



DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS

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# Service Bulletin

February 2012

## **DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)**

<http://www.va.gov/>

### **Veterans and Beneficiaries Receive 2012 Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA)**

[www.vba.va.gov/bln/21/Rates/#BM01](http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/21/Rates/#BM01)

Veterans, their families, and survivors receiving benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs saw a 3.6 percent increase in their compensation and pension benefits beginning January 1, 2012. The new compensation rates range from \$127 monthly for a disability rated at 10 percent to \$2,769 monthly for 100 percent. The cost of living adjustments (COLAs) also apply to disability and death pension recipients, survivors receiving Dependency and Indemnity Compensation, disabled veterans receiving automobile and clothing allowances, and other benefits.

Under federal law, COLAs for VA's compensation and pension rates are the same percentage as for Social Security benefits. The last COLA for VA benefits was in 2008 when the last Social Security increase occurred.

### **VA Introduces Text Messaging to Expand Efforts to Prevent Suicide**

[http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide\\_prevention/](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/)

VA is expanding its efforts to prevent suicide through several new initiatives, including a free, confidential text-messaging service in the existing Veterans Crisis Line, and introduction of toll-free access from Europe.

Now, in addition to the Veterans Crisis Line (1-800-273-8255 and Press 1) and online chat ([www.VeteransCrisisLine.net](http://www.VeteransCrisisLine.net)), veterans and servicemembers in crisis—and their friends and families—may text free of charge to 83-8255 to receive confidential, personal and immediate support. The text service is available, like the Veterans Crisis Line and online chat, 24/7/365 and connects a user with a specially trained VA professional.

As a part of the effort to extend VA's reach, veterans and members of the military community in Europe may now receive free, confidential support from the European Military Crisis Line, a new initiative recently launched by VA. Callers in Europe may dial 0800-1273-8255 or DSN 118 to receive confidential support from responders at the Veterans Crisis Line in the U.S.

### **New Law Change Increases Insurance Coverage for Veterans**

Some veterans covered under the Veterans Group Life Insurance program (VGLI) now have the opportunity to increase their coverage to the current maximum coverage under the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance (SGLI) program. Under the Veterans' Benefits Act of 2010, enacted on Oct. 13, 2010, veterans can increase their coverage by \$25,000 at each five-year anniversary date of their policy to the current legislated maximum SGLI coverage of \$400,000.

The VGLI program allows newly discharged veterans to convert their SGLI coverage from military service to a civilian program. Before enactment of this law, veterans could not have more VGLI than the amount of SGLI they had at the time of separation from service. For example, those who got out of the service prior to Sept. 1, 2005, when the maximum SGLI coverage was \$250,000, were limited to \$250,000 in VGLI coverage.

Now on their first five-year anniversary, these Veterans can elect to increase their coverage to \$275,000. On their next five-year anniversary, they can increase the coverage to \$300,000, and so forth. To date, approximately 21 percent of eligible Veterans have taken advantage of this opportunity, resulting in nearly \$113 million of new coverage being issued. The additional coverage can be issued regardless of the Veteran's health. Eligible Veterans are notified of this opportunity a week before the start of the 120-day period prior to their anniversary date, and twice more before the actual anniversary date.

### **VA Participates in Settlement with Mortgage Banks**

[www.benefits.va.gov/homeloans/alt-foreclosure.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/homeloans/alt-foreclosure.asp)

VA has announced its participation in the largest state-federal legal settlement in history that deals with problems within the mortgage industry. VA joined with the Department of Justice, a coalition of state attorneys general and other federal agencies in the settlement.

The nation's five largest mortgage servicers have agreed to a landmark \$25 billion settlement that addresses past mortgage loan servicing and foreclosure abuses, provides substantial financial relief to borrowers, and establishes significant new homeowner protections in the future. In addition to cash payments to avoid litigation, the banks also agree to undertake other activities, such as principal forgiveness, interest-rate-reduction refinancing, and forbearance during unemployment.

The settlement also enhances protections available under the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act and provides additional assistance when servicemembers are forced to sell their home at a loss due to reassignment to another location.

To get help, veterans and servicemembers – even those without a VA guaranteed loan – may call a national toll-free number, 1-877-827-3702 to speak with VA loan specialists who will provide information about the process of obtaining a VA-guaranteed home loan, or assistance in retaining their home loan or avoiding foreclosure.

### **VA's Home Loan Program Leads Mortgage Industry**

[www.benefits.va.gov/homeloans](http://www.benefits.va.gov/homeloans)

Home loans guaranteed by VA continue to have the lowest serious delinquency and foreclosure rates in the mortgage industry. Veterans have also taken advantage of their home loan benefit in record numbers, as VA loan originations reached their highest total in eight years.

Last year, VA helped 72,391 veterans and servicemembers who were in default on their mortgage loan retain their homes or avoid foreclosure, an increase from 66,030 from the prior year. At the same time, foreclosures on VA guaranteed loans dropped by 28 percent. According to the Mortgage Bankers Association National Delinquency Survey, VA's foreclosure rate for the last 14 quarters and serious delinquency rate for the last 11 quarters have been the lowest of all measured loan types, even prime loans.

In fiscal year 2011, VA guaranteed 357,594 loans, an increase of nearly 14 percent over last year. There are currently over 1.5 million active VA home loans. The program makes home ownership more affordable for veterans, active duty servicemembers, and eligible surviving spouses by permitting no-down-payment loans and by protecting lenders from loss if the borrower fails to repay the loan.

For veterans and servicemembers who have trouble meeting their mortgage obligations or anticipate problems in the near future, VA first recommends contacting their loan servicer. Depending on the situation, VA's loan specialists can intervene on a veteran's behalf to help pursue home-retention options such as repayment plans, forbearances, and loan modifications. Veterans and servicemembers can also call VA toll-free at (877) 827-3702 to speak with a specialist concerning foreclosure avoidance.

### **VA Extends the Period to Presume Service Connection for Gulf War Veterans**

VA has published an interim final rule in the Federal Register which extends the period allowing presumption of service connection for disabilities due to undiagnosed illnesses, medically unexplained chronic multi-symptom illnesses, and other diseases suffered by veterans who served in the Southwest Asia Theater of Operations during the Gulf War.

The interim final rule amends 38 CFR 3.317 to extend the presumption period from Dec. 31, 2011, to Dec. 31, 2016. The amendment extends the time period to presume service connection for disabilities associated with Southwest Asia military service that began on or after the start of the first Gulf War on Aug. 2, 1990, through the conflict in Iraq. For non-presumptive conditions, a veteran is required to provide medical evidence to establish an actual connection between military service in Southwest Asia and his or her illness.

### **VA “eBenefits” Portal Continues to Expand Services**

<https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/>

Veterans currently receiving disability payments from VA can check their new 2012 compensation or pension rate online at eBenefits, the joint Department of Defense/VA web portal that allows servicemembers and veterans to file and track claims and find information about various benefits. The eBenefits portal offers a wealth of information on DoD and VA benefits, as well as links to state Veteran Affairs offices. The site also continues to consolidate access to other VA and DoD systems through the portal, recently incorporating a gateway to vocational rehabilitation benefits under VA’s [VetSuccess](#) program.

A premium (level 2) account is required to take full advantage of all of the features eBenefits has to offer. Premium level account holders can register for automated messages notifying them of benefits they may be eligible for that are triggered by life events, such as marriage or separation from service. Premium level account holders can also access claim specific information regarding pending claims, payment history and generate Benefit letters, Civil Service Preference and Commissary Privilege letters, among other things.

Veterans with premium eBenefits accounts, who need to make changes to their marital status, dependents or school verifications, can now do so through eBenefits by using Veterans On Line Application (VONAPP) Direct Connect. The new tool uses a wizard feature that asks a series of questions to complete the application to add or change dependency. The wizard essentially replaces the paper versions of VA Form 21-686c, Declaration of Status of Dependents, and VA Form 21- 674, Request for Approval of School Attendance.



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