

NGAUS Retiree Seminar Summary – 4 Dec 2024

Introduction of New Interim Air Retiree/Separated Board Member

- **Appointment of Major General April Vogel**
 - At the recent November board meeting, Major General April Vogel was selected to fill the Air Retiree position vacated by Brig Gen Bobbi Doorenbos.
 - Vogel's background includes 33 years of service in various roles, including operational leadership, Assistant AG in Maryland, and Legislative Liaison for General Hokanson (CNGB).
 - The Air Retiree position will be open for election again in August at the retiree luncheon in Milwaukee.

Guest Speaker Introduction

- **Brigadier General Maureen Weigl**
 - General Weigl, a retired Army Brigadier General, was invited back as a guest speaker after her impactful presentation at the August meeting.
 - She currently serves as the Deputy Adjutant General for the Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, overseeing veterans' programs and initiatives.

Veterans Affairs Overview

- **State Office of Veterans Affairs**
 - Each state has an Office of Veterans Affairs, separate from the federal VA, providing various services and resources.
 - Pennsylvania's office, under the Adjutant General, manages long-term care facilities and outreach programs.
- **Long-term Care Facilities**
 - Pennsylvania has six long-term care facilities for veterans, offering personal and skilled nursing care.

- Veterans with a 70% or higher service-connected disability rating can have their care costs covered by the VA.
- **Outreach and Resources**
 - The office collaborates with service organizations to ensure service officers are trained to assist with claims and benefits.
 - States offer additional benefits, such as pensions and tax exemptions, beyond federal provisions.
- **Importance of Awareness**
 - Awareness is the primary issue for veterans accessing state resources.
 - Veterans are encouraged to connect with their state Office of Veterans Affairs to learn about available programs.

Key Topics Discussed

- **PACT Act and Toxic Exposure**
 - The PACT Act addresses toxic burn pit exposure and Agent Orange, expanding presumptive conditions for service-connected disabilities.
 - It includes a list of conditions presumed to be caused by exposure, simplifying the claims process for affected veterans.
- **TRICARE and Medicare**
 - Discussion on retiree TRICARE and Medicare benefits, ensuring veterans understand their healthcare options.

PACT Act and VA Health Care

- **Overview of the PACT Act**
 - The PACT Act expands presumptive conditions, making it easier for veterans to prove service-connected disabilities. However, it does not guarantee a 100% disability rating.
 - The Act opens up health care opportunities for veterans who were previously denied due to income or lack of service-connected disability.
 - Veterans are encouraged to undergo PACT Act screenings every five years to identify conditions not on the presumptive list and contribute to research.
- **Importance of PACT Act Screening**
 - Screening helps identify conditions and contributes to research, potentially adding new conditions to the presumptive list.

- Registration for the PACT Act does not automatically grant benefits; veterans must submit a claim.
- Veterans are advised to use trained service officers from organizations like the American Legion or VFW to avoid scams and unnecessary legal fees.
- **Scams and Legal Assistance**
 - Veterans are often targeted by scams, especially senior veterans who may not understand the claims process.
 - It is emphasized that veterans should not pay for claims and benefits adjustments, as there are free resources available.
 - A document with a phone number is available to verify if communications are legitimate or scams.
- **Encouragement to Utilize Benefits**
 - Veterans are encouraged to pursue PACT Act benefits, as they may qualify for significant back pay and support for their families.
 - The importance of screening is highlighted for both personal health and potential benefits for spouses.

TRICARE and Medicare Enrollment

- **TRICARE and Medicare Requirements**
 - TRICARE retirees must sign up for Medicare at age 64 to avoid losing TRICARE benefits at 65.
 - Enrollment in Medicare Parts A and B is necessary, with Part B incurring a cost.
 - Failure to enroll in Medicare results in the termination of TRICARE and DEERS enrollment.
- **Guidance for TRICARE Users**
 - Veterans are advised to contact TRICARE directly for specific guidance on Medicare enrollment, especially if still employed.

Title 32 AGR VA Rejections

- **Issues with VA Disability Ratings**
 - Some servicemen and women under Title 32 AGR are being denied VA disability ratings, as it is considered active duty for "training".

- Efforts are being made to appeal these cases and advocate for equal treatment with Title 10 AGR.
- **Steps for Affected Individuals**
 - Individuals facing this issue are encouraged to provide their information for further advocacy and support at the federal VA level.

Questions and Clarifications

- **PACT Act Screening Process**
 - The initial PACT Act screening is a questionnaire that can be completed via telehealth.
 - Follow-up referrals may be made for further appointments if necessary.
 - A document with detailed information on the PACT Act screening process, including contact numbers and websites, is available.

Veteran Benefits and Services

- **National Guard and Veteran Awareness**
 - Outreach and Education: Encourage National Guard members to understand their benefits and engage with veteran service officers. Many are unaware of their entitlements, such as VA healthcare access.
 - Documentation and Retirement Preparation: Ensure all service-related issues are documented in records to ease the retirement process and benefit claims.
- **Insurance and Financial Considerations**
 - TRICARE for Life and Additional Insurance: With Medicare A and B plus TRICARE for Life, additional insurance is a personal choice based on medical needs. It's recommended to consult TRICARE for cost comparisons and options.
 - Long-term Care Insurance: No specific veteran long-term care insurance exists. VA covers costs for those with a 70% or more disability rating, but this does not extend to spouses.

Legislative Concerns and Advocacy

- **Potential Changes to VA Benefits**

- Discussion on Benefit Reductions: There is ongoing discussion about reducing VA benefits to cut spending. Any changes would require legislation and could potentially grandfather current retirees.
- Advocacy and Involvement: Engage with organizations like NGAUS MOAA, and the VFW to stay informed and advocate for veteran benefits.

Burial and Pre-Need Planning

- **Burial at Veteran Cemeteries**
 - Pre-Need Eligibility: The pre-need form confirms eligibility but does not guarantee a burial spot. It's crucial to keep documentation like DD-214 and burial wishes accessible for next of kin.
 - Process and Documentation: Funeral directors handle arrangements with national cemeteries. Ensure all necessary documents and preferences are communicated to family members.

Veteran Benefits and Burial Information

- **Support for Spouses of Deceased Veterans**
 - Proactive Assistance: Efforts are being made to assist spouses of Vietnam veterans who have passed away due to Agent Orange exposure. These spouses are now eligible for benefits, approximately \$1,600 a month, which is crucial for their support.
 - Informing Families: It's important for veterans and their families, including children and caregivers, to be informed about burial and benefits.
- **State and Federal Veterans Cemeteries**
 - State Veterans Cemeteries: Some states, like New Jersey, have their own veterans cemeteries, which are well-maintained and follow federal criteria. These cemeteries can also accommodate spouses.
 - Federal Cemetery Capacity: Federal cemeteries are reaching capacity, with some in Pennsylvania already full. The federal government is now providing grants to states to manage and maintain veteran cemeteries.
 - Opportunities for Expansion: States have opportunities to expand cemeteries through federal grants and co-ops. For inquiries, contact the federal VA cemetery officials.

Retirement and Documentation

- **Obtaining Military Documentation**
 - DD Form 214: Retirees should ensure they have copies of all military orders before retiring. The final DD Form 214 can be obtained from various sources, including personnel offices, retirement services, and state offices.
 - Guard Advantages: National Guard members have the advantage of accessing documentation through state headquarters.
- **Challenges with Service Officers**
 - Bias in Service Officers: Not all county veteran service officers are supportive of National Guard members. Veterans are encouraged to seek service officers who best meet their needs and report any biases to the state VA office.

Legislative Updates

- **Major Richard Starr Act**
 - Current Status: The Starr Act, which affects retirement and benefits, has not progressed quickly through legislative sessions. Advocacy and grassroots movements are encouraged to push for its passage.
 - Proposed Changes: The Act aims to allow retirees to receive full entitlements without choosing between retirement or VA benefits.

Additional Announcements

- **Wreaths Across America Day**
 - Event Date: December 14th is designated as Wreaths Across America Day, aiming to place a wreath on every veteran's grave.
 - Sponsorship: The organization is short on wreaths this year. Individuals can sponsor a wreath for \$17 through the Wreaths Across America website.

Wreaths Across America Program

- **Ceremony Information**
 - The program hosts ceremonies at Arlington and other federal cemeteries nationwide.
 - These ceremonies are highly regarded and well-attended.
- **Funding and Logistics**

- Deadline for sponsorship is December 14th.
- Sponsorship cost is \$17 per wreath.
- Wreaths are shipped on December 12th and 13th from a farm in Maine.
- The program has specific guidelines for sourcing and logistics.

Air Guard Orders and Documentation

- **Order Management**
 - Air Guard members should have all orders in AROWS prior to 2005.
 - TAG office can request orders; DD-214 and IPR office can assist.
- **Meeting Recording**
 - The meeting is recorded, and a link will be provided for those who need to review it later.

Strategic Planning and Board Meeting

- **Strategic Planning Committee**
 - A new committee is being formed to update the strategic plan, last revised in 2014.
 - Focus areas include mission, vision, goals, fiscal matters, communication, membership, and stakeholder analysis.
 - Retirees are encouraged to participate due to their institutional knowledge.
- **Conference Summary**
 - Feedback from the last conference was positive, though some issues with presentation audibility were noted.
 - Future conferences will aim to engage spouses and provide better facilities for presentations.

Upcoming Conferences and Engagement

- **Milwaukee Conference Planning**
 - Co-chairs are Brigadier General Mitchie and Colonel Retired Hinman.
 - Potential venues include the Harley-Davidson Museum.
 - New senior leaders will be invited to engage with attendees.
- **TRICARE Briefing**

- A TRICARE briefing is planned for the next meeting or the August conference.
- **Survey Feedback**
 - Previous surveys showed high satisfaction but moderate participation.
 - Future surveys will aim to gather more comprehensive feedback.

Recognition and Honors

- **Legion de Lafayette Award**
 - The Retired and Separated Caucus received the Legion de Lafayette award.
 - The award recognizes the foundation's contribution to NGAUS's future.

Additional Topics and Questions

- **Conference Planning**
 - Mike Hinman is evaluating options for the retiree caucus meeting in Milwaukee.
 - Potential venues and activities are being considered, with updates to follow.

Harley-Davidson Giveaway and Event Planning

- **Discussion on Harley-Davidson Giveaway**
 - Plans to replicate a successful event from 2011, involving a Harley-Davidson giveaway.
 - The event was a hit, attracting many people to the showroom.
 - Participants had to be present to win the Harley.
 - Discussions are ongoing with Harley-Davidson to organize a similar event.
- **Suggestions for Event Improvement**
 - Emphasis on covering topics relevant to both the retired and separated community.
 - Encouragement for participants to share ideas for future topics and improvements.

Future Meetings and Communication

- **Meeting Schedule**
 - The intention is to hold virtual calls twice a year:
 - December timeframe after the August conference and November board meeting.
 - April/May timeframe covering the March board meeting.
 - Plus the Annual conference meeting.
- **Communication Channels**
 - Participants are encouraged to share thoughts and suggestions via chat or email.
 - Plans to include more information in the NGAUS magazine and potentially on the website.

Potential Topics for Future Discussion

- **Suggested Topics**
 - Long-term care in VA homes.
 - TRICARE and burial information.
 - More information about spouse benefits.
- **Additional Resources**
 - A link to the meeting video will be shared for review.
 - Regular updates and programming related to retirees will be included in the NGAUS magazine.

Retiree Offices and Support

- **Importance of Retiree Offices**
 - Retiree Offices assist with paperwork, retirement, and TRICARE.
 - They are staffed by knowledgeable Army and Air Retirees.
- **Challenges and Opportunities**
 - Retiree Offices are becoming scarce, with COVID impacting their funding.
 - Some states lack active Retiree Offices, relying on force support squadrons.
 - Interest in improving outreach and communication as part of strategic planning.