



**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

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News Release

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VA Reaches Out to Newest Combat Veterans

WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is expanding its efforts to reach veterans of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan to ensure they are aware of benefits they have earned.

Beginning today, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi is sending a personal letter to more than 150,000 veterans of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom who have recently separated from the military to thank them for their service and to remind them of their eligibility for VA health care and other benefits.

"I want these men and women to know that we are grateful for their service to our country," Principi said. "Those who served in Afghanistan, Iraq and other places around the world have risked their lives to make America more secure. One of the ways the nation shows its gratitude is by ensuring veterans receive the benefits they deserve."

Principi's letter includes brochures and links to its Web pages at www.va.gov that contain more details about VA benefits, including an opportunity to apply for benefits online.

As Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom veterans continue to leave the active-duty military, VA expects to mail about 10,000 letters each month.

VA also regularly mails information packets to all service members separating from the military to remind them of eligibility for basic VA benefits, such as VA-guaranteed home loans and education benefits. In addition, there are provisions in these programs for reservists and National Guard members.

The additional outreach to those recently deployed to combat theaters alerts them to special eligibility that increases their access to health care for two years after separation from the military for illnesses and injuries that may be the result of

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military service. For those medical problems, VA waives copayments for inpatient and outpatient care.

VA focuses special attention on those with service-related disabilities. The department's goal is a seamless transition from military to VA services, with claims for financial benefits receiving expedited processing. For the seriously wounded, VA has counselors working at the bedsides of patients in military hospitals with the largest numbers of casualties to begin benefit applications before they leave the military.

In addition, VA social service personnel work at these military facilities to plan health care coordination as service members move from military to VA care. This helps ensure a smooth transition to a VA hospital or clinic near the veteran's intended residence for continuity of medical care.

In partnership with state and local government benefits counselors and veterans service organization representatives, VA annually briefs about 200,000 service members around the world before discharge to help prepare them for civilian transition and VA benefits. It operates benefits offices at 133 military installations to help service members with conditions arising during service prepare to begin receiving VA compensation promptly after discharge.

"VA has learned many lessons since the Gulf War in 1991 and other conflicts, which will ensure that this newest generation of war veterans receives the health care and assistance they deserve when they return to civilian life," said Principi.

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