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1. **CONTACTS:** To help you obtain information about claims or other needs:
  - **VETERANS CRISIS LINE:** Veterans and loved ones can call (800) 273-8255 24/7 and then press 1 with total anonymity to speak to a professional counselor. A Houston Vet Center counselor, **James Bailey**, is available in Don Montoya's office on Thursdays for veterans and their families. Call Don's office at (979) 532-1311 for an appointment to see James Bailey. See forms on my desk for information.
  - **Don Montoya**, Wharton County Veterans Service Officer, 1017 N. Alabama Road, Wharton, TX 77488; (979) 532-1311, don.montoya@co.wharton.tx.us; **NEW OFFICE HOURS:** M, TUES, THUR (Wharton), 8:00a.m.-12:00 noon & 1:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m.; FRI (Wharton), 8:00a.m.-12:00 noon by appointment only & 1:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m. (Administrative time); On WED (El Campo library), 9:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m.
  - **Vanessa Hicks-Callaway**: (Congressman **Blake Farenthold's** Veteran Advocate), (361) 894-6446, Vanessa.Hicks-Callaway@mail.house.gov. **NOTE:** **Vanessa Hicks-Callaway will work with you on any other government agency.**
  - **Matt Minor**: (Texas State Representative **Phil Stephenson's** Veteran Advocate), (281) 232-7900, Matt.Minor@house.state.tx.us
  - **VA COMPLAINT HOTLINE:** New VA complaint hotline number is (855) 948-2311. Be courteous and be able to answer WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, and WHY about "wrong doing at the VA."
  - **NEW VA PHONE NUMBER TO CALL 1-844-698-2311:** This new national toll-free number is a go to source for Veterans and their families who do not know what number to call at the VA. It is identified at the VA as **myVA311**.
  - **VA INQUIRY ROUTING & INFORMATION SYSTEM (IRIS):** Use for written inquiries to the VA. <https://iris.custhelp.com>.

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1. **VA BENEFITS PAYMENT SCHEDULE:** Nov 2017-Dec 1, 2017; and Dec 2017-Dec 29, 2017.  
(Source: [Veteransbenefits@public.govdelivery.com](mailto:Veteransbenefits@public.govdelivery.com) )
2. **RAMP PROGRAM:** On August 23, 2017, Congress enacted a law called the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017. This law will dramatically change the VA claims and appeals process. The law will not go live until February 2019; however, the VA has already started to roll out a pilot program called the Rapid Appeals Modernization Program (RAMP). RAMP is limited to supplemental claims or higher-level review lanes only. Although Veterans may appeal to the Board, the VA will not start to adjudicate Board cases until February 2019. VVA's initial guidance to all claimants is to not opt-in to RAMP because VA has not yet published any proposed regulations and many of their current practices are subject to change. (Source: [veteranshealth@public.govdelivery.com](mailto:veteranshealth@public.govdelivery.com) , 11/2/2017)
3. **NEW PRESUMPTIVE DISEASES ASSOCIATED WITH AGENT ORANGE:** In March and April, 2016, I informed the Chapter about the Secretary of Veterans Affairs making a decision on four new presumptive diseases. The VA promised the then Secretary, McDonald, would but did not make a decision by the end of 2016. The VA then promised Secretary Shulkin would make a decision by November 1, 2017. Secretary Shulkin released the following statement on November 1, 2017. "After thoroughly reviewing the National Academy of Medicine(NAM)'s latest report regarding Veterans and Agent Orange, and associated data and recommendations from the NAM Task Force, I have made a decision to further explore new presumptive conditions for service connection that may ultimately qualify for disability compensation." (Source: [veteranshealth@public.govdelivery.com](mailto:veteranshealth@public.govdelivery.com) , 11/2/2017)
4. **COLA FOR 2018:** The Social Security has announced that the COST OF LIVING ADJUSTMENT (COLA) will increase by 2% next year, the largest increase in five years. Military retirees, disability compensation recipients, and those who receive checks for some other type of pay will also see a 2% pay raise in their monthly paychecks in 2018. Multiply your monthly check by 1.02 to get the approximate amount for 2018. (Source: RAO., pg 100, 10/15/2017)
5. **CARE PROGRAM TO REPLACE CHOICE PROGRAM:** The VA has announce that it plans to replace its CHOICE PROGRAM with the COORDINATED ACCESS & REWARDING EXPERIENCES (CARE) PROGRAM. The CARE Program is designed to improve Veteran's experiences with and access to health care, building on the best features of VA's existing community care programs and strengthening VA's ability to furnish care in its facilities. (Source: [veteransaffairs@public.govdelivery.com](mailto:veteransaffairs@public.govdelivery.com) , 10/16/2017)
6. **IRS STILL REQUIRING HEALTH INSURANCE:** The *HOUSTON CHRONICLE* is reporting that the IRS is still requiring most people to carry health insurance or risk a fine for tax year 2017. The IRS will automatically reject electronic returns for tax year 2017 that do not specify if the taxpayer had health insurance. (Source: *Houston Chronicle*, 10/22/2017, pg B6.)