

NEWSLETTER

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF THE MILITARY



SD TO HOST TWO STATE BRIDGE DEDICATION CEREMONIES

The South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs will be hosting two Fallen Hero State Bridge Dedication Ceremonies to honor U.S. Army SP4 Thomas L. Zeigler and U.S. Army S/SGT Ervin C. Rieck.

The SD49 bridge over the Hamill Dam Reservoir, just north of Hamill, will be dedicated as the SP4 Thomas L. Zeigler Bridge. The dedication ceremony will be Friday, July 18, 2025, at 2:00 p.m. (CT) at The American Legion in Winner (133 E. 3rd Street).

Zeigler was born on December 22, 1949, in Winner, South Dakota. He was drafted into the Army in 1969. He served bravely as a Specialist Fourth Class and squad leader with Company C, 5th Battalion, 46th Infantry Regiment, 198th Light Infantry Brigade during the Vietnam War. On March 22, 1971, just one month before he was due to return home, Thomas volunteered to take the point position for a fellow soldier and was killed in action during an ambush in Quang Tin Province.

The US-281 southbound bridge over Moccasin Creek just west of Warner will be dedicated as the S/SGT Ervin C. Rieck Bridge. This dedication ceremony will be Saturday, July 26, 2025, at 2:00 p.m. (CT) at the Community Hall in Warner (11 W. Main).

Rieck was born on August 5, 1915, in Brown County, South Dakota. Drafted into the U.S. Army in 1942, he trained as a machine gunner and served in the Philippines and Okinawa, rising to the rank of Staff Sergeant in Company C of the 383rd Infantry, 96th Division. On April 9, 1945, Ervin was killed in action on the Ryukyu Islands of Okinawa while trying to save a wounded fellow soldier. He was initially interred in Okinawa before his remains were later returned home for burial in 1948.

"It is an honor to recognize the brave men and women who gave their lives for our freedom," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jeremiah Schneider. "The Fallen Hero Bridge Dedication program ensures their sacrifice is remembered every day. These dedications serve as lasting symbols of gratitude and respect, connecting our communities to the legacy of those who serve."

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PATRIOT ALLEY CONNECTS VETERANS DURING FOURTH OF JULY CELEBRATION

Each year, the city of Custer hosts a vibrant Fourth of July celebration, and a highlight for vet-

erans and their families is *Patriot Alley*. Organized by the local American Legion, Patriot Alley brings together veteran service organizations and support resources to answer questions and connect veterans with the benefits and services they've earned.

This year, despite fewer vendors participating, Patriot Alley still served its purpose. Operation Black Hills Cabin, the American Legion, and the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs (SDDVA) were on hand alongside the Legion's popular Patriot Dogs stand. SDDVA's Western Field Service Officer, Will Huffmon, was available to answer questions about benefits, the claims process, healthcare, and other veteran-related concerns.

Throughout the day, Will was able to assist veterans and their



families not only from the Black Hills and across South Dakota but also those visiting from other parts of the country for the holiday festivities. His presence ensured that veterans—whether local or just passing through—had a trusted resource to help navigate the benefits they have earned through their service.

The Department extends its gratitude to the Custer American Legion for continuing this important tradition and for their dedication to supporting veterans in the community.

SDDVA PARTICIPATES IN WINGS AND WHEELS

The South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs (SDDVA) was proud to participate in this year's Wings and Wheels event, hosted by the Faulk County Flying Club in Faulkton. SDDVA Field Service Officer Kevin Bowen and Faulk County VSO David Huss were on hand to answer questions and connect with area veterans about the benefits and services available to them.

Bowen's booth was inside an aircraft hangar that was designated the "veterans' building" for the day. The hangar offered free water and ice cream bars exclusively for visitors, creating a welcoming spot for attendees to stop in and learn more about veterans' resources. Event organizers also held special prize drawings just for veterans, adding another layer of appreciation for their service.

Throughout the day, Bowen spoke with several veterans about their earned benefits and how SDDVA can assist them and their families. Events like Wings and Wheels play an important role in bringing information and support directly to the veterans.





VA TO REDUCE STAFF BY NEARLY 30K

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs has announced it's on pace to reduce total VA staff by nearly 30,000 employees by the end of fiscal year 2025, eliminating the need for a large-scale reduction-in-force.

While the VA had been considering a department-wide RIF to reduce staff levels by up to 15%, employee reductions through the federal hiring freeze, deferred resignations, retirements and normal attrition have eliminated the need for that RIF. The numbers break down as follows:

- VA had roughly 484,000 employees on Jan. 1, 2025, and 467,000 employees as of June 1, 2025 a reduction of nearly 17,000.
- Between now and Sept. 30, the department expects nearly 12,000 additional VA employees to exit through normal attrition, voluntary early retirement authority or the deferred resignation program.
 - The VA has multiple safeguards in place to ensure these staff reductions do not impact veteran care or benefits. All VA mission-critical positions are exempt from the DRP and VERA, and more than 350,000 positions are exempt from the federal hiring freeze.

The VA reports:

- VA's disability claims backlog is already down nearly 30%.
- VA is processing record numbers of disability claims, reaching 1 million claims processed for FY25 on Feb. 20 and reaching 2 million claims by June — both achievements were done in record time.
- VA has implemented major reforms to make it easier for survivors to get benefits.
- VA is accelerating the deployment of its integrated electronic health record system.
- VA is phasing out treatment for gender dysphoria.
- VA ended DEI at the department, reversing the divisive Biden-era policies and stopping more than \$14 million in DEI spending.
- VA has brought more than 60,000 VA employees back to the office.

"Since March, we've been conducting a holistic review of the department centered on reducing bureaucracy and improving services to veterans," said VA Secretary Doug Collins. "As a result of our efforts, the VA is headed in the right direction — both in terms of staff levels and customer service. A department-wide RIF is off the table, but that doesn't mean we're done improving the VA. Our review has resulted in a host of new ideas for better serving veterans that we will continue to pursue."

(continued on next page)

VA REDUCTION (CONTINUED)

VA is currently exploring a number of additional reforms to improve operational efficiency and service to veterans, including:

- The Veterans Health Administration, Veterans Benefits Administration and National Cemetery Administration all run duplicative and costly administrative functions that can be centralized or restructured so they can each focus on their core missions of health care, benefits and burial services, respectively.
- The VA is reviewing the centralization of support functions to streamline operations and improve support to veterans, including areas such as police, procurement, construction, IT, budgeting, and others.
- The VA operates 274 separate call centers that are not connected to one another. A centralized call center with modernized systems would lead to quicker and better service for veterans and could be run with fewer staff members.
- The VA has a proven payroll system that processes paychecks for more than 200,000 VA employees, but some 50 VAMCs still process their own payroll. The VA is already working to consolidate payroll for all employees under the VA Time and Attendance System, which will save time, money and resources.

NEW VSO FOR DOUGLAS COUNTY

Jerry Seiner will now serve both Charles Mix and Douglas Counties, helping veterans and their families access the benefits and services they have earned.

As part of this consolidation, Jerry will be available in Douglas County on the first and third Wednesdays of each month. Veterans in both counties are encouraged to reach out for assistance with claims, questions, and other support needs.

This partnership helps strengthen our commitment to serving every veteran in our communities. Join SDDVA in extending thanks to Jerry to this expanded role and his dedication to our veterans.



MIDWEST HONOR FLIGHT UPDATE

Here are some upcoming changes for future South Dakota Midwest Honor Flight Missions. Starting this fall's flight season, they're moving the Welcome Home operations from the Sioux Falls Arena to Maverick Air Center at FSD. Why the switch? Three big reasons:

- Their new charter partner, JetBlue, has different logistical needs, and the hangar setup better supports their operations since they do not have regular operations at the terminal.
- Their expenses at other venues have increased significantly in addition to all charter quotes received for this fall. Moving to the hangar allows them to stay efficient and continue providing a great experience for their veterans on each Mission without needing to spend more of donated dollars on each flight.
- Their flight time is one of the longest one-day charters in the Honor Flight Network. They want to make sure their veterans, guardians, and crew have the best experience possible while keeping everyone's safety in mind. With the move from the Arena to the Hangar, they will eliminate the need for a shuttle from the Airport and thus give everyone an extra hour to travel home with family or get much needed rest back at the hotel.



In addition to the change in location for their Welcome Home, they will also be moving their banquet to the Sanford Barn the night before each flight. This banquet is not open to the public as it is meant to be an intimate time for veterans, guardians, and their guests to get to know one another before their flight together.

These changes mean smoother operations, more flexibility, and ultimately, a better experience for everyone involved. More logistical information will be provided as they progress.

A heartfelt thank you to the Midwest Honor Flight team for their unwavering dedication to honoring our veterans. Their commitment ensures that their veterans receive the recognition and gratitude they so deeply deserve.

VA ANNOUNCES EXPANDED BURIAL BENEFITS

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs announced it has temporarily expanded burial benefits for certain Veterans, per the <u>Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act</u>.

The new law specifies eligible veterans are those who are discharged from VA-provided medical or nursing care to receive VA-provided hospice care at their home and who pass away between July 1, 2025, and Oct. 1, 2026.

Previously, veterans who died at home under VA hospice care after discharge from VA-provided medical or nursing care were not always eligible for a full VA burial allowance. The Dole Act addresses that gap.

"The VA is working hard to fully implement the many provisions of the Dole Act," said VA Secretary Doug Collins. "We're excited to offer this expanded benefit, which better supports veterans who choose to spend their final days at home, surrounded by their loved ones."

Families and caregivers of veterans receiving hospice care at home following discharge from VA-provided medical or nursing care are encouraged to contact their local county or tribal veterans service officer, or SDDVA, for information about eligibility and how to apply for burial benefits.





POKER RUN

Presented by the Sioux Falls Area Veterans' Council

Saturday, July 12th

Registration 8-10am

South Dakota Military Heritage Alliance, 1600 W Russell Street

Door Prizes, Raffle, Silent Auction, Sales of Items for Mike to Sign

Coffee and Donuts Available

\$25 Per Driver, \$10 additional Rider's Hand Winnings: 1st Place \$500, 2nd Place \$300, 3rd Place \$150

Kick Stands Up 10am

Return Gathering 1-5pm

Special Guest Mike Fitzmaurice!

VFW Post 628, 1700 W. Russell Street

Burgers, Brats, and Cash Bar

BONUS RAFFLE!

A Limited Edition Bronze Model of the Statue Valued at \$4,700!

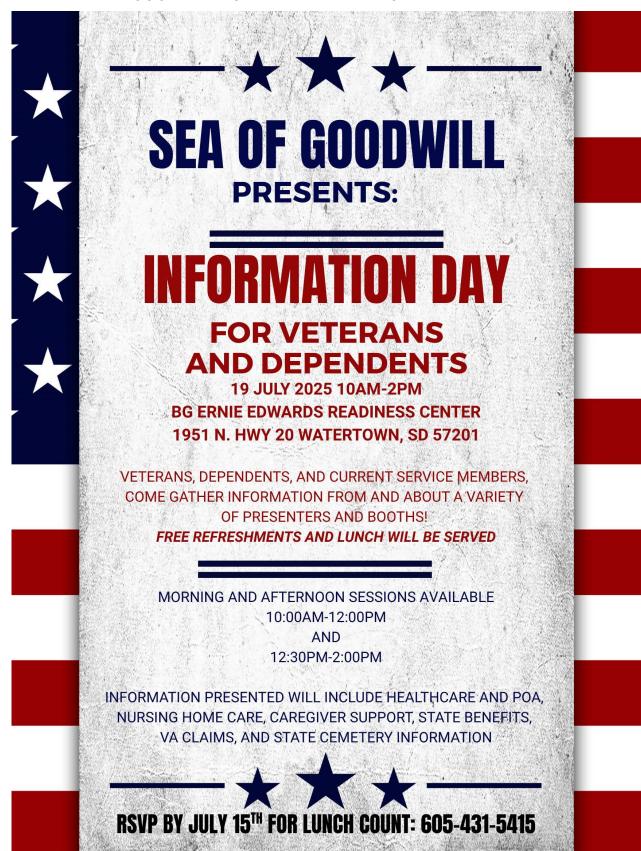
Tickets Available at the Door!

The Life-Size Bronze Michael J. Fitzmaurice Statue

created by Sioux Falls sculptor Darwin Wolf, commissioned by the SFAVC dedication at Sioux Falls VA Hospital Benefiting the:

Michael J. Fitzmaurice Medal of Honor Statue Project





UPCOMING EVENTS

- Jul 11—SDDVA What's Brewing—Harding County Courthouse (408 Ransland Street)—Buffalo—10:00 am (MT)
- Jul 12—FHBD—PFC Fred Larson—Community Center (916 F. Avenue)—Pollock—2:30 pm (CT)
- Jul 13—SDNG SAPR 5K—Memorial Park—Rapid City—10:00 am (MT)
- Jul 14—Black Hills Tee it up for the Troops Tournament—Arrowhead Country Club—Rapid City
- Jul 16—SD Veterans Council Meeting—Mitchell VFW Post—(215 N. Main Street)—Mitchell—1:00 pm (CT)
- Jul 18—FHBD—SP4 Thomas Zeigler—American Legion Post 169 (133 W. 3rd Street)—Winner—2:00 pm (CT)
- Jul 19—Veterans Information Day—BG Ernie Edwards Readiness Center—(1951 N. HWY 20)—Watertown—10:00 am—2:00 pm (CT)
- Jul 26—3rd Annual Korean War Veterans Appreciation Day—Brookings Outdoor Adventure Center—(2810 22nd Avenue S)—Brookings—9:00 am—2:00 pm (CT)
- Jul 26—FHBD—S/SGT Ervin Rieck—Community Hall (11 W. Main Street)—Warner—2:00 pm (CT)
- Jul 26—Homecoming for American Legion State Auxiliary President Susie Learing—Irene Community Center—(Main Street)—Irene—11:00 am (CT)
- Jul 27—Homecoming for American Legion Department Commander Kevin Hempel—Chester School Gym—(102 2nd Avenue)—Chester—1:00 pm (CT)
- Jul 28—SDDVA What's Brewing—The Ward's Store—(127 Calumet Avenue SE)—De Smet—10:00 am (CT)
- Jul 29—SDDVA What's Brewing—VFW Post 791—(209 Cedar Street)—Yankton—10:00 am (CT)
- Jul 30—Rosebud Sioux Tribe Veterans Stand Down—Sinte Gleska Multipurpose Building—(White Horse Blvd.)— Antelope—9:00 am—2:00 pm (CT)
- Jul 30—SDDVA What's Brewing—Jerauld County Court House Day Room—(205 Wallace Avenue S)—Wessington Springs—10:00 am (CT)
- Aug 1—FHBD—PFC Mark Shields—Community Center—(1021 Central Circle)—Fort Thompson—1:00 pm (CT)
- Aug 2—FHBD—PFC Ronald Dexter—4-H Grounds (517 Flynn Drive)—Milbank—11:00 am (CT)
- Aug 4-5—Your Journey Matters 2025 Behavioral Health Conference—Sioux Falls Sheraton Convention Center
- Aug 7—Purple Heart Day
- Aug 9—FHBD—1LT Larry Barbee—American Legion Post 92—(612 Main Street)—Redfield—2:00 pm (CT)
- Aug 9-13—National VFW Convention—Columbus, OH
- Aug 11—Barrel House Day of Giving for Midwest Honor Flight—(4701 E. 54th Street)—Sioux Falls
- Aug 13—DAV Golf Tournament—Prairie Green Golf Course—Sioux Falls
- Aug 13—Sioux Falls VA Show and Shine Car Show—Sioux Falls VA—(2501 W. 22nd Street)—5:00—8:00 pm (CT)
- Aug 14—FHBD—CPL Henry Kluess—VFW Post 2118—(520 Main Avenue)—Brookings—10:00 am (CT)
- Aug 20—South Dakota Veterans Council Meeting—Virtual—1:00 pm (CT)
- Aug 21—Cheyenne River Veterans Stand Down—Eagle Butte Vet Center Building—Eagle Butte—10:00 am (MT)
- Aug 27-Sep 1—South Dakota State Fair
- Aug 28—Veterans Day at the South Dakota State Fair
- Aug 30—FHBD—SP5 Richard Miller—Silo Market—(120 Main Street)—Plankinton—1:00 pm (CT)
- Sep 1—State Offices Closed—Labor Day
- Sep 9-12—SDDVA Annual CTVSO Benefit School
- Sep 17—SD Veterans Council Meeting—Yankton VFW Post—(209 S. Cedar Street)—Yankton—1:00 pm (CT)
- Sep 17—FHBD—PVT Elmer Albertson—Harding County School—(12474 Tipperary Street)—Buffalo—2:30 pm (MT)
- Sep 18—FHBD—PFC Peter Ommen—(243 Central Main Street)—Central City—1:00 pm (MT)
- Sep 19—POW/MIA Day
- Sep 20—FHBD—PVT Frank Holcombe—American Legion Post 43—(921 Main Street)—Centerville—10:00 am (CT)

UPCOMING EVENTS

- Sep 23—Midwest Honor Flight Mission 27
- Sep 25—Rapid City Veterans Stand Down—DoubleTree by Hilton Rapid City Downtown Convention Center— (505 N. 5th Street)—Rapid City—10:00 am (MT)
- Oct 3—FHBD—SGT Dirk Abbas—Event Center—(1203 3rd Street)—Britton—2:00 pm (CT)
- Oct 7—Midwest Honor Flight Mission 28
- Oct 8—FHBD—PVT Leroy Goosen—(location and time to be determined)
- Oct 13—State Offices Closed—Native American Day
- Oct 15—SD Veterans Council Meeting—Virtual—1:00 pm (CT)
- Oct 18—Derr Gala—Monument Lacroix Hall—Rapid City—5:00 pm (MT)
- Oct 18—4th Annual Midwest Honor Flight Fundraiser—South Dakota Military Heritage Alliance—(1600 W. Russell Street)—Sioux Falls—7:00 pm (CT)
- Nov 7—MWHF Bingo—Severance Brewing—(701 N. Phillips Avenue)—Sioux Falls—7:00—9:00 pm (CT)
- Nov 8—Northern Hills Veterans Appreciation Fair—Sturgis Community Center—(1401 Lazelle Street)—Sturgis—11:00 am—2:00 pm (MT)
- Nov 8—Day County Veterans Banquet—Webster Armory—5:00 pm (CT)
- Nov 10—Barrel House Day of Giving for the South Dakota Veterans Cemetery WAA—(4701 E. 54th Street)— Sioux Falls—11:00 am—Midnight (CT)
- Nov 11—State Offices Closed—Veterans Day
- Nov 11—Regional FHBD—SD Military Heritage Alliance—(1600 W. Russell Street)—Sioux Falls—2:00 pm (CT)
- Nov 19—SD Veterans Council Meeting—DAV Headquarters (1519 W. 51st Street)—Sioux Falls—9:00 am (CT)
- Nov 27—State Offices Closed—Thanksgiving
- Nov 29—Side by Side MWHF Poker Run—Pilot Mikes Roadhouse—(4901 N. Ellis Road)—Sioux Falls—11:00 am (CT)
- Dec 2—Governor's Budget Address—SD State Capitol—1:00 pm (CT)
- Dec 13—Wreaths Across America Wreath Laying Ceremony at South Dakota Veterans Cemetery—Sioux Falls—11:00 am (CT)
- Dec 25—State Offices Closed—Christmas Day

2026

- Jan 13—South Dakota Legislative Session Opens
- Jan 13—Governor's State of the State Address—SD State Capitol—1:00 pm (CT)
- Jan 14—SD Veterans Council Meeting—American Legion Post 8—(520 S. Pierre Street)—Pierre—2:00 pm (CT)
- Jan 14—South Dakota Veterans Council Legislative Reception—American Legion Post 8—(520 S. Pierre Street)— Pierre—5:30 pm—7:30 pm (CT)
- June 10-14—State VFW Convention—Mitchell
- July 18-19—Sioux Falls Air Show

Phone: 605-773-8242

Sep 15-18—SDDVA Annual CTVSO Benefit School

Audry Ricketts, Public Information Officer (<u>audry.ricketts@state.sd.us</u>)
South Dakota Department of the Military https://military.sd.gov/
South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs https://vetaffairs.sd.gov
Soldiers and Sailors Building - 425 E Capitol Avenue—Pierre, SD 57501

