

# WHAT IS VFAB?

by Ron Whitcomb

Veterans Family Advisory Board (VFAB) is a mental health consumer council made up of Veterans, family members, and some staff members. The mission of VFAB is to lead in building a working alliance between Veterans and VA leadership to ensure the highest quality of service and care to the Veterans. We also serve to allow Veterans' voices to be heard by VA leadership.

The suggestion boxes placed around the VA and the Vet Center are to be used for you to make suggestions about how the VA could be better. Your suggestions are collected and read by Veterans so that we can target areas for improvement.

*Veteran's Watch* is a quarterly publication written BY Veterans FOR Veterans. If you have suggestions for future articles or would like to join VFAB, please contact Jessica Zuehlke, PsyD, at 401-273-7100, ext. 2629.

### VFAB MEMBERS:

- Martin Cappelli
- Jack Croall
- Bob Goodreau
- Kathleen Meunier
- Don Sullivan
- Ron Whitcomb
- Jessica Zuehlke



# VETERAN'S WATCH

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## HEALTH CARE BILL: NO CHANGES FOR VETS

How will the new health insurance reform law affect our nation's Veterans? In general, the new law requires most US citizens to obtain private health insurance coverage by 2014 or they (or their employers) will face financial penalties through the US Tax Code.

Under the new law, all Veterans enrolled in VA health care and their dependents and survivors under CHAMPVA are deemed to have the minimum essential coverage that satisfies the individual requirement for healthcare insurance coverage. All military families, military retirees and dependents enrolled in military health care, TRICARE, and TRICARE for Life, meet the requirement as well. As such, Veterans and military families *are not* required to buy private coverage in addition to their government-provided health services.

Furthermore, under the new law but outside VA and the Department of Defense (DOD), Veterans and their family dependents, the same as all other Americans, may gain the option

**“DAV reports that under the new law, all Veterans enrolled in VA health care...are deemed to have the minimum essential coverage that satisfies the individual requirement for health insurance coverage.”**

to buy a private plan through state-run insurance exchanges, beginning in 2014. Based on income limits, they may also be eligible for financial assistance in purchasing insurance coverage.

To clarify the intent of the new law, the following legisla-

tion has been introduced:  
\*\* H.R. 4887 would provide that coverage under TRICARE and DOD's Non-appropriated Fund Health Benefits Program (for DOD employees of the Army and Air Force Exchange Service and others) constitutes minimal essential health care coverage as required by the health reform law.

\*\*H.R. 4894 would amend the health reform law to ensure nothing in that law could be construed to diminish the authority of the Secretary of VA or the Secretary of DOD over the VA and DOD health care programs, respectively.

\*\*Regarding severely disabled children of Vietnam and Korean War Veterans with spina bifida, S. 3162 would amend the reform law to guarantee that VA's spina bifida program for these children would be considered minimum essential coverage.

## NEW CLINIC OFFERS INTEGRATIVE CARE TO OEF/OIF VETS

The Providence VAMC has established an OEF/OIF New Patient Care Clinic, providing new OEF/OIF Veterans a one-stop-shopping model of integrative primary and behavioral healthcare as well as an opportunity to seek after-hours care. Michael O'Connell, MD, and Joan Karl, MD, are available to provide physical examinations, and Dr. Karl also offers women's healthcare.

The clinic is staffed by two patient care assistants, an eligi-

bility clerk, a clinician from the Primary Care integrated behavioral health



team, and the OEF/OIF Program Manager. The clinic also includes representatives from the Providence VA Regional Office as well as a consultant from Operation Vets who works with the local colleges and Veterans to offer

education on benefits, jobs, colleges, and the new GI Bill.

The new clinic is available on Mondays, from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. in the Medical Center's Special Populations Clinic (building 1) and provides excellent care and a seamless transition for new eligible OEF/OIF Veterans. Please contact Rochelle Fortin, LICSW, OEF/OIF Program Manager, Monday through Friday (7:30 a.m. - 4 p.m.) at (401) 273-7100, ext. 6137 to discuss access to the clinic.

## FREE GUN LOCKS

The VA has partnered with Project Childsafe to make gunlocks available to Veterans. Project Childsafe is a nationwide program whose purpose is to promote safe firearms handling and storage practices among all firearms owners through the distribution of key safety educational messages and free gun locking devices (firearms safety kits). While service members and Veterans may be expertly-trained in the use of firearms under conditions of deployment, they may not have had previous experience in the care and storage of guns in the context of their civilian lives. This is particularly important for those who have children in their homes.

Gunlocks are available to Veterans free of charge. Please ask your care provider or contact either Susan Raffa (401) 273-7100 ext. 3401 (building 1) or Liz Johnson (ext. 3287, T36). Gunlocks may also be provided to spouses, significant others/family members of Veterans.

## FREE BEACH PASS FOR VETS

*by Kathleen Meunier, PST*  
Veterans who have a 100% service-connected disability are eligible for a free beach pass, good at any RI state beach and for golfing at Goddard Park (East Greenwich). The Veteran gets the pass and can go in any vehicle. To get a pass, bring your award letter to the Division of Parks and Recreation, located in Johnston. You can obtain a copy of your award letter at the VA Regional office in downtown Providence.

## VA PROPOSES CHANGE TO BENEFITS FOR AGENT ORANGE EXPOSURE

Well over 100,000 Veterans exposed to herbicides while serving in Vietnam and other areas will have an easier path to qualify for disability pay under a proposed regulation published by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The proposal adds three new illnesses to the list of health problems found to be related to Agent Orange and other herbicide exposures. The illnesses are B cell leukemias, Parkinson's disease, and ischemic heart disease.

Even though this is a proposed rule, VA encourages Vietnam Veterans with any of these illnesses to submit their

benefits from the date of their applications once the rule becomes final.

Over 80,000 of Veterans will have their past claims reviewed and may be eligible for retroactive payment, and all who are not currently eligible for enrollment into the VA healthcare system will become eligible. Veterans who served in Vietnam anytime during the period January 9, 1962 through May 7, 1975, are presumed to have been exposed to herbicides.

**Illnesses related to Agent Orange exposure now include: B Cell leukemias, Parkinson's disease, and ischemic heart disease"**

applications for compensation now so the Agency can begin development of their claims. Veterans can receive

## VA RECOGNIZES "PRESUMPTIVE" ILLNESSES IN IRAQ, AFGHANISTAN

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Shinseki announced the VA is taking steps to make it easier for Veterans to obtain disability compensation for certain diseases associated with service in the Persian Gulf War, Iraq, or Afghanistan. Following recommendations made by VA's Gulf War Veterans Illnesses Task Force, VA is publishing a pro-

posed regulation in the *Federal Register* that will establish new presumptions of service connection for nine specific infectious diseases associated with military service in Southwest Asia during the Persian Gulf War, or in Iraq or Afghanistan on or after September 19, 2001.

Diseases include: Brucellosis, *Campylobacter jejuni*,

*Coxiella burnetii* (Q fever), malaria, *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, Nontyphoid *Salmonella*, *Shigella*, Visceral leishmaniasis and West Nile virus.

With the proposed rule, a Veteran will only have to show service in Southwest Asia or Afghanistan and a current diagnosis of one of the nine diseases.

## WHAT IS A PEER SUPPORT TECHNICIAN (PST)?

*by Kathleen Meunier, PST*  
A Peer Support Technician (PST) is an employee in Mental Health, who is also a disabled Veteran in recovery from a Serious Mental Illness (SMI). A PST is a role model to peers who helps inpatient and outpatient Veterans regain independence, provides information on coping skills, and acts as an extra support for Veterans with mental illness. Kathleen Meunier is the first PST at the Providence VA. She can be reached at (401) 273-7100, ext 2695.

Kathleen states, "I've lived

with this illness for 26 years and consider myself in actual 'Recovery' over the past six years. Some of my successes include getting my college education, adopting a daughter, and becoming employed. I live in recovery and know the future looks bright. It is a process, and I am grateful every day for my well-being.

"As a PST, I engage in peer mentoring. This means I discuss the active process of mental health recovery by



sharing my own story to assist Veterans in their recovery journeys. I hook Veterans up with resources and support endeavors for employ-

ment and involvement in VA programs, such as the Psycho-Social Rehab and Recovery Center (PRRC). I also co-lead some goal-oriented therapy groups. I try to be a role model and provide support to Veterans while also helping them to navigate the VA system."

## VA HOMELESSNESS: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

As of March 2010, the number of Veterans homeless on a typical night dropped 18% as the VA entered the second year of its campaign to eliminate homelessness among Veterans within five years. Last year, more than 92,000 homeless Veterans were served by VA's specialized homeless

programs, an increase of 15% from 2009. The VA is allocating 39 million to fund about 2,200 new transitional housing beds through grants to local providers: About \$24 million in grants are available to renovate or rehabilitate space to create 1,000 transitional housing beds. (The grants put a priority upon

housing for homeless women and housing on tribal lands). About \$15 million is expected to fund about 1,200 new beds for homeless providers who already have suitable transitional housing. The grants will provide per diem based upon the number of homeless Veterans being served.

## FREE OUTWARD BOUND FOR OEF/OIF VETS

Outward Bound, a 45-year old non-profit outdoor, adventure-education organization, is looking for OEF/OIF Veterans interested in participating in fully-funded reintegration wilderness expeditions. Adventures are physically, mentally, and emotionally stimulating and work to build the self-confidence, trust, and communication skills necessary to successfully return to their families and communities following wartime service.

Goals of the program are to provide a positive outdoor experience for military Veterans that will enable them to experience the healing benefits of the natural world and benefit from quality environ-

mental education.

**WHO:** Available to all OEF or OIF Veterans who were deployed to Iraq and/or Afghanistan, pending medical screening.

**WHAT:** A 5-7 day Wilderness Expedition: may include backpacking, rock climbing, canoeing, dog sledding, sailing, sea kayaking and white water rafting.

**WHEN:** Dates available year-round.

**WHERE:** Wilderness locations include: California, Colorado, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Utah, Oregon, Washington, Alabama, and Florida.

**HOW:** What sets Outward Bound apart is that the goal is personal growth. The wilder-

ness and the skills learned to deal with it are simply a vehicle for growth.

**COST:** All expenses paid! Veterans will not be responsible for the cost of the expedition including round-trip stateside transportation to course site. Funding is provided by the *Military Family Outdoor Initiative Project*, a joint project of the Sierra Club and the Sierra Club Foundation.

**TO ENROLL:** Please call 1-866-669-2362, ext. 8387.



## DISCOUNTS FOR VETERANS

The Home Depot offers an all-day, every-day 10% discount, (up to a \$500 maximum) to all active duty military personnel, reservists, retired or disabled Veterans, and their immediate families. Customers requesting the discount must present a valid military ID. This discount is not available for our online shoppers or in addition to existing discounts or promotions.

Lowe's Companies, Inc offers an all day, every day, 10% discount to all active

duty, reserve, and retired military personnel and their families to include disabled Veterans, with a valid, government-issued military ID card. All other military Veterans will receive the discount on the Memorial Day, Fourth of July and Veterans Day weekends. The discount is available on in-stock and Special Order purchases up to \$5,000. Excluded from the discount are sales via the Lowes website, previous sales, and purchases of services or gift cards.

## NEW GROUP FOR PARTNERS AT VET CENTER

Announcing a new Support Group for Female Partners of Veterans at the Vet Center in Warwick. The goal of the group is to provide support for partners of Veterans from all eras/conflicts. The group will meet on the second and fourth Thursday of each month from 6:00 p.m. - 7:30 p.m. For more information, please contact Clarisse DiCandia, PsyD, at (401) 739-0167.

## MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH MONTH!

Stop by the Mental Health Awareness table by Central Check-In on Tuesday, May 11 and Thursday May 13 for free information on Mental Health, Avoiding Stigma, and Food and Mood.

On Wednesday, May 12 at 11:30 a.m., come to Classroom 3 (fifth floor, building 1) to hear John Dupre (and three other Mental Health Consumers) discuss their journeys of Mental Health Recovery. Light refreshments will be provided by the VRR. Staff and Veterans are encouraged to attend.

## OPERATION VET 2 VET UPDATE

by Ron Whitcomb

Ron Whitcomb and Don Sullivan (Vet2Vet facilitators) were guest speakers at Brown University Grand Rounds, held in Ray Hall at Butler Hospital on March 3, 2010. They would like to thank Dr. Michael Goldstein for the opportunity and to all those in attendance. "It is always a joy to speak to clinicians about Veterans needs," Ron Whitcomb said.

The Wednesday night group at the Vet Center will move to the VA campus, in Trailer 33. This group is for OEF/OIF Veterans only. The time of the group is TBD and will be announced in the near future.