



pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY
AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

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ODAG-VA Newsletter

OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY ADJUTANT GENERAL – VETERANS AFFAIRS

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VA blood biobank to play major role in conquering diseases



Nearly a half million veterans have rolled up their sleeves for science as the Veterans Affairs Department shoots to build the largest blood repository in the world.

The VA's Boston-based Million Veterans Program is advancing the research on DNA mapping to better understand genetic markers linked to illnesses such as cancers, heart disease, post-traumatic stress and mental health conditions.

According to VA officials, the department is collecting the blood samples and medical histories of donors and feeding the information into a vast database to be used by civilian, academic and government researchers across the globe.

More than 440,000 veterans already have furnished blood to the program.

Precision medicine is the field of medical treatment tailored to a patient's condition, DNA makeup, environment and overall health. Experts believe ad-

vances in such personalized care will lead to more effective treatments for disease.

In his State of the Union address on Jan. 12, President Obama called for \$215 million in funding for the Precision Medicine Initiative, including \$70 million toward a cancer research "moon shot" — an effort to cure cancer within a decade, much as the United States put a man on the moon just eight years after President Kennedy announced the intention to do so.

Veterans make excellent donors for such scientific research because they have detailed medical records to accompany their samples, with some records dating back 40 years, according to VA officials.

The VA cannot simply use any patient's blood sample for the program. All veterans must volunteer to participate in the Million Veterans Program, agreeing to share their medical records and experiences.

The identities of all donors are kept secret from researchers. Samples are stored in a secure database and labeled with a code rather than a veteran's name, and no identifying information is attached to the data accessed by researchers, according to the VA.

Veterans can participate by walking in to a designated collection site, such as the Pittsburgh or Philadelphia VA in Pennsylvania.



Franklin County provides “Helping Hands for Heroes”

The Franklin County Veterans Affairs Office and the Franklin County Adult Probation Department have announced the Helping Hands for Heroes Program. This program is a partnership between the two departments and provides eligible probation participants the opportunity to serve Franklin County military and veteran personnel and their families. Justin Slep, Veterans Affairs Director, and Dan Hoover, Chief of Adult Probation, introduced the program at a recent meeting of the Franklin County Commissioners.

“Justin and Dan deserve great credit for working together for the benefit of our veterans and their families,” said Commissioner and Board Chairman Dave Keller.

“The Court supports the efforts of Adult Probation to partner with Veterans Affairs and provide meaningful community service opportunities that will benefit veterans, military personnel and their families,” said Carol Van Horn, President Judge of the 39th Judicial District, which includes Franklin and Fulton Counties.

Military and Veteran personnel and their families can request individual assistance with a range of outdoor needs including but not limited to: lawn care, landscaping, painting, cleaning, and small projects. Assistance will be provided based on need and efforts will be made to avoid competing with anyone who provides these kinds of services for a fee.

The work by probation participants can count toward community service hours. Participants may also volunteer time for veteran community events and services.

Dependents of deployed/TDY active duty military members, dependents of activated/deployed Guard or Reserve military members, qualifying Veterans or surviving spouse of Veteran may request services by contacting the Veterans Affairs Office (717) 263-4326. All necessary tools and supplies must be provided by the individual receiving services.

“I’m impressed that this new service will be managed by existing personnel and will not impact the budget,” said Commissioner Bob Thomas. The Veterans Affairs Director, the Chief of Adult Probation, and Probation’s Community Service Coordinator will administer the program.

Probation participants who are interested in completing community service hours through this program should contact their probation officer or Community Service Coordinator at the Adult Probation Department (717) 264-6613 to determine eligibility.

National Hat Day At The Delaware Valley Veterans’ Home



National Hat Day Celebration: This special day was celebrated by the residents where they had an opportunity to make their own hat. Thanks to the activities staff for a wonderful, happy hat making day!!!!!!



Statement from VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald On the Need to Reform the Veterans' Appeals Process

Recently I presented to the Senate Veterans Affairs' Committee the way forward for the important transformation of the Department of Veterans Affairs—what we call MyVA. We aim to improve our care and services to all Veterans. In order to do that, I made clear that we would need Congress' help in legislating a fair, streamlined, and comprehensive process for new appeals, as well as providing much needed resources to address the current pending inventory of appeals. I look forward to working with all stakeholders to design an appeals process that better serves Veterans.

VA will need legislation and resourcing to put in place a simplified appeals process that enables the Department to resolve the majority of our appeals in a reasonable timeframe for Veterans.

The appeals process we currently have set in law is failing Veterans—and taxpayers. Decades worth of law and policy layered upon each other have become cumbersome and clunky. Most importantly, it is now so antiquated that it no longer serves Veterans well as many find it confusing and are frustrated by the endless process and the associated length of time it can take to get an answer.

In 2012, VA made the commitment to end the disability claims backlog. It took too long for Veterans to receive a decision on their claim. Our commitment has resulted in transformational change. The disability claims backlog has been driven down to fewer than 82,000, from a peak of 611,000 in March 2013. At the same time, we have fully transitioned to a paperless, electronic processing system, eliminating 5,000 tons of paper a year. Last year, we decided 1.4 million disability compensation and pension

claims for Veterans and survivors – the highest in VA history for a single year and that comes on the heels on two previous record-breaking years of productivity. As VA has become more efficient in claims processing, the volume of appeals has increased proportionately. While it remains true that 11-12 percent of Veterans who receive a disability rating file for an appeal, more processed claims means more appeals. This is VA's next challenge.

The current pending inventory of appeals stands at more than 440,000 and is estimated to grow rapidly. Right now, Veterans who file an appeal wait an average of three years for appeals to be resolved by the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and an average of five years for appeals that reach the Board of Veterans Appeals' (Board), with thousands lasting much longer. That's unacceptable.

We are applying lessons learned from the transformative change that allowed us to reduce the disability claims backlog. Like our work with the claims processing, the appeals process will need changes in people, process and technology. Upgraded technology will make changes to our mail system and paper records, and incorporate some efficiencies in the way appeals are managed and processed. Retraining and increased staff will be necessary. But they will not be enough. We must also look critically at the many steps in the current complex appeals process used by VA and by Veterans and their advocates to design a process that better serves Veterans. A new appeals process would provide Veterans with the timely and fair appeals decisions they deserve, and adequate resourcing that permits the VBA and the Board to address the growing inventory of appeals.

Veteran Town Hall Meeting In Warren, PA

Veterans and their families are invited to participate in a town hall forum to share their experiences and suggestions regarding the Erie Veterans Administration Medical Center.

The meeting will be held at the Warren Public Library, located at 205 Market Street, Warren, PA on Tuesday, March 29, 2016 from 5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

Come on out and let your voice be heard.

VA's Polytrauma System of Care Marks One Million TBI Screenings

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Polytrauma System of Care (PSC) has hit the one million mark in screening Veterans for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), often regarded as one of the signature injuries of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. TBI symptoms such as severe headaches, memory loss, reduced executive functioning, and tinnitus can range from manageable to seriously disabling, potentially limiting a Veteran's ability to work and manage daily living. Screening Veterans for TBI and helping them to deal with the condition is one of the central programs of PSC.

Started in May 2005, PSC provides comprehensive and coordinated rehabilitative care to Veterans with life-changing injuries, including TBI, limb loss, blindness, hearing loss and tinnitus, among others. PSC also assists with community re-entry needs. It is fully coordinated with the Department of Defense to ensure uninterrupted, seamless health care transition for those that served on active duty.

Over these past 10 years, many Service members have returned home with injuries that would not have been survivable in previous conflicts. Today, they not only survive, they thrive, in large part due to PSC, a thoroughly Veteran-centric VA program.

"The one million mark in TBI screenings reflects VA's success in building an integrated polytrauma care program for wounded and injured Service members and Veterans," said Dr. David J. Shulkin, VA Under Secretary for Health. "VA's dedicated polytrauma care teams recognize the importance of taking care of the whole person and coordinating physical, mental and rehabilitative care for Veterans suffering the most dramatic injuries of the war."

VA employees created PSC to address the need for a comprehensive multi-disciplinary system of care to help Veterans suffering with two or more injuries considered disabling physical and psychological impairments, such as blast injuries and traumatic amputations. PSC patients have sustained injuries affecting multiple body parts that result in physical, cognitive, psychological, and functional disabilities. Frequently, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) occurs in Polytrauma patients, as does Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and other mental health problems.

"The Polytrauma System of Care sets VA apart from other health care systems," said Dr. Joel Scholten, National Director, Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation for VA. "PSC demonstrates VA's unique understanding of the needs of Veterans and the best way to support them in achieving well-being and their personal life goals."

VA has 110 Polytrauma rehabilitation sites across the country, including 5 Polytrauma Rehabilitation Centers (comprehensive inpatient rehabilitation); 23 Polytrauma Network Sites (comprehensive outpatient rehabilitation); and 87 Polytrauma Support Clinic Teams (comprehensive outpatient rehabilitations). Services available through PCS include interdisciplinary evaluation and treatment, development of a comprehensive plan of care, case management, patient and family education and training, psychosocial support, and use of advanced rehabilitation treatments and prosthetic technologies.

For more information about the Polytrauma System of Care, visit www.polytrauma.va.gov/.

Penn State Baseball Military Kids and Military/Veterans Appreciation Day

Penn State Men's Baseball, invites military personnel, both currently serving and Veterans, as well as their families to join them as they kick off Month of the Military Child at Penn State Baseball's 2016 Military Appreciation Day!

Join them at 1 p.m. on Sunday, April 3 for our Month of the Military Child Kick Off Event and watch as the Penn State Nittany Lions take on the Purdue Boilermakers. Military Families can claim up to four complimentary game tickets with additional tickets priced at \$3.50 per ticket. Special activities for military-connected kids and families throughout the game! Reserve tickets at <http://www.cvent.com/events/myp-military-kids-day-with-penn-state-baseball/event-summary-ca3a3a61e94342c5a081ee2eace9c40a.aspx?i=206fee80-bd78-4422-ba81-74d86000d390http://> or call 1-877-489-1398 during normal business hours. Registration deadline is March 23, 2016.

Post 911 GI Bill OJT Apprentice Finds Fertile Soil In Allegheny County



Mike Modugno served his country, and now he's helping feed it.

Like a lot of kids, Mike loved playing in the dirt and hanging out with his grandfather in the garden. After high school he enlisted in the Army, serving with the 101st Airborne Division, from 2000-2003.

Ready to leave active duty but uncertain about his next move, Modugno took online courses in sustainable farming through University of Massachusetts—he saw a future in agriculture but “wasn't the bricks and mortar college kind of student.” A desire to move from Connecticut to an area with a more reasonable cost of living for a growing family led Mike to Jane and Don Dillner's farm in Gibsonia, and his future in agriculture.

The Dillners raise vegetables and run their CSA (community supported agriculture) on land that's been in their family since the 1940's. With a need for dependable help on the farm Jane, a retired nurse, and Don were thrilled when Modugno approached them about becoming an apprentice. With coordination by a veterans education advisor with the state, they created a VA approved plan for Mike to learn the in's-and-outs of working on a profitable, sustainable farm. The Dillner's son Jonathon, a Penn State horticulture grad, took the lead in mentoring Mike day-to-day on vegetable production and off-season prepara-

tion work.

Their partnership came about through a VA program that holds great promise for veterans considering a second career agriculture—the Post 9-11 GI Bill On-the-Job Apprenticeship program. During the training period of 6 to 36 months, employers pay a wage based on a percentage of what a trained worker would earn, and may also receive a living stipend.

Jane Dillner encourages other farmers to consider mentoring a vet: “VA OJT is an excellent program for the veteran to learn a trade. Veterans are trained to be hard workers--he worked as hard as I did. And, the program staff was very easy to work with--anyone can do it.”

At the end of the apprenticeship period, an employment offer typically awaits the veteran. In Modugno's case, he's continued working with the Dillners, and dreams to someday own his own property and provide employment opportunities to other veterans. Jane and Don are actively seeking another VA OJT apprentice as a result of the positive experience they've had with Mike.

For now, though he's content to be a part of the Dillner's staff, supporting his family while helping feed his community. “Farming is a billion jobs rolled into one. Each day is different so you don't get bored. I feel at peace.”

Article contributed by: Mimi Thomas-Brooker, Department of Human Services, Westmoreland County.

Potter County Is Recognized For Its Dedication To Veterans



Potter County's efforts to recognize its citizens who were casualties of the Vietnam War are being recognized by national organizations and are being pushed as a model for other counties across the country.

For the past few years, officials have been holding dedication ceremonies to rename local bridges in

the honor of eight Potter County men killed while serving in Vietnam.

Those servicemen will now be further honored at the Education Center at the Wall, a new exhibit being launched at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C.

The director of program outreach for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, commended Potter County officials and the Veterans Service Committee established to spearhead efforts to recognize veterans across the county through events like the bridge dedication and the Korean Veterans Recognition Dinner. The committee is made up of core members Will Worthington, Potter county's director of veterans' affairs, the county executive secretary Dawn Swatsworth and commissioner Paul Heimel.

The county has met all criteria recommended by the memorial fund to assure the veterans are properly memorialized at the center.

County officials from across the U.S. gathered for the National Association of Counties' Veterans and Military Services Committee Legislative conference in Washington, D.C. at the end February were encouraged to follow the example of Potter County in recognizing veterans and their sacrifices.

Northampton Community College Offers Free Truck Driver Training

Northampton Community College (NCC) is offering free truck driver training to all Veterans, currently serving service members and their spouses including the Guard and Reserves. Normal tuition fees are \$4,200.

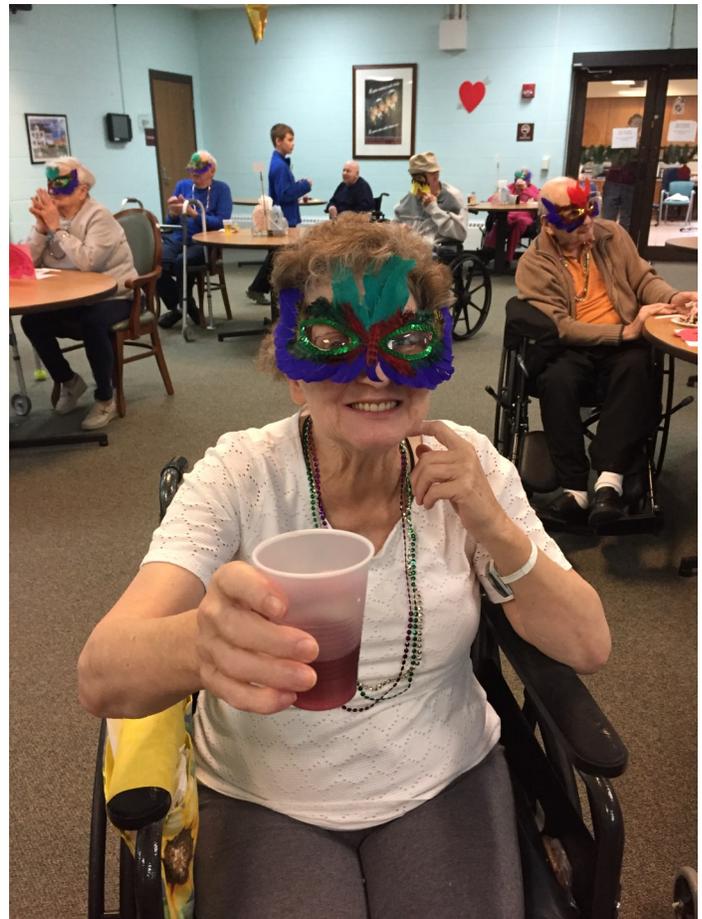
The training is being made available only to residents of Northampton, Pike, Wayne, Carbon and Lackawanna counties.

Day and evening classes are available throughout the year. Day classes are for 6 weeks and meet Monday through Friday 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Evening classes are eight weeks in length and meet Monday through Friday 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. and Saturday 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

To apply for the training contact the Driver Training Program at the NCC Monroe Campus at 570-369-1885 to make an appointment.



Veterans' Homes Residents Enjoy Mardi Gras Celebration



Residents from across the DMVA's State Veterans' Homes celebrated Mardi Gras recently by receiving beads, wearing masks, enjoying punch, and participating in trivia games.

Care and Benefits for Veterans Strengthened by \$182 Billion VA Budget

In his FY 2017 budget, President Obama is proposing \$182.3 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Funding will continue to support the largest transformation in VA history; expand access to timely, high-quality health care and benefits; and advance efforts to end homelessness among Veterans.

The FY 2017 budget includes \$78.7 billion in discretionary funding, largely for health care and \$103.6 billion for mandatory benefit programs such as disability compensation and pensions. The \$78.7 billion for discretionary spending is \$3.6 billion (4.9 percent) above the 2016 enacted level, including over \$3.6 billion in medical care collections from health insurers and Veteran copayments. The budget also requests \$70.0 billion, including collections, for the 2018 advance appropriations for medical care, an increase of \$1.5 billion and 2.1 percent above the 2017 medical care budget request. The request includes \$103.9 billion in 2018 mandatory advance appropriations for Compensation and Pensions, Readjustment Benefits and Veterans Insurance and Indemnities benefits programs in the Veterans Benefits Administration.

With a medical care budget of \$68.6 billion, including collections, VA is positioned to continue expanding health care services to its millions of Veteran patients. Health care is being provided to over 922,000 Veterans who served in Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation New Dawn/Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) and Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS).

The President's Budget provides for continued implementation of the Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) robust Transformation Plan -- a series of people, process, and technology initiatives -- in 2017. This plan will continue to systematically improve the quality and efficiency of claims processing.

Major claims transformation initiatives in the budget invest \$323 million to bring leading-edge technology to claims processing.

In addition, the President's Budget supports increasing VBA's workforce to address staffing needs so it can continue to improve the delivery of benefits to Veterans. As VBA continues to receive and complete more disability compensation rating claims, the volume of non-rating claims correspondingly increases. The request for \$54 million for 300 additional full-time equivalent employees (FTE) and claims processing support will allow VBA to provide more timely actions on non-rating claims.

The current appeals process is complicated and ineffective, and Veterans on average are waiting about 5 years for a final decision on an appeal that reaches the Board of Veterans' Appeals, with thousands waiting much longer. The 2017 Budget proposes a Simplified Appeals initiative -- legislation and resources -- to provide Veterans with a simple, fair, and streamlined appeals process in which they would receive a final appeals decision within one year from filing an appeal by 2021. The Budget requests \$156 million and 922 FTE for the Board, an increase of \$46 million and 242 FTE over 2016, as a down payment on a long-term, sustainable plan to improve services to Veterans.

The Administration has made the ending of Veteran homelessness a national priority. The Budget requests \$1.6 billion for programs to prevent or reduce Veteran homelessness.

The 2017 budget continues the largest Department-wide transformation in VA's history through the MyVA initiative, which is changing VA's culture, processes, and capabilities to put the needs, expectations and interests of Veterans and their families first. MyVA has developed five objectives fundamental to the transformation of VA: 1) improving the Veterans' experience; 2) improving the employee experience; 3) improving support service excellence; 4) establishing a culture of continuous performance improvement; and 5) enhancing strategic partnerships. To aid in this transformation, the Department established the Veterans Experience Office (VEO). The VEO will represent the voice of Veterans and their families in Departmental governance; design and implement customer-centric programs to make interactions with VA easier; and support VA's "mission owners" in carrying out MyVA improvements across the system.

The Veterans Choice Act provides \$5 billion to increase Veterans' access to health care by hiring more physicians and staff and improving the VA's physical infrastructure. It also provides \$10 billion through 2017 to establish a temporary program (the Veterans Choice Program) to improve access to health care by allowing eligible Veterans who meet certain wait-time or distance standards to use eligible health care providers outside of the VA system.

VA operates the largest integrated health care system in the country; the tenth largest life insurance program in the Nation, with \$1.3 trillion in coverage; monthly disability compensation, pensions, and survivors benefits to 5.3 million beneficiaries; educational assistance or vocational rehabilitation benefits and services to nearly 1.2 million students; mortgage guaranties to over 2 million homeowners; and the largest cemetery system in the Nation.