



# OPERATIONS IRAQI FREEDOM/

# ENDURING FREEDOM REVIEW

[www.VA.gov/GulfWar](http://www.VA.gov/GulfWar)

## Information for Veterans Who Served in Iraq and Afghanistan and Their Families

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### VA SEAMLESS TRANSITION OFFICE HELPS VETERANS

The goal of the recently established VA Office of Seamless Transition is to ensure that Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) veterans receive timely and high quality benefits and services and that their transition from the military to the VA is seamless and efficient. This is especially important for service members injured in these operations. According to Mr. John Brown, Director of the new office, it is situated at a high level within VA in recognition of the importance that VA attaches to its mission. The office includes representatives from Veterans Benefits Administration and Veterans Health Administration, as well as two active duty Marine Corps Officers.

The office is committed to improving the transition for seriously ill and injured service members from the military to VA by:

- Prioritizing and streamlining claims processing prior to release from active duty;
- Case managing patients' health care and benefit needs;
- Improving collaboration and communication between VA and DoD;
- Improving outreach to returning service members; and
- Ensuring VA staff is educated on transition procedures.

### Case Management

VA employees are stationed at many of the major military treatment facilities (MTFs) receiving casualties from Iraq and Afghanistan. VA staff brief service members about VA benefits, including health care, disability compensation, vocational rehabilitation, and employment. VA enrolls these veterans into the VA system and begins the process for applying for service-connected compensation benefits. Beginning these processes prior to discharge from military service helps eliminate any gaps in services or benefits.

VA social workers help the transfer of veterans from Walter Reed Army Medical Center and other major MTFs to the VA medical center closest to their home or to the most

appropriate VA facility for the specialized services their medical condition requires. In addition, each VA medical center and benefits office has identified a point of contact to ensure the seamless transition of these veterans into the VA system.

### VA Outreach

Throughout the Nation, VA officials identify service members from Iraq or Afghanistan for special outreach efforts. Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom Points of Contact at each VA Regional Office and Medical Center coordinate with DoD discharge staff to ensure a smooth transition to VA services at locations nearest to the veteran's residence after discharge. Through this coordination, the veterans are known at the local VA facilities that process their benefits claims and provide continuing medical care.

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VA developed and distributed pamphlets, brochures, and educational videos designed for returning service members, VA employees, and others involved in this important effort. VA also actively participates in discharge planning and orientation sessions for returning service members. Military services briefings are designed to ensure that service members are aware of their VA benefits and to provide assistance as needed.

Briefings include separation and retirement seminars and pre- and post-deployment briefings as well as the formal Transition Assistance Program. For those leaving active duty due to service-connected medical problems, the outreach effort is intensified to ensure a full understanding of the VA compensation process and vocational rehabilitation and employment programs.

### **Outreach Activities to Guard/Reserve**

To ensure our commitment in providing outreach to service members in the Guard/Reserve, VA developed outreach brochures, wallet cards, and a video of VA services/benefits for those coming home from OEF/OIF and active duty tours throughout the world. VA briefings on health care services and benefits are being conducted at town hall meetings and family readiness groups and during unit drills near the homes of returning Guard/Reservists. VA staff provides counseling, enrollment and disability claims processing assistance at these events as well as referrals for further healthcare, counseling or disability processing.

### **Education of VA Staff**

To ensure that the commitment is understood and shared at every level of the Department, VA has developed training materials and other tools for our front line staff to assist them in identifying combat veterans so that they can take the steps necessary to ensure the veterans receive timely access to appropriate VA services and benefits. In addition, VA has developed tools to assist VA clinicians in caring for OEF/OIF veterans. In collaboration with DoD, VA developed Clinical Practice Guidelines on two combat veteran health issues: post deployment health and unexplained pain and fatigue. VA also developed several Veterans Health Initiative (VHI) Independent Study Guides relevant to veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The long-term goal of the Office of Seamless Transition is to institutionalize the process beyond the OEF/OIF conflicts to all service members transitioning from military to civilian life.

For additional information on the seamless transition process and VA benefits and health care, please access our Internet Web site at [www.seamlesstransition.va.gov](http://www.seamlesstransition.va.gov).

## **ROSTER NOW HAS MORE THAN 390,000 OIF/OEF VETERANS**

The May 2005 combined roster of Operation Iraqi Freedom/ Operation Enduring Freedom already has more than 390,000 veterans who served in those conflicts and then left military service. The roster has been very helpful for the mailing of this newsletter, for planning scientific research, and other purposes.

The roster is expected to grow significantly during the next few years even if the number of servicemembers in the Theater of operations declines, because there are troops coming and going on a regular basis. There wasn't a complete list of Vietnam veterans until more than 30 years after the end of the conflict.

No end to the 1991 Gulf War has been officially declared. Thus, individuals serving in Iraq who are also considered Gulf War veterans and are entitled to receive the Gulf War Registry health examination and other benefits of Gulf War veterans as if they had served in the Gulf War in 1990-1991.

When Congress established August 2, 1990, as the start of the Gulf War, it indicated that the end would be a date set by law or Presidential proclamation. Thus far, neither has happened.

### **FACTS ABOUT OIF/OEF VETERANS**

As of July 18, 2005, we had 391,407 OIF and OEF veterans on a combined roster of those who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan and then separated from military service. About 40% (156,990) are active duty troops. The other 60% (236,417) came from the Reserve or National Guard.

About 26 percent (101,308) have received VA health care at least once. Only 0.6 percent has been hospitalized in VA. The overall impact on VA health care has been minimal. The 101,308 OIF/OEF veterans evaluated by VA in FY 2003-05 represent about 2% of the 4.9 million veterans who received VA health care.

Veterans on the roster have presented to VA with a wide range of both medical and psychological conditions. Diagnoses for these veterans cover more than 6,300 different diagnostic codes. The two most common health problems of war veterans have been musculoskeletal ailments, principally joint and back disorders, and dental problems.

### **NEW WEB PAGE FOR OIF/OEF VETERANS**

The Environmental Agents Service is pleased to announce a new page on its [www.VA.gov/EnvironAgent](http://www.VA.gov/EnvironAgent) web site devoted to the health concerns of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom veterans.

The page contains various VA health fact sheets, all of our newsletter (OIF/OEF Reviews), Under Secretary for Health Information Letters, and a poster. All OIF and OEF veterans who have Internet access are invited to log on and explore the page.

Interested parties should go to the Environmental Agents Web Site and select "Operations OIF/OEF."

## **IOM COMMITTEES LOOK AT GULF WAR VETERANS' HEALTH ISSUES, INFECTIOUS DISEASES OF SOUTHWEST ASIA**

Two Committees organized by the National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine (IOM) have recently begun work for VA on two Gulf War related efforts. Both are part of Congressionally required studies on Gulf War and health. The IOM is a prestigious, independent, scientific advisory group that is not part of the government.

It has been estimated that more than one billion dollars has been spent trying to understand and treat Gulf War veterans during the approximate 14 years since the 1990-91 Gulf War. What has been learned from this investment? This is one of the most important questions of the IOM's committee to review the medical literature on Gulf War veterans' health.

A new research committee will examine the enormous body of scientific literature now available and could suggest new means to improve the clinical care that VA currently offers to Gulf War veterans. They will answer the question, "Are we missing any good ideas for better diagnoses and treatments for the health problems suffered by these veterans?" The committee will also consider how this information may affect veterans.

The committee will also summarize what this health literature can tell us about the nature of veterans' symptoms and illnesses, including unexplained illnesses, diagnosable illnesses, neurological illnesses, reproductive health effects, cancer, disability, mortality, and hospitalizations.

This new committee will draw conclusions, when possible, about whether any exposures that may have occurred during deployment to the 1990-91 Gulf War could be associated with the veterans' symptoms and illnesses that came later on.

This project is expected to be completed 12 months after beginning, or December 2005.

A second IOM committee recently began work on another in the series of Gulf War & Health reports, looking at the possible effects of exposure to infectious diseases.

Earlier completed reports focused on depleted uranium, pyridostigmine bromide, sarin, and certain vaccinations (Volume 1, 2000); pesticide and solvents (Volume 2, 2003);

and exposure to fuels, pollutants from oil well fires, and certain other synthetic chemicals used by the Department of Defense during the 1991 Gulf War (Volume 3, 2004). Summaries are available at our web site: [www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents](http://www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents), and the full report can be seen at [www.nap.edu](http://www.nap.edu).

The IOM is required to include in its report a full discussion of the scientific evidence and reasoning that led to its conclusions. Volume 4 should be completed by December 2006.

## **SPECIALIZED VA HEALTH CENTERS PROVIDE SECOND OPINION ON UNEXPLAINED ILLNESSES THROUGH EXTENSIVE TESTS, CAREFUL EVALUATIONS**

Twenty-four year-old Arthur\* of Buffalo, NY, is a patriot. He enlisted in the Army National Guard, was called to active duty, and served honorably during his tour in Operation Iraqi Freedom. But he is sick, and nobody can explain why.

He started suffering from fatigue, nausea, and diarrhea and noticed a decrease in his energy level upon returning home from serving in Iraq during 2004-05. Worse yet, his doctors, despite numerous tests, reported that "nothing is wrong." Frustrated, Arthur thought about what he might do. Give up? Not an option!

Fortunately, several years ago, the Department of Veterans Affairs established a special program to help veterans, who, like Arthur, suffer from real, but undiagnosed illnesses. After exhaustive examinations at his local VA medical center, Arthur was referred to one of the War Related Illness and Injury Study Centers (WRIISCs), pronounced "risks." There, he underwent an extensive medical evaluation, with enough time to express his concerns, tell his story, and receive individualized recommendations.

### **WRIISCs Established in 2001**

VA established two WRIISCs in May 2001. The centers, located at VA Medical Centers in Washington, DC, and East Orange, NJ, were founded to provide service to combat veterans, families, and health care professionals through clinical care, education, risk communication and research addressing potential environmental exposures and adverse health outcomes.

Established to address the health problems of veterans who serve in past and future conflicts, these centers were a recommendation of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) under Public Law 105-368 (Veterans Program Enhancement Act of 1998, Section 103). The centers replaced the Gulf War Referral Centers and now offer wide-ranging clinical

*\* Not real name. To protect the privacy of this person, the name has been changed along with personal details.*

care to all those who served in combat, not just during the Gulf War. Dr. Han Kang is the director of WRIISC-DC, and Dr. Gudrun Lange heads WRIISC-NJ.

While most veterans do not suffer persistent and unexplained symptoms following deployment in a combat zone, it is recognized today that some do return home with undiagnosed illnesses. After thoroughly being evaluated at their local VA Medical Center, the veteran may be eligible to participate in an in-depth evaluation and examination, which serves as a second opinion, at one of the WRIISCs.

### Criteria for Referral

Eligibility to participate in the WRIISC program depends on a thorough referral process coordinated by VA Central Office. Once a veteran has undergone a complete workup at their local VA Medical Center, the VA primary care provider may refer him or her to the WRIISC National Referral Program. However, veterans first must meet the following criteria:

- Be referred by a primary care physician;
- Have an undiagnosed or difficult to diagnose illness and/or disabling unexplained symptoms
- Be medically and psychiatrically stable; and
- Be willing to participate in treatment and evaluation recommendations.

Accepting a referral, according to WRIISC-DC's Risk Communication Specialist, Aaron Schneiderman, Ph.D., "is dependent upon eligibility, necessity, and the agreement that the veteran has something to gain from the evaluation." Once accepted by the WRIISC National Referral Program, the veteran will be assigned to either the WRIISC in Washington, DC, or the center in New Jersey.

### Program Specifics

The evaluation period at the Washington, DC, or East Orange, NJ, WRIISC lasts 1 to 5 days. A major plus of the WRIISC National Referral Program is that travel arrangements are paid for by both the referring VA Medical Center and the appointed WRIISC. It is the responsibility of the referring VA Medical Center to arrange the veteran's travel to the designated WRIISC. The WRIISC provides travel arrangements for the veteran's return trip home.

The purpose of the veteran's visit to a WRIISC is to evaluate war-related health concerns, while providing the veteran with information about his or her condition and potential war-related exposures. "The WRIISCs offer an option to veterans who have not been able to find answers from other providers," stated Dr. Schneiderman.

While the WRIISCs are not designed to offer treatment on site, the centers communicate their recommendations and findings to the veteran and his or her hometown VA primary care providers for implementation and followup. This program allows the veteran to become more aware and to help take care of their health. The WRIISCs are proud of their ability to attend to just one patient at a time, which allows for an individualized, specific plan of action, unique to every veteran that attends the program.

In an effort to educate the many people that care for veterans at the various VA medical facilities, the WRIISCs are implementing an employee education campaign that involves a conference series, a new VA Veterans Health Initiative (VHI) independent study guide that will be produced using conference materials, and an employee training module that will be accessible at all hours on the VA intranet. Dr. Schneiderman emphasized that, "education is extremely important because the primary care provider acts as a gatekeeper to the local VA Medical Center and is the veteran's lifeline to optimal medical care."

Even though Arthur's evaluation at the WRIISC-DC did not provide him with a cure for his ailments, it did provide him with a plan of action for him and his health care provider that includes recommendations for medications, treatments, and better ways to live. The WRIISCs engage in activities that involve education and outreach to both veterans and health care professionals, in addition to evaluating patients.

For additional information about the National Referral Program and the WRIISCs please visit:

[www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents](http://www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents)

WRIISC-DC: [www.VA.gov/wriisc-dc](http://www.VA.gov/wriisc-dc)

WRIISC-NJ: [www.wri.med.va.gov/](http://www.wri.med.va.gov/)

Primary care providers who would like to refer a veteran with undiagnosed illnesses can request an evaluation at one of the Centers. VA health care providers who wish to request a referral must contact:

Ms. Helen Malaskiewicz  
Sr. Environ. Health Coordinator  
Environmental Agents Service (131)  
VA Central Office  
810 Vermont Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20420  
[www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents](http://www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents)

*Tiffany A. Anzalone, Summer 2005 Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities Intern for VA's Environmental Agents Service, conducted interviews, researched, and prepared this article. Tiffany is a graduate of Boston College and is currently in graduate school at Louisiana State University.*



## ABOUT THE “REVIEW”

This is the fourth issue of the “Operations Iraqi Freedom/Enduring Freedom Review” newsletter. Earlier issues are dated December 2003, June 2004, and February 2005. They are available on line at [www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents](http://www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents). The newsletter is written by VA’s Environmental Agents Service (EAS). The “Review” is published to provide information to veterans who served in Operations Iraqi Freedom, primarily in Iraq, and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, their families, and others interested in possible long-term health consequences of military service in those conflicts.

The “Review” describes actions by VA and others to respond to deployment health related concerns. For past and current issues of the “Review” and additional information, see our Web site at [www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents](http://www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents). For related Gulf War Review newsletters or information about the Gulf War, see [www.VA.gov/GulfWar](http://www.VA.gov/GulfWar).

The frequency of publication is two to three issues each year. Additional issues will be prepared as needed, when significant developments occur. This issue was completed in late August 2005, and does not include developments that occurred after that time.

Comments or questions concerning the content of the “Review” are encouraged. We would be happy to hear from you, any suggestions and ideas for future issues of the newsletter should be sent to the OIF/OEF Review, (131), VA Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20420.

Requests for additional copies of this and/or future issues should also be sent to Mr. Rosenblum. A limited supply of the prior issues is available. Please specify the quantity and issue date requested.

*Questions about the Gulf War Registry examination should be directed to the Environmental Health Coordinator or Environmental Health Clinician located at each VA medical facility. A listing of these VA staff is available online at [www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents](http://www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents). The telephone number for the nearest VA medical center can be found in the local telephone directory under the “U.S. Government” listings. Assistance is also available from the toll-free VA Gulf War Helpline: 1-800-749-8387. VA benefit offices also have a great deal of information about VA benefit programs. The national toll-free telephone number is 1-800-827-1000.*

## HOW TO GET VA DISABILITY COMPENSATION

*(Because of the high level of interest in this subject and the fact that not everyone reads every article in the newsletter, the following article has been updated).*

Like other veterans, Gulf War veterans are eligible for monthly payments, called disability compensation, from VA if they have service-connected illnesses or injuries. The disability must have been incurred or aggravated during active military service. Furthermore, the service of the veteran must have been terminated from military service through separation or discharge under conditions that were other than dishonorable.

Disability compensation varies according to the degree of disability and the number of dependents. Benefits are not subject to Federal or state income tax. The receipt of military retirement pay, disability severance pay, and separation incentive payments known as SSB and VSI (Special Separation Benefits and Voluntary Separation Incentives) also affects the amount of VA compensation paid.

The disability ratings range from 0 to 100 percent (in increments of 10 percent). For example, in 2005, a Gulf War veteran with a disability rating of 10 percent receives \$108; a veteran with disability rating of 50 percent gets \$663; and a veteran who is totally disabled and evaluated at 100 percent receives \$2,239 monthly.

Veterans with disability ratings between 30 and 100 percent are also eligible for monthly allowances for each child. (The amount depends on the disability rating).

A veteran who is in need of regular aid and attendance of another person, or who is permanently housebound may be entitled to additional benefits. VA must make that determination before the veteran can get these benefits.

### Must Apply to Be Considered

Compensation is not automatically provided to any veterans. Registry examinations are completely different from OIF and OEF claims for disability compensation. VA veterans service representatives (VSR) can provide the necessary application and assist veterans who need help in completing it. VSR’s are located at all VA Regional Offices, in VA medical centers, and at most VA clinics. For help in locating a VSR near you, call the following toll-free telephone number: **1-800-827-1000**.

### Other Benefits

In addition to the compensation program described above, individual veterans may be eligible for the full range of other benefits offered by VA, including education and training, vocational rehabilitation, home loan guarantees, life insurance, pension, burial benefits, and more.

To learn more about VA’s programs, OIF and OEF veterans and other interested parties can visit the VA home page [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov) or call **1-800-827-1000**.

## VA DISABILITY COMPENSATION RATES IN 2005

No Dependents		Veteran with Spouse Only	
10%	\$108	---	---
20%	\$210	---	---
30%	\$324	30%	\$363
40%	\$466	40%	\$518
50%	\$663	50%	\$728
60%	\$839	60%	\$917
70%	\$1,056	70%	\$1,147
80%	\$1,227	80%	\$1,311
90%	\$1,380	90%	\$1,497
100%	\$2,299	100%	\$2,429

For additional rate information, see compensation rate tables online at [www.vba.va.gov/bln/21/Rates/comp01.htm](http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/21/Rates/comp01.htm)

## OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM VETERANS IN THE GULF WAR REGISTRY

Initial examinations through 2003 – **82**

Initial examinations through 2004 – **1,204**

Total examinations, including followups, through 2004 – **1,290**

For comparison purposes: Total Agent Orange Registry exams -- **420,055**

January - March 2005 Agent Orange Registry examinations – **6,709**

## ADDRESS CHANGES

If this newsletter has your old address, please use this form to update our mailing list. Send the completed form to the Gulf War Review, Austin Automation Center (200/397A), 1615 Woodward Street, Austin, TX 78772-0001. If you have access to the Gulf War Review via the VA Web site [www.VA.gov/GulfWar](http://www.VA.gov/GulfWar) and wish to discontinue receiving a copy by mail, please complete the above form and return it to the Austin Automation Center. If you are receiving more than one copy of the newsletter, please let us know. Write to the address above. Please provide your name, address, social security number and name of the publication. Thank you.

Check or circle the language that describes your situation.

<input type="checkbox"/>	My address has changed, and I would like to continue to receive the newsletter.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am receiving more than one copy, but I only want to get a single copy.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I don't need to get the newsletter by mail as I can read it at <a href="http://www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents">www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents</a>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (explain) _____ You may use this or other paper. Please indicate which publication that you are receiving as this office puts out 4 national newsletters.

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Middle	
Last	
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APO/FPO Indicate which if applicable	
City	
Alpha State/or APO/FPO Code	
Zip Code	

## WHERE TO GET HELP

Active duty military personnel with questions or concerns about service in Southwest Asia (including Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom) contact your commanding officer or call the Department of Defense (DoD) Gulf War Veterans' Hotline (**1-800-796-9699**) for information. DoD also offers the "Direct Veterans Hotline," with the toll-free number **1-800-497-6261**.

Gulf War veterans, including OIF veterans with concerns about their health, should contact their nearest VA medical center. The telephone number can be found in your local telephone directory under Department of Veterans Affairs in the "U.S. Government" listings. Medical care may be available, and a Gulf War Registry examination is also available on request.

The VA Gulf War Information Helpline can also provide information and assistance. The toll-free telephone number is **1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387)**.

Check our Web sites for more Gulf War information on health care and other benefits (including those for Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom veterans) at [www.va.gov/GulfWar](http://www.va.gov/GulfWar), [www.va.gov/EnvironAgents](http://www.va.gov/EnvironAgents), and [www.VA.gov](http://www.VA.gov).

Gulf War veterans in need of marital/family counseling should contact the nearest VA medical center or VA Vet Center, also listed in your phonebook under Department of Veterans Affairs in the "U.S. Government" listings. For additional information about these programs call the Gulf War Information Helpline at **1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387)**.

Gulf War veterans seeking disability compensation for illnesses incurred in or aggravated by military service can contact a Veterans Benefits Counselor at the nearest VA regional office or health care facility at **1-800-827-1000**, or call the VA Gulf War Information Helpline at **1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387)**. You can also start a claim online at [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov).

Gulf War veterans interested in learning about the wide range of benefit programs administered by VA should contact a Veterans Benefits Counselor at the nearest VA regional office or health care facility at **1-800-827-1000**, or call the VA Gulf War Information Helpline at **1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387)**.

Representatives of veterans service organizations, including The American Legion (**1-800-433-3318**), Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, (**1-800-VFW-1899**), and Disabled American Veterans (**1-877-426-2338**),

have been very helpful to Gulf War veterans, especially veterans who are seeking disability compensation. (These organizations are cited as examples. There are many other excellent organizations. VA does not endorse or recommend anyone group over another.)

County Veterans Service Officers also have been of great help to many military veterans, including those who served in the Gulf War, who are seeking benefits they earned through their service to the Nation.

For additional Federal benefit information, see VA's Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents booklet. It is updated annually to reflect changes in law and policies. It is available for purchase from the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO) Superintendent of Documents, Washington, DC 20402.

Web site: [bookstore.gpo.gov](http://bookstore.gpo.gov). VA's Web pages are updated throughout the year to present the most current information. The VA home page ([www.VA.gov](http://www.VA.gov)) contains links to selections on compensation and pension benefits, health care benefits and services, burial and memorial benefits, etc.

## WHAT'S NEXT

Plans for the next issue of this newsletter include the following articles:

- New Research: Mental Health Care Needs Among Recent War Veterans
- VA Describes Major Initiatives in Response to OIF/OEF Veterans at Congressional Hearing
- VA OIF/OEF Veterans Health Care Utilization Report Updated
- Leishmania More Common Than Thought, Still Very Rare.

VA hopes to print and distribute the planned issue in the next few months.



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