In this month’s issue we will highlight Trocaire College as the first institution to join the Educational Pillar of our “Four Pillars of Empowerment” Program for the Erie County Veterans population. Dr. Paul B. Hurley, Jr., President of the school is a veteran of the US Army and served during the Vietnam War. He is committed to assisting our returning service members in their educational pursuits. Trocaire is celebrating their 50 year Anniversary during 2008 and we commend the Sisters of Mercy who established this college in 1958 for their commitment to higher education and the Western New York Community. Go to their web site and learn more about Trocaire: http://www.trocaire.edu/

If you have been reading the papers and listening to the news veterans’ issues continue to receive quite a lot of coverage. To all who are engaged in Veterans’ Advocacy we need to increase the pressure on our elected officials so they fully understand that the cost of war goes beyond the price of bullets and bombs. War’s cost also includes taking care of those who have borne the battle and suffered the physical and mental effects of war.

Next month we will feature information on the NEW GI Bill just passed by Congress and our affiliation with the Erie County Bar Association, Veterans Committee.

Please distribute this newsletter to your email distribution list. Anyone who would like to receive this each month can email me at patrick.welch@erie.gov

Remember my mantra: “If you do NOTHING, then someday when you need the VA, then NOTHING is just what you may get.” ©

County Executive visits the Buffalo site

On Friday, May 30, Erie County Executive Chris Collins and Erie County Director Veterans Services, Dr. Patrick Welch visited the Buffalo site of VA Western NY Healthcare System. Mr. Finegan and other leaders met with them and discussed all the great things going at our sites. It was the County Executive’s first visit to VA. Innovations with technology and work being done to serve returning troops and veterans of all eras were shared in a meeting with him. Some of our Six Sigma initiatives were also shared. A tour of Primary Care, Women’s Wellness, OEF/OIF office, Dental, Emergency Department and Veterans Service Center was also provided.

Government Spending

According to an article in USA Today by Gregg Zoroya, “the federal government is spending more money on veterans than at any time in modern history, surpassing the tidal wave of spending following World War II and the demilitarizing of millions of troops.”

Follow this link to read the article in its entirety: Spending on Vets Exceeds 1947 High

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Erie County Veterans Office and Senior Services Team up

We are pleased to announce that beginning in August the Erie County Veterans Office will be participating with the Erie County Senior Services Department in a series of outreach programs throughout the county. This program is to insure that all our seniors are aware of the many benefits available to them.

The August programs are:

**Friday August 15, 2008**
City of Tonawanda Senior Center
35 Main Street, Tonawanda, NY
12:00 noon to 3:30 p.m.

**Friday August 29, 2008**
Tosh Collins Senior Center
35 Cazenovia Street, Buffalo, NY
9:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m.

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Spotlight on Trocaire College
By Cindy Pearson

Veterans considering college or further career training would do well to investigate Trocaire College in Buffalo. The college has recently joined with Erie County Veterans’ Services in a new initiative to “pick up” where the GI Bill stops, in supporting the needs of veterans returning to school. It’s possible right now that this joint aid partnership could completely cover tuition, books, and more for qualifying veterans.

Trocaire offers a variety of two-year degree programs and certificate programs in health care, business, and liberal arts. While nursing and x-ray technology are well-known and large divisions, they are also in great demand, so it is worth taking a look at other possibilities in the health sciences offered at the college, such as diagnostic sonography and echocardiography. Computer Network Support and the Russell Salvatore School of Hospitality Management are growing options. Customized job training certificate programs for western New York employers are available. It’s also possible to earn an associate degree and transfer to a four-year college to continue on toward a bachelor’s degree in business and liberal arts.

Trocaire’s mission is to serve as “an agent of success,” says Vice President for Institutional Advancement John Vecchio. Flexible scheduling, including evening classes, and a diverse student population are factors contributing to the comfortable atmosphere the college strives to create. Classes are generally under 20 students. The Palisano Learning Center provides extra free tutoring. Each student is assigned a staff member as an academic advisor. There is an “extension site” on Transit Road where students may attend business and computer classes, which will become even more of an asset when it receives full campus designation from New York State.

Rolling admissions means that a veteran may apply at any time during the year and, once accepted, may begin classes when the next semester starts. Veterans may apply online at www.trocaire.edu or call 827-2545 for a preliminary interview. Admissions counselors are eager and prepared to explore how a veteran can fit into the Trocaire community, from satisfying the requirements for admission to qualifying for available aid. A call now might even result in starting classes the first week of the fall semester, August 25.

The current troubled economy in our region and the country dictates that job applicants be well qualified and prepared to enter the work force at full speed. Trocaire’s placement has remained competitive and apparently responsive to opportunities in our area; in the last available study, in 2004, 98% of graduates found employment in Western New York, with 94% going to work in their field of study.

Trocaire is the only independent private two-year college in the city. It aims to provide a welcoming, embracing community focused on appreciation of individual strength and progress in life and career skills, according to Kathy Popielski, Director of College Communications. If further education has been on your mind, this is a good place to begin.
In the last decade, the Department of Veterans Affairs has doubled the number of disability claim processors on staff, and yet the average time to process a claim has climbed during that period from four months to six. From January 2007 through June 2008, as VA added 2,700 claim processors to its inventory of 8,000, the average time to process a claim still fell unimpressively, from 183 days to 181.

"Something's going on here that isn't right, that needs to be fixed. I don't know what the hell it is," said a frustrated Sen. Jon Tester (D-Mont.), during a July 9 hearing of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.

"In the 1990s you were at 120 days" to process a claim. "Was there something in the process that changed," Tester asked Michael Walcoff, deputy under secretary for benefits for the Veterans' Benefits Administration.

Yes, Walcoff said. Congress in 2000 passed the Veterans Claims Assistance Act. Since then, two thirds of the time required to process a claim is committed to blocks of time set up to develop evidence to support the claim. A recent study of VA claims processing, conducted by IBM, confirmed that compliance with the VCAA has created bottlenecks for processors.

See what actions have been taken by congress to reduce the claims back-log and wait times.

"It's good law... set up to guarantee that veterans have certain rights and they are protected. It's something we all agree with," Walcoff said. But courts have interpreted that law "in various ways that have made it very difficult to administer and have added time to the process."

Passage of the VCAA, in effect, overturned a 1999 decision by the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims that veterans had to submit a "well grounded" claim for VA officials to be required to help them obtain further evidence -- such as doctor files or witness statements -- to prove their claim.

While the VCAA lowered evidentiary standards for veterans it also spelled out in great detail what actions VA had to take, and what deadlines it had to set, to help veterans develop evidence to support claims.

When a claim is filed, the VCAA mandates that claim processors carefully analyze it and send a letter to the veteran explaining evidence on file and evidence still needed. The letter also must explain that VA will help obtain evidence if names and addresses of doctors or witnesses are provided and that VA will obtain government records pertinent to the claim.

But the VCAA letter also tells a veteran that he or she has 60 days to submit the required evidence. And if the claim is to be based on the medical findings of a private physician, the doctor too is given a 60-day deadline to submit medical records.

"If the doctor doesn't reply in 60 days," said Walcoff, "we then write the veteran and say we're going to give the doctor another 30 days. And if he doesn't submit within 30 days we're going to decide the case on the evidence that we have. So, right there, you're talking about 90 days."

The process can be delayed further if their original claim fails to include a signed privacy form required for VA to request medical records from private physicians. "We then have to go back to the veteran to get the privacy form," Walcoff said. All of this, he said, is required by VCAA.

Some veterans' service organizations and lawmakers have criticized VA for implementing the VCAA, and follow on court rulings, like a lumbering bureaucracy rather than like a dynamic agency bent on speeding up the claims process. VA officials told senators they soon will implement some of the IBM report recommendations to speed the claims process.

The study said, for instance, that the VA should reduce the 60-day period given veterans to provide evidence supporting their claim.

"We are shortening that to 30 days so we can act faster," said retired Navy Rear Adm. Patrick W. Dunne, acting under secretary for benefits for the Veterans Benefits Administration. VA also will make the VCAA letter more understandable for veterans and make it available electronically in November after a software update.

(Continued on page 4)
VA disability claims have climbed by five percent from last year, to 883,000, the result of Iraq, Afghanistan and an aging veteran population. The claims backlog is still a hefty 390,000. Though decision timeliness remains a concern, said Sen. Daniel Akaka (D-Hawaii), committee chairman, decision finally are being handed down faster than claims are being filed.

But Sen. Richard Burr (N.C.), ranking Republican on committee, said claim timeliness remains very frustrating for veterans and their families.

"Simply drawing more money and more personnel to the problem clearly - clearly-- has not been the solution," Burr said. It's time "to seriously explore other options" including conversion to paperless claims and overhauling VA's overly complex disability rating system.

Howard Pierce, chief executive officer of PKC Corp., testified that his company in 2001 was tasked to set up a computerized decision model that could be used by VA disability raters and claim adjudicators. PKC analysts were stunned by the complexity of the decisions.

"What a rater is asked to do on a day-to-day basis is extraordinarily complicated. We live in a world of complexity in my company. We work with very challenging science. We have never seen anything more complex" than the VA claims system, Pierce said.

But Kerry Baker, with Disabled American Veterans, suggested other ways for VA to speed claim decisions and be fairer too. He said most claims still hinge on medical opinions, and VA should be more willing, as is the Social Security system, to accept well documented private medical opinions.

VA also should be required, "as a matter of fairness," to inform claimants on basic elements that render a private medical opinion adequate for rating disabilities. "VA relays this exact information to its own doctors when it seeks medical opinion," Baker said.

From Sergio Rodriguez
Assistant Service Officer

What is a Veteran?

This question has always been the cause of misunderstanding, especially since it is often times asked by those who themselves are veterans.

A common misconception is that, to be a veteran, one must have served in combat. This notion is simply based in false belief. For VA purposes, the definition of “veteran” is “a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable.” Thus, based on this criteria, anyone who served honorably while in active duty is considered to be, and in fact is, a veteran.

There are many different programs and benefits provided by the VA to those who are deemed to be veterans. Each benefit has its own set of eligibility criteria which a veteran must meet in order to qualify. One of the more popular programs for young veterans returning from duty and back into the civilian world is the GI Bill. On June 30, 2008, President Bush signed into law what is considered to be perhaps the most generous educational benefit in the history of the U.S. military.

In our next installment, I will be discussing the new Post 9/11 GI Bill and those who qualify.

from www.military.com

To comment, e-mail milupdate@aol.com, write to Military Update, P.O. Box 231111, Centreville, VA, 20120-1111 or visit: www.militaryupdate.com.
THE CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR

PO2 (EOD2) Mike Monsoor, a Navy EOD Technician, was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously for jumping on a grenade in Iraq, giving his life to save his fellow Seals.

During Mike Monsoor’s funeral in San Diego, as his coffin was being moved from the hearse to the grave site at Ft. Rosecrans National Cemetery, SEALs were lined up on both sides of the pallbearers route forming a column of twos, with the coffin moving up the center. As Mike's coffin passed, each SEAL having removed his gold Trident from his uniform, slapped it down, embedding the Trident in the wooden coffin. The slaps were audible from across the cemetery; by the time the coffin arrived grave side, it looked as though it had a gold inlay from all the Tridents pinned to it. This was a fitting send-off for a warrior hero.

Recent VA News Releases

To view and download VA news release, please visit the following Internet address: http://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel

VA, Monster Partner for Veteran Job Seekers Veteran-Owned Businesses Listed

WASHINGTON (July 22, 2008)- In a new plan to help veterans find jobs, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has partnered with Monster Government Solutions, a division of Monster Worldwide, Inc., a company that markets online employment services to employers and job seekers.

Part of VA's mission is to assist veterans to gain employment. Monster, in partnership with VA's Center for Veterans Enterprise, provides veteran-owned small businesses the opportunity to post job openings for veterans, including service-disabled veterans, at a large price discount. Monster will post the job openings for 60 days, twice as long as for other employers.

"This government-corporate partnership represents the best kind of effort to help those who gave up time in their lives to serve their country and return to an economic community that may not recognize their skills," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. James B. Peake. "The program should make it easier for employers to find qualified job candidates as well as veteran suppliers and service contractors."

To participate in Monster job listings, veteran business owners must be listed in VA's online Vendor Information Pages (VIP) maintained by the Department's Center for Veterans Enterprise at http://www.VetBiz.gov.

In addition to helping veteran owners get business from other companies and prospective veteran employees find jobs, VA's VIP pages will give Monster a source for purchasing services itself and VA will refer appropriate, listed suppliers to Monster.

The VA-Monster agreement is initially for two years and provides for extensions.
Buffalo, NY – Governor David A. Patterson and The New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (NYS OASAS) have approved funding in excess of $3 million for the construction of a facility on Horizon Health Services’ 11-acre Horizon Village campus to serve the intensive residential addiction treatment needs of area veterans.

The 22,000-square-foot treatment facility will contain 25 beds and will provide specialized chemical dependency and mental health services for veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) within its current, unique and intensive addiction recovery and family programs. Residents will have full access to Horizon Village’s broad range of services, including pre-vocational preparation and on- and off-site educational opportunities. The facility will be adjacent to the existing 50-bed residential facility located at 6301 Inducon Drive East in Sanborn, NY. Construction is to begin in early Fall, 2008.

The National Association of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors indicates that “approximately 40 percent of veterans who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan will experience a mental health problem and, of those, 60 percent will experience issues with chemical dependency.” Census data indicates there are approximately 166,000 civilian veterans in the eight counties Horizon Village serves.

“The OASAS “Service Need Profile” data indicates there is an 85 percent unmet need for this type of treatment for veterans in the Western New York area,” says NYS OASAS Commissioner Karen M. Carpenter-Palumbo. “The development of this facility at Horizon Village will offer timely access to specialized services for veterans and their families desperate for the help they need and deserve.”

“Currently there can be a 4-6-week wait for a bed at Horizon Village,” says Paige Prentice, executive director. “With the addition of this veteran’s facility and the proposed young adult facility for which we are currently raising funds, we will be better positioned to help more Western New Yorkers achieve the recovery they so deserve.”

The grant was secured with the help of NY State Assemblyman Sam Hoyt (D-Buffalo, Grand Island), Senator George Maziarz (R-C, Newfane) and NY State Assemblywoman Francine DelMonte (D-Lewiston).

Horizon Health Services is the largest and most comprehensive provider of fully-integrated mental health, behavioral health, chemical dependency, medical and vocational treatment and recovery services in Western New York.
WASHINGTON - Troops kept in the ranks through the military's stop-loss policy could see an extra $1,500 each month under legislation introduced Thursday.

Lawmakers supporting the measure said the move is an attempt to compensate those troops for the disruption additional service can cause, and represents a step forward in their efforts to end the stop-loss policy.

"It really is a backdoor draft," said Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., who sponsored the bill. "But this (proposal) isn't questioning the necessity of the policy. We're saying there ought to be some recognition of the sacrifice they're making."

The $1,500 monthly bonus would be retroactive to October 2001, allowing troops who have already fully separated from the service to receive a payout as well as those still on active duty.

"One guy said he felt liked he'd been drafted," he said. "When I enlisted I was told we wouldn't be stop-lossed unless it was World War III."

Buzzell, a well-known blogger during his tour of Iraq in 2003, left the service three years ago. He said several friends from the platoon who re-enlisted were killed two years ago while stop-lossed in Iraq to finish another tour.

Phil Ishmael said his son spent an extra 11 months in Iraq after the Army stop-lossed him. "He got no re-enlistment bonus, no special thanks, and no apology for the added disruption to his plans for the future," he said.

Ishmael said he thinks the extra compensation is a good move, but he'd prefer more warnings for new recruits about the stop-loss policy and more "disincentives" for service leaders relying on those personnel.

In recent months, military leaders including Secretary of Defense Robert Gates have expressed a dislike for using stop-lossed troops to cover personnel gaps, but also acknowledged that they'll likely need to continue the practice in coming years.

House sponsor Rep. Betty Sutton, D-Ohio, said the financial burden of putting off a job or college can be devastating for those troops. "This is difficult, unjust and undermines the voluntary nature of our military," she said. "We must honor their continuing service and sacrifice, and those of their families."

Lawmakers said they will push for hearings in coming months on the bill and the larger stop-loss issue.

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Welcome to Buffalo Navy Week!
August 24 - 31, 2008

http://www.buffalonavyweek.com/

Anchors aweigh, as the Navy sails into Buffalo during the week of August 24th! As part of a national community outreach program, the U.S. Navy has coordinated “Navy Weeks” throughout various cities across America to spread awareness about the sea services.

This year’s Navy Week in Buffalo will feature RADM Michael Lyden, a Buffalo native. Rhode Island Sound, the Navy’s rock band from Newport, will have public concerts throughout the week, featuring American Idol finalist Petty Officer Phil Stacey on Aug 25-26th. Additionally, the public will be invited to meet with EOD divers in a mobile dive tank, fly in a simulator or even walk through the Accelerate Your Life Exhibit. Sailors from USS Buffalo (SSN-715) will visit their boat’s namesake city, and other special Navy guests will be in town, schedule permitting.

Click here to see the Buffalo Navy Week Schedule of Events.

Mission Statement of Erie County Veterans Services

To insure that every veteran in the county is registered in the VA System and is fully aware of all the benefits that they have earned.

To make veterans an economic force in education, employment and business development.