

## September 2009 Department News Bulletin

### VA APPOINTMENTS Update 06:

The inspector general for the Veterans Affairs Department says that agency managers were aware of serious problems with a \$70 million project to replace its hospital appointment system several years before the VA dropped the program. The VA announced the project in 2000 after complaints from veterans about long waits to make appointments. It was halted in 2009. The inspector general says that managers didn't take timely and appropriate action to address problems, even as millions more were put into the program. VA Secretary Eric Shinseki has since ordered improvements in the VA's information technology management. But the IG says that the VA still needs more qualified staff.

[Source: Navy Times AP Kimberly Hefling article 27 Aug 09 ++]

### VA END OF LIFE BOOKLET:

U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter (D-PA) called on the Department of Veterans Affairs to consider suspending its use of an end-of-life planning document that critics have dubbed the 'death book for veterans.' 'There is an issue as to whether the VA document inappropriately pressures disabled veterans who forgo critical care by subtly urging them on end-of-life decisions,' the lawmaker wrote in a letter to U.S. Sen. Daniel K. Akaka (D-HI), chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, requesting that the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee hold a hearing on the matter. Early indications are Specter's request is being strongly considered. Specter said in an interview that he had not read the booklet but was disturbed by what he had gleaned thus far.

Concern about the document was raised 18 AUG when Jim Towey, the former director of the White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives under President George W. Bush, railed against it in the Wall Street Journal. The booklet, Towey noted, includes a worksheet titled "What makes your life worth living" that presents various scenarios, such as being confined to a wheelchair, relying on a feeding tube or being unable to shake the blues. Towey compared the wording of the worksheet to a political push poll meant to steer readers to a predetermined conclusion. "This hurry-up-and-die message is clear and unconscionable," wrote Towey, who noted that the Bush administration had suspended use of the document but that it has been resuscitated by the Obama White House.

VA officials, however, said that the document has been misrepresented by critics and that the decade-old publication, titled 'Your Life, Your Choices,' is an educational resource meant to help veterans direct in advance the medical care they want in the event they are incapacitated. VA is not suggesting that injured or sick veterans consider ending their lives and if this is the impression or implication derived from any VA materials, then that is wrong. The document is actually a 52-page, optional guidebook for veterans. It is about living wills and end-of-life care. The Bush Administration had the VA issue a directive in 2007 to list the book as an example of the type of document doctors should give to their patients if requested. The directive was updated in July by the Obama Administration. The document was developed under a federally funded research grant and published in 1997. VA spokeswoman Katie Roberts said. "The booklet is designed to help veterans deal with excruciating questions about what kind of health care they would like to receive if they are unable to

make decisions for themselves. "It is not an advance directive or living will, Roberts said. It has been restored to the VA Web site because it was produced with federal money. The document is being revised, according to VA officials. VA Assistant VA Secretary Tammy Duckworth in a discussion on Fox News said the VA provides its booklet it at no charge. There are many other no charge booklets that are out there. If veterans want to go and spend \$5 apiece and buy Mr. Towey's book on end-of-life discussions, they are welcome to do that."

[Source: The Washington Post Steve Vogel article 25 Aug 09 ++]

## **MEDICARE RATES 2010:**

Most Medicare beneficiaries won't pay higher premiums for Part B medical insurance coverage in 2010. Under current law, Part B premiums cannot rise faster than Social Security annual cost-of-living increases. The Congressional Budget Office predicts there will be no cost-of-living increases for Social Security recipients in 2010 and 2011. But the law doesn't protect all Medicare recipients from elevated health insurance costs. About 75% of people will be protected from the premium increase, according to Juliette Cubanski, a policy analyst at the Kaiser Family Foundation. The remaining 25% of Medicare recipients will face larger than normal premium increases because the costs are spread across a smaller share of beneficiaries. Here is who will have to pay greater Medicare premiums in the near future:

**Medicaid Recipients:** Medicaid, which is funded by states and the federal government, already pays Medicare part B premiums for low-income individuals who qualify for both government programs. Medicaid will absorb the larger premiums for the 17% of Medicare beneficiaries who are also eligible for Medicaid. "The individual doesn't pay the higher cost of the Part B premium, but the state does," says Cubanski.

**High Income Retirees:** Seniors with a modified adjusted gross income above \$85,000 for individuals and \$170,000 for couples in 2009 already pay steeper premiums than other retirees. The wealthiest 5% of Medicare beneficiaries aren't exempt from further Part B premium hikes.

**New Enrollees:** Retirees who sign up for Social Security and/or Part B medical coverage for the first time next year will also face higher premiums than existing Medicare recipients. While most Medicare Part B recipients currently pay \$96.40 per month and will continue to be charged the same premium amount next year, costs are likely to increase for a quarter of retirees to \$104.20 monthly in 2010 and \$120.20 in 2011, according to the Medicare Trustees.

**Part D Users:** Current law does not protect Medicare Part D prescription drug coverage recipients from premium increases in years when there is no Social Security cost-of-living adjustment. Retirees who experience increases in their Part D premiums could receive smaller Social Security checks next year.

[Source: US News & World report Emily Brandon article 26 Aug 09 ++]

## **POSTAL SERVICE Update 03:**

The U.S. Postal Service, which has been digging deep to find cost-cutting measures in the face of declining revenues, announced on 24 AUG that it will offer buyouts for up to 30,000 employees. Employees represented by the American Postal Workers Union or the National Postal Mail Handlers

Union who are eligible to retire or who agree to resign will be eligible for buyout packages worth \$15,000. The offer will not be available to electronic technicians because those positions are understaffed, according to USPS spokesman Greg Frey. Those represented by the National Association of Letter Carriers or the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association, as well as managers and executives, are not eligible to receive buyouts. "We are in a position where we have more employees than we need," Frey said, citing the recession, increased use of the Internet, and advances in mail-sorting technology. Those who take the incentive will receive \$10,000 in OCT 09, and another payment of \$5,000 in OCT 10. Up to 30,000 workers can take advantage of the buyouts on a first-come, first-served basis.

The beleaguered agency has been coping with a drop in printed mail and congressional mandates to prefund its Treasury retirement account. USPS has said it does not expect to meet a scheduled \$5.4 billion payment for future retirements on 30 SEP, the end of the fiscal year. In July, the Government Accountability Office placed the Postal Service on its list of federal agencies and programs at high risk of waste, fraud and abuse. Two bills in Congress - H.R.22 and S.1507 - would give the Postal Service more flexibility on its retirement payments, but officials have said more drastic reforms are needed to keep the agency viable. One option USPS officials and Congress are mulling is to reduce service by eliminating Saturday delivery - a move that could result in layoffs, USPS acting Vice President Jordan Small told the House Oversight and Government Reform Federal Workforce, Postal Service and District of Columbia Subcommittee at a hearing in July.

[Source: GOVExec.com Alex M. Parker article 25 AUG 09 ++]

## **TELEMARKETING CALL ELIMINATION Update 07:**

Since The Do Not Call list's inception six years ago, 185 million phone numbers have been registered on the government list. And yet, millions of Americans continue to get unwanted and unsolicited telemarketing calls. Why are telemarketers still calling? With billing records and other methods, authorities can trace violating calls to sources - but that requires a costly and time-consuming investigation. And that explains why, despite more than 1 million complaints filed annually on the Do Not Call website at [www.donotcall.gov](http://www.donotcall.gov), most consumers never hear back from the FTC.

André-Tascha Lammé listed his phone number on the National Do Not Call Registry 27 JUN 03, the day it opened. It didn't help. "The telemarketers kept calling. At one point, I was getting up to 20 calls a day," said the computer technology consultant. "And they still do. He filed numerous complaints with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which runs the Do Not Call list. "But no action was taken on any complaint I made," says Lammé. He finally took matters into his own hands, paying \$35 to file complaints in small claims court against telemarketers who ignored his repeated requests to stop calling his home. So far, he says, he has received \$16,000 in settlements and award - "and I haven't lost a case yet." He has even started a website [www.killthecalls.com](http://www.killthecalls.com) that provides how-to-sue instructions for other Do Not Call registrants pestered by telemarketing violators. "You really have to take action yourself," Lammé said. "The Do Not Call list is a joke. It does nothing to stop telemarketers." Maybe you can relate. Since the Do Not Call list's inception six years ago, 185 million phone numbers have been registered. And yet, millions of Americans continue to get unwanted and unsolicited telemarketing calls.

## **VA STATISTICS:**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers a wide variety of programs and services for the nation's 23.4 million veterans. In 2008, about 5.6 million people were treated in VA health care facilities, 3.8 million veterans and survivors received VA disability compensation or pensions, more than 540,000 used GI Bill education benefits and nearly 180,000 home loans were guaranteed by GI Bill home loan benefits. Nearly 72,000 veterans took advantage of VA's vocational rehabilitation and employment service in 2008. Nationally, veterans held more than 1.3 million life insurance policies valued at \$15.5 billion. More than 103,000 veterans and family members were buried in VA's national cemeteries and more than 360,000 headstones and markers were provided for veterans' graves worldwide. For individual state summaries and details on service facilities refer to

[www1.va.gov/opa/fact/statesum](http://www1.va.gov/opa/fact/statesum) .

[Source: [WWW.va.gov](http://WWW.va.gov) Aug 09 ++]

## **VETERANS CAMPAIGN:**

A training program for veterans thinking of running for political office will be held at Princeton University in New Jersey in SEP 09. The nonpartisan, non-ideological training program, called the Veterans Campaign, is designed solely to get more former military people, especially younger veterans, interested in serving in state and federal office, said Seth Lynn, executive director of the nonprofit education program and a former Marine officer. There is no charge for the two-day course, which starts 12 SEP with 50 available seats. Travel, meals, and lodging are participants' only financial obligations and assistance packages can be provided in exceptional circumstances. Lynn said the idea of helping veterans run for office came from his memories of Marine officers bemoaning the fact that the number of veterans serving in Congress has been declining for some time. Only 26 of 100 senators (down from 54 in 1994) and 101 members of the 435-member House of Representatives served in the military. In the years after World War II, more than half of lawmakers were veterans. For more details or to sign up, refer to [www.veteranscampaign.org](http://www.veteranscampaign.org) .

[Source: NavyTimes Rick Maze article 24 Aug 09 ++]