

Military OneSource Podcast — Commissary Benefits for Transitioning Disabled Veterans

Episode transcript

Intro voice-over:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Today we are joining you from the commissary at Fort Myer, which is in Arlington, Virginia, which is next door to Arlington National Cemetery and down the road a little bit from the Pentagon. It gives you an idea of where we are. We're in the commissary today because we're going to talk about something called Expanded Patronage. If you're a veteran, if you're from a veteran family, or if you know somebody who is a veteran or from a veteran family, I really hope you share this episode because we're going to get into some really important details, because there are some details to understand and we'll get into that. I've got a bunch of people here with me and they're going to walk us through all the details. Trust me, you'll want to stick around for those details.

What we're going to do is folks are going to join us, and as they join us they're going to introduce themselves. Pyper, I'm going to start with you because my first question is to give us a general idea of what is Expanded Patronage?

Pyper Brenner:

Yeah, hi. This is Pyper Brenner. I am the associate director for business policy in the Office of the Under Secretary of Personnel and Readiness, also referred to as P&R. Expanded Patronage came around with the National Defense Authorization Act of fiscal year 2019. It included the Purple Heart and Disabled Veterans Equal Access Act of 2018. We also refer to this as the Patronage Expansion Act. This act expanded patronage or provided increased access to shop at or use certain facilities on military installations. The Department of Defense implemented this expansion on Jan. 1 of 2020.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. We've expanded patronage to, like you said, certain ... Yeah, we're in the commissary, but it goes beyond that. Spoiler alert, that includes golf courses. Give us a general idea of where it goes.

Pyper Brenner:

Yes, thanks. The Patronage Expansion Act actually includes the commissary, the military exchanges and MWR retail facilities. So, as you mentioned, golf courses, bowling centers, marinas, RV parks, those kinds of things. I think here in a little bit we're going to get into who now is eligible under the expansion, correct?

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. We're going to spend some time on that. This is where you got to pay attention because it can get complicated, but we're not going to let it get complicated. We are going to get into who is eligible. There's different categories of veterans, so help us work through these categories and what it means.

Pyper Brenner:

Yeah. I'll run through the list of who is eligible under this expansion. Some of my partners here may help give some clarity so that people understand what some of these terms mean.

First off are veterans with a service-connected disability are eligible under the expansion. Veterans who are Purple Heart recipients. Veterans who are former prisoners of war, and individuals who have been approved and designated as the primary family caregivers of an eligible veteran under the Department of Veteran Affairs, their comprehensive assistance for family caregivers.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. I know that was a mouthful. We're going to unpack that. There's a couple of things we're going to unpack. One of them is caregivers. It's a category that needs a little bit of explanation and Dan's going to help us through that.

Dan Lutrell:

Thank you. Dan VA here. Currently, for purposes of shopping, eligible caregivers are individuals who are approved and designated as the primary family caregiver of an eligible veteran under VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers. Eligible caregivers show their VA-issued caregiver patronage letter, which were just mailed out for FY2025. They need to bring this to the commissary to have at the register.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, that's important. The other is you mentioned veterans with service-connected disabilities. It is possible to have a 0% disability. For that, we need explanation. You are?

Jeff Cereghino:

Yes, I'm Jeff Cereghino with the Veterans Benefits Administration. I'm a special assistance for DOD and military affairs. When a veteran files a disability claim, the VA's really determining two things. The first thing that they're going to determine is whether their current condition is tied to military service. Secondly, if that's true, then they're going to rate the severity of that disability, how it affects their day-to-day life. That

severity rating can range all the way from 0% to 100%. Now 0% would be the most minimal impact on the day-to-day life. Though it might not provide monetary compensation, it opens up the access to other VA benefits, like health care for that condition, or life insurance. In this case, what we're talking today, is those veterans being able to come in and use the commissary.

Bruce Moody:

There's probably a lot of people who have served and really haven't taken the steps to determine what their eligibilities are, what their rating might be. If somebody has gotten out and they haven't really done that work, what should they do? What are the steps they should take?

Jeff Cereghino:

Yeah, great question. If any individual believes that they have a current condition that's tied to their military service, that individual should file a claim with the VA. They could do it several different ways. They could do it by themselves. They can go online, they can submit a claim through the mail. They can in-person or walk into a regional office, to be able to do that. Or if that's challenging, they can get help from a trained professional. When I talk about trained professional, an accredited representative that's been accredited through the Veterans Affairs.

I'd be more than happy to make sure that I give a link that you guys can include or a QR code for individuals who are looking to figure out more. Or we also have a link that would let them know how they can check if the individual they're trying to get help from is accredited through the VA.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, we'll definitely get that link in the program notes.

Another aspect that I want to get into, it's called the Veteran Health Identification Card. Veterans refer to it as the VHIC. There's a couple of aspects to the card that I want to get into. One is that people might have a card that they notice is about to expire, and we want to get into what steps people can take. But first, give us an idea of what the VHIC is, why it's important to veterans, and what they do when it's time to renew it.

Dan Luttrell:

Hi, I'm Dan Luttrell with the VA DOD Collaboration Office. Just to speak about the VHIC, that's the Veterans Health Identification Card. Veterans who are enrolled in health care with the VA are issued this card. It has the service-connected disability status up in the top right-hand corner, which indicates your eligibility for this benefit to shop.

We have some resources available if you have questions about your VHIC. We have a 1-877-222-VETS number is a good resource. And also, to visit your local VA medical center enrollment office is really a good way to connect with information about how to enroll in a VHIC or renew your VHIC.

Bruce Moody:

All right. Let's go into the next step on this. Well, there's two steps. There's getting on the base, and then there's getting into the store, or getting to the golf course, or whatever it is that you're planning to do. Then to break that even further, there's the first time that you do it, and then the times that you do it afterwards.

Pyper is nodding and she is ready to explain all of this to us.

Pyper Brenner:

Yeah. Our veterans and caregivers, just like anyone trying to access a base for the first time, you need to stop at your installation visitor control center. There, you will establish your identity, fitness and purpose for your visit. When you do that, to establish your identity, that's where you present an acceptable credential. This is where you would present your VHIC or a state-issued Real ID. Once you've done that, then the next step is fitness and that's where you undergo an on-the-spot criminal record and terrorism check that establishes that your fitness is to come aboard the base. Then the next is a really nice change that we've done recently, the eligibility for on-installation benefits now is verified electronically if you're coming aboard for doing the commissary, or the military exchange, or any of the MWR facilities. The system will automatically verify if you're eligible to come aboard that base for that purpose.

I will make one comment. If you're coming to a base that doesn't have any of those facilities but does have a VA medical facility and you're trying to access for an appointment, you do need to bring proof of that medical appointment because that electronic verification won't happen. I do just want to clarify that.

But yeah, once you've gone through that process and you've met all three of those identity, fitness and purpose, they will enroll that VHIC for that Real ID for that recurring access. The next time you visit, you don't have to stop at the visitor's center. You just proceed to the gate, you present that ID that you enrolled. They will scan it and it will let you through. You don't have to stop again at the visitor's center unless you have a guest with you.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, we want to get into that. Some veterans need a driver, and that driver may not be an official designated caregiver. Who can this person be? What does that person need to bring with them? And what does the process look like for them?

Pyper Brenner:

It's very similar to what I just went through. Any guest, if they're 18-years or older, whether they're the driver for the veteran or just accompanying the veteran, has to follow those same three steps. They have to establish identity, fitness and purpose. Now because they are with the veteran, they typically won't be allowed to enroll their card. Each time they accompany that veteran, they'll have to go through this process. But yeah, it's as simple as that.

As always, we recommend if it's the first time you're visiting a base or it's been a while, always call ahead to your installation visitor's center to make sure that there's nothing unique or specific going on that may impact your ability to bring a visitor along with you.

Bruce Moody:

Let's talk more about that, and that is about just bringing in family members, friends. What's allowed, how many are allowed? What should they bring? How does that differ from what we've been talking about?

Pyper Brenner:

It's really very similar, other than different installations may have different numbers of people that a veteran can bring with them. As I mentioned, it's always good to call ahead to make sure you understand what that installation, based on their force protection at that time, is allowing. Whether they're allowing you to bring just one person with you, two people with you, whatever it is. Just always call and verify so that you don't show up and get surprised that maybe something's changed since the last time you visited.

Before we change, I do want to mention for those veterans and caregivers that do enroll either their VHIC or their Real ID, that link of enrollment for that recurring access, it stays in effect for either one year up to three years. Or from one year from the last time they visited the installation. If it's been more than a year since you've been there, you're probably going to have to go through that process to re-enroll. Also, if you ever have to renew your VHIC or renew your Real ID, you'll have to go through that initial process again to get your card reenrolled for that recurring access.

Bruce Moody:

Okay, appreciate that. All right, let's just move forward to the checkout aisle. We're standing here in the Fort Myer commissary and we're literally looking at the checkout aisle. If someone has gotten on the base, they've gone in the commissary, they've filled their shopping cart. What's next? It's a two-part question. What happens the first time they go through checkout? Then what happens after that?

Kevin Robinson:

I'm Kevin Robinson, chief of corporate communications for the Defense Commissary Agency. One of the things I want to echo or reinforce what my colleagues have already talked about. Before you actually go to the store, before you actually come on post, please check your VHIC card to make sure it's current. If you get through the base access, and you're at the store, and you're at the checkout, if you have a functioning VHIC card, if everything is current, there will be no issues. If though, your VHIC isn't current, people will allow you to do your first transactions with your VA-issued service-connected letter, but that's just the first transaction. The next time you come back, it is definitely important that you have your updated VHIC card with you.

Bruce Moody:

Interesting, alright. Now another question I have since you're with us. If a veteran hasn't been to the commissary in a while, they should probably know it's been changing over the years.

Kevin Robinson:

Definitely. This is not your grandparents' commissary. There have been a lot of updates over the years in the amount of products we carry, the quality of products. For example, commissaries now have a lot of coupons associated with them. We have private labeled products called Commissary Store brands, which save patrons even more money. And we have dietician-approved products and recipes which help a lot of us who are trying to watch our weight or eat healthy, make good choices when they're walking up and down the aisle. Last but certainly not least, the commissary is a good meeting place for the military community.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. You may not believe it, but this is a very, very social experience going to the commissary. I want to bring Stephanie into the conversation because you are the veteran. You've gone through all of the things that we've been talking about. You want to share with us your experiences and what worked for you, and how you went about it.

Stephanie Supplee:

Sure. My name is Stephanie Supplee. I'm a disabled veteran. I work in the military commissary, military resale distribution system, so I had the privilege of knowing very early on about the change of benefits in January 2020. I was already in the VA health system and I was able to take my old VA ID card, and go over to the hospital in the enrollment center, and get updated to a VHIC. It became very clear to me right away that a lot of people didn't really know about the benefits and the benefits change. Even the VA did a lot in terms of pushing out email communication and social media communication. It just got lost in the noise of everything that happened.

For me, there were several years there where I did not have access. What is great about the commissaries is, beyond the private brands that they have introduced to make groceries more affordable, they have a lot of really key brands. Many of us are brand loyal. For me, I lived in an area where there were about five or six commissaries around me. I had access to people to go on and shop for the items that I would always be looking for, the brands that I liked, at a surprisingly affordable price. It became part of my normal routine to go into the commissary, buy those items, and start to bring people along.

What I learned the most is most veterans don't know they have that access, they don't know they have that benefit. I'm also a big fan of going to the driving range, so having access to the golf courses, MWR activities. Again, living very close to a base, it becomes, "Why would I drive to a golf course? I can go on base and go do that."

In each store, I think that one of the biggest hurdles learning is because of my job, I get to visit a lot of bases. Base access is different everywhere. The biggest piece there is not to get frustrated, to call ahead to the base access, to the security office. They will help you. They'll tell you if you can bring somebody else on with you or if you can't. They'll tell you how many people. They'll give you an idea if you need appointments. It's always good to call ahead and get an idea for that first time. Especially if you're like me, and you're going to be accessing multiple bases, you have to get into each of those systems so that's important, too.

Bruce Moody:

I think that's an excellent summary. Kevin, you wanted to jump in?

Kevin Robinson:

This is Kevin from Defense Commissary Agency. I just want to add that this is a benefit that veterans have sacrificed and served for. It's their benefit. It's their opportunity to save \$25 on every \$100 they spend. It's a great benefit to follow on to your service. But as a veteran who also shops in the commissary, please don't leave money on the table. Take advantage of this benefit, it's yours.

Bruce Moody:

For anyone who has served, anyone who has worn the uniform, they may have moved on with their lives, but we're still here. We still honor them and we welcome them. We know that when we welcome them, it's going to be with a person saying, "Okay, but I have a lot of questions." That's okay because there are going to be people at every point to answer those questions. Starting with this podcast, and I really mean it when I hope that you share it with people who are veterans so that they know first steps to take, between the conversation we've here, the links we'll put in the program notes. We really do hope you share this episode with veterans, veterans' families to get their questions answered and to make sure they're taking advantage of the benefits that they've earned through their service.

With that, I will say thank you all for joining me today. I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you, if you have any questions about what you've heard today, any comments. There's a link in the program notes. If you have an idea for a future podcast, also use the link in the program notes. Be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.