

# VETERANS BENEFITS & BEYOND



## VA provides service dog benefits to Veterans with mental health disorders.

**T**he Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced recently that it is piloting a protocol to implement veterinary health benefits for mobility service dogs approved for Veterans with a chronic impairment that substantially limits mobility associated with mental health disorders.

"We take our responsibility for the care and safety of Veterans very seriously," said VA Under Secretary for Health, Dr. David J. Shulkin. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is committed to providing appropriate, safe and effective, compassionate care to all Veterans. Implementing the veterinary health benefit for mobility service dogs approved for Veterans with a chronic impairment that substantially limits mobility associated with mental health disorders may prove to be significantly beneficial for some Veterans. The Service Dog Benefits Pilot will evaluate this premise."

VA has been providing veterinary benefits to Veterans diagnosed as having visual, hearing or substantial mobility impairments and whose rehabilitation and restorative care is clinically determined to be optimized through the assistance of a guide dog or service dog. With this pilot, this benefit is being provided to Veterans with a chronic impairment that substantially limits mobility associated with a mental health disorder for whom the service dog has been identified as the optimal way for the Veteran to

manage the mobility impairment and live independently.

Service dogs are distinguished from pets and comfort animals because they are specially trained to perform tasks or work for a specific individual with a disability who cannot perform the task or accomplish the work independently. To be eligible for the veterinary health benefit, the service dog must be trained by an organization accredited by Assistance Dogs International in accordance with VA regulations.

Currently, 652 Veterans with approved guide or service dogs receive the veterinary service benefit. This Pilot is anticipated to provide the veterinary service benefit to up to 100 additional Veterans with a chronic impairment that substantially limits mobility associated with a mental health disorder.

The VA veterinary service benefit includes comprehensive wellness and sick care (annual visits for preventive care, maintenance care, immunizations, dental cleanings, screenings, etc.), urgent/emergent care, prescription medications, and care for illnesses or disorders when treatment enables the dog to perform its duties in service to the Veteran.

Additional information about VA's service dog program can be found at [www.prosthetics.va.gov/ServiceAndGuideDogs.asp](http://www.prosthetics.va.gov/ServiceAndGuideDogs.asp)

Source: [www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2809](http://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2809)

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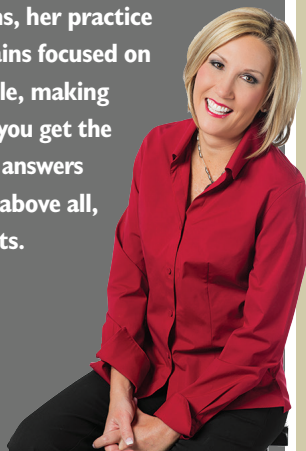
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*Jan Dils*



Jan Dils brings her expertise to issues that affect you and millions of other Americans every day. While her knowledge spans the critical areas pertaining to Personal Injury, Veterans' benefits, Social Security disability benefits and related appeals and claims, her practice remains focused on people, making sure you get the right answers and, above all, results.



## JAN'S Letter



On a family trip to Chicago this summer, we took a walking architecture/history tour. Besides showing us some of the city's most impressive buildings, the tour got me thinking about how most things are only as strong as the foundations they are built upon. Without a solid, well-built foundation, even the most beautiful buildings won't stand the test of time.

My team and I apply that same logic to our work in helping Veterans fight for benefits. Before anything else, we all work together to build a solid foundation for the strongest possible case. VA has undergone a lot of changes in the last few years to shore up their foundation, as well. We've included some articles here about a few of those changes: a pilot program to offer veterinary health benefits for mobility service dogs approved for Veterans with a chronic impairment associated with mental health disorders; Veterans receiving care at VA Medical

Centers will now be able to schedule routine ear and eye appointments at local VA Audiology and Optometry clinics without a primary care referral; and proposed regulations to establish presumptions for the service connection of eight diseases affecting military members exposed to contaminants in the water supply at Camp Lejeune, N.C.

Be sure to take a look to find out more about these important topics, and call or email us with any questions you may have about Veterans benefits for you or someone you care about. We look forward to hearing from you soon, and building on a foundation of partnership, experience and expertise to help you fight for the benefits you deserve.

Sincerely,  
Jan Dils



### STAY PLUGGED INTO THE PRACTICE

Want the scoop on what's new with our business and the team? You can find it right here, so stay plugged into the practice.

**Heather Wilson** is transitioning into the role of VA Case Manager.

## COMMUNITY CORNER

On August 12th, 2016 Jan Dils, Attorneys at Law, attended the **6th Annual Veterans Stand Down** in New Castle, PA. The event was held at the National Guard Barracks and was attended by hundreds of Veterans, their families and friends, and community members. The goal of the Stand Down is to help Veterans in need and to give them access to several resources at one time and in one place. We were proud to talk to so many men and women who served our country, and to spread the word to a lot of people in northwestern Pennsylvania about the work we do to help Veterans.



### SPOTLIGHT EMPLOYEE

#### Pauline Cline

Before joining the Jan Dils team, C-File Reviewer Pauline Cline took a Private Investigating Certification Course and received Certification at WVU-P, where she also graduated in 2013 with an Associate's Degree in Criminal Justice. In June 2015, she graduated from Washington County Career Center with a Certification in Surgical Technology. We have been so fortunate to have her unique blend of education and training as part of our team, and she is happy that she is able to make a difference in the lives of the Veterans we serve.

When she's not busy at work, Pauline is still very busy with lots of hobbies including flea market and thrift store shopping, repurposing old furniture, hiking, and taking long weekend trips. She enjoys spending time with her fiancé Larry, her 3 grown kids Ryan, Cassie and Joshua, and her 3-year old granddaughter Annabella, also known as the joy of Pauline's life. Add 3 dogs, 5 "grand-dogs", 5 "grand-cats" and a "grand-bunny" to the mix, and you have Pauline's recipe for a very busy—and very happy—life!



# Veterans Who Need Routine Audiology and Optometry Appointments Will Soon Be Able to Directly Schedule.

**V**eterans receiving care at Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Medical Centers will now be able to schedule routine ear and eye appointments at local VA Audiology and Optometry clinics without a primary care referral – a move that eliminates multiple steps and gets Veterans into appointments quicker.

Before now, Veterans seeking appointments with audiologists or optometrists had to first make an appointment with a primary care physician for a referral for a routine clinic consult visit. A clinic representative would contact the patient to set up the consult appointment, which could result in a several weeks'-long lag between the appointment and when the Veteran was actually seen. The new process, the Audiology and Optometry Direct Scheduling Initiative, which began as a successful pilot at three sites in 2015, is being expanded to all VA Medical Centers.

"The Audiology and Optometry Direct Scheduling Initiative allows Veterans who need eye and ear care to be seen sooner," said VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald. "It also has the benefit of freeing up primary care physicians so access to primary care improves for other Veterans as well. This kind of process improvement is exactly the type of innovation we expected when we launched MyVA in 2014. In the end, we changed a VA process by considering the needs of our Veterans, a change that allows for more timely care and an improved Veteran experience."

The Audiology and Optometry Direct Scheduling Initiative is one of a number of efforts underway at VA to improve Veterans' access to care and wait times. Among those recent accomplishments: VA and Choice contractors created more than 3.1 million authorizations for Veterans to receive care in the private sector from May 1, 2015 through Apr. 30, 2016. This represents an 8-percent increase in authorizations when compared to the same period in 2014/2015.

In FY 2015, 12 percent of all Veterans enrolled for VA care received telehealth-based care. This includes more than 2 million telehealth visits touching 677,000 Veterans; 45 percent of these Veterans live in rural areas. In FY 2015, more than 6,300 Veterans accessed VA care through live interactive video telehealth from home.

VA has activated over 3.9 million square feet of space in the past two years, and they have increased authorizations for care in the community 46% in the past two years. Clinic production is up 10 percent as measured by the same productivity standard used by many private-sector healthcare systems. This increase translates into roughly 20 million additional hours of care for Veterans. As VA improves access to care, more and more Veterans are choosing VA care – for the quality, for the convenience, or for the cost-savings so even though they're completing millions more appointments, VA continues to have



more work to do.

VA has increased salaries for physicians and dentists to close the pay gap with the private sector and to make VA an employer of choice. With more competitive salaries, VA will be better positioned to retain and hire more health care providers to care for Veterans.

"We want our Veterans and those who care for them to know that we are doing everything that we can to improve their experience with VA and to provide the care our Veterans deserve in a thoughtful and timely way," said VA Under Secretary Dr. David J. Shulkin. "We have made progress, but know there is more work to be done. This Audiology and Optometry Direct Scheduling Initiative is one of many initiatives underway to improve Veterans access to care."

The Audiology and Optometry Direct Scheduling Initiative is expected to be fully operational within all VA Medical Centers by the end of 2016.

Source: [www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2817](http://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2817)

If you like Cajun cooking, you'll love this delicious recipe for **Louisiana Seafood Gumbo**, provided by our Social Media and Community Outreach Specialist **Jon Corra!**



## INGREDIENTS

Olive oil (for sauteing)

1 1/2 medium-sized onions, coarsely chopped

1 Cup celery, cut crosswise into 1/3 (use the middle 1/3 only) and coarsely chopped

8 cloves garlic, finely chopped

1/2 green bell pepper, coarsely chopped

6 tomatoes, roughly chopped

Lemon slices

6 cups baked okra, sliced 1/4-inch thick and baked for about 10 minutes in baking pan

Roux (recipe follows)

Stock (recipe follows)

1 Pound shrimp heads reserved for stock

2 or 3 crabs, cleaned and chopped into chunks

Chopped green onions

**Directions:** Coat a large, heavy-bottomed saucepan with oil and cook the onions until translucent. Add the celery, garlic, bell peppers, and okra. Add the roux and mix thoroughly to pick up all the excess oil in the pot. Next add the tomatoes and bring the mixture to a boil. When mixed, strain the stock and add it to the pot, mixing thoroughly to prevent lumps. Cover with lid, bring to the boil and cook for 20 minutes. Clean the shrimp and saute in a separate pan to get rid of any excess moisture. When they have turned pink, add the shrimp and crab to the gumbo. Cook for 10 minutes. Lastly, add lemon slices and chopped green onions. Yields 6 servings. Serve with rice or as a soup and enjoy!

## Roux:

1/2 Cup flour

Olive oil

Combine the ingredients in a separate pan. Brown on medium high heat until it turns light brown.

## Stock:

9 Cups water

Shrimp heads

1 stalk celery

1/2 lemon

1 bay leaf

3 basil leaves

Creole seasoning (recommended: Dash)

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Combine ingredients in a large, heavy bottomed saucepan. Bring to boil and simmer for 1 hour

## WORD GAME

A mumbo jumbo is a list of words/hints for you to unscramble. You then take designated letters from each word/hint to come up with the final message that is associated with each hint you have unscrambled.

FRI  
PIEN  
PUSCER  
ERD KAO

□ □ □ □ □ T

Final answer: Forest

Answers: Fir, Pine, Spruce, Red Oak



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## VA Proposes Rule to Consider Certain Diseases Associated with Exposure to Contaminants in the Water Supply at Camp Lejeune.

**T**he Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has published proposed regulations to establish presumptions for the service connection of eight diseases affecting military members exposed to contaminants in the water supply at Camp Lejeune, N.C.

The presumptive illnesses apply to active duty, reserve and National Guard members who served for no less than 30 days at Camp Lejeune between August 1, 1953 and December 31, 1987, and are diagnosed with the following conditions:

- adult leukemia
- bladder cancer
- kidney cancer
- Parkinson's disease
- multiple myeloma
- non-Hodgkin's lymphoma
- liver cancer
- aplastic anemia & other myelodysplastic syndromes

"We have a responsibility to take care of those who have served our Nation and have been exposed to harm as a result of that service," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald. "Establishing a presumption for service at Camp Lejeune will make it easier for those Veterans to receive the care and benefits they deserve."

Environmental health experts on VA's Technical Workgroup conducted comprehensive reviews of scientific evidence, which included analysis and research done by the Department of Health and Human Service's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), Environmental Protection Agency, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the National Toxicology Program, and the National Academies of Science.

Military members with records of service showing no less than 30 days of service, either concurrent or cumulative, at Camp Lejeune during the contamination period can already be granted Veteran status for medical benefits, following passage of the Honoring America's Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act of 2012.

In the early 1980s, volatile organic compounds, trichloroethylene (TCE), a metal degreaser, and perchloroethylene, a dry cleaning agent (PCE), as well as benzene, and vinyl chloride were discovered in two on-base water supply systems at Camp Lejeune. These systems served the housing, administrative,



and recreational facilities, as well as the base hospital. The contaminated wells supplying the water systems were shut down in February 1985.

VA acknowledges that current science establishes a link between exposure to certain chemicals found in the water supply at Camp Lejeune and later development of one of the proposed presumptive

conditions. However, VA experts agree that there is no scientific underpinning to support a specific minimum exposure level for any of the conditions. Therefore, VA welcomes comments on the 30-day minimum exposure requirement and will consider other practical alternatives when drafting the final rule. VA also notes that the proposed 30-day requirement serves to establish eligibility for service connection on a presumptive basis; nothing in this proposed regulation prohibits consideration of service connection on a non-presumptive basis. The 30-day public comment period on the proposed rule is open until Oct. 10, 2016.