

Training The Best Service Officers To Be Even Better

VFW celebrating a centennial of service to America's disabled veterans

Aug 15, 2018

ANNAPOLIS, Md. – More than 130 service officers from across the nation and world are attending a weeklong training conference here to continue developing the skills they need to successfully help U.S. military veterans obtain their earned benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Sponsored and conducted by the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, the training is one of four basic and advanced courses the VFW holds annually to improve the skills of VFW service officers and those from other veterans service organizations, and state and county agencies who are accredited through VA.

“The VA requires a minimum of 40 hours of continuing education a year to maintain a service officer’s accreditation, but we provide up to 80 hours of training every year,” said VFW National Veterans Service Director Ryan Gallucci. “That’s because our network of benefits professionals are in our communities every day, and in order to successfully advocate on behalf of veterans, they must be able to explain what VA programs and benefits are available, as well as understand and access a complex VA benefits system.”

And the success of the VFW’s program is reflected in its numbers. In fiscal year 2017, the VA reports that the VFW’s global network of 2,000 service officers helped more than 500,000 wounded, ill and injured veterans to recoup nearly \$7.7 billion in disability compensation and pension, a number that included 158,000 new claims.

Four service officers attending this week’s training are:

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- Reginald Sims has been working as an assistant Department Service Officer in Madison County, Tenn., for the past seven years. A retired Army first sergeant, Sims said the annual training is helpful in staying up-to-date with the VA claims process. “I always take something from every class,” he said.
- Elizabeth Salvador is a Department Service Officer in Pittsburgh, Pa. An Air Force veteran who served in Iraq from 2005 to 2006, she went to the VFW for help getting her VA benefits. “I went to my local VFW Post because I wasn’t told anything when I separated,” she said. “I ended up getting involved. It’s a lot of hard work, but honestly, we don’t do it for the money,” she said. The best part of her job is “helping veterans. I am in their shoes, literally.”
- Troy North is an Assistant Service Officer in Ann Arbor, Mich., and a Navy veteran. The training allows him to “take the knowledge I learned to the next level. You help them navigate waters that they wouldn’t necessarily know where to begin,” he said.
- Robert Smith is a Service Officer with the Idaho Division of Veterans Services. He said the VFW’s annual training conference is invaluable. “There are changes monthly that you have to be flexible and have the ability to work with the VA. You have to stay flexible,” he said. A Marine Corps veteran who served in Desert Storm, Smith said he feels a sense of duty to his fellow veterans. “I just continue to honor the veterans by serving the living,” he said.

Also attending the class on an informational basis is new VFW National Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief Hal Roesch, who is saluting the VFW’s centennial of service to America’s disabled veterans.

“When our founders began returning home in 1899 from their wars in Cuba and the Philippines, they returned to an American government that provided little in assistance for their service-connected wounds, illnesses or injuries,” he explained. “Twenty years later, our World War I veterans returned home to the same government neglect. That’s when the VFW said ‘never again,’ and began petitioning Congress for better benefits and government health care,” he said. “A century ago the VFW had to force our government to do the right thing, and 100 years later, the programs and services we provide to veterans, service members and their families continue to be just as needed now as they were then.”

The VFW’s next training conference, Oct. 15-19, is for service officers with more than five years of experience.