



WHAT ARE MY VA BENEFITS?



WHAT ARE MY BENEFITS? WHAT AN IMPORTANT AND POWERFUL QUESTION. WORKING FOR THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, I ASK MYSELF THIS QUESTION EVERY YEAR WHEN IT COMES TIME FOR FEDERAL EMPLOYEES TO DECIDE WHETHER TO KEEP THEIR CURRENT HEALTH BENEFITS OR TO CHOOSE ANOTHER PROVIDER.



This question is just as important for anyone changing jobs, purchasing insurance, or just looking to join a new club. The person will likely base his or her decision largely on the answer to this question.

This question is also popular among our nation's veterans. There is no doubt that serving our country has its benefits. Those who have fought for our country not only deserve recognition and gratitude, but they deserve the best in healthcare, education and assistance in returning to society. As Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi has stated, "One of the ways the nation shows its gratitude is by ensuring veterans receive the benefits they deserve." The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) prides itself on doing just that.

To help veterans of the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the VA healthcare system has many unique specialty services and special emphasis programs. One of these specialty programs is the Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service – an integrated delivery system designed to provide medically prescribed prosthetic and orthotic devices; sensory aids; medical supplies, equipment and devices; assistive aids; repairs; and services to eligible disabled individuals.

Examples of prescribed items include aids for the visually impaired, artificial limbs, hearing aids, eyeglasses, speech and communication devices, home dialysis supplies, orthopedic braces and

supports, orthopedic footwear, ocular prostheses, cosmetic restorations, wheelchairs, hospital beds, and other daily-living aids. Other services and equipment provided by this department include – but are not limited to – in-house orthotic and prosthetic laboratories that fabricate and provide state-of-the-art prosthetics, home improvements and structural alterations, automobile adaptive equipment, and a clothing allowance.

The Home Improvements and Structural Alterations (HISA) Program helps pay for home improvements necessary to ensure continuation of medical treatment or to provide access to the home and essential lavatory and sanitary facilities. The VA will pay a lifetime benefit up to \$4,100 for home alterations for a veteran being treated for a service-connected disability and a lifetime benefit up to \$2,100 for other veterans. Some alterations chargeable to the cost limitations include – but are not limited to – roll-in showers, permanent ramping, widening of doorways, lowering of bathroom and kitchen counters and cabinets, and improving entrance paths and driveways in the immediate home area to facilitate access.

This program should not be confused with the Specially Adaptive Home Grant in which veterans may be entitled to a VA grant for a home specially adapted to their needs. For this benefit, the VA may approve a grant of not more than 50 percent of the cost of building, buying or remodeling adapted homes or paying debts on homes

already acquired, up to a maximum of \$50,000.

Maintaining independence is important and to help you do that, the VA assists in getting veterans with disabilities back on the road again. The VA has established more than 40 driver rehabilitation centers nationwide. Eligible veterans or active-duty personnel are provided a clinical program of primary services that include driving assessments, patient and family education, behind-the-wheel instruction, and vehicle and equipment evaluation. In conjunction with this program, certain veterans and service members qualify for an automobile adaptive equipment benefit if they have a service-connected loss of, or permanent loss of use of, one or both hands or feet or permanent impairment of vision in both eyes.

Veterans entitled to compensation for ankylosis (immobility) of one or both knees or one or both hips also qualify for an automobile grant. There is a one-time payment by the VA of not more than \$11,000 toward the purchase of an automobile or other conveyance. The VA will pay for adaptive equipment and for repair, replacement, or reinstallation required because of a disability and for the safe operation of a vehicle purchased with VA assistance. Other items, such as van lifts, raised doors, raised roofs, and wheelchair tie-downs for passenger

use, may be furnished as part of medical services for all veterans as a follow-up to VA care, provided the equipment is medically necessary for the care and treatment of the veteran.

Just as many of you receive yearly compensation from your employer for laundry or dry cleaning of uniforms or work clothes, the VA provides an annual monetary clothing allowance disbursement to any veteran who is entitled to receive compensation for a service-connected disability for which he or she uses a prosthetic or orthopedic appliance that tends to wear or tear his or her clothing. The allowance is also available to any veteran whose service-connected skin condition requires prescribed medication that damages his or her outer garments. This benefit could be approved annually or as a lifetime benefit depending on the disability and appliance causing damage to the clothing. The clothing allowance for this past year was \$588.

Enrollment in the VA also allows access to comprehensive inpatient and outpatient services, such as preventive services (immunizations), screenings, health education, primary healthcare, surgery, mental health, spinal cord injury care, physical medicine and rehabilitation, services for the blind, outpatient pharmacy services, home health, emergency services, and drugs

and pharmaceuticals.

Additional benefits and programs include home loans, life insurance, readjustment counseling, and other popular benefits such as vocational rehabilitation. In this program, the VA provides employment and independent-living services to service-connected veterans, vocational counseling to service members and veterans who have recently separated from active duty, and vocational counseling or special rehabilitation services to dependents of veterans who meet certain program eligibility requirements.

While the VA mails brochures to all service members separating from the military to notify them of VA benefits, the VA also has a Web site that contains more details about these and many other available benefits. You can apply for many of the benefits online at www.va.gov or by visiting your closest VA medical or regional office. Another good source of information is a pamphlet you can get at any of these locations titled *Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents*, which is updated and published yearly.

The VA has brochures, Web sites, and staff members who are ready and waiting to answer all of your benefits questions. The next step is yours.

—by Robert M. Baum