



Veteran's Advocate

January 2011

Volume 1 Issue 1

VA Urges Veterans to Sign Up for Direct Deposits

WASHINGTON- The Department of the Treasury announced a new rule that will extend the safety and convenience of electronic payments to millions of Americans and phase out paper checks for federal benefits by March 1, 2013. Officials at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) urge Veterans to sign up for electronic payment of their benefits.

"Receiving VA benefits electronically will increase the security, convenience and reliability of these vital payments," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "VA encourages Veterans who are now receiving their benefits in paper checks to set up direct deposits before the deadline."

On March 1, 2013, VA will stop issuing paper checks. People who do not have electronic payments for their federal benefits by that time will receive their funds via a pre-paid debit card. Called the Direct Express card, it is issued by Comerica Bank as the financial agent of the U.S. Treasury.

Another deadline affects people receiving VA's compensation or pensions for the first time after May 1, 2011. Those people will automatically receive the benefits electronically. Anyone already receiving federal benefit payments electronically will be unaffected by the changes.

Along with payments for VA benefit, the change will also affect recipients of payments from Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, Railroad Retirement Board, or Office of Personnel Management.

Korean Defense Service Plates Now Available

Korean Defense Service Plates may now be displayed on vehicles and motorcycles owned by veterans who are recipients of the Korean Defense Service Medal.

The Korea Defense Service Medal (KDSM) is authorized to members of the Armed Forces who have served on active duty in support of the defense of the Republic of Korea from 28 July 1954 to a date to be determined. The area of eligibility encompasses all land area of the Republic of Korea, and the contiguous water out to 12 nautical miles, and all air spaces above the land and water areas. Service members must have been assigned, attached or mobilized to units operating in the area of eligibility for 30 consecutive or 60 nonconsecutive days.



You must apply for veteran plates at a deputy registrar office or by mailing a Special Plate application and appropriate fees (\$10 plate fee plus \$8.50 filing fee) to Driver and Vehicle Services - 445 Minnesota Street Suite 164, St. Paul, MN 55101.

The applicant must supply a copy of their separation papers (DD214) or equivalent, showing discharge under honorable conditions, or if still in the military, a current military ID



South Central VA Outpatient Clinic Announced

Mankato, MN – Rep. Walz applauded the VA's South Central VA Outpatient Clinic announcement, saying expanded access to VA facility in Mankato is a win for veterans.

Walz was notified by the Department of Veterans Affairs Under Secretary of Health Dr. Robert Petzel, that the VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic contract has been awarded to Sterling Medical Associates for a clinic in Mankato with a satellite clinic in St. James. Veterans in southern Minnesota have been looking forward to this announcement. Currently, local veterans can receive mental health services in Mankato, but not primary care. With the opening of this clinic, veterans will have access to both mental health services and primary care in Mankato.

"Southern Minnesota veterans often have to drive over an hour to Minneapolis to receive VA care. This award announcement and the anticipated opening in April is great news. Many veterans just can't make the drive anymore and are forced to resort to private insurance or Medicare for their primary care," said Rep. Walz. "I have been pushing the VA to get this done and I am pleased with today's announcement."

"Congressman Walz has been a strong advocate for southern Minnesota veterans, working with us to ensure this project is delivered, so those veterans have improved access to primary care." said Dr. Robert Petzel, VA Undersecretary for Health.

Walz discussed the need for rural veterans to have better access to primary care, including the completion of this clinic, with VA Secretary Shinseki when he was in Mankato this summer.

Congress OKs GI Bill Benefit Expansion

WASHINGTON -- For the second time in two years, Congress has approved a major overhaul of GI Bill benefits, this time simplifying the formula for college tuition payments and awarding housing stipends to students attending classes online.

The measure, which passed the House in a 409 to 3 vote, would also allow more veterans to use the Post-9/11 GI Bill to pay for vocational school and on-the-job training. Veterans groups had lobbied Congress vigorously for that change, saying veterans who were not interested in college classes were too limited under the previous rules. The Senate approved the bill earlier this week. The president is expected to sign it into law before the end of the year, but the new tuition payments and program expansions won't go into effect until August 2011.

So far, about 300,000 veterans and their family members have used the post-9/11 college benefits to attend classes, but the new GI Bill changes would allow another 90,000 National Guardsmen previously ineligible to apply for the benefit. The amount of tuition they can receive will be tied to their time on active duty, for overseas or stateside emergency response efforts. The measure also simplifies tuition calculations for veterans attending private colleges. Under the measure passed two years ago, a four-year degree program at any public college in a veterans' home state is paid for in full, regardless of the total cost. But tuition payouts for those at private colleges are currently based on the most expensive state schools where veterans live. For example, veterans from Michigan attending private universities receive nearly \$28,000 a year in tuition reimbursement, while veterans at the same school who live in Missouri receive only about \$7,500 annually.

Starting next fall, any veterans attending private universities will receive \$17,500 in tuition payments, a figure tied to the median cost of private colleges. In addition, the bill passed would grant students taking courses online a portion of the housing stipend awarded to "brick and mortar" students. That stipend is tied to Basic Allowance for Housing calculations given to active-duty troops, and can total more than \$2,000 a month. The number of veterans eligible for the \$1,000 book stipend would also be expanded. And vocational training and apprenticeship programs, which had remained under the old GI Bill rules, will now be moved into the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

The measure would also extend the window when dependents of wounded troops can use the GI Bill benefits. Under the current rules, spouses and dependent children of troops who qualify to transfer their tuition payments can use the money for 10 years after their service member retires from the military. But the new bill allows the families of injured troops to waive that 10-year restriction if taking care of their wounded service member prevents them from attending classes.



Holiday Closures

The Veterans Service Office will be closed for the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday on Monday, January 17th. There will be no van service to the Minneapolis VA Hospital on that day.