

VISN 8 VA SUNSHINE HEALTHCARE NETWORK OEF/OIF GUIDE FOR RETURNING COMBAT VETERANS

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WHY YOU SHOULD READ THIS GUIDE

Letter From a Combat Vet,

Dear Veteran,

Welcome Home! You served this nation honorably and we are truly grateful for your service. There are many benefits you are now eligible to receive. You've earned all of these benefits, which include health care, education, readjustment assistance, and a whole list of others, which are explained in this Guide.

When I separated from the U.S. Army after two consecutive tours in Afghanistan, I went through a readjustment from military to civilian life. Every Service member will go through some type of readjustment. For some, the transition is smoother than others. The good news is that there's help. There are many dedicated people in the VA who care about you and want to make sure you have the smoothest readjustment possible.

I also encourage you to explore all of your benefits. While some follow you for the rest of your life, some do not. Keep this Guide handy as a reference and reminder of what is available to you. And again, Welcome Home.

Raf Raza
GWOT Outreach Specialist and
Operation Enduring Freedom Veteran

COMBAT VETERAN ELIGIBILITY

FIVE YEARS OF ENHANCED HEALTH CARE

Most veterans, including National Guard and Reservists, who served in a theater of combat operations after November 11, 1998 and were discharged under other than dishonorable conditions, are eligible to receive cost-free VA health care for combat-related conditions and enhanced enrollment priority for five years after separation from active duty.

After five years, services are still available for a co-pay, based on income. Combat veterans not previously enrolled who separated from active duty before January 28, 2003, are eligible for the enhanced benefits until January 27, 2011 after which time they might incur a co-pay.

HEALTH CARE BENEFITS UNDER THE COMBAT VETERAN AUTHORITY

- Cost-free care and medications for conditions potentially related to combat service.
- Enrollment in Priority Group 6, unless eligible for enrollment in a higher priority group. These individuals will not be charged co-pays for medications and treatment potentially related to their combat service.
- Full access to VA's Medical Benefits Package.

Priority Groups: During enrollment, each veteran is assigned to a priority group. VA uses priority groups to balance demand for VA health care enrollment with resources.

HOW TO ENROLL

To take advantage of these health care benefits, you must enroll in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Health Care system within five years of separation. Do this in person at any VHA facility or complete VA Form 10-10EZ, Application for Health Benefits at www.va.gov/healtheligibility/application. You can also mail the application to the VHA facility where you'd like to receive your care.

Include your DD-214 (separation document). For a list of VA facilities nearest you, refer to the Points of Contact (POCs) tab.

GUARD & RESERVE ELIGIBILITY

FIVE YEARS OF ENHANCED HEALTH CARE

National Guardsmen and women and Reservists currently constitute 50% of returning OEF/OIF veterans who use VA services. Like the regular active duty, mobilized Guard and Reservists called to active duty and serving in a theater of combat operations after November 11, 1998, are eligible to receive cost-free VA health care for combat-related conditions and enhanced enrollment priority for five years after separation from active duty. Combat veterans not previously enrolled, but who separated from active duty before January 28, 2003, are eligible for the enhanced benefits until January 27, 2011 after which time they might incur a co-pay.

ELIGIBILITY AND CONTACTS

To determine your eligibility for health care benefits call 1-800-827-1000 or visit www.va.gov/healtheligibility. You can also download a very useful guide to VA Benefits for National Guard and Reserve Personnel at www1.va.gov/environagents/docs/SVABENEFITS.pdf.

Also, every VA Medical Center and Clinic has a team standing by ready to welcome OEF/OIF service members and veterans, and help coordinate their health care. Call or e-mail the VA facility nearest you. A list of contacts can be found on the Points of Contact (POCs) tab.

OTHER HELPFUL WEB SITES

<http://www.turbotap.org/>: specifically for Service members leaving active duty status.

www.arng.army.mil/default.aspx: link to the Army National Guard Web site for family resources.

www.uscg.mil/hq/reserve/magazine/mag2001/FAMGUIDE/index.htm: Family Readiness Guide for Coast Guard Reserve personnel and families.

<http://www.marforres.usmc.mil/>: link to Marine Forces Reserve web site with more links to medical information, family and community services, etc.

<http://navyreserve.navy.mil/Public/Staff/WelcomeAboard/default.htm>: link to the Naval Reserve Web site.

<http://www.esqr.org/>: Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve Web site.

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VA HEALTH CARE SERVICES

VA provides general and specialized health care services to meet the unique needs of veterans returning from combat deployments. When you establish care at your local VA Medical Center or Clinic, you will be teamed up with a primary care provider. That provider is part of a team that can help you meet your post-combat health care needs including specialized services for:

- Acute illness and chronic disease management.
- Preventive medicine and health maintenance.
- Women's health concerns.
- Traumatic injury, including brain and spinal cord injuries.
- Post-combat mood changes, anxiety concerns, sleep problems and stress related difficulties (including post-traumatic stress disorder, also known as PTSD).
- Acute and chronic pain management.
- Visual and hearing impairment.
- Alcohol, tobacco and other drug abuse.

Services may include specialty medical or surgical care; rehabilitative services including vocational rehabilitation, prosthetics, social work and family services; benefits counseling; community resource information; and referral assistance. There is also hospital, outpatient medical, community living center, and community-based residential care.

OEF/OIF VETERANS: WHERE TO GET HELP

Each VA Hospital has a special program designed to meet the specific needs of veterans returning from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). To contact an OEF/OIF Coordinator at your nearest VA Hospital or Clinic, see the [Points of Contact \(POCs\)](#) tab in this Quick Series® Guide.

For information on VA enrollment, health and dental benefits, call 1-877-222-8387 or visit www.va.gov/healtheligibility.

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RECOVERING FROM COMBAT STRESS

Service members respond to war zone experiences in different ways. Some report feeling upset or keyed up even after returning home. Some continue to think about events that happened in combat, sometimes even acting like they were back in a combat situation. These are common combat stress reactions that can last for days or weeks, and are a normal reaction to combat experiences. Below is a list of common reactions:

Behavioral Reactions	Physical Reactions	Emotional Reactions
Trouble concentrating	Trouble sleeping, overly tired	Feeling nervous, helpless, or fearful
Jumpy and easily startled	Stomach upset, trouble eating	Sad, guilty, rejected or abandoned
Being on guard, always alert	Headaches and sweating when thinking of the war	Edginess, easily annoyed
Bad dreams or flashbacks	Lack of exercise, poor diet or health care	Experiencing shame, not feel happy
Avoiding people or places related to the trauma	Rapid heartbeat or breathing	Feeling hopeless
Work or school problems	Too much drinking, smoking or drug use	Irritable or angry
Loss of intimacy or feeling withdrawn, detached and disconnected	Other health problems becoming worse	Not trusting others, having lots of conflicts

Most who experience combat stress reactions like those listed above, will recover naturally over time. Others may continue to struggle with memories of their combat experiences and their reactions. These reactions may create problems which could become PTSD. If you recognize any of these reactions, getting help is very important.

Every VA Medical Center has a team ready to help. Call an OEF/OIF coordinator at the VA facility nearest you: see the [Points of Contact](#) tab. Vet Centers are another great place to get help. Find the nearest Vet Center at <file:///C:/Documents%20and%20Settings/vhav08wentzs/Local%20Settings/Temporary%20Internet%20Files/OLK346/www.vetcenter.va.gov> or call 1-800-827-1000.

**VA'S NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE:
1-800-273-TALK
[HTTP://WWW.SUICIDPREVENTIONLIFELINE.ORG/](http://www.suicidpreventionlifeline.org/)**

VA DISABILITY COMPENSATION

Disability compensation is a tax-free benefit paid to a veteran for disabilities that are the result of or made worse by injuries or diseases that happened while on

active duty, active duty for training, or inactive duty training. Disability compensation is also paid to certain veterans disabled from VA health care.

Eligibility and Payments

If you have a service-related disability and you were discharged under other than dishonorable conditions, you could be eligible for basic benefits ranging from \$117 to \$2,527 per month, depending on how disabled you are.

How to Apply

You can apply by filling out VA Form 21-526, Veterans Application for Compensation and/or Pension. You can also apply online at <http://vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp> or you can call 1-800-827-1000 for more information.

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WHAT IS PTSD?

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD is an anxiety disorder resulting from an intense or traumatic situation, like that experienced in combat. PTSD varies widely in its severity from mild and short-lasting to severe and chronic. Recognizing the symptoms, promptly being evaluated and getting treatment are key to overcoming PTSD.

SYMPTOMS OF PTSD

- Re-experiencing continuing to think about combat or feeling like one is still in combat.
- Avoidance and numbing of emotion not wanting to discuss the traumatic event, feeling detaching from others, feeling shut down emotionally.
- Arousal having a hard time relaxing or feeling on guard, feeling jumpy, unable to sleep, unable to concentrate, excessive concerns about security, getting angry easily.
- Depression.
- Suicidal thoughts.
- Anger or aggressive behavior.
- Alcohol and/or drug abuse.
- Self-blame, guilt and shame.

TREATING POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

Combat stress reactions usually go away over time. But if they don't, there are effective treatments for PTSD and the other problems. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy or CBT has been shown to be the most effective treatment for PTSD. It involves working with cognitions, or thoughts, to change emotions, thoughts and behaviors. Treatment usually focuses on the following:

- Assessment treatment typically begins with a discussion with a counselor about problems the service member or veteran has faced since returning.
- Setting goals.
- Learning about PTSD through individual and group counseling/discussion, and specialized classes.
- Learning coping skills or tools.

MEDICATION

Medication is another treatment option. It can reduce PTSD symptoms through anxiety reduction techniques, teaching coping skills, and correcting inaccurate thoughts related to the trauma.

Many VA health care centers have experts in PTSD and related problems. Contact the VA facility nearest you (see the [Points of Contact \(POCs\)](#) tab). More PTSD resources can be found at: <http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/>.

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TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURIES (TBI)

TBI is caused by a blow or jolt to the head or a penetrating head injury that disrupts the brain's normal function. Those returning from combat areas like Iraq and Afghanistan may have suffered a brain injury—some without even realizing it. TBIs can range from mild to severe and can result in short or long-term problems with independent function.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF A HEAD INJURY

The signs and symptoms of TBI can be subtle. Symptoms may not appear until days or weeks following the injury or may even be missed as returning veterans may look fine even though they may act or feel differently. Following are some common TBI signs and symptoms:

- Poor concentration
- Irritability

- Fatigue
- Depression
- Memory problems
- Headaches
- Anxiety
- Trouble thinking
- Dizziness
- Blurry/double vision
- Sensitivity to light

GETTING HELP

If you suspect that you or a loved one has TBI, it's important to get help as soon as possible. Contact the VA facility nearest you. Contacts are listed on the Points of Contact (POCs) tab.

Additional resources on TBI are available at: www.cdc.gov/ncipsc/tbi/TBI.htm.

DENTAL TREATMENT

Veterans are eligible for outpatient dental treatment if VA determines they meet one of the following criteria:

- Those having a service-connected, non-compensable dental disability or condition.
- Those who were Prisoners of War (POWs) and those whose service-connected disabilities rated at 100% or who are receiving the 100% rate by reason of individual unemployability.
- Those who are participating in a VA vocational rehabilitation program under 38 U.S.C. Chapter 31 with certain conditions.
- Those who are receiving outpatient care or scheduled for inpatient care and veterans enrolled in a VA Homeless Program, under certain conditions.

ONE-TIME TREATMENT FOR DENTAL CONDITIONS

Effective January 28, 2008, recently discharged veterans with a service-connected, non-compensable dental condition or disability who served on active duty 90 days or more, and who apply for VA dental care within 180 days of separation from active duty, may receive one-time treatment for dental conditions if the condition existed at the time of discharge and the veteran's certificate of discharge doesn't indicate he/she received necessary care within a 90-day period before discharge.

For more information about eligibility for VA dental and other benefits, call 1-800-827-1000 or visit www.oefoif.va.gov/healthcarebenefits.asp.

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PROGRAMS FOR WOMEN VETERANS

Each VA Medical Center has a Women Veterans Program Manager (WVPM) who can help women veterans establish their eligibility, understand their benefits, and obtain their health care in the VA system. The Women Veterans Health Program provides a full range of medical and mental health services, including:

- Primary care
- Reproductive health
- Gynecology services
- Patient education
- Preventive health screening for breast cancer, cervical cancer and osteoporosis
- Screening, counseling, and treatment for sexual trauma, substance abuse, PTSD and domestic violence
- Vocational rehabilitation
- Homeless programs
- Transition assistance separating from military duty

For more information, call a member of the OEF/OIF Program Office at the VA Medical Center nearest you. These contacts are listed on the [Points of Contact \(POCs\)](#) tab.

POINTS OF CONTACT

Every VA Medical Center has a team ready to welcome OEF/OIF Service members and help coordinate their care. Call the VA facility nearest you. For more information on the facility, visit their Web site.

VISN 8 FACILITIES

BAY PINES VAMC: 10000 Bay Pines Blvd., Bay Pines, FL 33744
OEF/OIF Program Office: 727-398-6661, Ext. 7541
<http://www.baypines.va.gov/>

MIAMI VAMC: 1201 N.W. 16th St., Miami, FL 33125
OEF/OIF Program Office: 305-575-7000, Ext. 6252
<http://www.miami.va.gov/>

JAMES A. HALEY VETERANS HOSPITAL: 13000 Bruce B. Downs Blvd.,
Tampa FL 33612
OEF/OIF Program Office: 813-972-2000, Ext. 3825 or 6173
www.visn8.med.va.gov/Tampa

WEST PALM BEACH VAMC: 7305 North Military Trail, West Palm Beach, FL
33410
OEF/OIF Program Office: 561-422-7223
<http://www.westpalmbeach.va.gov/>

ORLANDO VAMC: 5201 Raymond St., Orlando, FL 32803
OEF/OIF Program Office: 321-397-6272
<http://www.orlando.va.gov/>

MALCOLM RANDALL VAMC: 1601 SW Archer Rd., Gainesville, FL 32608
OEF/OIF Program Office: 352-376-1611, Ext. 5510
<http://www.northflorida.va.gov/>

LAKE CITY VAMC: 619 South Marion Ave., Lake City, FL 32025
OEF/OIF Program Office: 352-376-1611, Ext. 5510
<http://www.northflorida.va.gov/>

SAN JUAN VAMC: 10 Casia St., San Juan, PR 00921
OEF/OIF Program Office: 787-641-7582, Ext. 11266
<http://www.caribbean.va.gov/>

The VA Sunshine Healthcare Network, also known as Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 8, is an integrated system of hospitals, multi-specialty outpatient clinics and community-based primary care clinics in Florida, Southern Georgia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. For a complete list of VISN 8 facilities: www1.va.gov/directory/guide/region.asp?ID=1008.

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VET CENTERS

Vet Centers are a great place to get help after returning home. They are located throughout the country and are focused on helping veterans readjust to life after deployment and providing outreach. Many Vet Center counselors are veterans themselves who have recently returned from combat areas. They offer readjustment and mental health counseling, providing veterans and their families with resources to handle post-deployment issues.

To find the nearest Vet Center, go to <http://www.vetcenter.va.gov/>.

VETERAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

Another great resource for individuals returning from a war zone is Veteran Service Organizations or VSOs. They provide resources and help to military members following deployment as well as help to bring individuals with similar experiences together. They also help with paperwork required for VA benefits. They are often organized by branch of service, religion, ethnicity, war zone theater, purpose and many other categories. Large organizations like the American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) are focused on the needs of veterans in general.

For a list of VSOs, go to www.va.gov/vso.

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION & EMPLOYMENT (VR&E)

VR&E is an employment-oriented program that helps veterans with service-connected disabilities prepare for, find and keep suitable employment. The goal of these services is to locate suitable employment consistent with their aptitudes and interests, or achieving independence in their daily living. For veterans with service-connected disabilities so severe they cannot immediately consider work, VR&E offers services to improve their ability to live as independently as possible.

VR&E SERVICES

- Comprehensive rehabilitation evaluation to determine abilities, skills, interests, and needs.
- Vocational counseling and rehabilitation planning.
- Employment services like job-seeking skills, resume development, and other work readiness assistance.
- Help finding and keeping a job, including the use of special employer incentives.
- If needed, training such as on the job training (OJT), apprenticeships, and non-paid work experiences.
- If needed, post-secondary training at a college, vocational, technical or business school.
- Supportive rehabilitation services including case management, counseling, and referral.
- Independent living services.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

To receive an evaluation for VR&E services, a veteran must:

- Have received, or will receive, a discharge that is other than dishonorable.
- Have a service-connected disability rating of at least 10%.
- Submit a completed application for VR&E services.

VR&E services may be used 12 years from the latter of the following:

- The date of separation from active military service; or
- The date the veteran was first notified by VA of a service-connected disability rating.

For more information, visit: <http://vetsuccess.gov/>.

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EMPLOYMENT

The VA is always seeking to hire veterans of all eras. To view the latest information on VA job openings, go to VA Jobs at www.va.gov/jobs.

DEPARTMENT OF LABOR (VETS) JOB INFORMATION

The US Department of Labor is a job and job training counseling service, employment placement service, and job training placement service for eligible veterans. To view the latest information on services and programs offered by the DOL, visit www.dol.gov/vets/programs/empserv.

OTHER WEB SITES

Employer Support of the Guard and Reserves: <http://www.esqr.org/>

USA Jobs: <http://www.usajobs.gov/>

Vet Success: <http://www.vetsuccess.gov/>

Social Security Office Locator: <http://www.ssa.gov/> or call 1-800-772-1213

EDUCATION & TRAINING

GI BILL

Montgomery GI Bills are available for many different types of education and training programs including Institutions of Higher Learning (four-year universities, community colleges, advanced degrees), Non-College Degree programs, On-

the-Job & Apprenticeship Training, Flight Training, Independent Training, Distance Learning & Internet Training, Correspondence Training, National Testing Program, Licensing & Certification, Entrepreneurship Training, and others.

NEW POST-9/11 GI BILL

A new Post-9/11 GI Bill approved by President Bush in 2008 provides enhanced benefits to veterans pursuing graduate and undergraduate degrees, and vocational/technical training. The new bill goes beyond helping to pay for tuition. Many veterans who served on or after Sept. 11, 2001 will get full tuition and fees, a monthly housing payment, and an annual \$1,000 a year stipend for books and supplies. The new bill also gives activated Reserve and Guard members access to the same GI Bill benefits.

ELIGIBILITY

Veterans who have served at least 90 days of active duty service after September 10, 2001 and received an honorable discharge will qualify at least in part for the Post-9/11 GI Bill. To be eligible for the full benefit, you must have three years of active duty service after 9/11 or have been discharged due to a service-connected disability. Veterans who qualify for the Active Duty GI Bill, the Reserve GI Bill or the Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP) will have the option to choose which benefit best suits their needs.

For more information on the GI Bill, visit <http://www.gibill.va.gov/> or call 1-888-GI-Bill-1.

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HOME LOANS

VA home loan guaranties help eligible veterans obtain homes, condominiums, residential cooperative housing units, and manufactured homes, and to refinance loans. The VA guaranty varies with the size of the loan, and is issued to protect lenders so they can make loans to eligible borrowers. Because the lenders are able to obtain this guaranty from VA, borrowers do not need to make a down payment, provided they have enough home loan entitlement.

ELIGIBILITY

Besides the periods of eligibility and conditions of service requirements, VA home loan applicants must have a good credit rating, sufficient income, a valid Certificate of Eligibility (COE), and agree to live in the property in order to be approved by a lender. To obtain a COE, complete VA Form 26-1880 Request for a Certificate of Eligibility for VA Home Loan and mail to: VA Loan Eligibility Center, P.O. Box 20729, Winston-Salem, NC 27120. It is also possible to obtain a COE from your lender. Most lenders have access to VA's WebLGY system. This Internet-based application can establish eligibility and issue an online COE in seconds.

For more information or to obtain VA loan guaranty forms, visit <http://www.homeloans.va.gov/>.

RESOURCES

Locating Your Records: contact the National Personnel Records Center Military Personnel Records, 9700 Page Ave., St Louis, MO 63132-5100, or fax requests to 314-801-9195. Web: www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel.

<http://www.va.gov/>: main web site for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

www1.va.gov/health/index.asp: VA Health Care benefits or call: 1-877-222-8387

VA Benefits: call 1-800-827-1000 or visit <http://www.oefoif.va.gov/>.

<http://www.myhealth.va.gov/>: gateway to veteran health benefits and services. Provides trusted health information, links to Federal and VA benefits and resources, the Personal Health Journal, and online VA prescription refills.

<http://www.militaryonesource.com/>: Military OneSource offers a wide variety of support from education and transition to employment and financial matters.

<http://www.turbotap.org/>: veterans transitioning from military to civilian life can access resources through the TAP portal.

<http://www.dodtransportal.org/>: specifically for Service members leaving active duty status.

<http://www.seamlesstransition.va.gov/>: the Office of Seamless Transition offers a wide variety of resources.

www.survivingdeployment.com/links: resources for and about military families.

www.va.gov/statedva.htm: State Veterans Affairs Offices.

<http://www.tricare.mil/>: Tricare Military Healthcare System.

www1.va.gov/womenvet: Women Veterans.

<http://www.vetcenter.va.gov/>: Vet Centers.

<http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/>: National Center for PTSD.

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>: VA's National Suicide Prevention Lifeline; call

1-800-273-TALK.

<http://www.polytrauma.va.gov/>: VA Polytrauma System of Care.