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Background Brief on ...

Veterans

Background

An estimated 316,626 Oregonians are veterans. They are men and women of all races and ethnicities, who range in age from 18 to 85 and over, who have served in the armed forces of the United States. Serving in the armed forces entitles one to a wide range of benefits that are made available exclusively to qualifying veterans primarily through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

The VA is organized into three distinct divisions: Health Administration, Benefits Administration, and National Cemetery Administration. National Cemetery Administration is responsible for operating the entire national cemetery system (except Arlington). Health Administration is concerned with all aspects of health care (including crisis prevention and mental health issues) and delivery of care through numerous medical and nursing facilities across the nation. The third division, Benefits Administration, is concerned with the provision of all other benefits, from disability compensation to educational and employment-related to housing.

The Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs (ODVA) is the state entity primarily responsible for implementing VA Benefits Administration programs as well as state programs. It is also responsible for outreach to veterans, connecting eligible veterans with any of the services offered by any of the three divisions, and partnering with nongovernmental and volunteer organizations that offer even more resources to veterans. Congress has oversight authority over the VA, especially with regard to Health Administration, while the Oregon Legislature plays a role in overseeing ODVA's operations. ODVA programs and services include: processing claims for health benefits; end-of-life benefits; compensation for service-connected disabilities; retirement; the GI Bill and other educational benefits; providing employment services, home loans, and life insurance; and processing benefits for veterans' dependents and survivors.

Veteran Service Officers and Volunteer Organizations

A professional Veteran Service Officer (VSO) is someone who has been accredited by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and certified by the state. They are experts in identifying what benefits a veteran may be eligible for and assisting veterans throughout the claims process to obtain those benefits. They are located in most counties across the state, are supported and monitored by ODVA, and serve veterans at no cost. VSOs are the main point of contact for individual veterans, but they also function as centralized hubs of information and conduits that connect veterans with other veterans, active service members, and other local and nongovernmental resources that may be available. The state of Oregon is home to many dedicated volunteers who work with veterans and advocate veterans' issues, many of whom are veterans' family members. There are also a number of nonprofit organizations for veterans with chapters in Oregon, including the United Service Organizations (USO), Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), National Association for Black Veterans, Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), Student Veterans of America, and the Wounded Warrior Project.

Federal Programs

Disability Compensation – Disability compensation is available tax free to veterans made ill or injured while on active duty, or with illness or injuries made worse by active duty.

Life Insurance – Honorably discharged veterans with service-connected disabilities may qualify for insurance.

Burial and End of Life – Burial benefits include a gravesite in any national cemetery with available space, opening and closing of the grave, perpetual care, a government headstone or marker, a burial flag, and a Presidential Memorial Certificate, at no cost to the veteran's family.

Counseling and Outreach – Readjustment counseling and outreach services are available at no cost to all veterans who served in any combat zone. Family members may also receive no-cost services for military-related issues.

Education – The GI Bill is available to veterans, those on active duty, and selected reserve.

Employment – Veterans' Recruitment Appointment Preference permits federal agencies to appoint eligible veterans to jobs without competition. The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program is an educational employment program for veterans with 20 percent or higher service-connected disability.

Health Care – ODVA assists with eligibility and claims, and connects veterans to Oregon VA Medical facilities. Programs and benefits include: online Health Care Eligibility & Enrollment; Combat Veteran Health Care & Medical Check-Up; My Health-e-Vet (a website permitting authorized access to personal health records and other information and services (for Veterans, active duty soldiers, and their dependents and caregivers); dental care; hearing aids; and eyeglasses.

Housing and Homelessness –

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides home loans and guarantees to buy, improve, or operate farms.
- The VA offers a wide variety of assistance to prevent and address homelessness among veterans, including a national call center staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to connect veterans and their families to resources; a Compensated Work Therapy program to assist homeless veterans transitioning to competitive employment; a Transitional Residence Program of work-based rehabilitative residential treatment for veterans participating in compensated work therapy; and a Homeless Veteran Supported Employment Program (HVSEP) for vocational assistance and ongoing support.

- The VA also partners with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to provide supported housing and ongoing services and case management for homeless veterans who might not otherwise be able to live independently. (HUD has designated more than 10,000 Section 8 Vouchers to public housing authorities across the country for homeless veterans.)
- Drop-in Centers – These facilities provide a place for homeless veterans to clean up, wash their clothing, and participate in activities during the day.
- Stand Downs – These events provide homeless veterans with a variety of services and create an opportunity for the VA and community-based providers to reach more individuals. Stand downs offer a temporary refuge where homeless veterans can obtain necessities, health screenings, referrals, and access to other programs and assistance.

Transportation – Veterans and eligible beneficiaries may receive reimbursement for travel mileage; veterans may also obtain rides to medical facilities from the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) Transportation Network.

State Programs

ODVA is responsible for administration of federal benefits, but also offers a variety of in-state services, including benefits information and counseling and assisting veterans and their families with claims. Other services include the ORVET Home Loan program; educational assistance to attend an Oregon college, university, or vocational school; conservatorship services for veterans and their dependents (to maintain a veteran's estate while providing for housing, medical, and personal needs); a variety of emergency financial assistance; legal assistance for certain veteran issues; and nationally recognized skilled nursing, rehabilitative, and Alzheimer's care at the Oregon Veterans' Home (for veterans, their spouses, and any parent whose children all died serving in the Armed Forces of the United States).

Oregon's Department of Education permits qualifying veterans to receive a high school diploma from the school district where they currently live, or from the school district where they would have graduated. Diplomas may also be issued for qualifying veterans who are deceased.

Oregon's community colleges and University System provide in-state tuition for eligible veterans, both undergraduate and graduate; and the child or spouse of a veteran who died in active duty, or from a disability sustained in active duty, or who is 100 percent-disabled from military service, may receive a full tuition waiver and pursue a bachelor's or master's degree for only the cost of fees. (Educational assistance is also available for Oregon residents who are members of the National Guard or Reserves, in an active duty capacity in a combat zone, called the Voyager Aid Program).

Oregon's Employment Department provides Training Unemployment Insurance to allow eligible veterans who do not begin civilian employment immediately after leaving military service to receive weekly unemployment compensation for a limited time.

Workforce Career or One-Stop Employment Centers have specialists available to help disabled veterans find employment. They provide employment information, education and training opportunities, job counseling, job search workshops, and resume assistance.

Disabled Veterans Outreach Program Specialists (DVOP) and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVER) also assist veterans who wish to apply for federal, state, local government, and private-sector employment.

Veterans' Preference Points may be obtained by qualifying veterans and disabled veterans applying for competitive positions with public entities.

Oregon's Department of Motor Vehicles offers a veteran designation on driver's licenses;

allows for permanent vehicle registration for disabled veterans; has a veteran recognition license plate program offering a wide variety of plate designs that contributes a portion of fees to support the Oregon Veterans' Home; and links its website to ODVA to help veterans connect with the agency, and to encourage charitable contributions to benefit veterans.

Oregon State Parks and Recreation

Department provides free day use and camping at RV and tent sites year-round for service-connected disabled veterans and U.S. Armed Forces active duty personnel on leave.

Oregon's Department of Fish and Wildlife

offers a permanent combined hunting and fishing license for qualifying disabled war veterans.

Oregon Department of Revenue provides a property tax exemption, up to a certain amount of a property's assessed value, for war veterans or their surviving spouse.

County Recorder's Offices permit veterans to record documents and obtain certified copies of public documents, for veteran-related purposes, at no cost.

Oregon's "No Wrong Door" Policy

Oregon supports a "no wrong door" policy to encourage outreach to veterans and their families. "No wrong door" contemplates every contact between a person and a public entity as an opportunity to inquire about veteran status, and request permission to communicate information to ODVA. In Oregon, the Bureau of Labor and Industries, the Department of Transportation, and the Department of Human Services all incorporate questions about veteran status into certain forms and processes in order to connect people with the benefits they have earned.

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Resources:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
<http://www.va.gov/>

Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs
<http://www.oregon.gov/ODVA/Pages/index.aspx>

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