

# ODAG-VA Newsletter

OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY ADJUTANT GENERAL – VETERANS AFFAIRS

January 2016



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**Delaware Valley Veterans' Home:**

[www.dvvh.pa.gov](http://www.dvvh.pa.gov)

**Gino J. Merli Veterans' Center:**

[www.gmvc.pa.gov](http://www.gmvc.pa.gov)

**Hollidaysburg Veterans' Home:**

[www.hvh.pa.gov](http://www.hvh.pa.gov)

**Pennsylvania Soldiers' and Sailors' Home:**

[www.pssh.pa.gov](http://www.pssh.pa.gov)

**Southeastern Veterans' Center:**

[www.sevc.pa.gov](http://www.sevc.pa.gov)

**Southwestern Veterans' Center:**

[www.swvc.pa.gov](http://www.swvc.pa.gov)

## Shelter Dogs, Veterans Linked In Franklin County Program

Two dogs suffering in shelters have been taken in by new foster families and are training to become service dogs for Veterans with physical and emotional needs.

"Operation Save-A-Vet, Save-A-Pet" program was kick started in June with a \$12,000 grant from the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs. The program takes adult dogs pre-screened for temperament and places them in training classes to teach them skills such as opening and closing doors, turning lights on and off, calling 911 with a special device, waking someone with night terrors, fetching medicine bottles and carrying other items.



Justin Slep, Director of the Franklin County Veterans Affairs Office, anticipates working on placements of the dogs in the spring of 2016.

Anyone wishing to donate to the project can send a check, written to Franklin County Veterans Affairs, with "outreach fund" written in the memo line, to 425 Franklin Farm Lane, Chambersburg, PA 17201.

## Scholarships For Veterans Available

Western Governors University is accepting applications for its new WGU Salute to Veterans Scholarship. The nonprofit online university created the scholarship to financially assist Veterans and their spouses, who return to school for their bachelor's and master's degrees.

The scholarship is valued at up to \$2,500 per student and will be applied at the rate of \$625 Per six-month term and be renewable up to four terms. WGU reports tuition costs about \$3,000 per term for the majority of its programs.

Applications will be accepted through January 31 at [www.wgu.edu/veterans](http://www.wgu.edu/veterans). WGU will award up to 50 scholarships to new students nationwide.

## Lackawanna County Veterans Affairs Honored



The Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs recently recognized the Lackawanna County Veterans Affairs staff with a service award for five consecutive years of outstanding recovery of Veterans' benefits claims processing. Keep up the great work!

## Educational Gratuity Program For Students Of Veterans

Did you know that the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs offers an Educational Gratuity Program for students of Veterans who hold a 100% disability rating and served during wartime? Check out this [video](#) for more information!

For additional information not answered in the video, feel free to contact the Program Manager at 717-861-9410.



## Gino Merli Inducts Its Newest Hall Of Fame Member

The Gino J. Merli Veterans' Center recently inducted John Richards Jr. into its Hall of Fame. Mr. Richards' contributions run the gamut from calling bingo at the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center to speaking to schools about Vietnam and Veterans Issue.

Retired Corporal John Richards Jr. was wounded in Vietnam when a bullet struck him in the face while dragging a wounded Marine toward safety in an attempt to save Americans from a downed helicopter.

Mr. Richards is a life member of VFW Post 283 in Kingston and the Disabled American Veterans and is the past president of his Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club chapter.

Despite his injuries, Mr. Richards says part of the reason he volunteers is that others gave even more for their country, and many Veterans are still suffering.

The Center added Mr. Richards as the 47th name to its Hall of Fame. More than 50 people attended the ceremony, including his family, center residents and members of Veterans organizations who wore leather and denim



vests covered with patches displaying their military pride.

Mr. Richards earned several medals for his service in Vietnam to include the Silver Star and the Purple Heart.

## VA Caregiver Support

VA has long recognized the crucial role that caregivers play in helping Veterans recover from injury and illness and in providing for their daily care in the community. Caregivers are truly partners in caring for Veterans and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is dedicated to providing them with the support and services they need. The VA has many programs that support Veterans and their caregivers for additional information, please contact the Caregiver Support Coordinator at your local VA medical center.

In addition VA established a toll-free **National Caregiver Support Line 855-260-3274**. The support line is staffed by licensed independent social workers and is available to respond to inquiries about the new Caregiver services associated with Public Law 111-163, Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010, as well as serve as a resource and referral center for caregivers and Veterans from all eras, professionals and the general public; provide referrals to local VA Medical Center Caregiver Support Coordinators and VA/community resources; and provide emotional support.

## Online Veteran Registry To Assist Veterans

The Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) encourages Pennsylvania veterans to connect with them via their new online Pennsylvania Veterans Registry at [www.register.dmva.pa.gov](http://www.register.dmva.pa.gov) for assistance with obtaining veterans benefits and services.

The Pennsylvania Veterans Registry is an online application that allows veterans to connect with DMVA to request information related to valuable state benefits, programs and services offered by the agency. The registry features responsive design technology to make it accessible on mobile devices and computers. A registrants' information will be shared with the veteran's county director for veterans affairs and other relevant Commonwealth of Pennsylvania agencies in order to facilitate local connections that aid in providing service to the veteran.

By connecting with DMVA, veterans can also opt-in to receive timely, informative communication such as newsletters, press releases and program updates.

## New Law Allows Retirees to Transfer SBP When Ex-Spouse Dies

A new law will prevent military retirees from losing Survivor Benefit Plan benefits when their ex-spouse dies before they do, by allowing the benefit to be transferred to a current or future spouse.

The 2016 National Defense Authorization Act provision will help an unknown number of people, who paid tens of thousands of dollars into the Survivor Benefit Plan for their ex-spouse.

Retirees agree to pay a portion of their retirement pay into their SBP so that, when they die, the program will pay an annuity to their surviving beneficiary based on a portion of the retiree's pay.

This new interpretation has affected situations in which SBP was awarded to an ex-spouse as part of a divorce settlement. The Defense Finance Accounting Service said that, because the benefit would henceforth be considered part of the ex-spouse's property, the benefit "expired" if the ex-spouse died.

The new provision, which took effect on Nov. 25, fixes that problem for future retirees. It also applies retroactively to retirees who were previously unable to transfer their benefits after their ex-spouse died.

The new law allows:

- A military retiree who was married at the time of an ex-spouse's death, or who later remarries, to elect to provide SBP coverage to his or her current spouse. The request must be received by DFAS within one year after the date of the ex-spouse's death. For retirees who remarry after an ex-spouse's death, the request must be received within one year after the date of the marriage.
- A military retiree whose ex-spouse died before the effective date of the new law to elect coverage for his or her current spouse, regardless of whether the remarriage happened before or after the ex-spouse's death. The request must be received within one year of the law's Nov. 25, 2015, enactment.

## Pennsylvania State Veterans Commission

The public is invited to attend the Pennsylvania State Veterans' Commission meeting being held at 10 a.m. on January 8, 2016, at the Keystone Conference Center on Fort Indiantown Gap, Lebanon County.



## Pennsylvania Soldiers' And Sailors' Home Resident Receives Award

Allison Taylor, 101 was awarded the French government's highest distinction, the Legion of Honor, for his WWII service.

Mr. Taylor is a resident at the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs' Pennsylvania Soldiers' and Sailors' Home in Erie.

Seventy years ago Mr. Taylor was drafted into the U.S. Army in World War II and was awarded the Bronze Star for his service. He returned to Erie after the war and served another four years in the Pennsylvania National Guard before being discharged in 1951.

U.S. Representative Mike Kelly hosted the medal ceremony and praised Mr. Taylor in a statement saying "to have such heroes still among us is an absolute blessing and described him as being a 'national treasure'."

Surrounded by friends, family and members of the military, Mr. Taylor was presented with the Legion of Honor by Jean-Dominique Le Garrec,



the Honorary French Consul, as an outreach Ambassador of France to the United States.

Mr. Taylor celebrated his 102nd birthday on December 23.

## Governor Wolf Announces Pennsylvania Nearing Veteran Homelessness Goal

Governor Tom Wolf and officials from the Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) today announced that as part of the Governor's challenge to significantly reduce veteran homelessness, 481 homeless veterans in Pennsylvania were placed in permanent housing between Sept. 23 and Nov. 30, 2015. The Governor's challenge was announced on Sept. 22.

"Pennsylvania is making steady progress in housing its homeless veterans. With winter weather and extreme cold temperatures rapidly approaching, it is more important than ever that we locate and assist them," said Governor Wolf. "While we still must wait for final numbers for December, we know that we are getting closer to meeting our goal of providing 550 veterans with stable housing, as well as access to the programs and services that will help them rebuild their lives, by the end of the year."

The commonwealth's vast network of state agencies and community partners continue to work diligently to hit functional zero, which means having the process and the resources in place to identify and house any homeless veteran who wants to be assisted.

"Together, the city of Lancaster and Lancaster County have already announced that they have the systems in place to successfully meet the needs of homeless veterans in their area and we know other communities are very close to making the same announcement," said Brig. Gen. Jerry G. Beck Jr., DMVA's deputy adjutant general for veterans affairs. "Many other cities, including Pittsburgh, have also made huge strides. It's been rewarding for us to coordinate and rally the efforts of all of the stakeholders in this effort and we will continue to advocate for Pennsylvania's homeless veterans."

The challenge, officially known as the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness, is an initiative of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that was launched in June 2014. It was conceived as a means for local leaders to create and coordinate strategies to curb veteran homelessness. In early 2015, HUD conducted a point-in-time count which identified approximately 1,300 homeless veterans in Pennsylvania. Across the United States, 859 mayors, governors and county executives are currently participating in the challenge.

## Get Mobile: Now's The Time to Fall Into A Weight Loss Program

The holidays are behind us. Now is the time to get outside, get active and get back into healthy habits. You might want some help.

Have you heard of MOVE!, VA's national Weight Management Program? Since MOVE! Started in 2006, over 650,000 Veterans have enrolled in an effort to lose weight, keep it off and improve their health. Now you can use the [MOVE! Coach App](#) to help you fall back into a healthy routine.

Follow the 19-week MOVE! Weight Management Program by using tools in the app to build your weight management skills and meet your health goals. Each week builds on the week before, helping you keep good habits even after you have completed the program.



Use the app to set health goals and track information through diary entries about weight, diet and physical activity.

Move! Coach works because it gives you the support you need to be successful while helping you tailor the program to your needs.

The MOVE! Program is designed for both men and women, and for Veterans of all ability levels. Only Veterans receiving care from the VA can enroll in the MOVE! Program, but the educational resources and tracking features available can be downloaded by anyone with an iOS device.

MOVE! Coach is available for iPhones and iPads on the Apple app store. Search for 'MOVE! Coach' (if using an iPad, select the 'iPhone Only' filter for searching)

Visit <http://www.move.va.gov/moveCOACHintro.asp> to learn more. For help using the app go to <https://mobile.va.gov/training/move-coach>.



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## Lancaster County And Philadelphia Reduce Veteran Homelessness

First Lady Michelle Obama gives Lancaster County a well-deserved shout out for reducing Veteran homelessness.

Watch [here](#).

## VA Makes Changes To Veterans Choice Program

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has announced a number of changes to make participation in the [Veterans Choice Program](#) easier and more convenient for Veterans who need to use it. The move, which streamlines eligibility requirements, follows feedback from Veterans along with organizations working on their behalf.

"As we implement the Veterans Choice Program, we are learning from our stakeholders what works and what needs to be refined," said VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald. "It is our goal to do all that we can to remove barriers that separate Veterans from the care they deserve." To date, more than 400,000 medical appointments have been scheduled since the Veterans Choice Program went into effect on November 5, 2014.

**Under the old policy, a Veteran was eligible for the Veterans Choice Program if he or she met the following criteria:**

- Enrolled in VA health care by 8/1/14 or able to enroll as a combat Veteran to be eligible for the Veterans Choice Program;
- Experienced unusual or excessive burden eligibility determined by geographical challenges, environmental factors or a medical condition impacting the Veteran's ability to travel;
- Determined eligible based on the Veteran's current residence being more than 40 miles driving distance from the closest VA medical facility.

**Under the updated eligibility requirements, a Veteran is eligible for the Veterans Choice Program if he or she is enrolled in the VA health care system and meets at least one of the following criteria:**

- Told by his or her local VA medical facility that they

will not be able to schedule an appointment for care within 30 days of the date the Veteran's physician determines he/she needs to be seen or within 30 days of the date the Veteran wishes to be seen if there is no specific date from his or her physician;

- Lives more than 40 miles driving distance from the closest VA medical facility with a full-time primary care physician;
- Needs to travel by air, boat or ferry to the VA medical facility closest to his/her home;
- Faces an unusual or excessive burden in traveling to the closest VA medical facility based on geographic challenges, environmental factors, a medical condition, the nature or simplicity or frequency of the care needed and whether an attendant is needed. Staff at the Veteran's local VA medical facility will work with him or her to determine if the Veteran is eligible for any of these reasons; or
- Lives in a State or Territory without a full-service VA medical facility which includes: Alaska, Hawaii, New Hampshire (Note: this excludes New Hampshire Veterans who live within 20 miles of the White River Junction VAMC) and the United States Territories (excluding Puerto Rico, which has a full service VA medical facility).

Veterans seeking to use the Veterans Choice Program or wanting to know more about it, can call 1-866-606-8198 to confirm their eligibility and to schedule an appointment. For more details about the Veterans Choice Program and VA's progress, visit: [www.va.gov/opa/choiceact](http://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact)

## Delaware Valley Veterans Home Residents Treated To Veterans Day Dinner

The Verizon New Vision Telecom Pioneers Liberty Bell Chapter #6 sponsored a Veterans Day Dinner buy purchasing and serving the DVVH residents.

Their graciousness and hard work is greatly appreciated.






  
**pennsylvania**
  
 DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY
   
 AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

# Save the Date!

2016 Annual Training for County Directors of Veterans' Affairs  
and their Staff will take place

September 13-16 for Accreditation  
(Travel days are the 12th and 16th)

September 14-16 for Continuing Education  
(Travel days are the 13th and 16th)

at the Park Inn by Radisson Harrisburg West  
in Mechanicsburg, PA

\*this is the same location as 2015 training

*Registration will be announced in May*