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FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS



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News of the Week

Go to FloridaVets.org to Access Current Information on Veteran Bills

From the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs

TALLAHASSEE, Fla., Feb. 13 – In an ongoing effort to provide “up to date” access to veteran-related state legislation, the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs would like to alert you to the 2007 legislation the department is tracking.

You may view a list of current legislative items, track bill progress and even view the text. This page will be continuously updated as changes take place. To use this service, please go to the FDVA Web site at www.FloridaVets.org, then click on *Legislative Issues* in the menu box, which will take you to an information page and a subject titled “Legislation We Are Tracking 2007.”

To read a brief bill history and see the sponsor(s) and companion bills, click on the bill number which will open a page provided by Lobby Tools. To read the bill text in PDF click on the PDF link.

You can also find legislative updates in the *2007 Legislative Session Report* in your weekly *e-floridavetsNews* for updates.

DOD Honors African Americans' Military Legacy during Black History Month

Retrieved from Defense Link Web site <http://www.defenselink.mil/>
Feb. 14, 2007

The Department of Defense has dedicated a Web site to recognize the achievements and contributions of African Americans who have served and are serving in America's Armed Forces. You can view the Web site by clicking on <http://www.defenselink.mil/home/features/2007/BlackHistoryMonth/Index.html>.

Continuing Resolution Adds \$3.55 Billion to VA Budget

Nearly \$600 million will go to veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan

News from the Ranking Member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

WASHINGTON, Feb. 14 – Veterans across the United States will benefit from Wednesday's passage of a continuing budget resolution which adds \$3.55 billion to VA's budget for 2007. Of that, nearly \$600 million will go for the medical treatment of those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"There are portions of the joint funding resolution that I did not like, but when it comes to veterans, Congress really came through," said Sen. Larry Craig, the immediate past chairman and now top Republican on the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. "While some veterans are always skeptical of Congress, it's clear that when a financial need has been identified, we have stepped up to the plate and provided the money."

The increase the Senate approved today means that Congress has added a total of approximately \$8 billion above spending levels in 2006 for the nation's veterans. Total VA spending for 2007 will be just more than \$80 billion.

There are approximately 24.5 million veterans in the United States but not all will use VA medical care. The budget projects that an estimated 5.6 million patients will be served by VA in 2007. Of those, an estimated 209,000 veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are expected to show up for at least one medical care service from VA in 2007.

"Every veteran returning from a combat theater of operations has priority access to VA health care. The \$600 million in this budget will help make certain that care is timely and of the highest quality," Craig said.

House Veterans' Affairs Committee Holds Stakeholders Summit to Identify Legislative Priorities

Released from the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

WASHINGTON, Feb. 13 – With both Democratic and Republican Members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs in attendance, Chairman Bob Filner (D-CA) led the first summit of veterans service organizations to discuss legislative priorities for the 110th Congress.

"This summit is intended to bring about productive problem solving tactics on the issues facing our nation's veterans," said Filner. "Today's roundtable discussion allowed organizations to participate in identifying proposed priorities for this session's legislative agenda."

"Our job now is to work together to respond to the issues on the table by working within the budget realities," continued Filner.

Veterans service organizations that participated in the Stakeholders Roundtable Discussion: The American Legion, Vietnam Veterans of America, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Blinded Veterans Association, Jewish War Veterans, Military Order of the Purple Heart, National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, National Association of Uniformed Service, National Association for Black Veterans, and Gold Star Wives.

"I am pleased to have had the opportunity to represent veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan at this very productive roundtable discussion," said Patrick M. Campbell of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "To share a seat as equals with veterans from every generation and to have a chance to present our priorities for the 110th Congress represent the Chairman's commitment to our generation of veterans."

The series of roundtable hearings will continue throughout the 110th Congress. The issues to be addressed include reducing the backlog of veterans' disability claims at the Department of Veterans Affairs, post traumatic stress disorder, and health care services.

"I am pleased that Members of both parties were able to engage veterans' service organizations to address the needs of our veterans," stated Filner.

Vietnam Hero to be Awarded Medal of Honor

By Donna Miles
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 10 – More than 40 years after demonstrating the heroism immortalized in the bestselling book and movie, "We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young," retired Army Lt. Col. Bruce P. Crandall will receive the Medal of Honor, the White House announced.

Crandall will receive the nation's highest military award for actions during the Battle of Ia Drang Valley in Vietnam in November 1965. The battle, at Landing Zone X-Ray near the Ia Drang River, was the first major ground battle of the war.

During the incident, Crandall, then a major and commander of Company A, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), dodged intense enemy fire as he repeatedly flew to a landing zone to rescue and resupply besieged 1st Cavalry Division ground troops.

The narrative for Crandall's Medal of Honor credits him with displaying leadership by example and fearless courage as he "voluntarily flew his unarmed helicopter through a gauntlet of enemy fire on flight after flight, delivering desperately needed ammunition, water and medical supplies into one of the most hotly contested landing zones of the war."

Crandall led a flight of 16 helicopters in support of the 1st Cavalry Division's 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, which was out of water, running dangerously low on ammunition and engaging about two regiments of North Vietnamese army infantry "determined to overrun and annihilate them," the narrative reads.

When the enemy fire got so intense that the infantry commander closed the landing zone, Crandall volunteered for the mission. He and his wingman, Maj. Ed Freeman, are credited with saving more than 70 wounded soldiers by transporting them to safety.

Freeman received the Medal of Honor for his efforts in July 2001.

Several books about the battle recognize Crandall and Freeman's contributions. Among the most well-known is the bestselling "We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young," coauthored by Lt. Gen. Harold Moore, commanding officer of infantry units in X-Ray, and Joseph Galloway, a combat reporter who was in the landing zone during the battle.

A major motion picture based on the book featured actor Greg Kinnear as Crandall.

Later during his Vietnam tour, Crandall demonstrated another act of heroism. While under enemy fire, using a flashlight to guide his UH-1 Huey helicopter, he dropped through dense jungle to rescue 12 wounded soldiers. For that action, he was awarded the first AVCO-Aviation/Space Writers Association Helicopter Heroism Award. This award is sponsored by the Aviation/Space Writers Association and AVCC Corporation, and is awarded to an individual for heroism efforts involving the use of helicopter.

During a second tour in Vietnam, in 1968, Crandall was downed during another rescue attempt and spent five months in the hospital. He resumed his military career, retiring as a lieutenant colonel in 1977.

Crandall was inducted into the Army Aviation Hall of Fame at Fort Rucker, Ala., in 2004. He also was

the seventh Army inductee into the "Gathering of Eagles," a U.S. Air Force organization that honors contributors to aviation.

Bush will present Crandall the Medal of Honor during a Feb. 26 White House ceremony.

Program Helps Vets Own Franchises

By Donna Miles
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 14 – When he returned home from an 11-month deployment to Iraq in October 2005, Army Staff Sgt. John Reid realized he had stashed away a sizeable sum of cash and wanted to put it to work for himself.

"I didn't want to waste it on a new car or something like that," said the New York National Guardsman, who spent five years on active duty before joining the Guard in 1989.

Instead, Reid decided to invest in his own business. He attended a franchise expo, ultimately buying a Glass Doctor franchise in Somerset, N.J. Only when the company flew him to Waco, Texas, for an orientation did Reid learn about one of the best-kept secrets for veterans who dream of opening their own business: the Veterans Transition Franchise Initiative.

Known as "VetFran," the program offers financial incentives to veterans interested in owning their own franchise. By purchasing his franchise through VetFran, Reid said, he saved about 10 percent of the franchise cost. "That gave me a little more start-up money," he said.

In addition to financial help, Reid said the program gave him another whole network of advisors to help him make his new business a success. "It's really helpful that I can call on them any time with any problems," he said. "That's an added benefit."

Reid is among more than 600 veterans who have taken advantage of VetFran to buy franchised small businesses since Don Dwyer Sr. of the Dwyer Group founded the program in 1991. VetFran lost momentum after Dwyer's death in 1994, but his daughter, Dina Dwyer-Owens, revived it after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks. Today, some 200 companies in the International Franchise Association participate in the program.

"VetFran was created to honor America's veterans for their service to the nation," said IFA President Matthew Shay. "We ... do it in a way that helps them continue to contribute to the nation's well-being by becoming small-business owners and operators."

Cmdr. Gary Martin-Ranft, a Coast Guard Reservist, recently took advantage of VetFran to buy a HomeVestors of America franchise in Chicago. The company, best known for its "We Buy Ugly Houses" advertising signs, specializes in buying, rehabbing and selling houses.

Martin-Ranft said he was always interested in real estate, and welcomed the opportunity to buy a real-estate franchise through a program that recognizes veterans. "I like to be loyal to people who are good to veterans," he said.

VetFran is among a huge array of programs and services offered through corporations, grassroots

organizations and private citizens in support of the men and women in uniform and veterans of the U.S. military. These initiatives are highlighted in the Defense Department's America Supports You program.

Injured Vet Finds Future with Pizza Chain

American Forces Press Service

From a Little Caesars Pizza news release

WASHINGTON, Feb. 9 – A U.S. veteran who lost both legs in 2004 when a roadside bomb exploded in Iraq will begin a new career because his indomitable spirit moved a total stranger to give back to those who have served their country.

Army Staff Sgt. Robbie Doughty and Michael Ilitch, the founder of Little Caesars Pizza, one of nation's largest pizza chains, proudly stood side by side for the grand opening of the veteran's new pizza store in Paducah, Ky.

Doughty, 31, was honorably discharged from the Army in July 2004 and began a long road to recovery facing an uncertain future with his young family. As he endured months of rehabilitation, he never gave up hope, never lost his courageous spirit and learned to walk again, he said.

Ilitch who, along with Little Caesars Pizza, owns Major League Baseball's world champion Detroit Tigers and the National Hockey League's Detroit Red Wings, read about Doughty in a Nov. 23, 2004, USA Today article.

Ilitch was so moved by Doughty's courage and determination that he called the Kentucky veteran to thank him for serving the country. After many conversations, Ilitch offered Doughty an opportunity to open his own Little Caesars Pizza franchise in his hometown of Paducah.

"Doughty stood strong for our country. I was so impressed by his courage, commitment and upbeat attitude in the face of adversity, that I wanted to do something," Ilitch said. "Offering him a new career path in his hometown seemed like a good transition. Doughty's 'can-do' attitude will make him a strong Little Caesars franchisee."

Doughty accepted Ilitch's offer and followed his suggestion to find a business partner. His choice was fellow veteran Lloyd Allard, who served with Doughty in the 3rd Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group, in a dangerous area in Iraq.

"After a career in the military, I was open to a new venture," Doughty said. "Our military background and familiarity with systems, processes and a teamwork management style make the Little Caesars franchise a good fit.

"Opening a business and becoming an entrepreneur will definitely be an exciting new chapter in my life for my family and me," he said.

"From day one, Doughty was ready for his next challenge," Allard said. "With our leadership skills and Little Caesars' training and ongoing support system, we look forward to becoming strong franchisees and sharing our experience with other veterans."

Their story also prompted Ilitch to launch a new, innovative franchise program to provide qualified, honorably discharged veterans with a business opportunity when they transition to civilian life or seek a

career change. The program provides a benefit of \$10,000 for qualified veterans and up to \$68,000 in benefits for service-disabled veterans.

"Doughty and Allard inspired me with a vision: to develop a program to create career opportunities for military veterans," Ilitch said. "I believe that it's important for Little Caesars and corporate America to thank the men and women who have served in the armed forces and this program offers an exceptional opportunity for veterans who are seeking new career options."

Two Wounded Vets Transcend Their Disabilities

By John J. Kruzel
American Forces Press Service

STERLING, Va., Feb. 8 – Marissa Strock and Jake Kessler sat in adjacent wheelchairs while prosthetic specialists attached carbon-fiber feet to their titanium legs.

Strock, a 21-year-old Army private first class, and Kessler, a 36-year-old Army staff sergeant, are double-leg-amputee Iraq war veterans who forged a friendship at Walter Reed Army Medical Center here during painful rehabilitation sessions.

Strock accompanied Kessler and his wife, Vanessa, to Sport Rock Indoor Climbing Center Feb. 2. Disabled Sports USA and the Wounded Warrior Disabled Sports Project took six wounded veterans there for an afternoon of indoor rock climbing. Disabled Sports USA and the Wounded Warrior Disabled Sports Project are partners in the Defense Department's America Supports You program. The program highlights activities, grassroots groups, corporations and private citizens are doing to support the men and women in uniform.

"A week ago in physical therapy, I heard them say, 'rock climbing' and I said, "Oooh Oooh, pick me! Pick me! I wanna go!" Strock said.

A prostheticist untied Strock's pink shoelaces and removed her sneakers, revealing two rubber feet, which he unscrewed and replaced with a pair of carbon-fiber counterparts covered by rock-climbing shoes.

Strock had climbed several times before, but this was her first attempt since losing her legs.

On Nov. 24, 2005, Thanksgiving Day, Strock was patrolling a southern Baghdad area known as the "Triangle of Death" when her armored vehicle drove over an improvised explosive device.

"Two insurgents were apparently in the brush, and they had buried an IED in the middle of the road weeks before," Strock said. "There was no way to see it and no way to know it was there. When we drove over it, they blew it.

Strock's left femur was broken in multiple places and her right tibia, ankle and heel were severely damaged in the blast. Cranial swelling left her comatose. When she regained consciousness about a month later, Strock consented to below-knee amputation surgery.

Life with two metal legs began.

Six months later in Iraq, Kessler's vehicle was patrolling a Ramallah street when an improvised explosive device detonated under his gunner's hatch.

Kessler suffered two pelvic fractures, five fractures in his back and multiple broken ribs from the blast.

"Every move was painful for him," Kessler's wife, Vanessa, recalled.

"It also shattered my legs pretty bad," Kessler said, pointing to his titanium replacements.

After the explosion, doctors amputated Kessler's right leg below the knee and his left leg above the knee. A prosthetic knee joint and two titanium legs now stand in their places.

But Kessler and Strock refuse to let their situations keep them down.

"Climbing is one of the passions I've wanted to get back to," Kessler said. "Being able to get back here and climb is the first step of many."

"It's amazing knowing that you can get out and still do the same things you did before," Kessler said after his climb. "It helps a lot that there are positive people around me, encouraging me whether I make it to the top or halfway up.

To read this story in its entirety, click on

<http://www.americasupportsyounil/AmericaSupportsYou/Content.aspx?ID=44744338&SectionID=1>.

Air Force Enlisted Village Earns Four-star Rating

by Jodi L. Jordan

Air Force Retiree News Service

FORT WALTON BEACH, Fla., Feb. 15 – The Air Force Enlisted Village recently received the highest rating possible from an online service that rates charities on their ability to efficiently manage and grow their finances.

The four-star rating indicates the Air Force Enlisted Village outperforms the majority of nonprofit charities in America with respect to fiscal responsibility, said Trent Stamp, the executive director of Charity Navigator.

Charity Navigator provides information on and evaluates the financial health of more than 5,000 charities. Less than 25 percent of these charities receive the top rating of four stars overall.

"This 'exceptional' designation from Charity Navigator differentiates Air Force Enlisted Village from its peers and demonstrates to the public it is worthy of their trust," Mr. Stamp said.

The Air Force Enlisted Village provides a home for the widows of enlisted military servicemembers. The Air Force Enlisted Village operates three sites in the Fort Walton area -- Bob Hope Village, Teresa Village and Hawthorn House, the AFEV's new assisted-living residence.

Widows and widowers of enlisted servicemembers are eligible for residence at the three sites. Dependent parents of active duty and retired Air Force enlisted members are also eligible for residence.

"We are very proud to be recognized as a four-star organization," said retired Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force James C. Binnicker, the president and CEO of the Air Force Enlisted Village. "We depend on the generous contributions from our donors to help us provide a home for enlisted widows. We work

very hard to be good stewards of those donations, and to respect the bond our donors have with our organization."

NMFA Now Accepting Applications for Military Spouse Scholarships

Released from the National Military Family Association

ALEXANDRIA, Va. – The National Military Family Association is accepting applications for NMFA's *Joanne Holbrook Patton Military Spouse Scholarships*. Scholarships are awarded to military spouses to obtain professional certification or to attend post secondary or graduate school.

Applications will only be accepted online at www.nmfa.org/scholarship and must be submitted by midnight March 15, 2007. Spouses of uniformed servicemembers (active duty, National Guard and reserves, retirees, and survivors) of any branch or rank are eligible to apply. Scholarships normally range from \$500 to \$1,000 and may be used for tuition, fees, and school room and board.

Through a new partnership with the Military Channel, NMFA has expanded the *Joanne Holbrook Patton Military Spouse Scholarship Program* in 2007 to provide additional scholarships to a larger number of deserving military spouses. NMFA recognizes that unique challenges like frequent moves and deployments can interfere with military spouses' ability to complete their education. NMFA's military spouse education initiative is dedicated to helping military spouses gain the education they need to reach their full career potential. Visit www.nmfa.org/SpouseEd for additional resources.

About NMFA

The National Military Family Association is the only national organization whose sole focus is the military family and whose goal is to influence the development and implementation of policies that will improve the lives of the families of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and the Commissioned Corps of the Public Health Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. For more than 35 years, its staff and volunteers, comprised mostly of military family members, have built a reputation for being the leading experts on military family issues. Visit <http://www.nmfa.org/> for more information.

It's Tax Season; Don't Forget About Amendment 7

By an overwhelming majority, Florida voters approved Amendment 7 to the Florida Constitution in November, 2006. Amendment 7, introduced as an additive benefit to existing veterans' benefits, provides a discount from the amount of ad valorem tax on the homestead of a partially or totally permanently disabled veteran who is age 65 or older, who was a Florida resident at the time of entering military service, whose disability was combat-related, and who was honorably discharged; to specify the percentage of the discount as equal to the percentage of the veteran's permanent service-connected disability. The provision is self-executing, and does not require implementing legislation. The application deadline is March 1. For details on Amendment 7, click on <http://www.floridavets.org/pdf/amendment7.pdf> to review a list of frequently asked questions and responses.

Are Your Social Security Benefits Taxable?

News from the Internal Revenue Service
Feb. 12, 2007

How much, if any, of your social security benefits are taxable depends on your total income and marital status? Generally, if social security benefits were your only income, your benefits are not taxable and you probably do not need to file a federal income tax return.

If you received income from other sources, your benefits will not be taxed unless your modified adjusted gross income is more than the base amount for your filing status. Your taxable benefits and modified adjusted gross income are figured in a worksheet in the Form 1040A or Form 1040 Instruction booklet.

Before you go to the instruction book, do the following quick computation to determine whether some of your benefits may be taxable:

- First, add one-half of the total social security you received to all your other income, including any tax exempt interest and other exclusions from income.
- Then, compare this total to the base amount for your filing status.

The 2006 base amounts are:

- \$32,000 for married couples filing jointly
- \$25,000 for single, head of household, qualifying widow/widower with a dependent child, or married individuals filing separately who did not live with their spouses at any time during the year
- \$0 for married persons filing separately who lived together during the year

For additional information on the taxability of social security benefits, see IRS Publication 915, Social Security and Equivalent Railroad Retirement Benefits. Publication 915 is available on the IRS Web site at www.IRS.gov or by calling 800-TAX-FORM (800-829-3676).

2007 Legislative Session Report

Legislative Watch List:

The 2007 Regular Legislative Session is approaching. Listed below are key bills the department is tracking that have activity within the next couple of weeks. If you wish to view all the legislation the department is following, please visit FDVA's tracking web page at <http://www.floridavets.org/information/legislink.asp>.

Date	Time	Location	Chamber	Committee	Bill	Title	Sponsor
Feb. 20	10:30 a.m.	301 Senate Office Building	Senate	Military Affairs and Domestic Security	102	Relating to Veterans' Day Observance/Schools	Hill
Feb. 20	10:30 a.m.	301 Senate Office Building	Senate	Military Affairs and Domestic Security	116	Relating to Armed Forces Member/Use of Name	Atwater
Feb. 20	10:30 a.m.	301 Senate Office Building	Senate	Military Affairs and Domestic Security	300	Relating to Disabled-veteran Business Contracts	Fasano

Feb. 20	10:30 a.m.	301 Senate Office Building	Senate	Military Affairs and Domestic Security	412	Relating to Education/Children of POWs or MIAs	Baker
Feb. 20	10:30 a.m.	301 Senate Office Building	Senate	Military Affairs and Domestic Security	446	Relating to Postsecondary Ed. Fee Waiver/Veteran	Fasano
Feb. 21	2:30 p.m.	412 Knott Building	Senate	Community Affairs	1026	Relating to Ad Valorem Tax/Disabled Veterans	Haridopolos
Feb. 22	9:30 a.m.	110 Senate Office Building	Senate	Health and Human Services Appropriations	1318	Relating to Trusts Funds/FDVA/DOH	Peaden

Calendar of Key Legislative Dates:

Feb. 19-23 Interim Committee Week
 March 6 First Day of Regular Session – 109th since statehood
 March 6, noon Final Bill Filing Deadline
 May 4 Final Day of Regular Session

[News from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs](#)

[VA Partnering with States to Help Injured Veterans](#)

Nicholson: More Veterans Helped as VA, States Strengthen Cooperation

WASHINGTON, Feb. 12 – To help severely injured servicemembers receive benefits from their states when they move from military hospitals to Department of Veterans Affairs medical facilities in their communities, VA announced expansion of a collaborative outreach program with states and territories.

After a four-month pilot with the state of Florida, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson expanded the program to all states while addressing a conference of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs in Alexandria, Va.

"This initiative is a promising extension of VA's own transition assistance for those leaving military service," said Nicholson. "It is also an opportunity to partner with the states to make long-term support possible for our most deserving veterans throughout the country."

Called "State Benefits Seamless Transition Program," the initiative involves VA staff located at 10 Department of Defense medical facilities. They will identify injured military members who will be transferred to VA facilities. VA staff will contact state veterans affairs offices on behalf of the veterans. The state offices, in turn, will contact the veterans to inform them about state benefits for them and dependent family members. Most states and territories offer a range of benefits to veterans.

"Connecting veterans with state benefits immediately upon their separation from military service is a challenge, and more so for those who have suffered serious injury," said John M. Garcia, president of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs. "The State Benefits Seamless Transition Program opens a good line of communication and coordination between the Department of Defense, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the state departments of veterans' affairs."

NASDVA is an organization consisting of the top veterans affairs officials in each state and territory. The association is a nexus for the exchange of information among the states, Congress, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the veteran service organizations.

Nicholson said this state-federal initiative will maintain an injured veteran's privacy and provide early access to additional benefits. **The new national partnership between VA and the states is the result of a pilot project with the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs, which began in September 2006.**

"I applaud VA for expanding nationwide this worthwhile pilot program for our severely injured servicemembers," said LeRoy Collins Jr., executive director of the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs. "This new initiative will be of great value to state governments enhancing long-term support to their veterans and families."

Nation Marks "Salute to Hospitalized Veterans" Week

Nicholson Urged Youth Groups, Schools to Sponsor Events

WASHINGTON, Feb. 13 – With national "Salute to Hospitalized Veterans" Week being celebrated in communities all across the country Feb. 11-17, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson encouraged schools and youth groups to commemorate the sacrifices of America's veterans.

"Thank you is one of the most eloquent phrases in the English language," Nicholson said. "It is important that our nation's young people learn to honor the men and women who have worn the uniforms of the U.S. armed forces."

With 155 major medical centers, the Department of Veterans Affairs operates the largest integrated health care system in the country. In independent evaluations of health care, VA's patients consistently score higher in customer satisfaction than their private-sector peers.

Despite the high quality of VA's health care, Nicholson pointed out that many veterans, especially those with life-long health problems related to their military service, deeply appreciate knowing that their neighbors and the youngsters in their communities value those sacrifices.

"Salute to Hospitalized Veterans" Week is traditionally held the same week as Valentine's Day. Part of the week's events is "Valentines for Veterans," a program to encourage people to send valentines to patients in VA hospitals.

During the week, VA officials also encourage people to become volunteers in one of the department's medical centers or outpatient clinics.

Volunteers can sign up by visiting a VA health care facility, calling VA's toll-free number at 1-800-827-1000 or going to the department's Web site at www.va.gov and clicking "Health Care."

Currently, 88,000 active volunteers serve veterans in VA facilities across the country.

Technology Identifies Veterans at Risk for Diabetic Eye Disease

Secretary Nicholson: "Important Initiative for Veterans"

WASHINGTON, Feb. 15 – Many veterans with diabetes are getting initial screening for possible eye disease during their Department of Veterans Affairs primary care appointments, thanks to a national tele-retinal imaging program now in place at the majority of VA hospitals and clinics.

“This leading-edge technology will make a difference for our nation’s veterans. One out of every five VA patients has diabetes,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson. “Early detection of retinal abnormalities is essential in preventing vision loss from diabetes. This is another example of VA’s commitment to provide world-class care to our nation’s veterans.”

This new procedure, which screens patients for diabetic retinopathy, does not take the place of a dilated eye exam. Veterans with known retinopathy or laser treatment will be seen in eye clinics, along with high risk patients such as those with pregnancy or renal disease. The new procedure is a good initial way, however, to identify patients at risk for visual loss from diabetes.

Patients are scheduled for the imaging via the computerized patient record system. The images taken of the retina at the clinics are sent to an image reading center, where an eye care specialist determines the need for further care.

Diabetic retinopathy causes 12,000 to 24,000 new cases of blindness each year in the United States, making diabetes the leading cause of new cases of blindness in adults 20-74 years of age.

The tele-retinal imaging program is just one year old this month and expected to expand significantly in the coming year. VA collaborated with the Department of Defense and the Joslin Diabetes Center in Boston to implement the technology involving digital retinal imaging and remote image interpretations to assess for levels of diabetic retinopathy. This is another example of how VA has achieved efficiency and quality of care for its patients with diabetes that exceeds that in the private sector.

Diabetes is one target of a major VA program designed to reduce the high rates of illness caused by obesity. Called MOVE -- for “Managing Overweight Veterans Everywhere” -- it encourages veterans to increase their physical activity and improve their nutrition. Further information is available at www.move.va.gov.

VA Remembers President Lincoln on His Birthday

WASHINGTON, Feb. 12 – Monday marked President Abraham Lincoln’s birthday. Much of VA’s legacy stems from his administration – national veterans’ cemeteries, national soldiers homes and a veterans’ compensation and pension system; and one more thing – the VA motto “To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan.”

When Lincoln took the oath of office for the second time on March 4, 1865, the nation was in the last throes of the Civil War. In the conclusion of his second inaugural address, Lincoln said:

“With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the Nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan — to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

The VA adopted its motto in May, 1959, at the direction of VA Administrator Sumner G. Whittier. The 1967 edition of a VA medical history printed for the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs described Whittier:

“He worked no employee longer or harder than himself to make his personal credo the mission of the agency. What was that credo? Simply the words of Abraham Lincoln, ‘to care for him who shall have

borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan.' To indicate the mission of his agency's employees, Mr. Whittier had plaques installed on either side of the main entrance."

Whittier served as Administrator from December 1957 to January 1961. He was a veteran of World War II and held a number of public service positions from the age of 27, finally serving as lieutenant governor of Massachusetts from 1953 to 1956. He joined the Veterans Administration as Director of Insurance in January 1957 and in December of that year was appointed Administrator. He resides in Ellicott City, Md.

Editor's Note: VA Outpatient Clinics will be closed for the Presidents' Day Holiday Monday, Feb. 19. VA Medical Centers will be open.

VA Calling on Submissions for 2007 Veterans Day Poster

WASHINGTON, Feb. 15 – Attention photographers, graphic designers and artists. The Veterans Day National Committee, which is chaired by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, is seeking submissions for the 2007 National Veterans Day poster. The poster is distributed to more than 110,000 schools nationwide, military installations around the world, and to federal agencies in the nation's capital. It also graces the cover of the official program booklet for the Veterans Day ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery.

The committee will convene in May 2007 to review all submissions and select a finalist. The final poster must be 18x24" at 300 dots per inch, but please scale down submissions to 9x12" and submit electronic versions as JPG images or PDF files via e-mail to: vetsday@va.gov. Alternatively, send copies of artwork or a CD with artwork files to:

Department of Veterans Affairs (002C)
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, D.C., 20420

Please do not send originals.

To view Veterans Day posters from previous years, please visit <http://www.va.gov/vetsday> and click on "Poster Gallery". Submissions should include sufficient information to demonstrate that the image is the work of the artist and is not copyrighted material (i.e. photos and concepts).

VA Update on Missing Hard Drive in Birmingham, Ala.

Investigation Yielding Additional Information

WASHINGTON, Feb. 10 – The Department of Veterans Affairs issued an update on the information potentially contained on a missing government-owned, portable hard drive used by a VA employee at a Department facility in Birmingham, Ala.

"Our investigation into this incident continues, but I believe it is important to provide the public additional details as quickly as we can," said Jim Nicholson, Secretary of Veterans Affairs. "I am concerned and will remain so until we have notified those potentially affected and get to the bottom of what happened.

"VA will continue working around the clock to determine every possible detail we can," Nicholson said.

VA and VA's Office of Inspector General have learned that data files the employee was working with may have included sensitive VA-related information on approximately 535,000 individuals. The

investigation has also determined that information on approximately 1.3 million non-VA physicians – both living and deceased – could have been stored on the missing hard drive. It is believed though, that most of the physician information is readily available to the public. Some of the files, however, may contain sensitive information.

VA continues to examine data on the employee’s work computer. The employee has been placed on administrative leave pending the outcome of the investigation. VA has no information the data has been misused.

The non-VA physician data is used by VA to enhance the quality of care for veterans by analyzing and comparing information about the health care received from VA and non-VA providers.

Next week, VA will begin making notifications to individuals whose sensitive information may have been on the hard drive. VA is also making arrangements to provide one year of free credit monitoring to those whose information proves compromised.

“VA is unwavering in our resolve to bolster our data security measures,” Nicholson added. “We remain focused on doing everything that can be done to protect the personal information with which we are entrusted.”

On Jan. 22, the employee, who works at the Birmingham VA Medical Center, reported the external hard drive was missing. On Jan. 23, VA’s IG was notified. The OIG opened a criminal investigation, sent special agents to the medical center, and notified the FBI. VA’s Office of Information & Technology in Washington, D.C. also dispatched an incident response team to investigate.

The OIG seized the employee’s work computer and began analyzing its contents. This analysis continues and VA Information Technology staff has been providing technical support.

In addition to the ongoing criminal investigation, the OIG initiated an administrative investigation to determine how such an incident could occur.

VA is operating a call center that individuals can contact to get information about this incident. That toll-free number is 1-877-894-2600. The call center will operate every day from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. CST as long as it is needed.

2007 Veteran Organization Convention Schedule and Events

Organization	Event	Date	Location	Contact
Military Order of the Purple Heart, Chapter 776	3 rd Annual Purple Heart Ceremony (Veterans and public invited)	Feb. 17, 11 a.m.	Fallen Heroes Monument, Bicentennial Park, Crystal River	Curt Ebitz www.citruspurpleheart.org Info@citruspurpleheart.org
AMVETS Dept. of Florida	State Executive Committee Meeting	March 16-18	Rosen Centre, Orlando	Bill McRoberts 352-669-8490
Marine Corps League, Dept. of Florida	Spring Conference (All Marine Corps veterans invited)	March 29-April 1	Hawthorn Suites, 7450 Augusta National Dr., Orlando	John Ring ringjh@earthlink.net

Vietnam and All Veterans of Brevard	20 th Annual VVB Reunion	April 26-29	Wickham Park, Melbourne	Greg Welsh vets2gether@cfl.rr.com
Italian-American War Veterans of the U.S.	National Ladies Auxiliary Testimonial	April 27-29	Hawthorn Suites, 7450 Augusta National Dr., Orlando	Vito M. Rao vrhao@broward.org

Editor's Note: Veteran Service Organizations in Florida provided the information in the table above. If you would like to submit event information to include in the *e-floridavetsNews*, please e-mail the editor, Courtney Heidelberg, at heidelbergc@fdva.state.fl.us.

[Florida Job Fair Information](#)

Job fair information from the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation is available on-line at: http://www.floridajobs.org/onestop/os_job_fairs.html

[Supporting Veterans](#)

[License Plates Support Florida Veterans' Homes](#)

Your purchase of the "**Florida Salutes Veterans**" or one of the **approved Army, Navy, Air Force or Coast Guard Military Service license plates** helps people who need it most, when they need it most.

The entire \$15 surcharge goes into a Trust Fund for the operation and maintenance of critically needed Veterans' Homes in Florida. A portion of the Marine Corps License Plate also supports the State Veterans' Homes Program.

[Headstones and Markers](#)

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) furnishes upon request, at no charge to the applicant, a government headstone or marker for the grave of any deceased eligible veteran in any cemetery around the world. For all deaths occurring before Sept. 11, 2001, the VA may provide a headstone or marker only for graves that are not marked with a private headstone.

Spouses and dependents buried in a private cemetery are not eligible for a government-provided headstone or marker.

Flat markers in granite, marble, and bronze and upright headstones in granite and marble are available. The style chosen must be consistent with existing monuments at the place of burial. Niche markers are also available to mark columbaria used for inurnment of cremated remains.

When burial or memorialization is in a national cemetery, a headstone or marker will be ordered by the cemetery officials based on inscription information provided by the next of kin. When burial is in a private cemetery, [VA Form 40-1330, Application for Standard Government Headstone or Marker](#) (PDF), must be submitted by the next of kin or a representative, such as funeral director, cemetery official or veterans counselor, along with [veterans military discharge documents](#), to request a Government-provided headstone or marker. Do not send original documents, as they will not be returned.

To learn more information regarding headstones and markers including eligibility criteria, placing orders, inscriptions, replacements and more, click on http://www.cem.va.gov/cem/hm_hm.asp.

Vietnam Memorial Traveling Wall 2007 Schedule

Vietnam and All Veterans of Brevard (VVB) is hosting a Vietnam Traveling Wall. The wall is a 3/5 scale replica of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C., and is based in Brevard County, Fla. VVB is currently developing this year's schedule, which is slated to visit two cities in Florida to date. The current schedule is listed below. For more information on the Traveling Memorial Wall, visit the Traveling Wall Web site at www.TravelingWall.us

Florida Showings:

April 5-8 Ocala
April 22-29 Melbourne

The Wall That Heals Visits Florida this Spring

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund is hosting a traveling half-scale replica of the Vietnam Memorial Wall. *The Wall That Heals* and accompanying museum will visit more than 20 cities and towns throughout the nation this year, including two stops in Florida. See information below for details:

March 1-4 Port St. Joe, Fla.
March 8-11 Cape Coral, Fla.

*More information can be found by navigating the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund Web site at <http://www.vvmf.org/>.

State of Florida Veterans' Homes

Take a [virtual tour](#) of a **State Veterans' Nursing or Domiciliary Home**. The tour includes ten 360-degree fully interactive pictures. No additional software is required to view these images. Simply click on the desired picture and the tour begins.

Links and References for Veterans

[Click here](#) for a copy of **Florida Veterans' Benefits Guide**.

[Ask Benefits Questions Via E-MAIL](#): For specific Compensation and Pension benefits questions and local regional office issues, the contact list is by state and geographical area of jurisdiction.

[Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents](#) (Current Edition) - The current edition of this booklet lists the variety of federal benefits available to veterans and their dependents. Selecting the link above will allow you to download the booklet as a [PDF](#) file in English or Spanish.

La versión en Español de el folleto "Beneficios Federales para los Veteranos y sus Dependientes", el cual explica la variedad de beneficios disponibles para los veteranos y sus dependientes, se encuentra disponible en versión PDF al presionar [aquí](#).

[VA State Summary for Florida](#) – As of December 2006.

Florida Veterans Mobile Service Center - The Florida Veterans Mobile Service Center uses a state of the art 40-foot van equipped with two exam rooms, as well as facilities for dental care, to travel the state performing intervention with homeless veterans who live in rural encampments. This mobile unit offers a unique opportunity to provide homeless veterans immediate assistance of food and clothing, health screening and assessment, VA benefit determination and counseling, as well as assessment of housing, mental health, substance abuse, employment, educational and vocational needs.

The Mobile Service Center will visit the following locations in Florida soon:

March 3-4	Tampa
March 7	Port Charlotte
March 16	Jacksonville

Federal Government's Newly Renamed and Updated Web site

Library of Congress, Veterans History Project

Issues and Action: Federal Veterans Issues

Find your member of Congress

United States Senate

U.S. House of Representatives

Combat Veterans Information

Transition Assistance Program

Survivors Benefits

Women Veterans Information

(Some links require **Adobe Acrobat Reader, which can be downloaded here.**)

Please encourage others to sign up for *e-floridavetsNews*. Sign up, unsubscribe or change your email address at **<http://www.floridavets.org/news/newsletter.asp>**.

Editor's Note

The material presented herein does not have the effect of laws or regulations.

Please send questions or comments on this newsletter to Public Relations Manager, ATTN: *e-floridavetsNews*, 4040 Esplanade Way, Suite 152, Tallahassee, FL 32399-0950 or e-mail **HeidelbergC@fdva.state.fl.us**.

Changes to the e-mailing list may be accomplished by accessing FDVA's Web site at **<http://www.FloridaVets.org>**.

The newsletter archive is available online at **<http://www.floridavets.org/news/archive.asp>**.