

For Immediate Release

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September 22, 2020 - *September is Florida Veteran Suicide Prevention Month.*



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Honoring those who served U.S.

COVID-19 Update - Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs

Visit www.FloridaVets.org for the latest information.

Florida's Veterans' Claims Examiners – Who to contact?

Veterans' Claims Examiners affiliated with the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs connect veterans and their families with earned services, benefits and support. 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

Crisis Counseling – Who to contact?

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) – Family Member Access

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.

At Governor DeSantis' direction, Florida Division of Emergency Management Director and State Coordinating Officer Jared Moskowitz issued an Emergency Order on Sept. 1, which lifts restrictions for visitation to nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

FDVA has developed policies and home reopening timelines, taking into account local conditions and prevalence of COVID-19 among residents and staff at each state veterans' home. Contact your local veterans' home for current entry requirements.

New! Here is the current status of each veterans' home regarding essential caregiver visitation:

- Alexander Nininger State Veterans' Nursing Home, Pembroke Pines – Visits Pending
- Clifford C. Sims State Veterans' Nursing Home, Panama City – Visits Underway
- Douglas T. Jacobson State Veterans' Nursing Home, Port Charlotte – Visits Pending
- Baldomero Lopez State Veterans' Nursing Home, Land O' Lakes – Visits Underway
- Emory L. Bennett State Veterans' Nursing Home, Daytona Beach – Visits Pending
- Clyde E. Lassen State Veterans' Nursing Home, St. Augustine – Visits Underway
- Robert H. Jenkins Jr. State Veterans' Domiciliary Home, Lake City – Visits Underway

We also encourage family members to continue virtual calls with their loved ones via FaceTime, Zoom and other social media platforms.

General visitors will need to be 18 years of age or older, wear a face mask, sign a consent form indicating they understand the facility's visitation policies, comply with facility-provided COVID-19 testing if offered and maintain social distance of at least six feet with staff and residents.

Hurricane Season

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

Florida Veterans' Benefits Guide

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

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).

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

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.

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 offers debt relief to Veterans impacted by natural disasters

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced Sept. 16 its commitment to extend debt relief to veterans adversely impacted by natural disasters.

The department recognizes veterans and beneficiaries are negatively impacted by the wildfires and hurricanes prompting the offering of financial debt relief. This includes the suspension of debt collection action for up to 90 days or extending repayment terms on preexisting VA debts, whichever the Veteran prefers.

To request assistance for VA financial debt relief, Veterans should contact the VA Debt Management Center at 1-800-827-0648.

VA copay billing statements

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is not sending monthly patient account statements for health-care-associated costs to veterans and veterans will not receive a monthly bill for copayments or pharmacy charges during this time. Additionally, no late charges or interest will be added and collection action on copayment debt will be halted until at least December 31, 2020.

<https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5412>

VA will soon be reaching out to veterans directly providing them additional information in regards to when patient statements will resume and future payment options, including how to request financial hardship accommodations. In the interim, if veterans choose to voluntarily make payments, they can do so at any time:

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.freddie.mac.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.

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*.

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.