,000 military veterans in Alabama.

In 2011 and 2012, the state VA department was forced to close offices in 17 counties because of budget restraints.

The Veterans Service Offices will assist veterans and their dependents with compensation and pension claims, educational benefits, VA home loans, and referral services for needs such as temporary housing, healthcare, counseling, and job placement.





Proclamation

By the Governor of Alabama

WHEREAS, suicide is a national public health challenge that causes immeasurable pain among individuals, families, and communities across the country; and

WHEREAS, the number of Veteran and Military suicides has exceeded 6,000 each year from 2008-2017; and

WHEREAS, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States, 2nd for people ages 10-35, and on average 129 Americans die by suicide each day accounting for 47,173 suicide deaths in 2017; and

WHEREAS, on March 5, 2019, the President signed Executive Order 13861 calling for the development of a comprehensive plan to empower Veterans and end suicide through coordinated suicide prevention efforts, prioritized research activities, and strengthened collaboration across the public and private sectors. This plan is known as the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide or PREVENTS (the "Roadmap"); and

WHEREAS, for every individual who feels alone, ashamed, or believes that they would be a burden if their thoughts or feelings were shared, there are scores of others in every community who want to help but are not sure how; and

WHEREAS, Alabama businesses are in the unique position to leverage the learnings from our employees, including Veterans, to encourage a national discussion on mental health and wellbeing in the workplace, and collaborate on meaningful solutions; and

WHEREAS, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has a Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families that brings together interagency teams to address Veteran suicide at the state level; and

WHEREAS, the PREVENTS national public health campaign REACH, will seek to increase awareness of mental health issues and suicide prevention to reduce suicide for all Americans; and

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Kay Ivey, Governor of Alabama, do hereby proclaim our full support for the implementation of the PREVENTS "Roadmap;" working with this whole of Government and whole of Nation approach to help identify Veterans and other citizens in need of care; develop best practices around mental health; prioritize mental health in the workplace; participate in the Governor's, Mayor's, or other similar coordinated challenges and/or efforts if available in my state or as the opportunity arises; and promote the REACH National Public Health Campaign. I call upon all citizens, Government agencies, nonprofit organizations, corporations, health care providers, first responders, the criminal justice community, institutions of higher learning, the faith-based community, the Arts community, and the research sector in the great state of Alabama to raise awareness of mental health, suicide prevention, lethal means safety, and support services available in their communities and to encourage all those in need to REACH to access help, hope, and community.

Given Under My Hand and the Great Seal of the Office of the Governor at the State Capitol in the City of Montgomery on the 31st day of August 2020.

Kay Ivey
Governor



Governor Signs Alabama Veteran Suicide Prevention Proclamation

Gov. Kay Ivey lent her signature to the Alabama Veteran Suicide Prevention Proclamation, highlighting the state's involvement with the nation's comprehensive suicide prevention effort known as (PREVENTS) The President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide.

PREVENTS seeks to change the culture surrounding mental health and suicide prevention through enhanced community integration, prioritized research activities, and implementation strategies that emphasize improved overall health and well-being.

In conjunction with PREVENTS, Alabama accepted the "Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans and their Families," a national call to action asking state, military, and civilian interagency teams to embark on a process of collaborating, planning and implementing suicide prevention best practices and policies for service members, veterans, and their families statewide.

Both PREVENTS and the Governor's Challenge acknowledge that by working together on all levels, we can substantively reduce suicide.

The PREVENTS task force is partnering with stakeholders including the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as nonprofits, state and local organizations, and government leaders to implement best practices to improve health and prevent suicide.

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS AWARDS COMMISSIONER'S EXCELLENCE AWARD



Kim Justice awarded Commissioner's Excellence Award for Outstanding Department Performance

The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs awarded Kim Justice with the Commissioner's Excellence Award.

"Each year I have the pleasure of presenting the Commissioner's Excellence Award for best overall performance among our employees that improves the quality of service and image of the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs," said Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs Commissioner, Kent Davis. "It is an honor to present the latest award to Ms. Kim Justice for her exceptional stewardship of the state veterans homes program in 2019."

Her performance in that role was simply superb, and she received numerous accolades from customers for her level of service."

"I was very surprised when my name was announced as the recipient of the Commissioner's Excellence Award," said Kim Justice. "There are so many deserving fellow ADVA employees that work to assist veterans and their families every day. It was such an honor to be selected and receive this prestigious recognition."

"Ms. Justice proved to be an exceptional, key member of the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs (ADVA) team in 2019. Diligent, meticulous, and professional in every respect, her performance as Executive Director of the State Veterans Homes was superb," said Davis. "An absolutely invaluable employee, leader, manager, and supervisor, Ms. Justice guided her state veterans homes to numerous national quality awards during this period and was a superb ambassador for the department. Her unique, noteworthy contributions to ADVA in 2019 constitute an exceptionally positive representation of the entire department and are worthy of recognition in the form of Commissioner's Excellence Award," said Davis.

Some of Justice's accomplishments include: Single-handedly coordinating all planning and execution of significant contracts for the comprehensive, multi-million-dollar renovations of Tut Fann and William F. Green state veterans homes and spearheading the initiation of a major project to construct and operate a new, fifth state veterans home in the Wiregrass Region of Alabama.

ADVA AWARDS EMPLOYEES FOR EXEMPLARY EFFORTS



BRIAN FOSHEE AWARDED ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR

The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs awarded Covington County's Veterans Service Officer Brian Foshee Veteran Advocate of the Year. "Every year we give out this award," ADVA Commissioner Kent Davis said. "We have 55 Veterans Service Offices all over the state of Alabama. We honor someone every year with an advocate of the year award who best represents this quality of taking care of local veterans."

Davis said Foshee represents the tip of the spear of what a VSO should be. "These VSO's are out in the communities mingled with these veterans and taking care of their needs," Davis said. "They are often the first people that these veterans come into contact with when leaving the military. What's even better is that Brian's roots are in Covington County. He came back to his home area after many years of service in the U.S. Marine Corps, and that is admirable. We have several people that do that, but Brian represents the epitome of people that do that. Brian, more than anybody I know, has that local rapport with all of the local veterans."

Advocate of the Year was awarded to Foshee because he provided outstanding counseling, information, assistance, and referrals to nearly 3,200 veterans. "As VSO for Covington County, you greatly improved agency effectiveness and enhanced the lives of countless veterans and family members," Davis said. "On behalf of the department, it is an honor to present this award to Brian."

The words that Davis got back from several members of the military that served with Brian were words like "Superstar, nicest, most cooperative, most dedicated guy," Davis said. "He represents customer service at its finest. The government doesn't always get the best name when it comes to customer service, but Brian really takes it to heart. Covington County is lucky to have him here in this community." Foshee said the best part of his job is being able to help somebody who drastically needs it. "Getting this award is almost as deserving as serving as an active duty Marine," Foshee said. "But nothing could ever beat that." Foshee became the Covington County VSO in 2015 after serving in the Marine Corps for 30 years.



ERIC ERVIN AWARDED ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR

The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs recently awarded Tuscaloosa County's Veterans Service Officer, Eric Ervin, Advocate of the Year. The award is presented to individuals whose service to the community and veterans goes above the call of duty. Ervin helps veterans, dependents, and survivors of veterans apply for any benefits they might be entitled to at the federal and state levels.

"Eric Ervin is the consummate professional," said Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs Commissioner, Kent Davis. "Each year, we present one or more employees with the Veterans Advocate of the Year award. Eric was presented with this award for 2019 because his community and veteran involvement greatly exceeded the requirements of his normal duties and responsibilities. His customer service and local involvement with his client audiences greatly improved community relations and awareness in significant areas such as veterans benefits, college student veteran issues, and veteran healthcare," said Davis.

Ervin served with distinction in the United States Navy for over 22 years while rising to Senior Chief Petty Officer's rank (E8). He has continued to serve his country and state by providing exceptional service as the Tuscaloosa County and Greene County Veterans Service Officer.

"I have had the honor and privilege to be a part of the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs for seven years," said Veterans Service Officer Eric Ervin. "It is truly an honor to be selected for this award, and I am appreciative and thankful to be the recipient. Serving and assisting our veterans is a very rewarding job, and to be recognized for the commitment and dedication the job requires makes it even more rewarding and motivating to face each day with anticipation of making someone's day a little brighter."

"NEWS YOU CAN USE"

THE BIRMINGHAM VETERANS AFFAIRS HEALTH CARE SYSTEM (BVAHCS) HAS ANNOUNCED A NEW COMMUNITY BASED OUTPATIENT CLINIC (CBOC) COMING TO OXFORD, ALABAMA

The Birmingham Veterans Affairs Health Care System (BVAHCS) has announced a new Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) coming to Oxford, Alabama. The new 15,000+ square foot designed clinic will be the first of its kind in a true Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT) concept and will offer primary care and mental health services, as well as the addition of two new services with audiology and optometry.

The new CBOC will be located at 127 Davis Loop in Oxford, replacing the existing clinic currently located at 96 Ali Way. "We are excited about the new VA clinic being able to provide expanded services closer to where our Veterans live," said BVAHCS Director Stacy Vasquez. "The expansion of these services will assist many of our Veterans to receive care locally without having to drive to Birmingham. "The PACT design will include separate corridor/entrances into examination rooms for patient and staff, work areas for enhanced coordination of care team, twelve standard exam rooms, a Women's Health room, a Tele-Health room, a Tele-Retinal room, and two triage rooms while staffing more than 30 employees.

The current CBOC in Oxford/Anniston provides healthcare to more than 4,300 Veterans annually. Construction for the new site will be managed by Construction Managers Incorporation based in Fremont, NC. The construction project is expected to cost \$4 million with a five year lease and five one-year options. Completion of the new clinic is expected to be approximately one year after construction begins. Birmingham VA Health Care System (Birmingham VA Medical Center and its outpatient clinics in Bessemer, Birmingham, Childersburg, Gadsden, Guntersville, Huntsville, Jasper, Oxford, and Sheffield) provides care to more than 68,000 Veterans in northern and central Alabama each year. Information about the Birmingham VA Health Care System can be found at www.birmingham.va.gov.

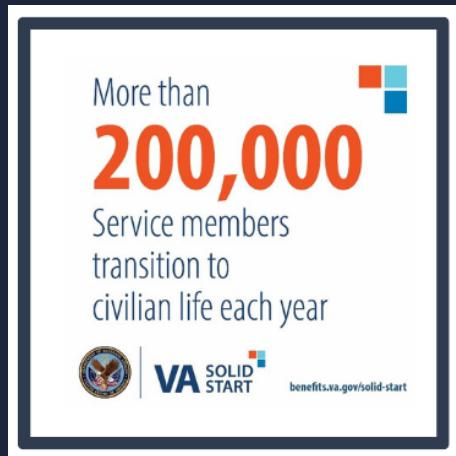
PLANS FOR VETS SUICIDE PREVENTION TRAINING, NEW THREE-DIGIT EMERGENCY MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS LINE SIGNED INTO LAW

President Donald Trump signed into law a pair of bills designed to help prevent veterans suicide, including a measure to establish a new three-digit national crisis line similar to 911 for mental health emergencies. Both measures had received significant support from veterans groups in recent months, and passed through Congress without significant objection. The bills were also cosponsored by Sen. Doug Jones, D-Alabama.

The new suicide crisis hotline measure will designate 988 as a universal telephone number for national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline services. Although the call center will not be exclusive to veterans, advocates have championed the idea in recent years as a way to make emergency mental health care more available to veterans. About 20 veterans and service members die by suicide each day, according to the latest statistics from the Department of Veterans Affairs. That figure has remained at about the same level over the last decade despite focused efforts by the department and Congress on outreach and new intervention services. Under the provisions of the bill, the new 988 crisis number will be active by fall 2021.

Both the VA secretary and assistant secretary for mental health and substance use at Health and Human Services will issue a report to Congress next April on progress with that work and additional resources that may be needed. The other measure — the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act — includes a new grant program to encourage collaboration with community organizations on suicide prevention, new hiring rules to quickly fill mental health staffing gaps at the Department of Veterans Affairs, and a host of new data requirements to better track potential causes of suicide.

VA Solid Start Program Helps Veterans Transition to Civilian Life



Transitioning from military to civilian life can be a stressful time for service members and their families – and VA is committed to supporting them throughout this process. In December 2019, VA implemented the Solid Start program to provide consistent, caring contact between service members and VA to guide them through understanding and using the benefits and resources available to them.

Getting a SOLID start

Representatives at the VA Solid Start program call newly separated Veterans three times during their first year of separation. A specially trained VA Representative will reach out to these Veterans around 90-, 180- and 365-days post-separation. The phone conversations are tailored to the Veteran's needs, directing them toward appropriate resources, services, and benefits. After each call, Veterans receive a follow up email with the information and resources specific to their needs.

Why Veterans should take the call

We know the first year post-separation can be overwhelming with a great deal of information to review and understand. There are new routines and new responsibilities, but Veterans don't have to carry that weight alone. VA Solid Start is designed to help them find the information and answers to their benefits- or transition-related questions.

Some common transition topics VA Solid Start can help with include:

- Medical and dental care, such as helping Veterans make appointments and connect with associated resources.
- Time-sensitive insurance programs, such as advising Veterans on the option to convert Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance (SGLI) to Veterans Group Life Insurance (VGLI).
- Mental health resources, prioritizing contact to Veterans who had a mental health care appointment within the last year of active duty service.
- Information on low and no down payment housing loans and refinancing options.
- Education assistance through the GI Bill that will pay for up to 36 months of education benefits.
- Counseling assistance, such as connecting Veterans to personalized career planning and guidance resources to help set goals for success.

VA will not ask for financial information and will only discuss topics that the Veteran is comfortable with. VA is committed to helping Veterans understand and access the benefits they have earned to help them get a solid start on civilian life.

Recently separated Veterans are encouraged to keep their contact information up to date in their VA.gov account.

For questions about VA Solid Start visit <https://benefits.va.gov/transition/solid-start.asp> or call the toll-free hotline at 1-800-827-0611, Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (ET).