

# MILITARY OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

Green Valley Chapter · Desert Duster Newsletter · Spring Issue: March 2022

Website: [greenvalleymoaa.org](http://greenvalleymoaa.org)

[GV MOAA Chamber of Commerce Member page](#)



## IN THIS ISSUE:

- President's Message from Elliott Jones
- March Topic: Surviving Spouse Advisory Council
- VA Continuing Needs
- March Dinner Reservation Form
- Membership Dues for 2022
- CERT to Offer Basic Course
- 2022 Chapter Dues Form
- Sahuarita High School JROTC Updates
- Chaplain's Corner
- Mark Your Calendars
- Free Tax Preparation at La Posada
- 2022 Officers, Directors & Chairs
- Sponsors
- MOAA National News
- Contributors

Scan website QR Code



## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



We have a very informative event and program scheduled in March which will prove beneficial for everyone. Reservation form is on page 3 and program details can be found on page 2.

MOAA on a national basis is working hard to advocate for the veteran community in Congress. Specifically, these are three key goals:

1. Military Pay Raise 4.6%
2. Richard Star Act
3. TRICARE Mental Health Copays

For more information about MOAA's National Advocacy Goals for 2022 [click here](#).

On an Arizona statewide basis MOAA is actively monitoring legislation that affects the veteran community. John Chernoski and Darren Venters, chapter board members, are keeping an eye on these issues. More information about State legislation affecting Veterans can be found [here](#).

We are always looking for new members to join the Board to share ideas. We meet at Friends in Deed at 9 a.m. on the first Wednesday of the month.

If you have not yet renewed your membership for 2022, we hope you will soon. It is renewals that help us maintain our 5-Star Level of Excellence status and continue the work we provide to the veteran community. The dues form is on page 5 of this newsletter.

A special thank-you to Marianne Rogers Faust for her help in securing our landing page on the Green Valley/Sahuarita Chamber of Commerce site. [Clicking this link](#) will give you access to our page.

I look forward to seeing you at one of our future events.



Elliott Jones 1LT USA (former)  
2022-2023 Chapter President  
Green Valley Chapter, MOAA



## Barbara Smith to Be Speaker for March MOAA Dinner

Peggy McGee, 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President/Programs



If you passed away, would your spouse know what to do? Or if your spouse died, would you know what to do, at least paperwork wise? Hint: Make sure both names are on all utility accounts now. If you have always done the taxes, would your spouse know where the paperwork is to get the taxes done on time? And don't forget about the passwords for your online accounts. This is not a pleasant topic to discuss with one's spouse but it is indeed a necessary one.

These are just a few of the topics that our March speaker, Barbara Smith, will cover at the dinner meeting on Tuesday, March 15. Barbara who has been a member of the Surviving Spouse Advisory Council for 4 years is coming from MOAA HQ to share vital information with us. Most of her message applies to all veterans though she will touch on topics that apply to spouses of military retirees. Maybe some have forgotten all they and their spouses are entitled to once they retire from military service.

Barbara Smith has been a surviving spouse for 19 years and has been involved with MOAA for the past 9 years. She has 3 daughters, 8 grandchildren and 15 great grandchildren. She is an Army (actually Army Air Corps) brat and a Navy wife. She comes from a long line of service members from her grandfather, uncles, father, to her son-in-law and grandsons.

The dinner will be held at Grill on the Green on March 15 with the social period beginning at 5 p.m. **There will be a ribbon cutting ceremony at 5:20 to commemorate the Green Valley MOAA Chapter's being accepted into the Green Valley/Sahuarita Chamber of Commerce.** The reservation form with menu choices is on page 3. Cost for the dinner will be \$30. **Deadline to sign-up is March 8.** If you do not have a printer, you may write your name and dinner choices on a piece of paper and mail it along with a check payable to GV MOAA to the address listed on the form.



## VA Continuing Needs

Peggy McGee, 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President/Programs



The VA is still accepting 2022 calendars in both wall and pocket styles as well as unopened travel and full sized shampoo, conditioner, tooth paste, floss, body lotion and Chapstick. They can also use non-prescription reading glasses as well as new socks and underwear. Please bring donations to the dinner on March 15 or drop them at the McGee's, [1908 E Longspur Place](http://1908 E Longspur Place), 4<sup>th</sup> house up from the Quail Creek waterfall.

# MILITARY OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

Green Valley Chapter · Desert Duster Newsletter · Spring Issue: March 2022  
Website: [greenvalleymoaa.org](http://greenvalleymoaa.org)      [GV MOAA Chamber of Commerce Member page](#)



**March 15, 2022 · Social 5PM Dinner 5:30PM**  
Grill on the Green · 5800 S. Camino del Sol, Green Valley

**Please make your reservations by March 8th**

Reserve \_\_\_\_\_ places      Cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_ (\$30 per person)

## MENU SELECTIONS:

**#1 BRISKET PLATTER** Slow Roasted BBQ Brisket | Red Skin Mashed Potatoes | Coleslaw | Green Chile Cornbread

**#2 GRILLED SALMON** Roasted Garlic - Spinach & Creamy Sundried Tomato Sauce | Jasmine Rice | Vegetables

**#3 TUSCAN SHRIMP PASTA** Creamy Sundried Tomato Sauce | Roasted Garlic | Tomato | Spinach | Linguine Pasta | Parmesan | Garlic Bread

Dessert and choice of non-alcoholic beverage included.

Check # \_\_\_\_\_  
Attn: GV MOAA Reservation

**Mail check and reservation form to:**  
MOAA of Green Valley · PO Box 1535 · Green Valley, AZ 85622-1535

Rank: \_\_\_\_\_ Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

**Indicate Menu Selection (#1, #2, #3)**

Member/Guest name: \_\_\_\_\_

Member/Guest name: \_\_\_\_\_

Member/Guest name: \_\_\_\_\_

Member/Guest name: \_\_\_\_\_

If you require a ride to the meeting, program or event please check here:

✂ ----- CUT HERE -----

If you cannot get your reservation and check mailed timely, or **if you have made a reservation and find you cannot attend, PLEASE CALL (leave a message if no answer):** Peggy McGee 520-207-6188 or email: [peggy@greenvalleymoaa.org](mailto:peggy@greenvalleymoaa.org). **Your chapter is charged for all ordered meals even if they aren't served.** Please bring a check or exact cash amount to the meeting.

## Membership Dues for 2022

Jack Bundy, 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President/Membership

It is that time of year. A new year means it is time to update your dues for 2022. Many members have already paid, but not all.

**RENEWAL  
REMINDER**

If you have not done so yet, it is easy.

- Just go to our Green Valley Chapter Website at: [greenvalleymoaa.org](http://greenvalleymoaa.org)
- Scroll down and click this link: [Membership Application/Renewal Dues Form](#) (Depending on the device you are using \*smartphone, computer, iPad\* the form may auto-download.)
- Once downloaded, fill out the form, and mail it with your check to: **Green Valley MOAA, P.O. Box 1535, Green Valley, AZ 85622-1535** **NOTE:** The Dues Form is also in this newsletter on page 5.

*Chapter Dues: (Regular-\$25; Spouses-\$15)*

If you do not have print capability, put the info you see on the online form on a plain piece of paper and mail it as indicated.

*Have I paid my dues?*

Many members are not sure if they have paid current dues or not. If you are uncertain, send an email to Jack Bundy, [jhbundyaz@gmail.com](mailto:jhbundyaz@gmail.com) and he will let you know your dues status for 2022.

---

## CERT to Offer Basic Course

John McGee, LtCol USMC (Ret)



The spring session of Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training is just around the corner. The upcoming course will be offered in two phases:

**Phase 1:** Online training to be conducted individually at the student's own pace will cover Disaster Preparedness, Disaster Medical, Disaster Psychology, Fire Safety, Light Search & Rescue and CERT and Terrorism. Approximately 12 hours are required to complete the training which runs between March 14 and April 8.

**Phase 2:** With the supervision of a trained coach, students will demonstrate knowledge gained and skills learned during Phase 1. The practical phase will be four classroom sessions, April 13, 14, 20 and 21 from 1:00 – 5:00 p.m. The culmination will be a disaster simulation exercise April 23, 9:00 – 11:30 a.m. To graduate, students must attend each session. The Phase 2 sessions will be held at the Green Valley Fire District Training Center, [1285 W Camino Encanto](#).

After completing training, there is no obligation to join CERT or to respond to a community emergency. Those who do join will receive a CERT Kit and shirt. This free CERT training will increase one's ability and confidence to safely help self, family, and neighbors.

For details, questions and registration visit CERT's website at [ggvcert.com](http://ggvcert.com).

# MILITARY OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

Green Valley Chapter · Desert Duster Newsletter · Spring Issue: March 2022  
Website: [greenvalleymoaa.org](http://greenvalleymoaa.org)      [GV MOAA Chamber of Commerce Member page](#)



Military Officers Association of America  
Green Valley, Arizona Chapter  
P.O. Box 1535 · Green Valley, AZ 85622-1535

## 2022 CHAPTER MEMBERSHIP DUES

This Membership Dues Form may also be found on the [GreenValleyMOAA.org website](http://GreenValleyMOAA.org)

**Chapter Dues:** (Regular-\$25; Spouses-\$15)

Membership Dues \$ \_\_\_\_\_ Make check payable to: Military Officers Association of Green Valley (or GV MOAA).

### PLEASE PROVIDE THE INFORMATION BELOW:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ New \_\_\_\_\_ Renewal \_\_\_\_\_

Rank: \_\_\_\_\_ Branch of Service: \_\_\_\_\_ National # \_\_\_\_\_

Spouse/Partner \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip \_\_\_\_\_

DOB (Month/Day/Year): \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: (        ) \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_

**Scholarship & Military Assistance Fund \$ \_\_\_\_\_ Donation.**

Make check payable to: **Green Valley MOAA Scholarship and Military Assistance Fund** or **GV MOAA S&MA Fund**. Dues may be paid at any meeting or mailed to Military Officers Association of America, Green Valley, Arizona Chapter, P.O. Box 1535, Green Valley, AZ 85622-1535.

## Sahuarita High School JROTC Updates

Marianne Rogers Faust, Director/JROTC Liaison



In our previous two newsletters we shared some information about the activities of the Air Force JROTC unit and the Army JROTC unit. Now it is time to highlight some of the Navy JROTC events and activities.

The Sahuarita NJROTC has had a busy and productive start to 2022. In January, they took first place overall in the California Navy JROTC Orienteering Championship held in San Dimas, CA. They competed against 10 other teams from California and Nevada. Sahuarita had the first place overall female varsity runner and the first place overall JV runner. Forty-five cadets traveled to Santa Ana High School, Santa Ana, CA for the Area 11 Navy JROTC Regional Field Meet. They competed against 14 other teams in drill, personnel inspection, academics, and physical fitness. They placed 9th overall, 5th in Physical Training, and brought home a first place trophy in the 8 x 200 meter relay race. Five cadets traveled to Anniston, AL to compete in the Navy National Marksmanship Competition. The team placed 9th in the country and one cadet qualified to compete in the Joint Service Marksmanship competition in Camp Perry, OH this spring.

Additionally, in January, several cadets participated in the Massing of the Colors program co-sponsored by the Military Order of the World Wars. This very patriotic, solemn ceremony celebrated military service and service to the local community. It was held at Sahuarita High School and the Army JROTC from Rio Rico participated too. This event was open to the public and we hope many of you will consider attending next year if it is held again.

Some of their upcoming competitions include the Tombstone High School Raider and Rifle Meet on 26 February and the Jr Olympic Marksmanship Competition to be held on 5 March at Ben Avery Shooting Range in Phoenix.

Our Scholarship Subcommittee will meet soon to select our scholarship winners for this year. As always, we will have some outstanding young people competing for assistance to further their education. And, as you probably know, the cost of higher education continues to climb. So, once again, please consider donating to our Scholarships & Military Assistance fund. You will truly be investing in the future of some outstanding, dedicated young people!

## Chaplain's Corner

Robert D. Lewis, Chaplain



During this elongated Covid outbreak, and the subsequent mutations, a person could easily become depressed. We all wish we could get back to some level of normalcy in our lives. Not to wear a mask, one simple thing, and yet

here we are. I believe this fits into the biblical category of "trials and tribulations." I remember the words from a song "*We Never Promised You a Rose Garden*." I was hoping that in the twilight of my life it would look more like a rose garden than a bed of thorns! Maybe you thought the same also.

So, how do we find that bed of roses as we battle our trials and tribulations? With evil running rampant in our society, how can that be possible? The difference is that we can have Hope. Hope in a faithful God. Even God did not promise you a rose garden on earth, but He did promise even more than a rose garden for you in Heaven. Through prayer we find ourselves being offered Hope.

Hope is what has driven this country to be the beacon in the world. Prayer releases Hope.



As we ask for Hope, ask for Peace, ask for healing, ask for forgiveness and it will all be given to you.

As I was growing up in the church, I would often try and guess which benediction the Pastor would use at the end of his sermon. One always gave me a smile and goose bumps as the Pastor recited it. My favorite benediction then and even now is:

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you and give you, His peace.



Pray and Hope that His face will shine upon you.

## MARK YOUR 2022 CALENDARS

**18 January** – Luncheon Meeting  
11:30-1:30 Location: Dominick's

**15 March** – Surviving Spouse program. Dinner  
5-7:30 Location: Grill on the Green

**2 May** – Dinner 5-7:30 Scholarship Awards  
Location: TBA

**21 September** – Luncheon 11:30-1:30  
Location: TBA

**15 November** – Dinner (possibly Mix & Mingle) 5-7:30  
Location: TBA

**8 December** – Holiday Dinner 5-7:30 Location: TBA

**The Board of Directors meeting** is the 1st Wednesday of each month 9-10:30am at the Friends in Deed Building, Green Valley. Members are welcomed to attend... join us! There will be no Board meetings in June, July or August.

## Free Tax Preparation at La Posada

Peggy McGee, 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President/Programs



There are still some openings in March and April to get your taxes done for free at the La Posada Rec Center. The program is made possible by AARP Tax-Aide volunteers. All returns will be prepared on Wednesdays and Fridays on an appointment only basis. If one expects to get brokers statements, AARP recommends that appointment be scheduled for March 16 or later. Appointments can be made at [appt.link/gv-laposada-taxaide](https://appt.link/gv-laposada-taxaide). Clients can select from multiple appointment times and will get an email confirmation of their appointment. Clients without computer access may call 520-222-7652. Leave a message if no answer.

Tax preparers have completed a rigorous training program and passed IRS certification tests. AARP volunteers cannot prepare business returns, but many self-employed individuals can utilize the free tax services as long as there is no inventory or expenses over \$35K or a loss. They cannot prepare Married Filing Separately tax returns, returns containing farm income, or those with rental property.

The only state for which counsellors receive training is Arizona; tax returns for other states cannot be prepared. Once they have gotten an appointment, clients may pick up the necessary tax preparation paperwork at Valley Assistance Services, [3950 S Camino Heroe](#), or the Green Valley Food Bank during their normal business hours or at the La Posada Rec Center on Wednesdays and Fridays between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.

## 2022 Officers, Directors & Chairs

(Area code is 520 unless otherwise indicated)

**President:** 1LT Elliott Jones USA (Fmr)  
(847) 366-6466

**First Vice-President and Membership:**  
CW3 Jack Bundy USA (Ret) (951) 760-8706

**Second Vice-President and Programs:**  
COL Peggy McGee, USAR (Ret) 207-6188

**Secretary:** Maj. Gen. James Whitehead, Jr., USAF  
(Ret) 475-8033

**Treasurer:** COL Mike Faust, USAF (Ret)  
(210) 240-8730

**Immediate Past President, President, 501(c)(3):**  
LT Joseph Longo, USA (Fmr) (509) 945-4993

**Legislative Affairs:**  
Lt Col Darren Venters, USAF (Ret) 490-4470

**ESGR Representative:**  
Lt Col Dick Kosnick, USAF (Ret) 867-8999

**Surviving Spouse Liaison:** Nora  
Durham  
(714) 232-9277



**Director, Personal Affairs:**  
CWO3 James Rundlett, USCG (Ret) (509) 389-4286

**Chaplain:** Robert Lewis, CWO3 USA (Ret) 481-6994

**Director/JROTC Liaison:**  
COL Marianne Rogers Faust, USAF (Ret)  
(210) 861-9440

**Historian:** COL Marianne Rogers Faust, USAF (Ret)  
(210) 861-9440

**Transition Liaison:**  
Lt Col Darren Venters, USAF (Ret) 490-4470

**Public Relations Officer:**  
COL Peggy McGee, USA (Ret) 207-6188

**Webmaster/Newsletter:**  
Marianne Cobarrubias, [webmaster@greenvalleymoaa.org](mailto:webmaster@greenvalleymoaa.org)



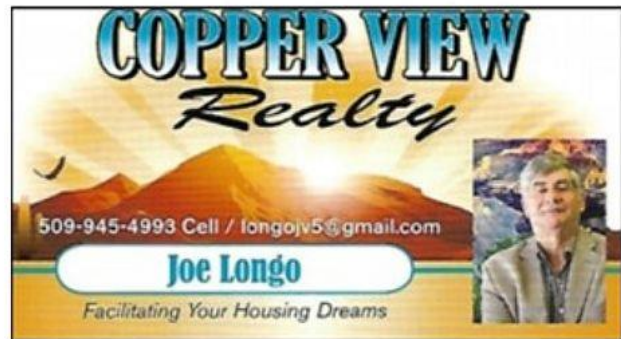
**Sponsors** A special “thank you” to our sponsors who support MOAA of Green Valley with a sponsor ad.



Now and Always  
We'll be There.

 MOAA  
INSURANCE  
PLANS


1-800-247-2192 • [www.moaainsurance.com](http://www.moaainsurance.com)



**COPPER VIEW**  
*Realty*

509-945-4993 Cell / [longojv5@gmail.com](mailto:longojv5@gmail.com)

**Joe Longo**  
Facilitating Your Housing Dreams

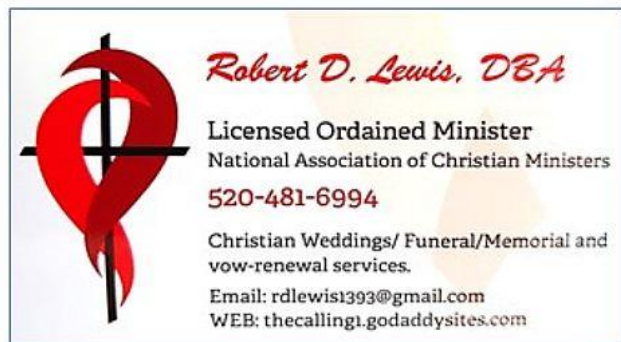


**LONG REALTY**  
A BERKSHIRE HATHAWAY AFFILIATE

**Justine Lewis**  
REALTOR®




DIRECT (520) 918-8116  
CELL (520) 481-6997  
EMAIL [justinel@longrealty.com](mailto:justinel@longrealty.com)  
WEB [justinel.longrealty.com](http://justinel.longrealty.com)  
275 W Continental Rd. #101 Green Valley, AZ 85622



**Robert D. Lewis, DBA**

Licensed Ordained Minister  
National Association of Christian Ministers  
520-481-6994

Christian Weddings/ Funeral/Memorial and  
vow-renewal services.  
Email: [rdlewis1393@gmail.com](mailto:rdlewis1393@gmail.com)  
WEB: [thecalling1.godaddysites.com](http://thecalling1.godaddysites.com)



## MOAA NATIONAL NEWS

### MOAA Announces Dates, Topics for Spring Advocacy in Action Campaign

MOAA's annual Advocacy in Action (AiA) event is taking shape, and while there's more than a month until the official launch, there are several ways MOAA members can begin showing their support as the campaign draws closer.

First, the basics: The 2022 AiA event will be held virtually from April 1-29. Based on Capitol Hill security measures and nationwide health challenges, we will again exercise appropriate measures of caution to bring our messages to legislators via virtual engagements. However, there may be opportunities for you to engage your legislators in person (safely) when they are home during Congress' spring break (April 11-22).

(continued to pages 10-12)



This year's advocacy topics:

- **Support the Major Richard Star Act (concurrent receipt for combat-injured servicemembers)**
- **Reduce TRICARE Mental Health Copayments**
- **Enact a 4.6% Military Pay Raise in the FY 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)**

Learn more about each topic, and how MOAA chooses the topics, below. But first:

### ***What You Can Do Now***

**Contact a MOAA Chapter.** Most engagements during the April campaign will originate from MOAA's councils and chapters. Their legislative leaders and volunteers make most of the appointments and arrangements with legislative offices. One of the advantages of the virtual environment is the use of online meeting platforms (Zoom, Teams, etc.) which can facilitate engagement from home; please contact your local chapter to see if they can add you to their efforts – it could be as easy as sending you a link to a meeting.

**Save the Date.** If you are not near a chapter, please mark your calendar for April 1 as the kickoff for AiA engagements. We will share another article like this one with more up-to-date information, talking points, and fact sheets on our three topics, as well as links to the latest information and MOAA's web-based letters, along with the phone number for MOAA's Capitol Switchboard if you would rather call your legislators.

**Stay Informed.** Be sure to subscribe to the weekly *MOAA Newsletter* for the latest AiA news and updates (MOAA members [can click here](#) to update their newsletter preferences). Keep up with all the latest advocacy news at [MOAA's Advocacy News page](#).

### ***How MOAA Picks the Topics***

People often ask how we come up with the topics each year, and some wonder if their priorities are being considered in that process. I can assure our members we consider all the priorities, which are usually found within groupings of these [priorities on our website](#). The decisions are driven by guidelines established by our board of directors. We want to ensure we are taking care of the currently serving troops and their families – as members of an officer association, we should be proud MOAA maintains this important perspective.

We also want to address an issue within our health care portfolio, as our members continue to see this as one of their priorities. When conditions permit, we also seek to leverage momentum on



important issues – often the case in the second session of a Congress as they wrap up work from the previous year.

This year's topics:

- **The Major Richard Star Act (concurrent receipt for combat-injured servicemembers).** Target legislation is [H.R. 1282](#) with 186 co-sponsors as of Feb. 14 – picking up 35 new co-sponsors this session. The Senate's bill, [S. 344](#), has 55 co-sponsors as of Feb. 14. We will build on this momentum from last year to get these bills to a floor vote, or have the bill's language made part of the FY 2023 NDAA with support from House and Senate leaders. This legislation impacts over 50,000 combat-injured service members who were not able to serve their full 20 years due to those injuries. Passage of this bill will also impact current and future members who may face the same fate of early retirements due to combat injuries.
- **TRICARE Mental Health Copayments.** MOAA supports the Stop Copay Overpay Act ([H.R. 4824](#)) – mental health is increasingly important, and the issue is getting attention on the Hill due to pandemic impacts and the effects of social media on children's well-being. This topic acknowledges the national shortfall of access to quality mental health care and addresses TRICARE's financial barrier to care when it is available – a problem MOAA can help fix. This legislation will benefit our currently serving families on TRICARE Select and our working-age retirees and their families.
- **Military Pay Raise at 4.6%.** This will be worked in the FY 2023 NDAA with insights in the president's budget and input from the Armed Services Committees in both chambers. Some legislators are interested in [adjusting pay tables for the junior enlisted](#). We have yet to see details of any such plans, but in the meantime, we remain focused on the 4.6% raise for all ranks. This topic addresses the currently serving and their families (pay and benefits) and is significantly important to those who are about to retire.

## **What's Next?**

We will follow up with several actions over the coming weeks:

- The MOAA AIA website will be live in mid-March for those who want to get a head start on lobbying for these three important topics. Watch for updates at [MOAA.org/AiA](http://MOAA.org/AiA).

- As noted above, around the same time our website goes live, a follow-up article at MOAA.org will share links to everything you would need to go it alone with your legislators. However, we ask that you consider reaching out to your local chapter to possibly join their efforts.
- Your April issue of [Military Officer](#) (available to Life and Premium members) will include a message from MOAA's president highlighting the AiA efforts, as well as more details on the topics and what we are trying to achieve with your help. **Very important:** The publication also will include tear-out letters for you to fold, seal, stamp, and mail to House and Senate leaders, making them even more aware of our efforts and seeking their support. These letters will highlight the Major Richard Star Act.
- Throughout April, we will provide articles and links to Calls to Action via our [new Legislative Action Center](#), which allows you to send messages to your legislators via our web-based letter service.
- April 11-22 is the congressional working period in the states and districts: Your legislators will be home and hard at work campaigning. This is a golden opportunity to seek an appointment in person or virtually, depending on the comfort level of those involved.

Thank you for reviewing this timeline and putting some of these dates on your calendar. MOAA's reputation for advocacy is largely the result of our grassroots network across the nation; certainly, one of the main reasons *The Hill* news outlet has recognized MOAA as a top lobbyist for [15 years in a row](#). Our members have always been a part of this continued success.

---

## VA to Overhaul Disability Evaluations for Mental Health, Other Conditions

The [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) will change its disability ratings criteria for mental health conditions, sleep apnea and tinnitus, part of a major overhaul of the review process to ensure that compensation matches veterans' medical conditions and needs, department officials say.

The VA plans to update its Schedule for Rating Disabilities -- its guide for determining how it evaluates and provides benefits for service-connected disabilities -- for [mental health](#) conditions, to include their impact on veterans' lives, and abolish the "0%" disability rating for any service-connected mental health diagnosis in favor of a 10% minimum, [according to a notice published Tuesday in the Federal Register](#).

*(continued to pages 13-14)*

For tinnitus, the department will get rid of its stand-alone rating and consider the condition a symptom of whatever underlying disease is its cause.

As for sleep apnea, ratings will be assessed based on the effectiveness of treatment and the condition's impact on "earning impairment," [according to the notice](#).

Previously, most conditions were assessed on the number and severity of symptoms, but VA officials said the consideration of lost wages or productivity is needed to ensure that the department compensates veterans appropriately.

Officials say the changes, which would go into effect after a period for the public to comment and a final version is published, likely will result in higher disability ratings for veterans with mental health conditions, but fewer qualifying for disability compensation for tinnitus and sleep apnea.

Veterans already receiving disability for these conditions will not see their ratings downgraded by any changes, officials said.

"Veterans who currently receive compensation for a service-connected condition in these body systems will not have their disability rating impacted when the VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities is updated," Thomas Murphy, acting VA undersecretary for benefits, said in a press release.

Assessing disabilities by the impact they have on earning capacity will allow the department to "more accurately compensate [veterans] for their service-connected disabilities," officials said in the press release.

"Updating the rating schedule allows veterans to receive decisions based on the most current medical knowledge relating to their condition," Murphy said.

Under the proposal for mental health conditions, the VA will consider a condition's impact on cognition, relationships and ability to complete tasks, care for oneself and perform activities necessary for functioning daily.

Citing studies that showed the current VA disability rating system does not adequately provide compensation to make up for earnings lost if a veteran misses work or can't work as the result of a service-related mental health condition, the department plans to adopt the new criteria to "more accurately capture the occupational impairment caused by mental disabilities and provide more adequate compensation," according to the notice.



The new criteria also will be used to assess disability ratings for eating disorders, which currently are outlined in a separate part of the disability ratings schedule.

Officials said an overhaul of the system is underway because the disability ratings evaluation schedule has been updated piecemeal since it was first created in 1945.

To date, the VA has completed updating 10 of the 14 sections of the schedule; the proposed changes to mental health and the section that covers tinnitus and sleep apnea make up half of the remaining.

VA officials said the changes made to the criteria reflect modern medicine and a better understanding of how diagnoses and treatments affect veterans' lives.

Speaking with reporters during a press conference, a VA benefits official noted that when overhauling the section on musculoskeletal injuries, the department shortened the time period for veterans to receive disability payments following a hip replacement from 12 months to four.

"We looked at more recent medical studies ... and found that the time somebody is off of work after having that surgery is closer to three months ... so we made a revision to that portion," the official said.

The VA is seeking public comment on the proposed changes to the ratings schedule through the Federal Register. After the comment period closes April 18, the department will review them and draft a final version, to include the dates the changes will go into effect.

Once the changes are made, veterans who believe their ratings should be upgraded based on the new criteria should file a claim, the official said.

## **MOAA Interview: VA Secretary Denis McDonough on Toxic Exposure, COVID, and More**

VA Secretary Denis McDonough has been working on Capitol Hill for over 20 years — serving in roles with the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the National Security Council, as a foreign policy adviser, and as former President Barack Obama's chief of staff. Combining this experience with his personal and professional background with the military, he seeks to take on toxic exposure reform and make it easier for veterans to contact VA.

The following interview conducted in late 2021 has been edited for length and clarity.

*(continued to pages 15-16)*

## **Q. Where do toxic exposure reform efforts stand?**

**A.** Obviously, MOAA has been at the front of making sure that we make good on our pledges and our promises to our veterans who are exposed to toxic exposure. Over the course of the last several months, we've seen a couple of important innovations. One is we're now implementing the three presumptives related to Agent Orange that Congress passed [in late 2020]. So, we are actively examining claims and adjudicating claims and making benefit payments now related to Parkinsonism and bladder cancer, for example.

We're also making significant strides on toxic exposure in Southwest Asia, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan. For the first time since the first Gulf War, we're now paying claims for three diseases, which we've determined to be presumptively connected to service in those areas — rhinitis, sinusitis, and asthma. We expect as many as 300,000 claims. But importantly, we're also looking at how we can expand the number of diseases that are presumptively covered ... [and determined] by service in that region.

## **Q. What do you see as the VA's role in continuing to battle the pandemic?**

**A.** Well, I see three things. One is we have to continue to get veterans who are not vaccinated at all yet, vaccinated. We have vaccinated about half of the eligible veterans, well over 3 million now. About half of the veterans who get all of their care from us have been vaccinated by us. But that still leaves room to grow.

The second thing is we have to execute on boosters. ... And then the third is we have to be in a position to deal with the fallout from COVID. And that's in two ways. One is on things like long COVID, which is a series of conditions that many survivors of COVID end up wrestling. We're really leading the federal government's effort on understanding and treating long COVID. The position to respond to is people who deferred care during the pandemic because they wanted to not go to a hospital or a clinic. So, we're going to continue to be providing enhanced care for our veterans, who may have slightly more complicated or even significantly more complicated health situations because of deferred care.

## **Q. What have you done to solicit feedback from veterans? How have you responded to their concerns?**

**A.** We have a very active channel called V Signals where we're constantly in touch with our veterans to hear what's on their minds. We're in the process of implementing the electronic health record, so that any individual servicemember from the time he's enrolled to the time he becomes a veteran will have his medical record or her medical record travel along with that veteran.

We had a big question at the start of my tenure here at VA about deciding what portal we'll use for the electronic health record. ... I said, "I won't decide that; our veterans will decide that." So, we've been out in the field with veteran focus groups across the country, many of whom already use [My HealtheVet portal](#) at VA, to get their sense of the best way for us to establish a portal for the new electronic health record. So that's a very concrete way that we're talking to veterans and using their feedback to design products that are designed to serve our veterans.

**Q. How can veterans service organizations like MOAA help VA achieve some of these priorities?**

**A.** The main thing is to continue to be aggressive advocates for your members and for vets. It's amazing to see how even in the context of the pandemic, MOAA's advocacy work has not diminished at all. ... So, continue to advocate for our vets, continue to advocate on Capitol Hill, and then continue to have this candid relationship that you have with us where you're not only sharing good ideas, but holding us accountable.



*GV MOAA News contributors this issue:*

Jack Bundy, Elliott Jones, Robert Lewis, John McGee, Peggy McGee, and Marianne Rogers Faust