

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2015



VETERANS BENEFITS & BEYOND

VA Initiative More Than Triples Volunteers In Facilities Nationwide

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced that the 2015 Summer of Service initiative, which launched in May, has exceeded the goals set for community volunteers serving Veterans and the development of new partnerships to reach Veterans and their family members. VA's Summer of Service mobilized approximately 300,000 citizens across the country to honor the nation's sacred commitment to caring for Veterans.

"Community by community, state by state, VA and the country came together to serve those who have served this nation. I am incredibly proud of the hundreds of thousands of volunteers who came into VA facilities to stand alongside our hard-working employees to help America's Veterans," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald. "At VA, we know that there is more work to do to serve America's heroes. We cannot do it alone. This summer, the American people recognized our vital role caring for those who have borne the battle and joined us in this sacred mission. Committed employees and volunteers, and strong partnerships, are the cornerstone of our efforts to transform this Department into one that Veterans and all citizens can be proud of."

The Summer of Service built upon the Department's existing partnerships to grow the number of individuals and organizations serving Veterans in their communities. VA facilities nationwide worked closely with their Congressional partners, Veterans Service Organizations, Mayors and local communities, private sector and non-profit organizations, and VA employees in unprecedented ways to support VA's commitment to care for those who "have borne the battle" and their families.

Through VA's outstanding volunteer program, the Department engaged approximately 300,000 volunteers around the country, far exceeding our goal of 100,000 volunteer connections. Through the work of Veterans Service Organizations and other community/civic groups, supplemental services and programs were made available for America's Veterans.

In May, VA committed to growing their partnerships with new MOUs and expanding current agreements to reach more than 15,000 Veterans and family members. VA's new, reenergized, and expanded partnerships, with NASCAR, the United States Tennis Association, PsychArmor and many others, reached 40,683 Veterans and their family members, nearly tripling their goal.

As part of VA's Summer of Service, the Department committed to holding VA Open Houses in VA facilities across the country to spur increased local engagement and welcome members of the community interested in supporting the needs of Veterans. Over the course of the summer, VA held more than 130 open houses across the system.

This year, VA has made progress on the many challenges faced in delivering care and benefits to Veterans and their families, completing more than 61.5 million appointments between July 1, 2014 and July 31, 2015 – an increase of 2.36 million more appointments than were completed during the same time period in 2013-2014. VA created over 2.7 million authorizations for Veterans to receive care in the private sector between August 16, 2014, and August 15, 2015, a 21-percent increase in authorizations when compared to the period ranging from August 2013 to August 2014. The backlog of disability claims (claims pending more than 125 days) was 93,674 as of September 7, an 85-percent reduction from its peak of 611,000 claims in March 2013 and the lowest ever in VA's history since 2007, when VA started measuring the backlog.

In an effort to improve the Veteran's customer service experience, VA has begun the most comprehensive re-organization in its history. The initiative, called MyVA, has been guided by ideas and recommendations from Veterans, employees and stakeholders.

Want to help serve our Veterans? Look for VA at community events, and call your local facility to find out what you can do to help. Check out VA on Vantage Point, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. To volunteer at a VA medical facility or national Cemetery, visit www.volunteer.va.gov. To join VA full-time, visit www.mycareeratva.va.gov or www.usajobs.gov.

Source: www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2726

INSIDE

VA/DOD ONLINE SERVICE

Tops 5 Million Users

VA AWARDS LOCAL GRANTS

To Prevent and End Homelessness

OFFICE INBOX

Office News And Events

WHAT'S COOKING!

Johnny Appleseed Squares



JAN'S LETTER

Welcome to our final VA newsletter of 2015! The months have flown by, and the holidays are here. As I do every year, I like to take some time to reflect on all we have accomplished throughout the year, and give special thanks to our team members and those who have placed their faith in us by trusting us to fight for the benefits they deserve. I know I speak for our entire team when I say "Thank You" to each and every one of our country's Veterans for their service, and say what an honor it is to serve you all.

Throughout the year, we find evidence that we are not the only ones who enjoy serving Veterans. One of the articles we have included in our latest newsletter focuses on the incredible success of a recent initiative by VA to increase the number of community volunteers serving Veterans and the development of new partnerships to reach Veterans and their family members. Just one of many ways

that people are demonstrating their appreciation for our Veterans. You'll find even more good news in our last newsletter of the year, including an article on how flexible grants are helping achieve lower rates of Veteran homelessness, community by community. And, as always, there's so much more in store—I hope you enjoy our newsletters as much as we enjoy creating them for you!

In closing, I'd like to take a moment to wish all of our Veterans, teammates, friends, family members, and other loved ones a safe and joyous holiday season. We look forward to wonderful New Year ahead!

Sincerely,
Jan Dils



JAN DILS brings her expertise to issues that affect you and millions of other Americans every day. Her knowledge across vital areas – including Veterans' benefits, disability benefits and related appeals and claims – and a practice that focuses on the people, ensures you get answers and the right results.

VA/DoD Online Service Tops 5 Million Users

Participation in the joint Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DoD)'s eBenefits website recently topped five million users, two months ahead of schedule. VA established an agency priority goal of reaching five million eBenefits users by the end of fiscal year 2015, and achieved this early milestone through aggressive outreach efforts and with the support of DoD and its Veterans Service Organization partners.

"Veterans are encouraged to enroll in eBenefits and file their claims online through this one-stop shop for benefits-related tools and information," said Under Secretary for Benefits Allison Hickey. "We have already implemented nearly 60 self-service features and we continue to expand eBenefits capabilities to give Veterans and Servicemembers greater flexibility in securing their information."

The number of eBenefits users is a key measure of VA's success in improving Veterans' access to VA benefits and services and is reported on www.performance.gov. To enroll in eBenefits, Veterans and Servicemembers must obtain a DoD Self-Service Logon (DS Logon), which provides access to several Veterans and military benefits resources using a single username and password. The service is free and may be obtained online at www.ebenefits.va.gov or in person at a VA Regional Office.

"The successful collaboration of eBenefits and DS Logon is just one more example of how the DoD and VA are working together to continue bringing current and former Servicemembers secure online access to the benefits they've earned," said Mary Dixon, Director of Defense Manpower Data Center.

The rapid and continued growth in the utilization of the eBenefits website demonstrates the importance of giving Veterans greater access to information about their own benefits. In addition to filing claims online and

checking the status of those claims, Veterans can also message their VA doctor, order prescription drug refills and obtain official military documents through eBenefits. More than 7.5 million VA letters have been generated and downloaded by Veterans that show proof of disability, income or Veterans preference used in federal or state government hiring.

"The successful collaboration of eBenefits and DS Logon is just one more example of how the DoD and VA are working together to continue bringing current and former Servicemembers secure online access to the benefits they've earned"



Source: <http://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2724>



SPOTLIGHT EMPLOYEE

Savannah Gay

"Every day is a new adventure and I love every minute of it; I couldn't ask for a more rewarding job!" That is how Savannah Gay describes her role in helping our Veterans as a VA Appeals Clerk and member of the Jan Dils team. Savannah was raised in Ritchie County, West Virginia, where she attended Ritchie County High school and played volleyball, basketball, and softball. After graduating, she attended the United States Naval Academy for her plebe year, and graduated from Washington State with a degree in Respiratory Therapy. In March of this year, Savannah married her best friend, United States Marine Matthew Gay, who is being deployed overseas with his unit.

When she's not assisting our Veterans in obtaining their benefits, Savannah enjoys spending time with her "furry baby", a dog named Duke. She also enjoys working out, hiking, fishing, hunting, walking the dog, and spending time with her husband and family.

"I am so blessed to have found such a wonderful job that lets me help the veterans that have fought so hard for our country and our freedom," said Savannah. "My favorite part about this job is talking to clients and hearing their stories. Thank you to all of our veterans!"

BRAIN GAME

A wuzzle is a saying/phrase that is made up of a display of words, in an interesting way. The object is to try to figure out the well-known saying, person, place, or thing that each wuzzle is meant to represent.



ANSWERS: 1. Low Back Pain 2. Shaking All Over 3. Head Over Heels in Love 4. Count Down

OFFICE INBOX

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.

Please join us in our sending heartfelt prayers along with a big "Thank You" to the husbands of our teammates who are being deployed overseas. Jeraude Lowe, husband of VA Attorney **Angie Lowe**, is being deployed with his Air Force Unit. Matthew Gay, VA Hearing Clerk **Savannah Gay's** husband, is being deployed with his Marine Core Unit. And last but not least, Jason Watkins, husband of Social Security Case Manager **Tricia Watkins**, will be deployed with his Air Force unit. Best wishes to all for a safe return, and thank you for your service to our country!

It's hard to believe but school has been back in session for a couple of months, and that means it's time to kick off a new year of Jan Dils Golden Apple Award winners! Nominations are accepted throughout the year for the award, which honors one exceptional educator each month. This school year's first award was presented by Jan Dils team member Cheryl Wingrove on September 29th to **Lori Mendenhall**, a 1st grade teacher at Belmont Elementary. Ms. Mendenhall was almost as surprised and delighted as her classroom full of first graders to find that she had been chosen as the 2015-2016 school year's first award recipient. Join us in congratulating Lori Mendenhall, and thanking all of the teachers who make a real difference in the lives of our children every day!



Wondering what to do with all those apples? Social Security Managing Attorney Gowan Moise has the perfect solution with this month's recipe!

Apple season just got a lot tastier, thanks to this month's recipe for Johnny Appleseed Squares. Bake a batch today, then keep these easy ingredients on hand for the next time you have a surplus of apples!

INGREDIENTS:

5 medium apples (a mix of your favorites), peeled, cored, and sliced (about 6 cups)

1 can (14 oz.) sweetened condensed milk

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1 ½ cups biscuit baking mix

½ cup (1 stick) plus 2 tablespoons cold butter

½ cup firmly packed brown sugar

½ cup chopped walnuts or pecans

Directions: Preheat the oven to 325 degrees F. Lightly oil a 9-inch square baking dish (or use a cooking oil spray). Combine the apples, condensed milk and cinnamon in a medium-sized bowl. Measure 1 cup of the biscuit mix into a separate medium-sized bowl and cut in ½ cup of the butter with two knives or a pastry blender until it resembles large crumbs. Stir in the apple mixture, and spoon the batter into the baking dish. In a small bowl, combine the remaining ½ cup of biscuit mix with the brown sugar and cut in the remaining 2 tablespoons of cold butter until crumbs form. Stir in the nuts, then sprinkle the nut mixture evenly over the apple batter. Bake for 50-60 minutes, until a skewer inserted into the center comes out clean. Serve with vanilla yogurt or ice cream, and enjoy! Notes: Makes 8 servings. You don't need to peel the apples if they have thin skins.



IT'S TIME TO...

... Bake a cake with room for 240 candles. **November 10th is the United States Marine Corp's birthday.**

... Take part in our nation's show of gratitude. **November 11th is Veteran's Day.**

... Count your blessings and pass the turkey. **November 26th is Thanksgiving.**

... Enjoy the festival of lights. **Hanukkah begins December 6th.**

... Remember the date that will live in infamy. **December 7th is Pearl Harbor Day.**

... Celebrate the day in the company of family and friends. **December 25th is Christmas Day.**

... Make the last day of 2015 a good one. **December 31st is New Year's Eve!**

IMPORTANT VETERANS BENEFITS NEWS FOR EVERYONE

1.877.VETERAN / FIGHT4VETS.COM



Want to keep up with all the latest news or get to know us better? Like us on Facebook!



Connect with us on our social networks!



WWW.VETERANDISABILITYBLOG.COM

VA Awards Local Grants to Prevent and End Homelessness

Thousands of very low-income Veteran families around the nation, who are permanently housed or transitioning to permanent housing, will continue to have access to crucial services with the renewal of approximately \$300 million in grants under the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program.

SSVF renewal funding, which supports outreach, case management and other flexible assistance to prevent Veteran homelessness or rapidly re-house Veterans who become homeless, went to 286 non-profit organizations and consumer cooperatives in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. A list of grantees is located at www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf.asp.

"SSVF grants empower our local partners to provide short-term-focused interventions that promote housing stability among the most economically vulnerable Veterans and their families," said Department of Veterans Affairs' Secretary Robert A. McDonald. "Whether they need rental or child care assistance, transportation vouchers or another type of support, SSVF grantees offer Veterans the mix of services they need to gain housing and stay housed."

SSVF grantees typically serve Veterans with incomes below 30 percent of the area median income. Grantees must follow the housing first approach, which centers on permanently housing homeless Veterans quickly

without preconditions and providing supportive services as needed. Additional SSVF requirements are that grantees engage in outreach to find and serve Veterans in need, provide Veterans with case management and assist them in obtaining VA and other public benefits.

SSVF served 127,829 participants in fiscal year (FY) 2014 and is on track to serve 135,000 Veterans and their family members by the end of FY 2015. As a result of these and other efforts, Veteran homelessness is down significantly since the launch of the Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness in 2010. Since 2010, nearly 230,000 Veterans and their family members have been permanently housed, rapidly rehoused or prevented from falling into homelessness by VA's homelessness programs and targeted housing vouchers provided by HUD.

"SSVF grants empower our local partners to provide short-term-focused interventions that promote housing stability among the most economically vulnerable Veterans and their families."



Source: www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2727