

VAntage Point

Official Blog of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

DoD answers top 10 questions on expanded commissary, exchange, MWR access



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The Defense Department recently announced expanded commissary, military service exchange and MWR access Jan. 1 (<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/67974/commissary-military-service-exchange-mwr-access-extended-veterans-beginning-january/>) and established a standard for physical access to military installations. Below are the top 10 questions

Veterans have asked the Defense Department about the expanded access.

Q1. How do I get access if I have a 0 percent service-connected condition, but my income is too high to get a Veteran Health Identification Card?

A1. Veterans who have received a Health Eligibility Center Form H623A that states they have been placed in VA health care priority group 8E may bring this form paired with an acceptable credential like a REAL ID-compliant driver's license or a U.S. passport for installation and privilege access.

Q2. If I've got a DoD-issued identification card because I'm retired, a Medal of Honor recipient, or have a 100 percent VA-documented disability or unemployability rating, do I also need to have a Veteran Health Identification Card (VHIC) to get access to DoD privileges?

A2. No. If you are eligible for a DoD-issued retiree, Medal of Honor, or 100 percent disabled identification card, you should obtain and use the DoD-issued card to access DoD installations and privileges. While you could use a VHIC if you had one, you would be subject to the commissary credit/debit card user fee if you paid for your commissary purchases with a commercial credit or debit card. The commissary credit/debit card user fee is not charged to DoD-issued identification card holders. Your DoD-issued identification card will also allow you broader morale, welfare, and recreation activity access.

Q3. How does the installation access process work for me and my guests; and if I have old felony activity on my record, will I be denied access to the installation?

A3. All newly eligible Veterans and caregivers and any guests traveling with them who are age 18 or older must stop at the visitor control center before entering an installation for the first time to verify identify, establish purpose for the visit, and undergo a basic on-the-spot background check.

- Newly eligible Veterans must show a Veteran Health Identification Card that displays "PURPLE HEART," "FORMER POW," or "SERVICE CONNECTED" below the photo on the front of the card; or a Health Eligibility Center Form H623A that states the Veteran has been placed in VA health care priority group 8E, paired with an acceptable credential like a REAL ID-compliant driver's license or a U.S. passport. (DoD installations cannot accept a driver's license that is not REAL ID-compliant as proof of identity.)
- Newly eligible caregivers must show an eligibility letter from the VA's Office of Community Care that lists them as the Primary Family Caregiver for an eligible Veteran under the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers, paired with an acceptable credential like a REAL ID-compliant driver's license or a U.S. passport. (DoD installations cannot accept a driver's license that is not REAL ID-compliant as proof of identity.)
- Guests of newly eligible Veterans or caregivers who are age 18 or older must show an acceptable credential like a REAL ID-compliant driver's license or a U.S. passport. (DoD installations cannot accept a driver's license that is not REAL ID-compliant as proof of identity.)

If the installation has credential enrollment capability and the acceptable credential(s) used are enrollable, they can be enrolled for recurring access so that the individual(s) don't have to stop at visitor control every time they want to visit the installation. Even a guest's acceptable credential can be enrolled. It will not allow them to enter the installation without someone who is eligible to enter the installation, but it will allow them to have their credential scanned from the car when entering with an authorized individual. This is the same process used for anyone who desires entry to an installation.

An individual may be denied access if derogatory information shows up on the background check that reflects on the integrity or character of an individual that indicates that such an individual may pose a risk to the good order, discipline, morale, or safety of a DoD installation or the resources or personnel on that installation. Examples include, but are not limited to, aspects of an individual's criminal history or current status as wanted or as a known or appropriately suspected terrorist. There is a process for an individual with accurately identified derogatory information that prevents individuals from establishing either historic or current fitness to seek an exception due to their specific circumstances, allowing them to be

granted unescorted access. DoD Components may grant unescorted access to a convicted felon, in accordance with applicable Federal, State, and local laws, after considering appropriate mitigating factors such as the nature and seriousness of the offense, the circumstances surrounding the offense, recency and frequency of the offense, the individual's age and maturity at the time of the offense, the individual's effort toward rehabilitation, and other factors. Under these conditions, an individual should apply directly to the installation commander requesting an exception to all allow access to the installation.

Q4. Are dependents of newly eligible Veterans and caregivers also eligible for DoD privileges?

A4. No. The Purple Heart and Disabled Veterans Equal Access Act of 2018, only gave these privileges to specific Veterans and caregivers, not to their dependents. Dependents may accompany eligible Veterans and caregivers as their guests, but they may not make purchases.

Q5. Why can't all Veterans have these DoD privileges?

A5. The scope of operations on military installations is sized to take care of the needs of military members and their families. Military operations are not funded or sized to accommodate all Veterans. Expanding access to the 4.1 million Veterans and caregivers directed by the Purple Heart and Disabled Veterans Equal Access Act of 2018 (and that number continues to grow daily), will already be a test of DoD's capacity. Inserting another 15 million Veterans into the mix would overwhelm the system and our military members and their families would suffer for it.

Q6. Will Veterans who choose to live overseas be able to access military installations and privileges in overseas foreign countries?

A6. It depends. U.S. law doesn't apply outside of the United States and outside of the U.S. territories and possessions. Access in overseas foreign countries is subject to applicable host-nation laws and applicable international agreements, like status of forces agreements. The function of the installation also sometimes restricts access. It is best to check with the installation you desire to visit to find out if, as a Veteran or caregiver in one of the new Veteran or caregiver categories, you will be authorized access. Chances are that if you are a retired military member living abroad and didn't already have access as a retiree, you will not get access under any of the new categories.

Q7. Can newly eligible Veterans and caregivers bring guests to the installations and facilities?

A7. Yes. Guests will be subject to installation access procedures described in #8 above and must remain with the eligible Veteran or caregiver at all times when they are on the installation. Also, guests cannot make any purchases in commissary or exchange stores.

Q8. Which of the following MWR activities can be used? (This is not an exhaustive list, only the most frequently asked about activities.)

A8.

AmericanForcesTravel.com: Yes.

Bowling: Yes.

Camping: Yes. Tent sites and RV parks.

Child Care: No.

Clubs: Yes.

Fishing: It depends. If lakes are operated as part of the installation park and picnic areas, no. If lakes are operated as part of the installation outdoor recreation activity, then it is at the discretion of the Military Department, subject to capacity and funding conditions.

Golf: Yes.

Gyms: No.

Libraries: No.

Lodging: Yes. Cabins, cottages, recreation centers, resorts, and official temporary duty and permanent change of station lodging (on a space-available basis).

Movies: Yes, if there is an admission fee. (No, if the movies are shown at no charge.)

Pools: Yes, if designated as a recreational swimming pool. (No if designated as an aquatic training facility.)

Rentals: Yes.

Tickets: At the discretion of the Military Department, subject to capacity and funding conditions.

MAC flights: This is NOT an MWR, exchange, or commissary activity and access is NOT authorized.

Pharmacy: This is NOT an MWR, exchange, or commissary activity and access is NOT authorized.

USO: This is NOT a military organization. USO is a non-Federal entity.

Q9. What conditions are required to get access to the DoD privileges?

A9. Newly eligible Veterans must meet at least one of the following conditions:

- Purple Heart recipient
- Former prisoner of war
- Service-connected disability rating (between 0-90 percent)

Veterans with a 100 percent disability or unemployability rating and Veterans who are Medal of Honor recipients already have DoD privileges, so they are not newly eligible.

Veterans include former members of any of the uniformed services (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, U.S. Public Health Service, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration).

Newly eligible caregivers must be the individual assessed, approved, and designated as the Primary Family Caregiver for an eligible Veteran under the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers.

In addition to meeting one of the above conditions, newly eligible Veterans and caregivers must possess the specific documentation that DoD will accept as proof of identity and eligibility for access:

- Veterans must possess a Veteran Health Identification Card (VHIC) (<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/68479/veterans-need-vhic-for-in-person-commissary-military-exchange-and-mwr-access/>) that displays "PURPLE HEART," "FORMER POW," or "SERVICE CONNECTED" below the photo on the front of the card. If an eligible Veteran is not eligible to obtain a VHIC, the VA Health Eligibility Center Form H623A indicating placement in VA health care priority group 8E, paired with an acceptable credential, like a REAL ID-compliant driver's license or U.S. passport, will be accepted.

- Caregivers must possess an eligibility letter from the VA Office of Community Care that lists them as the Primary Family Caregiver for an eligible Veteran under the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers, paired with an acceptable credential like a REAL ID-compliant driver's license or a U.S. passport.

Q10. Can anyone with a Veteran Health Identification Card (VHIC) get these privileges?

A10. No. Only Veterans with a VHIC that displays "PURPLE HEART," "FORMER POW," or "SERVICE CONNECTED" will be authorized the new privileges. Veterans may be able to use a VHIC that doesn't contain one of these markings to access an installation with a medical facility if they have an appointment there, but if the VHIC does not display "PURPLE HEART," "FORMER POW," or "SERVICE CONNECTED," they will not have access to commissaries, exchanges, or morale, welfare, and recreation facilities.

Learn more about the VHIC requirement and how you can get one here (<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/68479/veterans-need-vhic-for-in-person-commissary-military-exchange-and-mwr-access/>).

Download the *Expanded Access at Commissaries, Exchanges and Recreation Facilities* fact sheet here (<https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Factsheets/expanding-access-fact-sheet.pdf>).

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