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**1. VFW Urges Congress to Include Medically Retired Veterans in the Stimulus Bill:** The VFW is urging Congress to pass the [Major Richard Star Act](#) during this challenging COVID-19 pandemic to help put money back in the pockets of veterans who were forced to retire early from military service because of battlefield injury or illness. “Retirement pay and VA disability compensation are fundamentally different benefits, granted for different reasons,” said VFW National Commander William “Doc” Schmitz. “To deny earned retirement pay from veterans who were unfortunately medically retired early because of wounds or illnesses sustained on the battlefield is an absolute injustice that must end now.” The *Major Richard Star Act* would eliminate the unjust offset for 42,000 Chapter 61 retirees who suffered injuries in combat. This is a modest segment of the approximately 450,000 military retirees who are unjustly denied their retirement pay. [Learn more.](#)

**2. VA Tele-Hearing Modernization Act Now Law:** The president signed the VFW-supported [VA Tele-Hearing Modernization Act](#) into law last Friday. The new law permits appellants in disability compensation cases before the Board of Veterans’ Appeals (BVA) to appear remotely by picture and voice transmissions, also known as “tele-hearings,” from locations other than VA facilities. “Tele-hearings provide veterans with an opportunity to conveniently attend hearings for their disability compensation cases before the Board of Veterans’ Appeals,” said VFW Washington Office Executive Director B.J. Lawrence. “The VFW lauds the enactment of this law, which will significantly improve access for veteran appellants in disability compensation cases and would permit a greater number of veterans to participate in the appeals process.” The VFW thanks all original cosponsors for their efforts to expand veteran access to tele-hearings. [Learn more.](#)

**3. VFW Sends Letter to President Trump to Keep VSO 48-Hour Claims Review:** On Wednesday, the VFW sent a joint Veterans Service Organization (VSO) letter to President Trump requesting that he direct VA Secretary Wilkie to maintain the policy of permitting VSOs to review claims decisions within the 48-hours preceding promulgation. During the 48-hour review period, VSOs inspect claims for accuracy to ensure that all claims were properly evaluated and are free from error prior to a veteran receiving notification of a ratings decision. “The 48-hour review period is an essential feature of the VA claims process,” stated VFW National Commander William “Doc” Schmitz and the leaders of seven other VSOs. “Eliminating VSO review prior to finalizing a claim decision would lead to VA wrongfully denying veterans their earned benefits because of correctable errors. Moreover, this abrupt policy change comes amidst the nationwide public health crisis caused by COVID-19. During these uncertain times, VA should not implement broad policy changes to veterans’ claims adjudication, which will only bring about more uncertainty.” [Read the letter.](#)

**4. Emergency Stimulus Checks:** All eligible veterans will receive their 2020 stimulus check regardless of whether they filed taxes or not. Veterans who do not file taxes because they rely on VA benefits are still eligible to receive stimulus checks. Such veterans can go to the [IRS Coronavirus Tax Relief and Economic Impact Payments webpage](#) to input their direct deposit and dependent information to help expedite and track when they will receive the stimulus checks. Eligible individuals for whom the IRS does not have direct deposit information and do not submit their data electronically will instead receive paper checks through the mail, which is estimated to take several months.

**5. VA to Reimburse Denied and Rejected Non-Department Emergency Claims:** Starting this week, many veterans will have their rejected emergency room expenses reimbursed by VA. The action stems from a [VFW-supported court case](#) decided in September 2019, which found VA failed to comply with laws and regulations requiring it to reimburse veterans for emergency room visits. This week, the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, again, ruled that VA's new regulations are in violation. The court has required VA to reexamine more than 72,000 rejected claims, and update its rule. VA estimates it will need to reimburse between \$1.8 billion and \$6.5 billion in new and previously denied emergency room claims to comply with the court order. [Read more.](#)

**6. COVID-19 Testing Costs:** Under the [Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#), TRICARE will waive co-pays for approved COVID-19 testing that is ordered by a doctor. Beneficiaries are not responsible for copays for tests (and related provider services and supplies) furnished on or after the date of enactment. Claims that were filed with a copay will be re-processed to remove the copayment or cost-share. Beneficiaries who already paid a copay for now-covered tests can file for reimbursement. [Learn more.](#)

**7. Facebook, VA, and The American Red Cross Provide a Connection:** As a part of the PREVENTS initiative, veterans enrolled in VA’s caregiver support programs or a geriatric and extended care program now qualify for two free video-calling devices while supplies last. [The program provides two portal devices:](#) one for the veterans and the other for a caregiver or family member. VA has seen a 70% increase in mental health appointments in March compared to

February. [Read more](#). During this time of social distancing and loneliness, it is more important to check in with both veterans and their caregivers. [#BeThere](#) and keep these resources handy:

--[Veterans Crisis Line](#): Dial 1.800.273.8255 and press 1 to talk to someone or send a text message to 838255 to connect with a VA responder.

-- [VA Caregiver Support Line](#): 1.855.260.3274 (toll free 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. EST).

**8. Reproductive Health and COVID:** Last week, VA presented a cyber-seminar on [“COVID-19: Emerging Considerations Regarding the Care for Women Veterans for Clinicians and Researchers.”](#) The cyber-seminar centered around reproductive health, maternity care consults, gynecologic care, access to contraceptives, infertility treatments, labor and delivery, breastfeeding, interpersonal partner violence, domestic violence, mental health, and telehealth during the [COVID pandemic](#). The [seminar](#) is now available on the [HSR&D library](#).

**9. FDA Withdrawal of Zantac Affects Military Health Beneficiaries:** On April 1, 2020, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advised a withdrawal of all over-the-counter and prescription ranitidine. The drug, often referred to by its brand name, Zantac, is most commonly used to treat heartburn, stomach ulcers, gastroesophageal reflux disease, and other conditions related to stomach acid levels. Consumers taking prescription ranitidine should talk to their doctor before stopping the medication. Anyone taking over-the-counter ranitidine products should immediately stop taking the drug and dispose of all supplies safely, according to FDA guidelines. The FDA is removing ranitidine products from the market because the agency determined that the impurity in some ranitidine products increases over time when stored at higher than room temperatures and may result in consumer exposure to unacceptable levels of this impurity. For an alternative to this medication, please consult your health care provider. [Read more](#).

**10. 90-Day Pause of DHA Transition for MTFs:** To allow the military services and the Defense Health Agency (DHA) to focus efforts on the COVID-19 response, Deputy Secretary of Defense David Norquist approved a 90-day pause in activities to transition military treatment facilities to the DHA. The decision will be assessed again after 45 days. Service medical organizations are required to extend their direct support to DHA for a period beyond Sept. 30, 2020, equal to the total number of pause days. The decision puts on hold the transitions of the next five market offices (Tidewater, San Antonio, Colorado Springs, Puget Sound, and Hawaii). The transition implementation will continue as soon as is practical, and will occur as conditions allow over the next 1-5 years.

**11. MIA Update:** The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced four new identifications for service members who have been missing and unaccounted-for from WWII and the Korean War. Returning home for burial with full military honors are:

-- **Marine Corps Pvt. Jack R. Stambaugh**, 20, was a member of Company B, 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force, which landed against stiff Japanese resistance on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll of the Gilbert Islands, in an attempt to secure the island. Over several days of intense fighting at Tarawa, approximately 1,000 Marines and sailors were killed and more than 2,000 were wounded, while the Japanese were virtually annihilated. Stambaugh died on the third day of battle, Nov. 22, 1943. He was reported to have

been buried in Row D of the East Division Cemetery, later renamed Cemetery 33. Interment services are pending. [Read about Stambaugh.](#)

-- **Army Pfc. Anthony F. Mendonca**, 28, was a member of Company A, 106th Infantry Regiment, 27th Infantry Division, when American forces participated in the battle for Saipan, part of a larger operation to secure the Mariana Islands. Mendonca was killed during fighting on June 28, 1944. His remains were reportedly not recovered. Interment services are pending. [Read about Mendonca.](#)

-- **Army Sgt. Billy V. Rodgers**, 19, was a member of Company A, 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 31st Regimental Combat Team, 7th Infantry Division. He was reported missing in action on Dec. 2, 1950, when his unit was attacked by enemy forces near the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea. Following the battle, his remains could not be recovered. Interment services are pending. [Read about Rodgers.](#)

-- **Army Pvt. Wayne M. Evans**, 21, was a member of Battery G, 59th Coast Artillery Regiment, when Japanese forces invaded the Philippine Islands in December 1941. Intense fighting continued until the surrender of the Bataan peninsula on April 9, 1942, and of Corregidor Island on May 6, 1942. Interment services are pending. [Read about Evans.](#)

To sign up new veterans' advocates, visit: <https://votervoice.net/VFW/register>.

As always, we want to hear your advocacy stories. To share your stories or photos with us, simply email them directly to [vfwac@vfw.org](mailto:vfwac@vfw.org).

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