



NEWSLETTER

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



SWO HOSTS WELCOME HOME VIETNAM VETERANS EVENT

SDDVA Secretary Whitlock had the great honor to address over 90 Vietnam Veterans last week at the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Welcome Home Celebration and Honoring ceremony.

In his remarks, Secretary Whitlock shared this message. "Vietnam Veterans were a generation of veterans that came home, and even though some Americans turned their back on them – they never turned their back on America. Like generations before them, they took off the uniform, but never stopped serving. They became leaders and public servants, from town halls to Capitol Hill -- lifting their communities, our state, and our nation."

Vietnam Veterans didn't just take care of their own, they cared for those that followed. They made it their mission to make sure today's troops get the respect and support that all too often they did not receive.

Medal of Honor recipient and Vietnam Veteran Michael J. Fitzmaurice and Senator Mike Rounds also addressed the veterans.

SDDVA Field Service Officer Guy Arnold and County Veterans Service Officers Chris Hicks (Roberts County), Dave Daberkow (Marshall County), and Jeff Nelson (Day County) also attended the program.

This day of honoring was hosted and organized by Tribal Veterans Service Officer Geri Opsal.



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VA PENSION DEBT AND TIMELINESS STANDARDS

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs reports that in 2011 and 2022, challenges in data matching resulted in an inability to reliably verify the self-reported Social Security income for veterans and survivors receiving a VA pension. Upon resuming income verification in June 2022, the VA discovered that over 9,900 beneficiaries had higher incomes than reported, leading to overpayments in some instances over many years. As required by law, the VA established debts for these veterans and survivors and contacted them to recoup overpayments. Upon further review, it was also discovered that an additional 30,000 veterans and survivors might also have pension debts that have yet to be established.

In November 2023, recognizing the hardship such debts may impose on this vulnerable group, the VA halted the collection of all established pension debts and the formation of new debts while exploring all possible relief options.

However, as the VA continues to process other claim types, such as dependency claims or medical expense reports, the VA conducts an income match and may identify additional debts. During the period between Nov. 2023 and now, the VA has determined that more than 12,000 pension beneficiaries (up from the initial estimate of 9,900) had higher incomes than reported. Some of those were initially part of the 30,000 that had not yet been processed. The VA anticipates this number will continue to increase as additional claims are processed. Currently, the VA has more than 27,000 individual claims related to the SSA match to review.

Based on the VA Secretary's December 2023 guidance, the VA has decided to not collect pension debts associated with the June 2022 SSA income verification match and will contact the 12,000-plus affected individuals directly to inform them of the resolution process. Additionally, they are refunding beneficiaries for any payments already made as a result of this income verification match. The VA is also reviewing the causes of the data quality issue to prevent future occurrences.

The VA extends their apologies to the beneficiaries impacted by these pension debt notifications and will assure them that relief efforts are underway. Following is a summary of the recent developments and the current status of this issue.

Recent Developments:

- Effective November 2, 2023, the VA suspended the creation of new debts and the collection of existing debts related to this issue.
- On December 22, 2023, the VA Secretary issued guidance to not collect any debts arising from the June 2022 SSA income match and to refund any collections already made.
- January through early March 2024, the VA worked with the Debt Management Center (DMC) and Veterans Benefits Administration's Office of Financial Management on mechanisms to stop collection of debts for beneficiaries.

(continued)

PENSION DEBT (CONTINUED)

Current Status:

- VA continues to run this match quarterly since June 2022 to further identify beneficiaries and identify income discrepancies earlier.
- VA will inform the 12,000-plus affected beneficiaries about adjustments to their pension debt balances.
- Beneficiaries will be notified of their updated debt balances and the reduction in debt amounts.
- Beneficiaries who have made payments based on prior notifications will be informed of the refunds.
- VA is developing updated procedural guidance for claims processors related to the additional 27,000 beneficiaries identified in the June 2022 SSA income match. VA anticipates resuming claims processing by May 2024.

Actions for Beneficiaries:

Affected beneficiaries will receive a letter from the DMC. No further action is required if the current debt balance is \$0.00. For those with existing debt balances, the VA is ready to assist in managing these debts. The VA encourages beneficiaries with additional questions to visit their debt management website, www.va.gov/manage-va-debt, or contact them at 800-827-0648. Veterans and survivors may also use the following resources for their questions or for additional assistance:

- For details about a debt, contact the DMC at 1-800-827-0648, available from 6:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. CT, Monday through Friday.
- Translation services are offered in over 200 languages and dialects.
- Use Ask VA (AVA) at <https://ask.va.gov/> for secure messaging—choose “Veterans Affairs – Debt” for proper routing.
- Visit the Debt Portal at www.va.gov/manage-va-debt for account information.
- For details on why a pension debt was issued, contact the VA benefits hotline at 1-800-827-1000 or the National Pension Call Center at 1-877-294-6380.

WELCOME HOME VIETNAM VETERANS EVENTS

The Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter No. 959 and DAV Arthur H. Muchow Chapter No. 1 will be hosting a National Vietnam Veterans Day open house and lunch on Friday, March 29, from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm (CT). The event will be held at DAV Headquarters (1519 W. 51st Street) in Sioux Falls.

Featured speakers include: Sioux Falls VA Executive Director Sara Ackert, VA Dakotas Regional Office Director Shawn Bohn, and VA Veteran Service Representative Jesse Blankenship.

REVIEW OF SOUTH DAKOTA 99TH LEGISLATIVE SESSION

The 2024 Legislative Session is a wrap! There were 550 bills, commemorations, and resolutions introduced this year.

The South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs introduced two bills this year and monitored 29 pieces of proposed legislation.

Bills introduced that were veteran related focused on education benefits, property tax relief, hunting, long-term care services, residency requirements for admissions to the state veterans home, employment of veterans service officers, establishing a code talker memorial, fee charging for filing of veterans claims, Medal of Honor recognition day, specialty license plates, removal of fees for birth certificates and ID cards for the homeless, and appropriations to fund state government and the respective programs. As always, not all bills that are introduced survive.

Veteran related bills and resolutions that were approved and will become law July 1 are as follows:

Senate Bill 29 expands the State Tuition Assistance benefit for the airman and soldiers of the South Dakota National Guard allowing them to utilize their State Tuition Assistance benefit at an in-state private, nonprofit post-secondary university. This benefit increases the South Dakota National Guard's ability to recruit and retain high-quality Soldiers and Airmen to better serve the citizens of South Dakota in their time of need.

SB 80 appropriates \$2 million to provide grants to select providers for technology improvements for providers of elderly care and to make an appropriation therefor.

SR 701 encourages congress to open an official inquiry into the Medals of Honor given to United States soldiers for their involvement in the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890.

HB 1007 provides counties and tribes who encounter prolonged VSO vacancies the opportunity to contract with the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs to provide those services.

HB 1008 removes the South Dakota residency requirement to be eligible for admission to the State Veterans Home.

HB 1013 adopts the advanced practice registered nurse compact.

HB 1015 adopts the social work licensure compact.

HB 1067 designates March 25 as a state Medal of Honor Recognition Day.

HB 1068 allows disabled veterans to obtain a standard issue county motor vehicle or motorcycle license plate.

HB 1082 changes the eligibility requirements, and the exempt value, of a property tax relief program for disabled veterans and surviving spouses from \$150,000 to \$200,000.

HB 1101 provides a special motor vehicle license plate for recipients of the Legion of Merit award.

(Continued on next page)

SESSION (CONTINUED)

HB 1131 waives certain fees for nondriver identification cards for individuals who are homeless.

HB 1231 places restrictions on the ownership of agricultural land.

HCR 6007 encourages the United States Congress to allow veterans to receive long-term care services at facilities that do not otherwise meet the requirements set by the VA.

HCR 6010 acknowledges the need to protect our borders and affirming South Dakota's support of the defense of the southern border.

HC 8012 honors the victims of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War.

None of these bills had an emergency clause on them, so these bills will become law effective July 1. SDDVA will be updating forms, the VSO Manual, and the website with these changes. You can review any of the bills at: <https://sdlegislature.gov/Session/Bills/69>.

The Legislative Executive Board will meet the end of March to select topics for interim study committees to review this summer.

VETERANS PROVIDED INCORRECT INFORMATION

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs was recently notified and confirmed an error by a contract service provider that nearly 6,000 veterans and/or accredited representatives received letters advising them to submit an incorrect form. Veterans and/or accredited representatives who submitted outdated forms for decision review requests (VA forms 0995 and 0996) were sent letters directing them, inaccurately, to submit form 526EZ.

The VA will ensure all affected veterans are made whole and they receive the benefits they have earned. Claims identified as impacted are being processed with adjusted effective dates and using the date of their original submission as appropriate.

The VBA continues to examine data to identify which cases are resolved satisfactorily and those that remain to be completed. The data breakdown will be provided once it is available.

On March 7, 2024, the VA was first alerted to the error by veterans, veteran service organizations, and VA Regional Office staff members. The VA and the service provider took immediate corrective action to stop inaccurate letters from being sent by deploying system fixes to the automation process.

Additionally, the VA has initiated appropriate contractual actions to hold the service provider accountable for the failure and lack of appropriate configuration management procedures. The VA utilizes the service providers automation capabilities to support receipt of claims and evidence submitted to VBA. To ensure the automation services are operating as designed, a full operational review will be required by the vendor. In parallel, the VA will conduct an independent technical analysis of the service provider's solution and after-action report.

MELISSA STOCKWELL

Veteran. Paralympian. Author. Mom.

FRIDAY

VETAID

April 5, 2024

DOORS OPEN AT 5PM

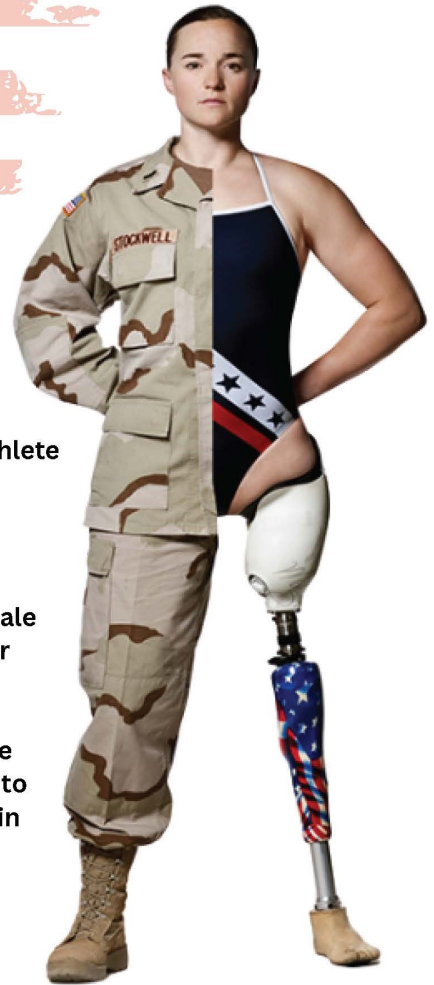
EVENT STARTS AT 6PM

HELD AT: THE ALLIANCE,
1600 W. RUSSELL ST., SIOUX FALLS, SD 57104

The Power of Choice

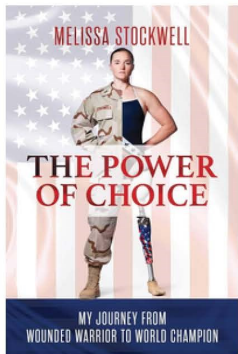
The Inspiring Story of Melissa Stockwell, an Army Veteran and Paralympic Athlete
Melissa Stockwell served as a Second Lieutenant in the US Army, and was deployed to Baghdad, Iraq in March 2004. Sadly, just three weeks into her deployment, a roadside bomb hit her Humvee causing the loss of her left leg above the knee. After undergoing several surgeries to recover from multiple infections, Melissa was honorably discharged from the Army. As the first female soldier to lose a limb in active combat, she was awarded both The Bronze Star Medal and the Purple Heart.

Despite the tragic incident, Melissa turned to sports for recovery. She made history in April 2008 by becoming the first Iraqi War Veteran to qualify for the Beijing Paralympics. She then shifted her focus to Paratriathlon and went on to become a three-time World Champion. Her talent and hard work led her to win the Paralympic Bronze Medal at the Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro on September 11, 2016.



TICKETS:

GENERAL SEATING: \$20
GENERAL SEATING with Pre-signed Book: \$45



Pre-Signed Books
Available for Purchase at the event
for \$30 (Limited Quantity)



SCAN THE QR CODE FOR
TICKETS OR GO TO
www.vfw628.org



the **ALLIANCE**
South Dakota Military Heritage Alliance, Inc.



Proceeds benefit local Veterans Support Programs

**IN HONOR OF NATIONAL VIETNAM WAR
VETERANS DAY.**

**JOIN US FOR A VERY
SPECIAL MOVIE
SCREENING.**



**A RETIRED GREEN BERET RETURNS TO
VIETNAM FOR ONE FINAL MISSION.**

RETURN is the story of adventure, vulnerability, and healing that follows Jim Markel Sr., a retired Green Beret who voyages from Montana to Vietnam for the first time since the war. In retracing his steps with his adult son, he reflects on his past actions as both soldier and parent. Together, father and son embark on a deep search: for long-overdue family healing, for the roots of PTSD, and for the mountain tribes Markel once lived with, fought alongside, and eventually abandoned 45 years ago.

SHOWTIMES:

Friday, March 29 at 7:00pm
Saturday, March 30 at 2:00pm



Veterans receive a **FREE** small popcorn.

Tickets are available online at siouxfallsstatetheatre.org
or call the State Theatre at (605) 335-5757.



316 S Phillips, Sioux Falls SD 57104

UPCOMING EVENTS

- Mar 22—USD Veteran Legal Clinic—South Dakota Military Heritage Alliance—(1600 W. Russell St)—Sioux Falls—9:00 am—4:00 pm (CT)
- Mar 23—Stand Up for Women Veterans—Our Savior’s Lutheran Church—(909 W. 33rd St)—Sioux Falls—8:00 am—2:00 pm (CT)
- Mar 23—USD Veteran Legal Clinic—VFW Post #2118—(520 Main Ave)—Brookings—9:00 am—4:00 pm (CT)
- Mar 25—Midwest Honor Flight Fundraiser—Drive to Fly @ Great Shots—(2505 W. Benson Road)—Sioux Falls—2:00—5:00 pm (CT)
- Mar 26—Yankton County What’s Brewing—VFW Post 791—(209 Cedar St)—Yankton—10:00 am (CT)
- Mar 29—April 1—State Offices Closed
- Apr 4—Brule County What’s Brewing—Community Center—(112 N. Main St)—Chamberlain—1:00 pm (CT)
- Apr 5—Melissa Stockwell Program—SD Military Heritage Alliance—(1600 W. Russell St)—Sioux Falls
- Apr 12—Day County What’s Brewing—VFW Post—(521 First St West)—Webster—5:00 pm (CT)
- Apr 12—Purple Up for Military Kids**
- Apr 16—McPherson County What’s Brewing—School Multi Purpose Room—(805 10th St)—Eureka—1:00 pm (CT)
- Apr 17—SD Veterans Council Meeting—VFW Post 1273—Rapid City—9:00 am (MT)
- Apr 19—Mogen’s Heroes Dance—El Riad Shrine—(510 S. Phillips)—Sioux Falls—6:00 pm (CT)
- Apr 23—SDDVA Mini Conference—Pennington County Conference Room—(312 Kansas City St)—Rapid City—10:00 am—2:00 pm (MT)
- Apr 24—SDDVA Mini Conference—Post 8 AL Cabin—(520 S. Pierre St)—Pierre—10:00 am—2:00 pm (CT)
- Apr 24—Operation Chow Line—Vermillion Eagles Club—(114 W. Main St)—Vermillion—4:00—7:00 pm (CT)
- Apr 25—SDDVA Mini Conference—SD Military Heritage Alliance—(1600 W. Russell St)—Sioux Falls—10:00 am—2:00 pm (CT)
- Apr 26-27—DAV State Convention—Deadwood Lodge
- Apr 27—Operation Chow Line—Vern Eide Marine—(4501 E. Arrowhead Pkwy)—Sioux Falls—11:00 am—1:00 pm (CT)
- May 6-18—Fareway Round Up Campaign at participating stores
- May 7—Corson County What’s Brewing—Pavilion—(Main and First Ave)—McIntosh—10:00 am (MT)
- May 7—Midwest Honor Flight Mission 18—Welcome Home Ceremony—Sioux Falls Convention Center—(1201 N. West Ave)—Sioux Falls—9:30 pm (CT)
- May 21—Midwest Honor Flight Mission 19—Welcome Home Ceremony—Convention Center—(1201 N. West Ave)—Sioux Falls—9:30 pm (CT)
- May 27—SDDVA Memorial Day Program—SD Veterans Cemetery—12:00 noon (CT)
- Jun 5—Midwest Honor Flight Mission 20—Welcome Home Ceremony—Convention Center—(1201 N. West Ave)—Sioux Falls—9:30 pm (CT)
- Jun 7—8—VFW State Conference—Holiday Inn—Spearfish
- Jun 14—Midwest Honor Flight Day of Sweetness—Chick-fil-A—(4005 W. 41st St)—Sioux Falls—7:00 am — 10:00 pm (CT)
- Jun 20—23—American Legion State Conference—Pierre
- Jun 30—Midwest Honor Flight Honor Ride—SD Military Heritage Alliance—(1600 W. Russell St)—Sioux Falls—Registration—1:00 pm/Ride Begins at 2:30 pm (CT)
- Jul 15—6th Annual Tee it up for the Troops Midwest Honor Flight Fundraiser—Arrowhead Country Club—(3675 Sheridan Lake Road)—Rapid City—7:15 am (MT)
- Jul 17—SD Veterans Council Meeting—Aberdeen

(Continued)

UPCOMING EVENTS

Aug 1—2—South Dakota Suicide Prevention Conference—Convention Center—(1201 N. West Ave)—Sioux Falls

Aug 21—SD Veterans Council Meeting—Yankton

Aug 26—Midwest Honor Flight Fundraiser—The Barrel House—(4701 E. 54th St)—Sioux Falls—11:00 am—8:00 pm (CT)

Aug 29—Veterans Day at the SD State Fair—Northwest Energy Freedom Stage—Huron

Aug 29—Sep 2—SD State Fair—Huron

Sep 3—5—SDDVA Annual CTVSO Benefit School—SD Military Heritage Alliance—(1600 W. Russell St)—Sioux Falls

Sep 18—SD Veterans Council Meeting—Rapid City

Oct 12—Midwest Honor Flight Third Annual Elvis Night—SD Military Heritage Alliance—(1600 W. Russell St)—Sioux Falls

Oct 16—SD Veterans Council Meeting—Brookings

Nov 9—Fifth Annual Northern Hills Veterans Appreciation Fair We've Got Your Six—Sturgis

Nov 18—Wreaths Across America Fundraiser—The Barrel House—(4701 E. 54th St)—Sioux Falls—11:00 am—8:00 pm (CT)

Nov 20—SD Veterans Council Meeting—Sioux Falls

Nov 20—SD Veterans Council Legislative Round Table—Sioux Falls

Nov 21—SD Veterans Council Legislative Round Table—Watertown

Nov 22—SD Veterans Council Legislative Round Table—Rapid City

Nov 23—SD Veterans Council Legislative Round Table—Pierre

Dec 3—Governor's Budget Address—1:00 pm

Dec 14—Wreaths Across America Wreath Laying Ceremony at South Dakota Veterans Cemetery—Sioux Falls—11:00 am (CT)

2025 Events

Jan 14—Governor's State of the State Address—1:00 pm

Jan 14—Legislative Session starts

Jan 15—SD Veterans Council Meeting—Pierre

Feb 14—16—American Legion Mid-Winter Conference—Oacoma

Jun 12—15—VFW State Convention—Ramkota—Pierre

Jun 19—22—American Legion State Conference—Huron

Dec 13—Wreaths Across America Wreath Laying Ceremony at South Dakota Veterans Cemetery—Sioux Falls—11:00 am (CT)

Audry Ricketts, Public Information Officer

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

Phone: 605-773-8242

E-mail address: audry.ricketts@state.sd.us

