



IOWA COUNTY VETERANS NEWSLETTER

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COLA SUMMARY 2023

Retirement, VA Disability, SBP and SS Recipients Military retirees and veterans receiving disability payments from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will see their paychecks go up by 3.2% for 2024, triggered by an annual adjustment to the federal Cost of Living Allowance (COLA). That annual adjustment has averaged around 1.5% for the last 10 years. The Social Security Administration announced the adjustment rate. The VA is required by law to alter disability payment rates by that amount.

VA PAUSES PENSION DEBT COLLECTIONS AFTER DISCOVERY OF SYSTEM ERROR

Nearly 40,000 low-income veterans and their survivors receiving federal pensions may owe money because of accounting errors made over the last 12 years, but Veterans Affairs officials said they don't plan on collecting that debt for now.

The episode is the latest computer systems headache for the department, which has seen a series of benefits mistakes due to glitches in recent months. Department officials on Friday said they recently discovered that tens of thousands of pension recipients "may have debts that have not yet been established" because of overpayments due to past mistakes in their self-reported income levels. The pension payment issue dates back to 2011.

VA officials said "due to discrepancies in data matching," department staffers were for years unable to verify the actual income of pension recipients. When new tools were made available in July 2022, they found that 9,900 beneficiaries were being overpaid, some for more than a decade.

"As legally required, VA established debts for these veterans and survivors, meaning that VA determined that the amount of the overpayments was due back to VA," the department said in a statement outlining the problems.

But that work also uncovered about 30,000 additional beneficiaries who may have pension debts as well. VA officials are still sorting through their records to see how many individuals were overpaid. "Many of these veterans and survivors are elderly, and all are low-income, so these debts represent a significant hardship," the department's statement said. "Recognizing the hardship and distress that these pension debts may cause, VA has paused the collection of all established pension debts and the establishment of new pension debts while we determine the path forward."

Monthly pensions for the low-income individuals can range from a few hundred dollars to more than \$5,000, depending on beneficiaries' income and other support services.

Officials plan on contacting the veterans and survivors in coming weeks to explain the situation and "provide as much pension debt relief as possible." Leaders also promised "a review to understand why the data discrepancies occurred and why it took so long to address."

The situation echoes problems uncovered by VA staffers in August and September. About 90,000 veterans who filed disability claims through the

department's online portals attempted to use the online systems to add dependents to their existing claims, or filed appeals applications had their cases lost in VA's computer systems. Some of those problems also dated back to 2011. In the wake of those discoveries, VA leadership appeared before congressional committees and promised system-wide improvements to ensure that veterans' cases will not be lost or ignored in the future.

Veterans with questions about financial aid or debt management issues can visit [the department's website](#) or call 800-827-0648.

LAWMAKERS ADVANCE BILL TO LET DISABLED VETS COLLECT FULL BENEFITS, BUT HURDLES TO PASSAGE REMAIN

A key House panel has for the first time advanced a bill that would dramatically expand benefits for veterans injured in combat.

In a voice vote, the House Armed Services Committee approved the Major Richard Star Act, which would ensure service members who medically retire before 20 years have full access to both military retirement pay and Department of Veterans Affairs disability benefits.

"This bill gets at a big injustice facing many of our veterans," Chairman Mike Rogers, R-Ala., said at Wednesday's committee meeting.

Right now, veterans with fewer than 20 years of service and a disability rating of less than 50% have their retirement pay reduced by a dollar for every dollar of [disability pay](#) they get.

Those rules mean an estimated 50,000 retirees are ineligible for concurrent benefits. The average offset was about \$1,900 per month in 2022, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

The Major Richard Star Act, which is named after an Iraq and Afghanistan veteran who died in 2021 from cancer he developed after burn pit exposure, would remove those restrictions so that all retirees with combat-related disabilities can collect their full retirement and disability benefits.

The bill has been a major priority for veterans service organizations, and Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester, D-Mont., [identified it as one of his top priorities](#) this

year. The legislation has also garnered broad bipartisan support, with 325 co-sponsors in the House and 68 in the Senate.

Despite the strong bipartisan support, the bill has in the past struggled to advance, in part over questions about how it would be paid for. Additionally, last year, getting the sweeping toxic exposure bill known as the [PACT Act](#) over the finish line took precedence over the Major Richard Star Act.

The Congressional Budget Office has estimated the legislation could cost an estimated \$9.75 billion in what's known as mandatory spending over the next decade.

Despite Wednesday's breezy passage through the House Armed Services Committee, questions about how to pay for the bill remain, making its path to final passage unclear. Under House rules, increases to mandatory spending must be offset.

"Although I support this bill, I am disappointed the committee is being forced to act on it before a pay-for could be found. Moving a bill forward with mandatory spending that isn't fully offset opens the bill up to a point of order against its consideration on the floor," Rogers said. "Nevertheless, we will work with leadership and the VA committee to see if an offset can be found for this bill."

"The brave men and women who return from serving our country should be able to receive the benefits promised to them," Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Fla., the lead sponsor of the measure in the House, said in a statement after the committee scheduled its vote on his bill. "Military retirement pay and service-connected disability compensation are two completely different benefits. One does not diminish the merits of the other."

TAPS - How It Originated

The origins of "Taps," the distinctive bugle melody played at U.S. military funerals and memorials and as a lights-out signal at 2100 hrs (9:00 PM) to soldiers at night, date back to the American Civil War. In July 1862, U.S. General Daniel Butterfield and his brigade were camped at Harrison's Landing, Virginia, recuperating after the Seven Days Battles near Richmond. Dissatisfied with the standard bugle

call employed by the Army to indicate to troops it was time to go to sleep, and thinking the call should sound more melodious, Butterfield reworked an existing bugle call used to signal the end of the day. After he had his brigade bugler, Private Oliver Wilcox Norton, play it for the men, buglers from other units became interested in the 24-note tune and it quickly spread throughout the Army, and even caught on with the Confederates.

Not long after Butterfield created "Taps," it was played for the first time at a military funeral, for a Union cannoner killed in action. The man's commanding officer, Captain John Tidball, decided the bugle call would be safer than the traditional firing of three rifle volleys over the soldier's grave, a move which couldn't been confused by the nearby enemy as an attack. As for the name "Taps," the most likely explanation is that it comes from the fact that prior to Butterfield's bugle call, the lights-out call was followed by three drum beats, dubbed the "Drum Taps," as well as "The Taps" and then simply "Taps." When Butterfield's call replaced the drum beats, soldiers referred to it as "Taps," although this was an unofficial moniker, according to "Taps" historian and bugle expert Jari Villanueva. He notes that Butterfield's bugle call was officially known as "Extinguish Lights" in American military manuals until 1891. Since that time, "Taps" also has been a formally recognized part of U.S. military funerals.

The tune is also sometimes known as "Butterfield's Lullaby", or by the first line of the lyric, "Day Is Done". Taps" is a bugle call – a signal, not a song. As such, there is no associated lyric. Many bugle calls had words associated with them as a mnemonic device but these are not lyrics. A Horace Lorenzo Trim wrote a set of words intended to accompany the music:

Day is done, gone the sun,
From the lake, from the hills, from the sky;
All is well, safely rest, God is nigh.
Fading light, dims the sight,

And a star gems the sky, gleaming bright.
From afar, drawing nigh, falls the night.

Thanks and praise, for our days,
'Neath the sun, 'neath the stars, neath the sky;
As we go, this we know, God is nigh.

Sun has set, shadows come,
Time has fled, Scouts must go to their beds
Always true to the promise that they made.

While the light fades from sight,
And the stars gleaming rays softly send,
To thy hands we our souls, Lord, commend.

Today at Berkeley Plantation, the historic estate located at Harrison's Landing, there's a monument commemorating the origins of "Taps" at the site.

VETERAN SERVICE ORGANIZATION HAPPENINGS

Arena VFW Post #9336 is offering their Steak Feed throughout the winter months. Carryout meals are available, call (608)753-2225 to order. Dine-in is also available Dates are listed below:

December 9, 2023
February 10, 2024
March 9, 2024
April 13, 2024
May 11, 2024

Ridgeway American Legion Post #257 will be having their steak feeds again this winter season. The Post is located at 307 W Farwell St., Ridgeway, WI.

February 17, 2024
March 16, 2024
April 20, 2024

Be sure to step out and let one, or both, of these posts take care of the Saturday night cooking. Any Iowa County Veterans Service Organization is welcome to have events listed in the newsletter. Contact the Veterans Service Office at (608)930-9865.

Information in the newsletter is compiled from various news sources and press releases.

Iowa County Veterans Service Office
303 W. Chapel Street – Suite 1300
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**Veterans
Newsletter**

IMPORTANT DATES

Sunday, December 24th – Christmas Eve
Monday, December 25th – Christmas Day
Sunday, December 31st – New Year's Eve
Monday, January 1, 2023 – Happy 2024

VETERANS SERVICE OFFICE CLOSINGS

Thanksgiving
Day after Thanksgiving
Christmas Eve Holiday
Christmas Holiday
New Year's Day

Thursday, November 23rd
Friday, November 24th
Friday, December 22nd
Monday, December 25th
Monday, January 1, 2024