COVID-19 Update - Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs


The online COVID-19 edition of the annual Florida Veterans’ Benefits Guide can be found at http://floridavets.org/resources/va-benefits-guide/

Veterans’ Claims Examiners

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

Women Veterans

To contact our teleworking State Women Veterans’ Coordinator, call (727) 319-7418 or e-mail ThomasV@fdva.state.fl.us. 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.

White House VA Hotline: 1-855-948-2311

Agents with extensive training on VA programs and services staff the hotline. Most of these agents are a veteran, military family member, caregiver or a survivor. The White House VA Hotline conducts immediate warm hand offs for at-crisis risk veterans needing the services of the National Veteran Crisis Line.

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

Coronavirus FAQs: What veterans need to know (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs) https://www.va.gov/coronavirus-veteran-frequently-asked-questions/

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS’ AFFAIRS (FDVA)

State Veterans’ Homes (FDVA)

On March 11, 2020, the Governor, in conjunction with the Florida Division of Emergency Management and FDVA senior leadership, made the difficult decision to restrict all visitor access to our homes through Executive Order 20-52, with the exception of those whose veteran is receiving end-of-life care. With enhanced cleaning protocols in place, our goal continues to be the elimination of as much risk to our residents and staff as humanly possible while continuing our efforts to provide skilled and loving care to our residents. This “no visitor” policy was undertaken to safeguard our predominantly older resident population, many of whom have multiple complex health conditions that make them particularly vulnerable to complications from infection.

We fully understand the difficulty of being restricted from physical contact with your beloved family members. We also believe that sustained communication with family members and guardians of our resident heroes is essential.

Governor DeSantis announced in August the formation of Florida’s Task Force on the Safe and Limited Re-Opening of Long-Term Care Facilities. Members of the task force will develop guidelines on how to safely allow family members to visit their loved ones in Florida’s long-term care facilities where visitation has been prohibited due to COVID-19. While we’re waiting for the recommendations to be released, we encourage you to continue your virtual calls with your loved ones via FaceTime, Zoom and other social media platforms. We appreciate the spirit of understanding we receive from our families and guardians.

State Veterans’ Nursing Homes, VA Medical Centers and VA Outpatient Clinics are not designated hurricane evacuation shelters.

VA Health Care (VA)
Veterans who are concerned they may have symptoms of COVID-19, 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. The service is available at no cost to veterans enrolled for care in VA Sunshine Healthcare Network (VISN 8).

**COVID-19 Testing**

Several VA Medical Centers in Florida are offering drive-thru COVID-19 testing for veterans who are symptomatic or those who are undergoing certain aerosol generating procedures. *Testing will be completed by appointment only.* If a veteran suspects they have COVID-19 symptoms, contact your VA health team or the VISN 8 Clinical Contact Center (1-877-741-3400) for nurse advice and triage.

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

- 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.

- 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 VA facilities.** If you do not have a mask on entry, VA will provide one to you.

- 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.
The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is resuming in-person Compensation and Pension (C&P) exams in concert with the reopening of VA lead medical centers in select locations across the country.

VA Veterans Benefits Administration’s (VBA) contracted medical examination providers will immediately begin contacting veterans in select locations with claims pending C&P exams to schedule exam appointments. Veterans outside of a service area will continue to be served through telehealth appointments or the acceptable clinical evidence process, which includes a review of existing medical records to provide information needed to complete the claim, whenever possible.

Veterans within resumed service areas that do not yet feel comfortable receiving in-person exams may opt to schedule their exam for a later date without impact to their disability claim. No final action will be taken on a claim while a required in-person exam is pending.

**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](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/COVID_coach_app.asp) 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](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/COVID_coach_app.asp).

The VA COVID Coach app was created to support self-care and overall mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

National Cemeteries (VA)

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) national cemeteries resumed committal services June 9 at all Florida VA national cemeteries. Interments will be offered the option of a committal service at the time of interment. Military funeral honors, customarily provided by the Department of Defense and volunteer honor guards, will be based on local availability.

For more information, visit the National Cemetery Administration. To make burial arrangements at any VA national cemetery contact the National Cemetery Scheduling Office at (800) 535-1117.

Benefits and Assistance

The St. Petersburg VA Regional Office is closed and employees are working from home. Veterans may get information about benefits or file a claim for benefits by visiting www.va.gov or by contacting a teleworking FDVA Veterans’ Claims Examiner at (727) 319-7440 or via e-mail at VSO@fdva.state.fl.us. All services are free to the veteran.

VBA benefits and services provided to veterans, families and survivors are continuing to be delivered throughout the duration of COVID-19 impacts.

The Board of Veterans’ Appeals (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs)

Regional Offices are currently closed to the public. The Board of Veterans’ Appeals (Board) temporarily suspended all in-person (travel board, video, and Central Office) hearings. Virtual hearings remain available.

The Board typically notifies an appellant of a scheduled hearing 90-120 days in advance via letter. Some appellants were issued notice of a hearing prior to office closures due to COVID-19. Public Contact Representatives must advise appellants not to travel to a Regional Office at this time.

Veterans may work with their representatives to elect a virtual hearing or to reschedule hearings. Veterans who prefer to wait for travel board, video, or central office hearings to resume will receive top priority in hearing rescheduling.
The board has expanded its virtual hearing capacity. 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. Virtual hearings became a permanent option for veterans, April 10, when President Trump signed the VA Tele-Hearing Modernization Act into law.

Note: The postponement of a scheduled BVA hearing does not automatically shift it to a “virtual hearing.” The veteran must request it.

**VA Debt Management Center (DMC)**

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs announced July 9 its commitment to extend debt relief to veterans adversely impacted by COVID-19 to the end of 2020 by suspending certain debt collection actions.

VA is suspending all actions on veteran debts under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Treasury Department. This includes the suspension of collection action or extending repayment terms on preexisting VA debts, whichever the veteran prefers.

For benefit debts, veterans should contact the VA Debt Management Center at 1-800-827-0648. For health care debts, veterans should contact the Health Resource Center at 1-866-400-1238 or https://www.pay.gov for payments.

**Vocational Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Program**

VR&E provides benefits and services that enable transitioning service members and veterans with service-connected disabilities and an employment barrier, to prepare for, obtain and maintain suitable employment, and to the maximum extent possible, achieve independence in daily living.

VR&E requests that all participants send correspondence to the following address:

**Department of Veterans Affairs**

**Vocational Readiness & Employment (VR&E) Intake Center**

PO Box 5210

Janesville, WI 53547-5210

Once your mail is received, it will be processed and made available to your Vocational Readiness Counselor digitally.

**Post-9/11 GI Bill**
The State Approving Agency (FDVA) upholds education standards and is the GI Bill link between the VA, student & school. For updates, visit us at https://www.floridavets.org/benefits-services/state-approving-agency/.

Are you eligible for increased benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill? Changes to benefit levels effective Aug. 1, 2020 increase the amount VA will cover for those with fewer months of service. VA pays Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits at different rates (known as benefit levels) based on length of service. Effective Aug. 1, 2020, the 40% benefit level is eliminated and the 60% benefit level is expanded for the Post-9/11 GI Bill program.

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. 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 may contact the Education Call Center at 1-888-442-4551 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.

Student veterans 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 may contact the Education Call Center at 1-888-442-4551 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 COVID-19 pandemic to help homeowners avoid home foreclosure.

VA’s Loan Guaranty Service is working to assist veterans. The service is focused on ensuring 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, you should contact your loan servicer (the company that accepts your monthly mortgage payments). If you do lose income, you always have options to avoid foreclosure 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 summarizing the mortgage forbearance changes.

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

- Homeowners can use the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau’s (CFPB) “Find a Housing Counselor” 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, 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 for more information. Check out VA’s coronavirus frequently asked questions 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.

VA Caregiver Program

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Caregiver Support Program (CSP) recognizes caregivers play a critical role in caring for veterans during 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

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

COVID-19 Project Vet Relief Fund to Help Florida Veterans

Funds to help our veterans in dire straits are extremely low and help is needed now. 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.

The fund is seeking any level of donations from corporations and individuals to help support the increased demand of the veteran community at www.HelpFLVets.org or email Lew@HelpFLVets.org to make a donation. Veterans in need of assistance need to apply online at https://helpflvets.org/covid-19-support/ and find the application form, requirements and guidelines listed on the page along with additional resource links to help with utilities, food and more.

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