For Immediate Release
Contact: Steve Murray
murrayr@fdva.state.fl.us
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Labor Day is September 7, 2020

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/

To request an individual copy of the Florida Veterans’ Benefits Guide, please email FrazierM@fdva.state.fl.us

For bulk copies of 50 or more, please email Sferrazza-RiosL@fdva.state.fl.us

Florida’s 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

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

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

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


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.

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS’ AFFAIRS (FDVA)

State Veterans’ Homes (FDVA)

Safely reuniting our veterans’ home residents with their loved ones has been a unified goal of the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs since March 11, when 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. The “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.

The Sept. 1, 2020 announcement by the governor is a positive step forward in achieving our shared goal of reuniting our veterans’ home residents with their loved ones. The Task Force’s recommendations strike an important balance between a safe reopening of our seven veterans’ homes to family members and keeping our residents and staff protected from COVID-19, which has been our number one priority since the pandemic began. Our goal continues to be the reduction 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.

FDVA is developing its policies and home reopening timelines, taking into account local conditions and prevalence of COVID-19 among residents and staff at each veterans’ home.

While we’re waiting for our veterans’ homes to safely reopen, we encourage family members to continue virtual calls with their loved ones via FaceTime, Zoom and other social media platforms.

Note: 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).

Statement from VISN 8 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs) – Sept. 2, 2020

While we are starting to see some promising downward trends in COVID-19 cases across most of our network, VA’s phased approach to resuming in-person services and operations is deliberately cautious. We remain firmly committed to providing a safe and healthy environment for our patients including our most vulnerable populations who we care for in our residential programs.

Recently Florida Governor Ron DeSantis announced relaxation of visitor restrictions to community nursing homes and other congregate living facilities under certain conditions. This emergency order does not apply to VA operated facilities.

To minimize the risk of exposure to COVID-19, we continue our no outside visitor policy for our Community Living Centers (CLCs) and Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Long Term units.

We understand these past months have been extremely stressful for our patients and families and that connecting with family members is important; which is why we have implemented virtual visitation during this time to help them remain connected with their loved ones. Using VA-owned iPads and Android tablets, the medical centers ensure CLC residents can reach out to their loved ones who are unable to visit due to physical distancing requirements. This allows them the opportunity to connect through Skype or Facetime in addition to telephone, email and text. Some facilities are offering “drive thru” visits as well.

VA continuously monitors COVID-19 community spread, positive cases in our patient and employee populations and other criteria. As our facilities advance through the stages for resuming in-person visitations we will provide updated information.

COVID-19 Testing

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 outpatient 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

- 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.

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)

All Vet Centers are currently open and operational, providing face-to-face and virtual counseling and outreach. Vet Centers will continue to assess the community impact of COVID-19 at a local level and may begin to restrict access or limit foot traffic, transitioning services to virtual care if needed. It is VA’s goal of keeping Vet Centers open and operational for veterans, active duty service members, and their families. Those looking to seek Vet Center services may call their nearest Vet Center or the Vet Center Call Center at 877-WAR-VETS (927-8387).

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 COVID-19 pandemic. 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.

National Cemeteries (VA)

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

Benefits and Assistance

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

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. For more information, visit https://www.benefits.va.gov/vocrehab/

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 and by Freddie Mac by going to 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.

To support those who support our veterans, VA’s Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers is expanding in October to include: eligible World War II, Korean, and Vietnam veterans, eligible veterans with a service-connected disability rating of 70% or higher, and access to financial planning and legal services. And all Caregivers have access to many supportive resources, such as workshops, a Support Line and Peer Support Mentoring.

Homeless Veterans

Veterans who are homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness are encouraged to contact the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at (877) 4AID-VET (877-424-3838) for assistance. If veterans do not have access to a phone or the Internet, only then are they to visit their closest VA medical center without calling in advance. VA also urges veterans who are not homeless or at risk of homelessness to contact their VA medical center before visiting for any reason. These steps are necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Each VA facility has created separate areas or zones to isolate veterans with possible or confirmed COVID-19 from uninfected patients who need other routine and emergent care. VA is also identifying appropriate quarantine options for veterans who are
homeless to receive treatment if they are symptomatic or screen positive for COVID-19 but are not ill enough for hospital-level care.

**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](http://www.HelpFLVets.org) or email [Lew@HelpFLVets.org](mailto:Lew@HelpFLVets.org) to make a donation. Veterans in need of assistance need to apply online at [https://helpflvets.org/covid-19-support/](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.