State Legislative Update

2020 Florida Legislative Session

The 2020 session will begin on Jan. 14, 2020 and conclude on March 13, 2020. Here are some of the key bills we are actively monitoring and providing guidance.

1. Florida Veterans’ Care Coordinator Program (Harrell/Zika)

The proposed bill authorizes the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs to establish the Florida Veterans’ Care Coordination Program to provide veterans and their families with behavioral health care referral and care coordination services. The bill allows the department to contract with a certain nonprofit entity to enter into agreements with Florida 2-1-1 Network participants to provide such services while providing program goals and the statewide delivery of specified services by program teams. This effort continues the statewide expansion of the Veteran Care Coordinator Program that will not be funded after June 30, 2020.

2. Health Care Licensing Requirements for VA Doctors (Gainer/Pigman)

The proposed bill with allow MDs and Doctors of Osteopathic Medicine employed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs who are licensed in other states to practice in private medical facilities in Florida. Doctors must have an MOU with the facility as well as a temporary certificate from the Department of Health. The intent of this bill is to allow the exemption of health care licensing laws, rules and regulations for health care professionals who are employed by the VA and who treat Florida
veterans at licensed medical facilities in the state. The proposed legislation applies only to Veterans who are currently receiving care through the VA using their earned benefits.

3. Veterans Treatment Court (Lee/Ponder)

The proposed language looks to standardize and address funding for Veterans Treatment Courts statewide. It specifically addresses adding a gatekeeper to Veterans Treatment Courts, allowing the alleged victim the right to participate in the veteran’s treatment and provides standards for determination of acceptance into the program.

4. Homestead Tax Exemption (Wright/Killebrew)

The joint resolution proposes an amendment to the Florida Constitution to allow the same ad valorem tax discount on homestead property for combat-disabled veterans age 65 or older to carry over to the surviving spouse of a veteran receiving the discount if the surviving spouse holds legal or beneficial title to the homestead and permanently resides thereon. The discount would apply to the property until the surviving spouse remarries, sells, or otherwise disposes of, the property. If the surviving spouse sells the property, the discount may be transferred to the surviving spouse’s new residence, not to exceed the dollar amount granted from the most recent ad valorem tax roll, as long as the residence is used as the surviving spouse’s permanent residence and he or she does not remarry.

5. Veterans Protection Act (Wright/Payne)

The proposed legislation would add “veterans” as defined in Sec. 1.01, Fla. Stat., to the state’s White Collar Victim Protection Act, Sec. 775.0844. The WCVP Act aggravates penalties for a range of fraud crimes that victimize 10 or more elderly persons, or 20 or more persons as defined in Sec. 1.01, Fla. Stat., or any state or local government agency. The bill would make it a first-degree felony to commit a listed fraud crime against a group of veterans or a veteran fraud against a larger group of Florida victims. This is the state of ensuring that Florida Veterans are protected from crimes targeting veterans and crimes by persons using stolen valor to pretend to be veterans.
Key Upcoming Events

- Jan. 14 – Opening Day of 2020 Florida Legislative Session
- Jan. 16 - Florida Veterans Council Meeting, Orlando
- Jan. 20 – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day
- Jan. 29 – Florida Senior Day, Capitol
- Feb. 14 – Valentine’s Day
- Feb. 17 - Presidents’ Day (VA facilities closed)
- March 13 – Closing Day of 2020 Florida Legislative Session

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Governor DeSantis and FDVA Executive Director Burgess Highlight Historic First Year in Office to Support Veterans

TALLAHASSEE – Gov. Ron DeSantis and officials from the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs (FDVA) are pointing to a string of policies and initiatives that are providing critical support to the state’s 1.5 million veterans.

Gov. Ron DeSantis said: “It’s been a fast-paced and meaningful first year. As a Navy veteran who served in Iraq, our state’s 1.5 million veterans will always have my unwavering support, along with all Floridians. With FDVA Executive Director Danny Burgess’ leadership, we will continue to ensure that veterans and their families in our great state have access to meaningful benefits, support and mental health services.”

First Lady Casey DeSantis said: “We are working with Florida’s veteran community to help connect them with vital mental health counseling and services. It’s a long-term partnership that I’m pleased to have the support and engagement from FDVA
Executive Director Danny Burgess said: “I’m proud of Governor Ron DeSantis and First Lady Casey DeSantis, our Cabinet and legislature in supporting FDVA and the 1.5 million veterans of our state. The Sunshine State offers unique benefits such as in-state tuition rates for veterans and their families using the Post-9/11 GI Bill, several layers of property tax exemptions, expanded veterans’ preference, and extensive benefits, licensure and fee waivers for many activities and occupations. Together, we will continue to ensure Florida leads the charge as the most veteran-friendly state in the nation.”

**Forward March Initiative:**

- On March 29, Governor DeSantis and FDVA announced *Forward March*, an initiative which aims to unite the combined energy and resources of Florida’s state agencies, veterans’ service organizations, private partners and local communities. *Forward March* is the start of an ongoing effort to determine best practices and ensure the state of Florida sets the national standard for veteran services and support.

- The initiative kicked off at the University of South Florida, with regional meetings held during the summer of 2019 in Pensacola, Jacksonville, West Palm Beach, Ocala, Miami, Port Canaveral and Sarasota. Participants engaged in a series of breakout sessions focusing on topics such as Community Services, Mental Health and Wellness, Benefits and Assistance, Transition and Legal Services and Veterans’ Treatment Courts. With the feedback gathered from the regional meetings, FDVA is identifying where Florida needs to reinforce best practices, reduce redundancies and implement solutions to fill gaps.

**GI LAW – Lawyers Assisting Warriors:**

- On April 18, Governor DeSantis announced the Governor’s Initiative on Lawyers Assisting Warriors (GI LAW), an initiative to leverage the talent of Florida’s leading law firms to provide pro bono services to military members. Florida’s men and women in uniform will receive free legal counsel in a variety of civil manners, including actions in local courts.

- GI LAW began accepting pro bono legal services requests from active duty service members in May 2019, and to date, seven statewide law firms have provided free legal representation to more than 75 service members.
Mental Health:

• On June 26, Governor DeSantis signed CS/CS/HB 501: Alternative Treatment Options for Veterans. The bill, sponsored by Rep. Mel Ponder and Sen. Tom Wright, creates a $200,000 pilot program focused on treating post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries in veterans using alternative therapies. It expands available therapies for eligible veterans to include accelerated resolution therapy, equine therapy, music therapy, service animal training therapy and hyperbaric oxygen therapy at registered facilities.

• On Aug. 20, FDVA Executive Director Danny Burgess met with First Lady Casey DeSantis in Tampa to discuss suicide prevention and enhancing care coordination to veterans and military families. FDVA then partnered with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VISN 8) and Crisis Center of Tampa Bay to highlight the state’s veteran suicide prevention efforts during Florida Veteran Suicide Prevention Week, Sept. 8-14. A joint editorial was released statewide by FDVA Executive Director Burgess, VISN 8 Network Director Dr. Miguel H. LaPuz and Clara Reynolds, President and CEO of the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay.

• The Florida Veterans Support Line, 1-844-MyFLVet (693-5838), continues to provide confidential emotional support and connection to community resources 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The line, supported by FDVA and its suicide prevention partners, is available to all veterans in Florida.

• On Aug. 26, Governor DeSantis joined the Cohen Veterans Network to celebrate the opening of the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic at Aspire Health Partners. The clinic will provide additional support to Florida veterans who are suffering from mental health and post-traumatic stress issues, so they can live purposeful lives despite their critical wounds.

• On Veterans Day, Governor DeSantis and FDVA Executive Director Burgess joined Lee Health, the largest healthcare system in Southwest Florida, and Home Base Southwest Florida, a Red Sox Foundation and Massachusetts General Hospital Program, to announce a partnership offering mental health services for veterans and military families who call Southwest Florida home – at no cost.

Career and Job Opportunities:

• Governor DeSantis announced that CareerSource Central Florida, CareerSource Flagler Volusia and CareerSource Polk were being awarded Veterans’ Performance Incentive Awards for their diligent work of providing employment and training opportunities to thousands of veterans.
Governor DeSantis announced the launch of a new military-friendly travel section on VISIT FLORIDA’s website, www.visitflorida.com/military. The site includes information about discounts and experiences available to military members and their families, monuments and memorials, military-related events, museums and more.

$1,500,000 was awarded to Veterans Florida following the 2019 Legislative Session to meet the duties and responsibilities established by the legislature for the Veterans Entrepreneur and Training Services (VETS) Business Training Grants Program. $1,000,000 was also awarded to Veterans Florida for the Veterans Employment and Training Services (VETS) Entrepreneurship Program.

The 75th Anniversary of the GI Bill was June 22. More than 46,000 Floridians currently use GI Bill benefits to further their secondary education.

**Investment in Veterans:**

On June 26, Governor DeSantis signed CS/CS/HB 427: Honor and Remember Flag. The bill, sponsored by Rep. Tommy Gregory and Sen. Joe Gruters, allows the flying of the Honor and Remember Flag to serve as the state’s emblem of the service and sacrifice of the brave men and women of the United States Armed Forces who have given their lives in the line of duty.

Veterans in East Pasco County will soon have access to a brand new 14,000 square foot VA clinic, replacing the existing 4,500 square foot community based outpatient clinic (CBOC). A ground breaking ceremony took place in Zephyrhills on June 7.

Governor DeSantis joined the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Nov. 22 for the groundbreaking ceremony of a new Community Based Outpatient Clinic located in St. Augustine. The Governor was joined by FDVA Executive Director Danny Burgess.

Governor DeSantis and Executive Director Burgess attended the 2nd Annual 50th Anniversary Lapel Pinning Ceremony hosted by Collier-Lee Honor Flight to honor Vietnam veterans. During the event, 50th Anniversary Pins authorized by the U.S. Congress were distributed.

Governor DeSantis and First Lady DeSantis dedicated the Purple Heart Memorial at Tallahassee National Cemetery, Aug. 7.

Governor DeSantis announced Sept. 9 the selection of Henry “Hank” James Thomas to the Florida Civil Rights Hall of Fame. Thomas, of Jacksonville, served in the U.S. Army from 1963-1966 where he earned six combat medals, including the Purple
Heart. He was active in the civil rights movement and one of the original thirteen Freedom Riders, as well as a committed Freedom Fighter.

- Governor DeSantis joined the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) to announce that Florida has been designated an Age-Friendly State, making Florida the fourth state in the nation to join the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities. The Sunshine State has more than 789,000 veterans 65 years of age or older.

- FDVA printed and distributed 200,000 copies of the 2019 edition of the Florida Veterans’ Benefits Guide, courtesy of a grant from the Florida Veterans Foundation. To connect with veterans renewing their driver license, the guides have for the first time been distributed to Tax Collectors Offices and the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles.

**State Veterans’ Homes:**

- The FDVA budget resulting from the 2019 Florida Legislative Session was signed into law by Governor DeSantis and supports the daily operations of Florida’s six state-run veterans’ nursing homes and one assisted living facility. The facilities provide essential services and care to veterans throughout Florida.

- The Florida Health Care Association (FHCA) recognized four state veterans’ homes for earning a 2019 Silver – Achievement in Quality Award from the American Health Care Association and National Center for Assisted Living. They are the Alexander Nininger State Veterans’ Nursing Home in Pembroke Pines, Baldomero Lopez State Veterans’ Nursing Home in Land O’ Lakes, Emory L. Bennett State Veterans’ Nursing Home in Daytona Beach and Robert H. Jenkins Jr. Veterans’ Domiciliary Home in Lake City.

- Barbara Klein, a health care professional at the Douglas T. Jacobson State Veterans’ Nursing Home in Port Charlotte, was named the FHCA 2019 Long Term Care Rising Star in Nursing Award winner.

**Gov. Ron DeSantis’ Bolder, Brighter, Better Future Budget:**

- The governor’s proposed budget for FY 2020-2021 invests $18.2 million for the completion of the Ardie R. Copas State Veterans’ Nursing Home in St. Lucie County and the Lake Baldwin State Veterans’ Nursing Home in Orange County. The budget also invests $6.1 million for 48 positions to complete the required staffing necessary for the Ardie R. Copas State Veterans’ Nursing Home and $12.1 million for 40 positions to complete the required staffing and repairs necessary for the Lake Baldwin State Veterans’ Nursing Home in Orange County.
• Additionally, the budget recommends $6.7 million for capital improvements, equipment updates and 16 additional nursing staff for Florida’s existing state veterans’ nursing homes.

**Florida Veterans’ Hall of Fame Class of 2019:**

Gov. Ron DeSantis and the Cabinet voted unanimously to induct 16 individuals into the Florida Veterans’ Hall of Fame during the Sept. 24, 2019 Cabinet Meeting at the Capitol. An induction ceremony is planned, but no details are available at press time.

Class of 2019 inductees are:

John A. Brinkley  
USMC/USAF Veteran (Ormond Beach)

Kathryn Gates-Skipper  
USMC Veteran (Lake Wales)

Dr. Edward Copeland III  
USA Veteran (Gainesville)

Col. Dale M. Leslie  
USMC Retired (Madison) *deceased*

CW4 Donald Courtney  
USA Retired (Palmetto)

CAPT Norman Olson  
USN Retired (The Villages)

Raymond “Ray” Cralle  
USMC Veteran (Boynton Beach)

Lt. Col. Robert (Pat) Phillips  
USAF Retired (Winter Park)

Col. Michael Flynt  
USAF Retired (Miramar Beach) *deceased*

SFC Juan Santiago-Seda  
USA Retired (Viera)
The Florida Veterans' Hall of Fame recognizes and honors those military veterans who, through their works and lives during or after military service, have made a significant contribution to the state of Florida through civic, business, public service or other pursuits. It is not a traditional military hall of fame, as it focuses on post-military contributions to the State of Florida. Nominations for the Class of 2020 are being accepted until May 31, 2020.

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**Attorney General Moody Announces Partnership with Statewide Legal Helpline to Better Protect Veterans and Service Members**

TALLAHASSEE — Attorney General Ashley Moody announced a new partnership Nov. 8 to bolster ongoing efforts to protect Florida veterans and service members. The partnership between the Florida Attorney General’s Military and Veteran Assistance Program and Bay Area Legal Services’ Florida Veterans Legal Helpline will allow for a more rapid response to fraud, identity theft and other legal issues confronting current and former military members.

Attorney General Ashley Moody said, “Florida veterans and service members risk their lives to protect this great country, and as a state, we must do all that we can to make sure these brave men and women have access to legal support in their time of
need. By coordinating efforts between MVAP and the Helpline, we can bolster the ongoing efforts of our organizations and hopefully improve outcomes for military members and veterans targeted by scammers or confronted with other legal challenges.”

President and CEO of Bay Area Legal Services Richard Woltmann said, “This partnership will help veterans resolve significant legal problems and will help hundreds of veterans change their lives for the better. By working together, MVAP and the Helpline will be able to ensure that more veterans around the state are able to access these services.”

As part of the Nov. 8 press conference alongside FDVA Executive Director Danny Burgess, Attorney General Moody signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Florida Veterans Legal Helpline. The MOU outlines plans to:

Coordinate bilateral training about the missions and responsibilities of MVAP and Helpline programs;

Build a network of mutual referral services and continually build upon the network to ensure veterans and service members are provided the best resources to address legal concerns and scams; and

Conduct outreach to inform and educate current and former military members about how to spot fraud and where to turn for assistance if targeted by scammers.

MVAP educates military members and veterans about scams and what can be done to avoid falling victim. Members of the MVAP team work directly with military service members and veterans who have been targeted by scams in an effort to resolve any consumer protection related issues. To contact MVAP, call 1(866) 9NO-SCAM. For more information, click here.

The Helpline provides assistance to veterans on a range of legal issues such as housing, family law, consumer and veterans benefits matters. The Helpline number is (866) 486-6161.

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