For Immediate Release
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Memorial Day Weekend

COVID-19 Update - Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs

Monday, May 25 is a Federal and State Holiday.

Visit www.FloridaVets.org for the latest information. The 2020 Memorial Day Proclamation can also be viewed by visiting www.FloridaVets.org

The 2020 online edition of the Florida Veterans' Benefits Guide can be found at http://floridavets.org/resources/va-benefits-guide/

To contact a teleworking FDVA Veterans’ Claims Examiner, call (727) 319-7440 and they’ll return your call within 24 hours. You may also contact them via e-mail at VSO@fdva.state.fl.us

To contact the State Women Veterans’ Coordinator, call (727) 319-7418 or e-mail ThomasV@fdva.state.fl.us. If you need care or support or know of any woman veteran in need of support, you may also contact your local VA Medical Center or text the Women Veterans Call Center at 1-855-VA-WOMEN (829-6636) or chat online here.

Our teleworking friends in the State Approving Agency are here for the student veteran. SAA upholds standards and is the GI Bill link between the VA, student & school. Visit us at https://www.floridavets.org/benefits-services/state-approving-agency/ for key updates.

For 24-hour counsel, call the National Veteran Crisis Hotline at 1-800-273-8255. You are NOT alone!
Veterans in Florida, you may also call the Florida Veterans Support Line at 1-844-MyFLVet (693-5838) or 2-1-1.

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS’ AFFAIRS (FDVA)

State Veterans’ Homes (FDVA)

FDVA is restricting visitor access to its State Veterans’ Homes until further notice, with the exception of essential visitors, such as family members of those residents undergoing end-of-life care. In addition, we are temporarily suspending admissions in our network of state veterans’ homes. Thank you for your understanding.

We fully understand the difficulty of being restricted from physical contact with your beloved family members. Many of you are using various web-based and social media channels to see and speak with your loved ones and we highly encourage the continuation of these efforts.

VA Health Care (VA)

Veterans who are concerned they may have symptoms of COVID-19 (Coronavirus), flu or cold should contact the VISN 8 Clinical Contact Center at 1-877-741-3400 (toll free) before coming to a VA facility. Clinical staff are available to provide 24/7 virtual care and support, including nurse advice and triage. This service is available at no cost to Veterans enrolled for care in VA Sunshine Healthcare Network (VISN 8).

VISN 8 facilities include all VA Medical Centers and clinics associated with the following healthcare systems which are providing updates to their operations as they change (click on name of facility to go to their webpage):

- Bay Pines VA Healthcare System
- James A. Haley Veterans’ Hospital and Clinics
- Miami VA Healthcare System
- North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System
- Orlando VA Healthcare System
- West Palm Beach VA Medical Center

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs announced May 7 a three-phase plan for resuming regular operations at its medical centers, benefit offices and national cemeteries in a post-COVID-19 setting.

VA medical facilities will be permitted to embark on Phase 1 of the plan once certain local conditions have been met. These conditions include falling numbers of patients
exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms, reduced numbers of people testing positive for the virus, and increased testing capacity.

Starting May 18, certain elective surgeries, procedures, specialty care and diagnostic testing appointments are resuming. VA care teams will contact patients to schedule these appointments.

- The VA will continue to limit the number of patients who come to its facilities for health care. Access will be provided to patients with scheduled appointments or urgent health care needs. We encourage veterans to continue to use virtual care options (Telehealth, VA Video Connect, VISN 8 Clinical Contact Center) for most primary care and mental health services. Patients who need an in-person appointment will be scheduled by their care team.

- If a caregiver must drive you to the medical center or clinic they will not be permitted to accompany you to your appointment unless medically required. In addition, no children under 18 are permitted into the facility (including infants).

- **Everyone is required to wear a face covering in our facilities.** Patients and their caregivers are permitted to wear homemade or cloth masks if they are clean and fully cover the lower part of the face (nose to chin). If you do not have a mask on entry, VA will provide one to you. Employees will wear VA issued surgical masks or personal protective equipment (PPE) depending on their job.

- We will continue strict entry point health screenings for all prior to entering our facilities. Please allow a bit of extra time for this process.

- We are streamlining check-in processes, using VetText and other advance notifications to limit the time spent in waiting rooms. Patients are asked to arrive no earlier than 15 minutes before their scheduled appointment time.

- Visitation is prohibited in VA Community Living Centers and our other inpatient locations; exceptions may be made in compassionate cases.

- Patients undergoing surgical or other medical procedures will be tested for COVID-19. Patients who are admitted to residential units (Community Living Centers or inpatient Mental Health programs) will also be tested prior to admission.
• The VA is making changes to waiting areas, check-in desks and other common spaces to encourage physical distancing. Please maintain a 6-foot separation between you and others where possible.
• Additional space between seating, limited elevator capacity, visual markings on floors are just a few of the changes you will notice at VA facilities.
• As a reminder, washing your hands with soap and water (for at least 20 seconds) is still the best way to clean your hands. However, if that is not possible, additional hand sanitizer stations are located throughout our facilities.

Phase 2 of the plan is the resumption of services that have been postponed, again as deemed possible based on local conditions, and subject to safety protocols deemed as necessary by local staff.

In Phase 3, VA facilities will again allow visitors to hospitals, community living centers, senior living facilities, and spinal cords injury and disorder units after a full assessment of the risks and only amid continuing improvement in their part of the country. Most VA employees will also return to work in this phase.

VA’s national cemeteries, benefit administrators and Board of Veterans Appeals will also be using this same three-phase approach to determine whether and how best to resume things like public cemetery interments and face-to-face meetings with veterans about their benefit status.

Vet Centers (VA)

Veterans and their families are encouraged to find their nearest Vet Center and call to get connected to counseling services or reach out to the 24/7 Vet Center Call Center at 1-877-927-8387. Many Vet Centers are using telehealth services through VA Video Connect and can also speak to individuals via phone to reduce any barriers to seeking necessary help.

VA Mental Health Counseling

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs continues to deliver quality and timely mental health care to Veterans, even as the COVID-19 pandemic has made traveling to VA facilities complex.

VA Video Connect allows veterans to consult with their healthcare provider via their computer, tablet or phone.
Veterans interested in learning more about scheduling a telehealth appointment can read the latest VA information about the Coronavirus and mental health.

The VA COVID Coach app was created to support self-care and overall mental health during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/COVID_coach_app.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/COVID_coach_app.asp)

Veterans looking to connect to local VA staff by phone can find their closest VA facility here.

For Veterans in crisis or those who are concerned, help is available at the Veterans Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255, and press 1, or text 838255, or chat [www.VeteransCrisisLine.net](http://www.VeteransCrisisLine.net).

For more information about VA’s overall response to the COVID-19 pandemic and how procedures have changed at your local VA, click here.

**National Cemeteries (VA)**

New! National Cemeteries are holding virtual Memorial Day Ceremonies this year, due to COVID-19 precautions. Consult your local National Cemetery for details.

All U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) national cemeteries are open and will continue to provide interments for veterans and eligible individuals. All committal services and the rendering of military funeral honors will discontinue until further notice. Immediate family members (limited to no more than 10 individuals) of the deceased may witness the interment if requested. Families choosing to continue with interment may schedule a committal service for a later date. Families wishing to postpone an already scheduled interment to a later date should contact the cemetery as soon as possible to convey their wishes. Certain portions of a cemetery typically open to the public, such as public information centers or chapels, may be closed to the public. Contact your local cemetery for updates regarding closures. For more information, contact NCA at 202-891-9987. Veterans can call the National Cemetery Scheduling Office at 800-535-1117 or schedule a burial arrangement online. To ensure social distancing at the cemetery, witnessing family members will be asked to view the interment from their cars or the road very near their cars. Families may visit the gravesite in the days following the interment consistent with CDC guidelines and local travel restrictions.
Benefits and Assistance

To contact a teleworking FDVA Veterans’ Claims Examiner, call (727) 319-7440 and they’ll return your call within 24 hours. You may also contact them via e-mail at VSO@fdva.state.fl.us

The St. Petersburg VA Regional Office is closed and employees are working from home. Veterans can continue to get information about benefits or file a claim for benefits by visiting www.va.gov.

Veterans with claims specific or other questions may request information via Inquiry Routing & Information System (IRIS) or by calling toll free 1-800-827-1000. VBA benefits and services provided to veterans, families and survivors will continue to be delivered throughout the duration of COVID-19 impacts.

The Board of Veterans’ Appeals (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs) has suspended all video and Central Office hearings through June 1, 2020. In light of COVID-19 the Board has also expanded its virtual hearing capacity to hold about 250 virtual hearings per week. Virtual hearings at the Board allow Veterans who have the proper technology to participate in their appeals hearings from the comfort of their own homes, instead of traveling to a VA facility. The BVA is requesting that VSOs contact veterans scheduled for Board hearings during the month of May. The appellants should be offered the options of 1) rescheduling an in-person hearing, 2) arranging for a virtual hearing, or 3) withdrawing from the hearing altogether. Virtual hearings became a permanent option for veterans, April 10, when President Trump signed the VA Tele-Hearing Modernization Act into law.

Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Program

Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program communications have shifted to digital service delivery. In order to maintain the flow of communication, we are implementing centralized receipt of paper mail nationwide. VR&E requests that all program participants send your correspondence to the following address:

Department of Veterans Affairs
Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment (VR&E) Intake Center
PO Box 5210
Janesville, WI 53547-5210

Once your mail is received at this location, it will be processed and made available to your Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor digitally.
**Post-9/11 GI Bill**

**GI Bill Benefits to Continue During COVID-19 Pandemic** - President Trump signed into law a bill on March 21, which enables the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to continue providing the same level of education benefits to students having to take courses online due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. The law gives VA temporary authority to continue GI Bill payments uninterrupted in the event of national emergencies, allowing for continued payment of benefits even if the program has changed from resident training to online training. Thanks to the law, GI Bill students will continue receiving the same monthly housing allowance payments they received for resident training until Dec. 21, or until the school resumes in-person classes. Students receiving GI Bill benefits are not required to take any action. Benefits will continue automatically. VA will work closely with schools to ensure enrollments are accurately certified and processed timely. Students with specific questions can contact the Education Call Center at: 888-442-4551 between 8 a.m.-7 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday-Friday.

President Trump on April 28 signed into law a second emergency GI Bill fix for student veterans whose studies have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, protecting work-study programs and providing extra insurance in the case of college closings.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ Education Service has a dedicated phone line for GI Bill beneficiaries who are a surviving spouse and child of an active duty service member who died in the line of duty and need assistance with their education benefits. A child or surviving spouse can contact the Education Call Center at 1-888-442-4551 and select Option 5. An agent with specialized training in survivor benefits will be ready to assist the caller with their education benefits or survivor-related resources. Agents are available Monday – Friday from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Eastern Time.

Student veterans, including those utilizing their GI Bill Benefits, may qualify for unemployment compensation if they meet applicable state and federal guidelines. Each state administers a separate unemployment insurance program, but all states follow the same guidelines established by federal law. Students with specific questions can contact the Education Call Center at: 888-442-4551 between 8 a.m.-7 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday-Friday.
CARES Act Extends VA Home Loan Pre-Foreclosure Options

On March 27, the President signed the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act*, or CARES Act, into law to help Americans economically impacted by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic to help homeowners avoid home foreclosure.

As the country rallies together to prevent further spread of the coronavirus, VA’s [Loan Guaranty Service](https://www.va.gov) is working to assist Veterans. The service is specifically focused on ensuring our Veterans and their families facing temporary or more long-term difficulty paying their monthly mortgage understand their options.

**How does this law affect my VA home loan?**

If you experience financial hardship caused directly or indirectly by COVID-19, then – as with any financial hardship – you should immediately contact your loan servicer (the company that accepts your monthly mortgage payments). If you do lose income, you always have [options to avoid foreclosure](https://www.va.gov) on your VA home loan. Your options include forbearance extension under the CARES Act.

The CARES Act allows borrowers with government-backed loans (including VA loans) to request special forbearance – an agreement between you and your mortgage servicer – where your servicer agrees to either delay payments or to accept partial payments for one or more months. The details of any forbearance agreement are between you and your servicer, which means you don’t have to call VA for permission. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) has a [video](https://www.consumerfinance.gov) summarizing the mortgage forbearance changes.

**What if I don’t have a government-backed home loan?**

- All homeowners can use the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau’s (CFPB) “[Find a Housing Counselor](https://www.consumerfinance.gov)” tool to find counseling agencies approved by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in your area.
- You can also call the [HOPE™ Hotline](https://www.consumerfinance.gov), open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at *(888) 995-HOPE (4673).*
- If your loan is owned by Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac, other programs may be available. As a homeowner, you can find out if your loan is owned by Fannie Mae by going to [https://www.knowyouroptions.com/covid19assistance](https://www.knowyouroptions.com/covid19assistance) and by Freddie Mac by going to [https://myhome.freddiemac.com/getting-help/relief-for-homeowners.html](https://myhome.freddiemac.com/getting-help/relief-for-homeowners.html)

Visit the VA home loan [CARES Act webpage](https://www.va.gov) for more information. Check out VA’s [coronavirus frequently asked questions](https://www.va.gov) page for all VA-related issues.
Also, visit CFPB’s coronavirus website for mortgage relief options, tips to keep up on your finances, and more.

And if you experience any issues with your home loan, you can call a VA Regional Loan Center at 1-877-827-3702. We may have additional call volume, so please be patient with us.

VA Caregiver Program

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Caregiver Support Program (CSP) recognizes caregivers play a critical role in caring for Veterans every day, and even more so now, in the time of COVID-19. Your local Caregiver Support Coordinator (CSC) can link you to important resources and services that are available to you, as a caregiver, and to the veteran. The Caregiver Support Line, 1-855-260-3274, is available and offers support by caring licensed professionals.

Homeless Veterans

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced May 6 that it has expanded support services enabled by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, to make available immediate relief for veterans experiencing or at risk of homelessness during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

The CARES Act allocates $17.2 billion for the Veterans Health Administration, $300 million of which will be used this fiscal year to address the challenges faced by homeless and at-risk Veterans.

Funding is provided for three critical VA programs to assist with the emergency response needed for Veterans living without safe, stable housing.

- **Supportive Services for Veteran Families Program** - $202 million has been allocated to provide emergency housing and homelessness prevention assistance to very low-income Veteran families to mitigate the expected wave of evictions and potential homelessness that will result from extensive unemployment. Funds for this program will also assist the Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing program in placing Veterans in safe housing to isolate them from the virus.

- **Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program** - Grants from the GPD program usually consist of a capped per diem payment from VA to community organizations to provide transitional housing and supportive services to Veterans. $88 million has
been allocated to this program, which allows VA to waive per diem limits during the crisis and help GPD grantees to provide all needed emergency housing and supportive services, including emergency placement for Veterans who need to be isolated for their safety or the safety of others.

- **Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program** - $10 million has been allocated to provide emergency shelter and supportive services during the crisis, including placement in hotel rooms for Veterans needing emergency shelter or isolation to avoid spreading the virus. Housing will be paired with care, treatment and rehabilitative services.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs announced May 18 a new initiative requesting the public to make donations to help provide emergency relief and facilitate remote access to health care for veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For more information, visit [https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5453](https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5453)

The initiative will run through the end of the calendar year and may be extended if circumstances warrant.

To contact a VA Homeless Veteran Coordinator in Florida, call toll free 1-800-827-1000.

**Veterans Florida**

Veterans Florida has suspended, through June 30, 2020, the requirement that Florida employers seeking veteran talent or workforce training funds under the VETS Program, s. 295.22 F.S., may only seek such assistance for full-time and permanent positions to allow for temporary or part-time positions as the state’s manufacturers and economy shift to meet the requirements of addressing the pandemic.

**Florida Veterans Foundation**

*COVID-19 Project Vet Relief Fund to Help Florida Veterans*

COVID-19 is impacting many Floridians as well as Florida’s veterans, active duty military members and their families. As many businesses and organizations are being forced to close their doors, our veterans are unable to work and provide an income to support their families. The Florida Veterans Foundation has teamed up with the American Legion of Florida to create the Project Vet Relief Fund. This will help with emergency assistance for those veterans who are affected by this pandemic around the state of Florida.
Funds are extremely low, and the project is seeking any level of donations from corporations and individuals to help support the increased demand of the veteran community at www.HelpFLVets.org.

Veterans in need of assistance will find the application form, requirements and guidelines listed on the website and additional local resource links to help with utilities, food and more. Due to limited personnel, they are not taking phone calls and will accept online/email applications only. Visit www.HelpFLVets.org to learn more and donate to support our veterans.

Honor Flight

All Honor Flights have been postponed nationwide until June 30, 2020.

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