



VETERANS AFFAIRS



Celebrating Service and Community

Dear Veterans, Families, and Members of Our Community,

I hope everyone had a wonderful Thanksgiving! November was such a full and busy month that we weren't able to publish a newsletter—but what an incredible month it was, full of events, celebrations, and meaningful connections that highlighted the spirit of our Veteran community.

First, I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to all our Veterans as we celebrated Veterans Day. Our team was proud to participate in several local events. Even though the weather was cold and snowy, it was inspiring to see so many members of the community brave the elements to honor our Veterans. The dedication and willingness to come together to recognize those who served is a reminder of the deep respect and gratitude that exists in our county for our Veterans. Seeing the smiles, hearing the cheers, and feeling the camaraderie made the chilly weather worth it.

November was also a monumental month for our county Veterans with the inaugural Expo and Stand Down. This was a first-of-its-kind gathering in our community, and we are thrilled to share that it was a remarkable success. Over 350 Veterans and their family members attended, accessing valuable resources, services, and support from local organizations and agencies. The event provided not only practical assistance but also a sense of community and connection that we hope will continue to grow in the years to come. We are extremely proud to have hosted this event and are committed to making it an annual tradition, ensuring that our Veterans know they are seen, appreciated, and supported.

As we move into December, there is much to look forward to. We will begin the month by honoring our DAV volunteer van drivers with a special luncheon to recognize their tireless dedication. These volunteers go above and beyond to ensure Veterans can get to their medical appointments safely and comfortably, and we are grateful for their service and generosity.

On December 18th, we will host our annual Holiday Open House, welcoming Veterans, family members, and community members, to stop by, say hello, and enjoy some snacks. This event is a wonderful opportunity to connect, and celebrate the season.

The holiday season is always a time for reflection, gratitude, and the spirit of giving. We want to wish you a Merry Christmas and a joyful start to the New Year. Thank you for your continued support and for helping us make a positive impact in the lives of our Veterans each and every day.

Jessica
Jessica Walker
Director

Highlights

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Programs

VA CALM



To reach the
INDIANA COUNTY VA CLINIC
Call: 1-877-626-2500, Extension 15567



SATURDAY, DEC. 6TH
10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

In the spirit of Christmas, come join us as we say "Thank You" to all of our active duty men and women serving our country.

Live Music, Santa, Wagon Rides, Meet a Soldier
Refreshments available for purchase to benefit the cause!

Show your appreciation by donating a Christmas tree
& include a special message on the tag.

Unable to attend but still would like to donate?
Call Mytrysak Family Tree Farms at **724-463-0570** to donate a tree.
Mastercard, Visa, and Discover are accepted.

Hosted by the Trees for Troops Day Committee
Mytrysak Family Tree Farm
Recipient of the 2024 "Spirit Award"
1803 Fleming Road, Indiana

MARCELLO CHARITABLE TRUST'S
5th Annual Christmas
Gala

CELEBRATE THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT OF GIVING
BY SUPPORTING OUR VETERANS

Cocktail Reception, Dinner Buffet, Dessert Bar, Cash Bar

Live Music by: 7 Mile Run

Dancing, Basket Raffles, Professional Photography

December 12th

The Ballroom at The Indiana Country Club from 5:30pm – 10:00pm

Formal Attire / Black Tie Optional

Tickets: minimum donation of \$50, purchase by December 5th

For more info or to purchase tickets, visit Marcello Charitable Trust's Facebook Page
or go to: [Ticketstripe.com/mctgalaz025](https://www.ticketstripe.com/mctgalaz025)

Department of Veterans Affairs

Holiday Open House

THURSDAY | 18 | DECEMBER

1:00 - 3:00 pm
825 Philadelphia Street
Courthouse - Second Floor

Meet and visit with our team, explore our services, enjoy refreshments, and connect with fellow Veterans!

For more information call
(724) 465-3815

Veteran Spotlight

This month, we honor Donald Lee Helsel, a proud U.S. Army Vietnam Veteran who served as a Specialist E4 and personnel clerk from July 9, 1969, to April 12, 1971. Outside of his military service, Donald is a devoted family man. He is married, with four stepchildren and two adopted children, and is blessed with 10 grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. Family is a central part of his life, and he treasures the moments spent together. Donald enjoys keeping his mind and spirit active with hobbies such as traveling, reading, and solving puzzles.

2025 Veteran's Expo & Stand Down



Photography by Jamee Crusan at Switch Hitter Media (unless otherwise noted)

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Photo by Diann Overman

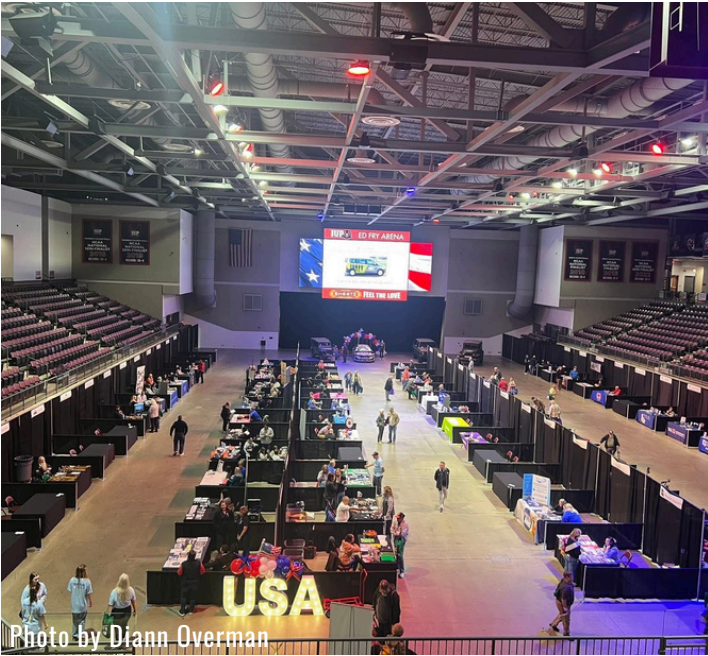


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2025 Veteran's Expo & Stand Down



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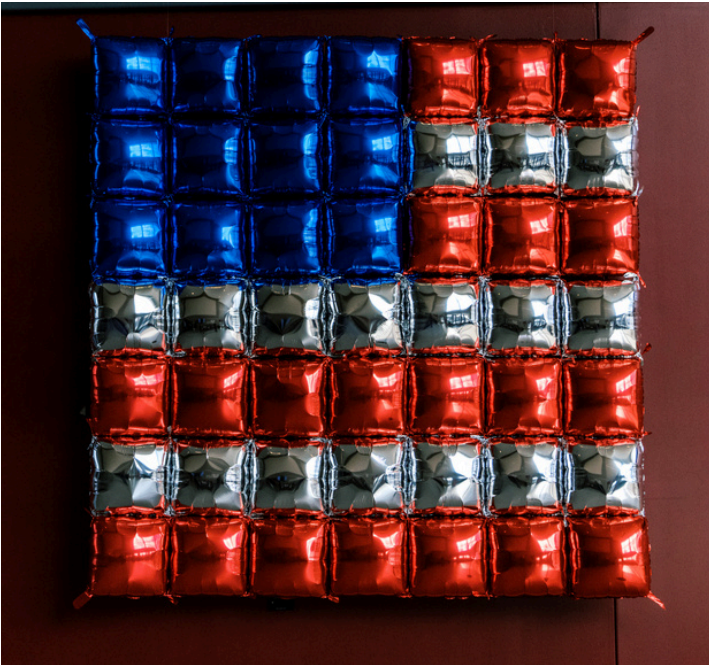


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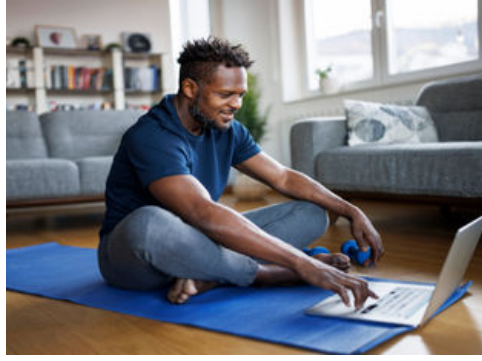


VA News and Information



GI Bill Restored

The VA announced that potentially thousands of Veterans discharged under the COVID-19 vaccine mandate may now regain eligibility for GI Bill education benefits. Following Executive Order 14184, the Department of War has reviewed discharges and upgraded the status of 899 Veterans so far, with thousands more potentially eligible. VA encourages Veterans separated for refusing the COVID vaccine to seek discharge upgrades and reapply for GI Bill benefits. Veterans can request reviews through their Military Department Review Boards, and once their status is officially upgraded to fully honorable, they can submit a new benefits claim. For more information, visit [VA Education Benefits](#) or call 888-GIBILL-1. [Read More](#)



Whole Health for Veterans

VA is ushering in a new era of person-centered care called Whole Health, which puts Veterans at the center of their own health journey. Celebrated during Person-Centered Care Month in October, Whole Health helps Veterans focus on their values, goals, and overall well-being—not just their medical conditions. For those who cannot access in-person services, Tele Whole Health offers virtual care from anywhere, along with digital tools like the Personal Health Inventory, Live Whole Health app, and Whole Health coaching. These resources support Veterans in creating personalized care plans and achieving their goals. To start your Whole Health journey and build a plan centered on you, visit the VA Whole Health website and take the first step toward living your best life. [Read More](#)



Screen Early

Regular cancer screenings save lives, and for Veterans, staying up to date is one of the most important steps for protecting your health. VA recommends routine screenings for lung, colorectal, cervical, and breast cancers, tailored to age and risk factors. Low-dose CT scans can detect lung cancer early, colon cancer can be screened with tests like the at-home FIT, cervical cancer can be monitored with Pap or HPV tests, and mammograms for women are now recommended starting at age 40. Veterans should also discuss additional screenings, such as skin or prostate exams, with their provider based on personal risk factors. For more information, visit [cancer.va.gov](#). [Read More](#)



Ending Veteran Homelessness

The Department of Veterans Affairs announced that it permanently housed 51,936 homeless Veterans in fiscal year 2025, 4,011 more than last year and the highest number since VA began tracking individual Veterans housed rather than total housing placements. Under the updated methodology introduced in 2022, VA has steadily increased its results each year. This year's progress was driven in part by the Getting Veterans Off the Street initiative, launched in May 2025, which helped connect 25,065 unsheltered Veterans with interim or permanent housing, health care, and benefits. These efforts align with a recent presidential executive order establishing the National Center for Warrior Independence for Homeless Veterans on the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center campus, which aims to support up to 6,000 homeless Veterans by 2028. VA leadership emphasized the life-changing impact of this work and reaffirmed its commitment to sustaining momentum nationwide. Veterans seeking support can learn more at [VA.gov/homeless](#). [Read More](#)



VA Cuts Claims Backlog

The Department of Veterans Affairs announced significant progress in FY25, reporting a 57% reduction in the disability and pension claims backlog since the start of the current administration — dropping from 264,717 to 112,353 claims pending more than 125 days. This improvement was driven by record-breaking productivity, including an all-time high of 3,001,734 claims processed in FY25, surpassing last year's record. VA also processed one million claims by February 20 — the fastest pace ever — and set new single-day and single-month records by completing 15,364 claims on May 29 and 300,799 in July. Claims processing accuracy improved as well, rising to 93.5% from 91.6% the previous year. In total, VA provided \$195 billion in compensation and pension benefits to 6.9 million Veterans and survivors, reflecting the Department's continued commitment to delivering faster and more reliable service. [Read More](#)

Resources



Angels' Wings Program Supporting Veteran Families This Holiday Season

The Angels' Wings Program, sponsored by Diamond Drugs, Inc. in partnership with ICCAP, helps bring holiday cheer to families, children, seniors, and Veterans across Indiana County. The program is still in need of sponsors for Veteran families, and community members are encouraged to help make a difference this season.

Interested in sponsoring a Veteran family? Email: info@angelswingsprogram.com

Volunteers are also welcome to assist with shopping and gift wrapping. Angels' Wings reminds us that every act of kindness matters, and together we can ensure no Veteran family is forgotten this holiday season.

Supporting Those Who Care: VA Caregiver Programs for Veterans' Families

Caring for a Veteran can be incredibly rewarding, but it can also come with challenges. The VA offers two main caregiver support programs to help family members and loved ones provide care while also taking care of themselves.

The Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) is designed for caregivers of Veterans who were seriously injured in the line of duty on or after September 11, 2001. This program provides a monthly stipend, health insurance, mental health support, training, respite care, and reimbursement for travel and lodging for both the caregiver and Veteran for medical appointments.

For caregivers of Veterans of all eras, including pre-9/11, the **VA Caregiver Support Line and General Caregiver Support Services** offer education and training, peer support, respite resources, guidance on benefits and services, and connections to local VA and community programs.

Both programs give caregivers access to tools to manage stress, build resilience, and stay connected, including online support communities, educational webinars, and one-on-one coaching. Caregivers interested in learning more or applying for either program can contact the VA Caregiver Support Line at 1-855-260-3274 or visit **VA Caregiver Support**.

Supporting those who care ensures that Veterans receive the best care possible—and that caregivers have the help they need to thrive.

Find Calm, Manage Pain: VA Center for Mindfulness Programs

The VA Center for Mindfulness offers powerful, evidence-based tools to help Veterans manage stress, anxiety, chronic pain, and overall well-being through mindfulness. One of the most popular programs available is VA CALM for Chronic Pain—a structured, supportive program designed specifically for Veterans living with persistent pain.

VA CALM (Compassionate Awareness Learning Module) is a 6-week online program that teaches simple, practical mindfulness techniques to help Veterans cope more effectively with chronic pain. Mindfulness focuses on paying attention to the present moment without judgment and has been shown to reduce stress, improve emotional balance, ease anxiety and depression, and support healthier pain management.

In addition to live classes, Veterans can practice mindfulness anytime using the free Mindfulness Coach app, developed by the VA. This easy-to-use app offers guided meditations, breathing exercises, stress management tools, and educational resources to support daily practice at your own pace.

How to Get Started? Veterans interested in enrolling in VA CALM classes or accessing mindfulness resources can speak with their VA care team or visit the **VA Center for Mindfulness** online to register.

The Mindfulness Coach App is available for free download in both the Apple App Store and Google Play.

Mindfulness is a simple but powerful way to take control of stress, improve well-being, and build resilience—**one breath at a time**.

PENNSYLVANIA PROBLEM GAMBLING HELPLINE



The helpline offers **24/7/365**, live assistance to callers.

Free and Confidential!

Thank you for reading!

Indiana County Department of Veterans Affairs	(724) 465-3815
https://www.indianacountypa.gov/departments/veteran-affairs/	825 Philadelphia Street Second Floor, Court House Indiana, PA 15701

