

MARCH/APRIL 2014



VETERANS BENEFITS & BEYOND



Veterans Receive 1.5% Cost-of-Living Increase In Benefits.

Veterans, their families and survivors receiving disability compensation and pension benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs received a 1.5 percent cost-of-living increase in their monthly payments beginning Jan. 1, 2014.

“We’re pleased there will be another cost-of-living increase for Veterans, their families and their survivors,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki when the announcement was made. “The increase expresses in a tangible way our Nation’s gratitude for the sacrifices made by our service-disabled and wartime Veterans.”

For the first time, payments are not rounded down to the nearest dollar. Until this year, that was required by law. Veterans and survivors will see additional cents included in their monthly compensation benefit payment.

For Veterans without dependents, the new compensation rates will range from \$130.94 monthly for a disability rated at 10 percent to

\$2,858.24 monthly for 100 percent. The full rates are available on the Internet at www.benefits.va.gov/compensation/rates-index.asp.

The COLA increase also applies to disability and death pension recipients, survivors receiving dependency and indemnity compensation, disabled Veterans receiving automobile and clothing allowances, and other benefits.

Under federal law, cost-of-living adjustments for VA’s compensation and pension must match those for Social Security benefits. The last adjustment was in January 2013 when the Social Security benefits rate increased 1.7 percent.

In fiscal year 2013, VA provided over \$59 billion in compensation benefits to nearly 4 million Veterans and survivors, and over \$5 billion in pension benefits to more than 515,000 Veterans and survivors.

For more information about VA benefits, visit www.benefits.va.gov, or call 1-800-827-1000.

“The increase expresses in a tangible way our Nation’s gratitude for the sacrifices made by our service-disabled and wartime Veterans.”
Secretary of Veterans Affairs **Eric K. Shinseki**

(Source: www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2503)

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JAN'S LETTER

It has been such a long, cold winter...can it be possible that warmer weather is just around the corner? I'm sure you will be just as excited as I am to see the sun again! In the meantime, take advantage of these last days indoors by reading up on the latest news and developments about Veterans benefits. For this edition of our newsletter, we've compiled a list of articles representing some good news across the board, like the cost-of-living raise in Veterans benefits that became effective in January of this year. We were also happy to add an article about a substantial reduction that was reported in the backlog of VA claims that could signal quicker claims processing in the future. Also, the VA has expanded the benefits for traumatic brain injury. And of course, we've included some good news from our own team and a few "just

for fun" facts, as well as a delicious new recipe that I can't wait to try myself!

I'm glad to report that 2014 is off to a great start, and we have experienced some great success stories in helping the Veterans we work with receive the benefits they deserve. As always, I invite you to call us or send us an email with any questions you may have. The process of applying for your benefits can be a confusing one, and we are always happy to share our experience and knowledge with you.

Thanks for reading, and we look forward to hearing from you soon!

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 Reports 36% Drop In Claims Backlog Since March 2013.

At a hearing in December before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, the Department of Veterans Affairs' Under Secretary for Benefits, Allison A. Hickey, outlined progress made by the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) in reducing the backlog of Veterans' disability compensation and pension claims by 36 percent since March 2013 – attributing the success to the combined impact of VBA's transformation initiatives and increased employee productivity.

"We know there is much more work to be done to reach our goal of eliminating the disability claims backlog in 2015," said Hickey. "But I'm encouraged that the improved tools and processes we've put in place so far are having a real impact so that we may better serve our nation's Veterans, their survivors and their families."

In her testimony, Under Secretary Hickey detailed the elements of VBA's transformation plan, which includes re-training and reorganizing its workforce, streamlining business processes, and building and implementing new technology solutions. With each transformation milestone, said Hickey, VBA is successfully moving away from a paper-bound, manual process to improve benefits delivery to Veterans, their families, and survivors through paperless claims processing. She also noted that if full funding is received, mandatory overtime for VBA claims processors, which helped bring down the backlog this year, will continue for much of 2014.

Key accomplishments highlighted in the testimony included:

- Decreasing the pending inventory of claims by 22 percent;
- Decreasing the number of claims in the backlog (those pending over 125 days) by 36 percent;
- Increasing claim-level accuracy from approximately 83 percent in 2011 to 90 percent today;
- Increasing medical issue-level accuracy to approximately 97 percent today;
- Completed processing of 99.9 percent of all claims that were pending over two years;
- Completed processing of 97 percent of all claims that were pending over one year through the end of October;
- Converting over 360 million images of paper claims documents into a digital format for electronic processing; and

- Establishing over 3.2 million Veteran, Servicemember and family member accounts in eBenefits, the joint Defense Department/VA web portal for accessing and tracking VA benefits.

Also, VA's web-based, paperless electronic claims processing solution, the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS), was successfully deployed to all 56 of VA's regional benefits offices across the country, six months ahead of schedule. VBMS has also been fielded to the Appeals Management Center, the Records Management Center, the Board of Veterans' Appeals, VA's National Call Center, and all VA Medical Centers. Currently, about 75 percent of the VBA's claims inventory is in digital form for electronic processing in VBMS – a percentage that is growing daily. In December, VBMS will continue to add new features and capability.

During her testimony, Hickey thanked the committee members for their support, noting that VA will rely on their continued support for resourcing the information technology and automation advancements needed to meet the Department's goal of eliminating the backlog in 2015. In fiscal year 2013 alone, VA provided over \$59 billion in compensation benefits to four million Veterans and survivors, and over \$5 billion in pension benefits to more than 515,000 Veterans and survivors.

For Veterans and separating Servicemembers who are planning to file a disability claim, VA urges them to do so by filing Fully Developed Claims (FDCs) electronically through eBenefits. Veterans and separating Servicemembers who need help filing their claims can contact their local veteran service organization for assistance.

Under current law, Veterans filing initial disability compensation claims as FDCs now through Aug. 5, 2015, may be eligible for up to one year of retroactive benefits. Registered eBenefits users with a Premium account can file a claim online, track the status, and access a variety of other benefits, including pension, education, health care, home loan eligibility, and vocational rehabilitation and employment programs.

For more information about VA benefits, visit www.benefits.va.gov, or call 1-800-827-1000.

(Source: www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2505)



SPOTLIGHT EMPLOYEE

Eric Hillyard

Accounting and Human Resources Manager Eric Hillyard joined Jan Dils, Attorneys at Law in 2011, and has enjoyed helping the team fight for Veterans ever since. A West Virginia native born and raised in Lumberport, Eric graduated in 2010 from West Virginia Wesleyan College with a Bachelor's Degree in Accounting, and recently earned a Master's of Healthcare Administration from Walden University. He and his wife Erica, a Pharmacist, have settled in Parkersburg with their two "four-legged children", dog Cooper and Lucy the cat. When he's not at the office, Eric can often be found playing piano and attending car shows. Join us in thanking Eric for the work he does every day for our team and for the Veterans we are honored to serve!

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.

	<p>FIRING FIRING FIRING</p>

ANSWERS: 1. Bags Under the Eyes 2. Firing Line 3. One Step Ahead 4. Snake in the Grass

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.

And the Apple Goes To... Jan Dils team member Cheryl Wingrove had the pleasure of presenting January's Golden Apple Award to Franklin Elementary School First Grade teacher **Ashley Lott**, who received a standing ovation along with lots of hugs from her students. Her family also surprised her for the special event that honored her for going the extra step with both her students and their parents.

Mrs. Lott, who recently experienced the bittersweet feeling of seeing the first class of first graders she taught move up to Middle School, says that she looks forward to meeting the new batch of parents each year, and watching her students grow throughout the school year. Luckily for her students, she says she can't imagine doing anything else except being surrounded by the kids. Please join us in thanking our latest Golden Apple Award winner for her incredible dedication, and for the difference she makes every day in the lives of our children!



For A Healthy, Hearty Dinner, With A Different Twist, Serve This PORTUGUESE KALE SOUP!

Our team member Lindsey Bailey shares a recipe that's an old favorite from her husband's Portuguese family.



INGREDIENTS

- 2-3 Potatoes
- Oil
- 1 Onion, chopped
- 4-5 Garlic cloves, chopped
- 1 lb. Kale, coarsely chopped (best if you remove thick parts of the stem)
- Salt and pepper
- 1 Can (15 oz.) garbanzo beans
- 1 Can diced tomatoes
- 1 lb. Sliced chorizo sausage (Linguica also works, or any spicy Mexican-type sausage)
- 1 qt. Chicken broth
- Fresh bread, crusty, like baguettes
- Crushed red pepper, to taste
- Optional: 1 egg per person

Directions: Heat oil. Add onions and cook until soft and translucent. Add garlic and kale to the pot. Cover pot and wilt the greens until they're soft. Add salt and pepper, crushed red pepper, beans, tomatoes, sausage, and broth and bring soup to full boil. Reduce heat and simmer until potatoes are tender. The longer you cook it, the more the sausage seasons the soup and the better it is!
**Expert tip: right before you're about to serve it, bring it to a boil again, and crack an egg in it and cook until it's hard (one for each bowl you're serving). Serve with bread. Enjoy!*

IT'S TIME TO...

- ...Pig out! **March 1st is National Pig Day.**
- ...Remember to wear green or risk being pinched. **March 17th is St. Patrick's Day.**
- ...Treat yourself to a bouquet. **March 21st is Flower Day.**
- ...Thank your favorite M.D. **March 30th is Doctor's Day.**
- ...Don't fall for it! **April 1st is April Fool's Day.**
- ...File an extension? **April 15th is Tax Day.**
- ...Don't forget where you hid the eggs. **April 20th is Easter.**
- ...Pucker up! **April 28th is Kiss Your Mate Day.**
- ...Celebrate with a new 'do. **April 30th is Hairstylist Day.**

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PARKERSBURG, WV 26101

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VA Expands Benefits For Traumatic Brain Injury.

Some Veterans with traumatic brain injury (TBI) who are diagnosed with any of five other ailments have an easier path to receive additional disability pay under new regulations developed by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The new regulation, which took effect in January, impacts some Veterans living with TBI who also have Parkinson's disease, certain types of dementia, depression, unprovoked seizures or certain diseases of the hypothalamus and pituitary glands.

"We decide Veterans' disability claims based on the best science available," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "As scientific knowledge advances, VA will expand its programs to ensure Veterans receive the care and benefits they've earned and deserve."

This regulation stems from a report of the National Academy of Sciences, Institute of Medicine (IOM) regarding the association between TBI and the five diagnosable illnesses. The IOM report, *Gulf War and Health, Volume 7: Long-Term Consequences of Traumatic Brain Injury*, found "sufficient evidence" to link moderate or severe levels of TBI with the five ailments.

The new regulations, printed in the Federal Register, say that if certain Veterans with service-connected TBI also have one of the five illnesses, then the second illness will also be considered as service connected for the calculation of VA disability compensation.

Eligibility for expanded benefits will depend upon the severity



of the TBI and the time between the injury causing the TBI and the onset of the second illness. However, Veterans can still file a claim to establish direct service-connection for these ailments even if they do not meet the time and severity standards in the new regulation.

Information about VA and DoD programs for brain injury and related research is available at www.dvbc.org.

Information about VA's programs for Gulf War Veterans is available at www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/hazardous_exposures.asp.

(Source: www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2506)