

VFW SERVICE OFFICER NOTES FOR THE TEN-HUT JULY 2017

DOD Inspecting Groundwater at 400 US Installations

Late last month news broke that nearly 400 military bases in the continental US are being tested for drinking water contamination.

A nationwide review of water on or around bases has begun, especially targeted towards bases that used a firefighting foam containing toxic chemicals. DOD has confirmed water contamination at or near more than three dozen.

[Click here for a map of the locations where contamination has been found.](#)

While this process plays out, the chemicals in soil or groundwater could continue to leach into drinking water, experts say, meaning the problem could grow.

The chemicals causing the contamination are PFOA and PFOS, known collectively as perfluorinated compounds (PFCs). They are unregulated and little understood. Used in manufacturing and in military firefighting foam, they have been linked to health problems including testicular and kidney cancers, thyroid disease, and high cholesterol. Research on other potential health effects is ongoing, and some experts contend even water below the EPA's health advisory level is unsafe. The chemicals are commonly found around military air bases, civilian airports, manufacturing plants and fire stations.

Local and state officials around the country are pressing the Department of Defense to step up and pay for cleanup efforts wherever contamination linked to military activity is found.

President Trump Signs VA Accountability Executive Order, Secretary Shulkin Makes New Key Announcements

Secretary David Shulkin Announces Establishment of Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection & Names Peter O'Rourke as Senior Advisor and Executive Director.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin recently announced that he has established the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection in the Department, and that Peter O'Rourke will serve as Senior Advisor and Executive Director of the Office, reporting directly to the Secretary.

This announcement implements the requirements in President Trump's Executive Order signed at the Department on April 27, 2017 in one third of the 45-day timeframe required by the Order.

As detailed in the Executive Order, the Executive Director will:

- Advise and assist the Secretary in using, as appropriate, all available authorities to discipline or terminate any VA manager or employee who has violated the public's trust and failed to carry out his or her duties on behalf of Veterans.
- Advise and assist the Secretary in recruiting, rewarding, and retaining high-performing employees.
- Identify statutory barriers to the Secretary's authority to discipline or terminate any employee who has jeopardized the health, safety, or well-being of a Veteran and to recruit, reward, or retain high-performing employee and report such barriers to the Secretary for consideration as to the need for legislative changes.
- Work closely with relevant VA components to ensure swift and effective resolution of Veterans' complaints of wrongdoing at VA.
- Work closely with relevant VA components to ensure adequate investigation and correction of wrongdoing throughout the VA, and protect employees who lawfully disclose wrongdoing from retaliation.
- Consider redundancies and the possibility of combining the office with existing VA components to improve the VA's efficiency, effectiveness, or accountability.

O'Rourke is a veteran of both the US Navy and Air Force and has held executive roles in non-profit, consulting, and the federal government.

"I am pleased to announce the establishment of this office, fulfilling one of my highest priorities at the Department. We need to hold our employees accountable for their actions if they violate the public trust, and at the same time protect whistleblowers from retaliation," said Dr. Shulkin. "Setting up this office under the strong leadership of Peter O'Rourke will give us the tools to do just that."

The VFW – No One Does More For Veterans

There is strength in numbers. Yes, each of us can make a difference. Please sign up to receive a weekly email edition of the VFW Action Corps. It gives the latest "Scoop" on legislation affecting veterans. There is a very convenient method of contacting our federal elected officials. The VFW has a narrative of a letter (or there's space to write your own input), that can be sent to Washington. After you send your first letter, you'll find that the letter automatically populates with your name, address, email, City, State, zip code, etc.

Here's the first step in getting on the VFW's Action Corps distribution list. Send an email with your name, email address, and zip code. Ken Wiseman is the VFW's National Legislative Service Director for the Action Corps newsletter in Washing DC. Ken's phone number is: 202.608.8363.

VA Partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services

The VA has entered a partnership agreement with the Department of Health and Human Services that will allow the assignment of medical professionals from the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps to provide direct patient care to Veterans in VA hospitals and clinics in underserved communities.

"My priority has been to improve access to care for our nation's heroes," said Dr. David J. Shulkin, Secretary of Veterans Affairs. "By partnering with our colleagues at HHS, we will enhance the availability of clinical care in those areas most in need."

The initial agreement enables up to 20 officers from the Commissioned Corps to treat Veterans in VA facilities that are most in need of staffing support. The agreement also allows up to 10 more officers to help support coordination for veterans receiving non-VA community care.

New Fraud, Waste and Abuse Taskforce

The Secretary announced a major new initiative to detect and prevent fraud, waste and abuse in the Department of Veterans Affairs. This initiative has the potential to save tens of millions of taxpayer dollars currently at risk, for fraud, waste and abuse that can be redirected to better serve Veterans. The initiative will include bringing in the leading thinkers from the private sector and other government organizations in an advisory committee to identify and leverage cutting-edge fraud detection tools and; and coordinate all fraud, waste and abuse detection and reporting activities across the Department through a single office.

The Department has identified potential savings in the area of improper payments to health care providers, major contracts, contracts for pharmaceuticals, and the delivery of benefits to Veterans.

"Restoring the trust of Veterans and improving system-wide accountability are among my top priorities. It's essential to ensure that all our employees and the companies that we do business with are being good stewards of the resources available to care for our Veterans," said Dr. Shulkin.

Removing Red Tape at State-owned Veteran Nursing Homes

The VA is amending guidelines to allow state-owned Veteran nursing homes to follow state guidelines in the construction design of their facilities - removing red tape, while increasing access to services for Veterans.

Up to now, to qualify for federal grant funding for Veteran nursing homes in their state, Governors and state officials have had to follow federal construction design guidelines. With today's announcement by the Secretary, that is no longer the case, and Governors are freed up to follow their own state guidelines in the construction design of these

facilities while still qualifying for the same level of federal grant funding as before.

In announcing the move, Secretary Shulkin noted that State design guidelines already are sufficient to the task of providing safe conditions for our Veterans and the Department recognizes the need to move quickly to reduce unnecessary barriers to providing much needed services to our Veterans.

Phony telephone number scam targets veterans

There's a new scam out there, preying on veterans who are making decisions about their medical care. The Veterans Choice Program (VCP) is an initiative of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The program allows certain eligible vets to use approved health care providers who are outside of the VA system. Veterans or families can call the VCP's toll-free number to verify their eligibility for the program.

Here's the problem: Scammers have set up a phony telephone line that very closely resembles the VCP's real telephone number. Con artists often use names, seals, and logos that look or sound like those of respected, legitimate organizations. This time they're using a phone number that's almost identical to the real thing, counting on creating confusion. You call and think you've reached the VCP. The fake line's message says you're entitled to a rebate if you provide a credit card number. But if you give up your account information, they'll debit your account and you'll get nothing in return. There is no rebate and you'll need to cancel your credit card.

If you're a veteran – or you're helping one with health care – remember these tips to avoid a scammer's tricks.

- Be sure you're calling the real number for the Veterans Choice Program: **866-606-8198**. If you're not sure you've reached the VCP, hang up. Check the VCP's site for the real number and try again.
- *The VA – or any government agency – will not ask for your financial account information.*

Visit VCP's site to learn more about the [Veterans Choice Program](#) – or call **866-606-8198**. Check out the VA's identity theft prevention program, [More Than a Number. Report identity theft](#) to the FTC – and get a personalized recovery plan – at [IdentityTheft.gov](#).

Who is Classified as a Veteran?

MN State

Minnesota Statute 197.447 defines a Veteran as a citizen of the United States or a resident alien who has been separated under honorable conditions from any branch of the armed forces of the United States after having served on active duty for 181

consecutive days or by reason of disability incurred while serving on active duty, or who has met the minimum active duty requirement as defined by Code of Federal Regulations, title 38, section 3.12a, or who has active military service certified under section 401, Public Law 95-202. The active military service must be certified by the United States secretary of defense as active military service and a discharge under honorable conditions must be issued by the secretary. Therefore, to be eligible for any Veteran program with the State of Minnesota, you must meet the definition contained in this statute.

Federal

Title 38 United States Code section 3.1(d) states, Veteran means a person who has served in the active military, naval, or air service who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable. On the surface, this seems simple enough. However, different VA programs have special service requirements. For example, entitlement to non-service connected pension benefits requires that a Veteran serve a minimum of 90 days active duty and be discharged under conditions other than dishonorable. One day of this service must have been during a federally defined period of war.

Please contact your County Veterans Service Officer (CVSO) to find what benefits and programs you may be eligible to receive.

To find your CVSO visit www.macvso.org or call 1 (888) LinkVet (546-5838). [Request your DD 214.](#)

Women Veterans

Women Veterans is the fastest growing subset of the Veteran population. Women serve in every branch of the military and now can serve in every occupation. They make up approximately 15 percent of the active duty military and 18 percent of the Guard and Reserve forces. Learn more about MDVA's [Women Veterans Program](#), and resources for women Veterans.

Women Veterans: Help for Postpartum Depression

The birth of a baby is a life-changing event that can trigger all kinds of emotions from happiness and joy to jitters and fear. It can also lead to something you might not expect — postpartum depression.

Postpartum depression — a depression that occurs after having a baby — is the most common complication of giving birth. It affects one in seven new mothers. Left untreated, postpartum depression can have long-lasting negative results, harming the health of new mothers, their babies, and their families.

It could be the “baby blues” or it could be postpartum depression.

After giving birth, many women have the “baby blues,” which are feelings of worry, sadness, and tiredness that usually last a few days. Symptoms of postpartum depression are like those of “baby blues,” however, postpartum depression symptoms are more intense and can last for many months.

Are you at risk for postpartum depression?

Women Veterans commonly suffer from depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder after military service. Veterans who become pregnant have an increased likelihood of having a mental health issue, which puts them at a higher risk for postpartum depression. With more women serving in the military than ever before, it is important to support women Veterans by providing information and treatment options.

Postpartum depression is not your fault.

Postpartum depression is never anyone’s fault. Pregnancy, childbirth, and caring for a child can be a challenge for all parents, physically and mentally. Postpartum depression affects more than half a million American women each year and can affect *any* woman who becomes pregnant — women with easy pregnancies or difficult pregnancies, first-time moms and mothers with one or more children, women who are married and women who are not, and women of any age, race, ethnicity, culture, education, or income.

Only about 15 percent of women who suffer from postpartum depression receive professional care. There are many reasons that women do not seek treatment, including misdiagnosis, denial, and lack of access to care.

Know the symptoms.

Postpartum depression can begin anytime within the first year after giving birth. Signs you have postpartum depression may include extended periods (two weeks or more) of:

- Feeling sad, down, or depressed
- Losing interest in what you usually enjoy
- Difficulty in thinking or decision making
- Loss of appetite
- Loss of energy
- Frequently thinking about death or suicide

If you think you may have postpartum depression, seek help.

VA and Women’s Health Services offers many care options to help you get treatment for postpartum depression:

MomMoodBooster. A free online program designed to help women Vets recover from postpartum depression. Women complete six sessions and receive calls from a phone coach.

Anonymous Screening Tool

Make The Connection. Kim, an Air Force Veteran, shares her experience with postpartum depression that went undiagnosed for years.

Women Veterans Call Center. Chat online or call 1-855-VA-WOMEN (1-855-829-6636) Monday through Saturday to get help about VA benefits and services, including postpartum depression treatment.

Veterans Crisis Line. Chat online, send a text to 838255, or call 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1 to receive confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

VA Medical Centers Seek therapy and treatment options tailored to women Veterans' needs.

Maternal Mental Health. Seek postpartum support during pregnancy AND postpartum. Online resources are available or call 1-800-944-4PPD (4773).

Get the Support You Need
Explore the VR&E Program

Are you a Veteran or Servicemember with a service-connected disability? VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program may be able to help you tackle barriers to employment.

The VR&E program assists Veterans and Servicemembers who have an established employment handicap resulting from a service-connected disability. The program offers one-on-one support, counseling, and training to start on your next career path.

VR&E services may help you.:

- Evaluate your current skills and interests
- Receive vocational counseling and rehabilitation planning
- Develop your resume and search for a job
- Get the support you need through case management and counseling

Medallions For Privately Owned Grave Markers



Small Medallion



Medium or Large Medallion

The Department of Veterans Affairs provides a medallion, by request, to be affixed to an existing, privately purchased headstone or marker to signify the deceased's status as a Veteran.

This device is furnished in lieu of a traditional Government headstone or grave marker for those Veterans who served on or after Apr. 6, 1917 and whose grave in a private cemetery is marked with a privately purchased headstone or marker.

Sizes: The medallion is available in three sizes: **Large** (6-3/8"W x 4-3/4"H x 1/2"D), **Medium** (3-3/4"W x 2-7/8"H x 1/4"D) and **Small** (2"W x 1-1/2"H x 1/3"D). Each medallion is inscribed with the word "VETERAN" across the top and the branch of service at the bottom.

Once a claim for a medallion is received and approved, VA will mail the medallion along with a kit that will allow the family or the staff of a private cemetery to affix the device to a headstone, grave marker, mausoleum or columbarium niche cover.

Important: This benefit is only applicable if the grave is marked with a privately purchased headstone or marker. In these instances, eligible Veterans are entitled to either a traditional Government-furnished headstone or marker, or the new medallion, but not both.

For family members of eligible Veterans interested in submitting a claim for the medallion, [instructions on how to apply for a medallion](#) are available. Please use: [VA Form 40-1330M, Claim for Government Medallion for Placement in a Private Cemetery](#)

Visit the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs

I encourage all veterans and their next-of-kin to visit this website. It is full of very handy information. <https://mn.gov/mdva>

VFW Launches Action Alert Opposing Veteran Benefit Cuts

The VFW increased its opposition to proposed cuts to benefits received by disabled veterans. The proposed cuts were in the President's budget proposal and would result in tens of thousands of dollars being cut from the benefits a veteran receives annually. Known as Individual Unemployability (IU), the program helps those veterans who have service connected disabilities and are not able to work. The proposed cut would eliminate the IU benefit once a veteran becomes eligible for Social Security but this would be a devastating drop as many veterans on IU have not been able to work for many years. Because the IU program also raises the veteran's disability rating to 100%, other benefits including dental insurance for the veteran and medical insurance for their dependents would also be lost. Everyone is asked to participate including veterans and non-veterans, as well as members and non-members.

Sign up For the VFW's Action Alert Messages!

VA to Use Same Electronic Health Care Record System as DoD

Although this change will not be immediate, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. David J. Shulkin recently announced that the VA will dramatically reform his agency's Electronic Health Record (EHR) system by replacing the old antiquated system with same system used by the Department of Defense. This change is a shift from the VA's previous plan to develop its own digital records system. The system would bring the agencies closer to being able to share veterans' health information. This would solve a problem that has plagued both departments for decades. "The health and safety of our veterans is one of our highest national priorities." Shulkin said "Having a veteran's complete and accurate health record in a single common EHR system is critical to that care, and to improving patient safety." Secretary Shulkin claims the electronic records system has a high level of cyber-security.

Veterans Can Register for Online Military Exchange Shopping

Some veterans who register at VetVerify.org will be invited to be beta testers. They will have the ability to shop online earlier than the planned November 11, 2017 launch date.

Officials said the sooner veterans register on the site, the better their chances of being chosen as a beta tester. Honorably discharged veterans interested in shopping online at military exchanges can begin their verification process immediately. Exchange officials said, some patrons may be able to shop online before the program's full launch. The exchange websites offer tax-free shopping, and discounted pricing. Actual online pricing can be seen only by those who are authorized to shop at the following websites:

[shopmyexchangeshopcgx](#), [mymcx](#) and [mynavyexchange](#)

[VetVerify.org](#) uses information from the Defense Department's Defense Manpower Data Center to verify a veterans' status. Veterans will receive notification of their acceptance as online shoppers. If their records are incomplete, they will receive guidance on how to update their records. Doing this in advance of the deadline will allow veterans to start shopping on November 1, or earlier if they are chosen as "beta testers" of the system.

This new benefit, which would increase the online shopping base by an estimated 13 million veterans, **only applies to online military exchange shopping**. This will not affect shopping at the physical military installations. Until now, online exchange shopping was only available to active-duty, reserve and Guard members, retirees, 100 percent disabled veterans and their dependent family members, as well as certain others.

COLAs vs. Pay Raises

It's still far too early to know what the COLA will be next year, or even if there will be one. For the curious, if a COLA were given today, it would be 1.1 percent.

However, it's important to remember that a COLA is not the same as a pay raise. The COLA, or Cost of Living Adjustment, is just that. It's an adjustment in the amount of retired pay to compensate for the effects of inflation that eat away at retirement pay. Without a COLA retirement pay would end up impoverishing many retirees because it becomes worth less and less as the years go by.

Since 1975, Social Security general benefit increases have been cost-of-living adjustments or COLAs. Prior to 1975, Social Security benefit increases were set by legislation.

A complicated formula is used in determining what the COLA will be and many argue it's not fair to seniors because the current formula does not take into consideration the kinds of increases in costs that seniors experience, as opposed to younger workers.

Pay raises; on the other hand, must be given each year by Congress, if there is to be one. That's why there is usually a difference between the amount of a pay raise and the amount of a COLA. In addition, Congress can decide to give workers a pay raise even if retirees don't get a COLA.

White House Veterans Complaint Line

During the 2016 Presidential election campaign, then Presidential candidate Donald Trump pledged to create a White House complaint line for veterans. The phone line is now available and the number is [855-948-2311](tel:855-948-2311). It is intended to "collect, process and respond to the complaints of individual veterans in a responsive, timely and accountable manner," according to Department of Veterans Affairs officials.

VA Secretary Dr. David Shulkin has described the initial rollout of the line as a soft launch, with "live-answer agents" receiving and processing some of the calls. He promised that by August 15, the hotline will have continuous coverage from a live operator 24 hours a day, every day of the week. Calls to the hotline will be kept confidential, but information will be shared with VA officials. In some cases veterans will be asked to give personal information for responses to specific problems.

VA testing mobile app to allow Veterans to schedule their own health care appointments

[VA recently implemented](#) a mobile Veterans appointment request application at 99 sites across the country to further modernize its systems and give Veterans more scheduling choices.

"VA is making critical improvements to Veteran health care, and will always look to leverage innovative tools that will put more capabilities in the hands of Veterans," said VA Secretary Dr. David J. Shulkin. "Self-scheduling apps are widely used in the private sector and will help create a better experience for Veterans and their medical-care providers."

Last month, VA awarded a contract to Document Storage Systems to provide an off-the-shelf online patient self-scheduling system to help improve access to care for Veterans. The app is the focus of an 18-month pilot program, under which Veterans can use a cell phone, tablet, computer or mobile device to schedule and confirm primary care, specialty care and mental health appointments.

[VA's mobile Veterans Appointment Request app](#) also provides most of the key capabilities required by the [Faster Care for Veterans Act of 2016](#), and is modeled after successful mobile applications used for patient scheduling. VA intends to continue development and incorporate new capabilities into the app.

For Veterans with arthritis, VA offers a variety of treatment

Did you know that arthritis affects **1 in 5** adults in America? Did you know that arthritis is our nation's #1 cause of disability and that two-thirds of arthritis sufferers are working-age adults who are striving to stay employed in the face of pain and functional limitations?

The burden of arthritis is even greater among U.S. military Veterans. About **1 in 3** Veterans has arthritis. About half of all Veterans with arthritis report limitations in their daily activities because of joint symptoms.

May is Arthritis Awareness Month. It's a time for us to pay attention to the tremendous impact arthritis has among Veterans, and to the ongoing need for new, better treatments. It's also a time to focus on what Veterans, their health care providers and their communities can do now to face arthritis as a team.

[Researchers are working hard](#) to understand the causes of arthritis and to develop better treatments, and ultimately a cure. In the meantime, arthritis is best managed with a combination of clinical therapies (like medicines) *and* healthy behaviors. Years of research have shown that physical activity and weight management help to improve pain and function for people with arthritis. But it can be hard to exercise when your joints hurt! So Veterans with arthritis need tools and a team of supporters to help them stay active and manage their arthritis. Here are some tips and key resources for Veterans with arthritis:

- Take advantage of online and community-based physical-activity and arthritis-management programs. The Arthritis Foundation provides a set of [free, online tools](#) that can guide Veterans and others with arthritis in appropriate exercise and healthy eating, identify local arthritis management programs, and connect people with arthritis for mutual support.
- See a physical therapist. Physical therapy is a recommended part of care for arthritis, but many individuals with arthritis do not receive physical therapy until years after diagnosis, or don't receive it at all. Physical therapists can help Veterans with arthritis to address functional limitations, develop a home exercise program, and meet needs for knee braces or assistive devices that can help with daily tasks. The Durham VA Healthcare System delivers a group-based physical therapy program that was found in a research study (funded by VA Health Services Research and Development) to be as effective as individual physical therapy, and it has the added benefit of peer support.
- Try something new! There is emerging evidence that some complementary and integrative health approaches can be helpful for people with arthritis. Yoga, tai chi and massage therapy are three examples of treatments Veterans may want to try.

VA has a very active and diverse portfolio of arthritis research, ranging from laboratory studies of potential new medications for rheumatoid arthritis to studies on complementary and rehabilitative therapies. During Arthritis Awareness Month, take some time to read some highlights of VA arthritis research [here](#).