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Extracted from Veterans Radio.com

Veterans Affairs changes thousands of prescription deliveries to other carriers over USPS delays



The Department of Veterans Affairs is moving thousands of prescription deliveries from the U.S. Postal Service to other carriers because of delays across the country, internal VA memos show.

In a memo to VA officials, a pharmacy system leader said the department was monitoring and working on delivery delays with carriers. Specifically, "USPS is really struggling," according to the memo obtained by Connecting Vets, which was sent to the VISN Pharmacist Executives (VPE) Committee by Mariano Franchi, deputy chief consultant at VA's Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacy (CMOP) system.

The vast majority of VA prescriptions are fulfilled by mail from a group of seven massive, automated hub pharmacies across the country, the CMOP system. That centralized pharmacy system processes about 80% to 90% of all VA outpatient prescriptions and almost all (90%) of those are typically shipped through USPS. The other prescriptions are usually filled at local VA medical facilities, though in some cases VA may use alternative carriers such as FedEx and UPS.

VA's mail-order pharmacy system processes about 120 million prescriptions per year, nearly half a million prescriptions daily and each working day, more than 330,000 veterans receive a package of prescriptions in the mail, according to the department. Veterans who live further from VA medical facilities, especially in rural and remote areas of the country, often depend on mail-order prescriptions.

"We are working with UPS to move about 33,000 packages per day from USPS to UPS second-day air," the memo reads. "We are also working with FedEx and USPS to try to alleviate log jams."

In emails to veterans, however, some VA medical centers warned of possible mail delays.

"Due to COVID-19 and an increase in holiday mail, the United States Postal Service is experiencing an increase in delays by 146.9% over the previous two weeks period," the Maryland VA Healthcare System said in an email announcement. "We are asking Veterans to call the Pharmacy Service if they are experiencing delays with medication deliveries."

Meetings

Due to increasing COVID-19 cases in CT, the Chapter 120 membership meeting will be tentatively held on Thursday, March 4, 2021 at 7:00pm in the Machinists Union Hall, 357 Main St., East Hartford.

The Board of Directors will meet via ZOOM on Thursday, January 28 at 7:00pm. Call the Chapter office for any changes in schedule.

Notice

If you have moved or changed your address, PLEASE notify us immediately. Call the Chapter office at (860) 568-9212, mail us at the address on the back of this newsletter or e-mail the Newsletter editor at ctchapter120@aol.com.

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Chapter/State News

Chapter Donates Coats to South Windsor

Chapter 120 donated 34 children’s coats to the South Windsor Human Services Department in December. We received a thank you note from Director Andrea S. Cofrancesco.

On behalf of the Department of Human Services, we would like to express a sincere thank you for the generous donation of 34 new children’s coats to the South Windsor Human Services Department. Your continued support is greatly appreciated by the people who utilize our programs. Without these donations, we would not be able to provide assistance to South Windsor residents who are experiencing difficulties in providing for their families and keeping them warm.

Once again, thank you for your generosity.

Sincerely,

Andrea S. Cofrancesco
 Director of Human Services
 Town of South Windsor
 150 Nevers Road
 South Windsor, CT 06074
 860-648-6357
 andrea.cofrancesco@southwindsor.org

Sen. Blumenthal seeks investigation into fatal explosion at VA complex in West Haven after receiving ‘profoundly troubling documents’ from whistleblowers



Saying he has “profoundly troubling documents” provided by two whistleblowers, U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal called Tuesday Dec.15 for an immediate investigation by the federal Veterans Affairs inspector general into a steam pipe explosion that killed two workers and injured four others at the VA medical complex in West Haven.

The whistleblowers are charging that infrastructure repairs might have been neglected, potentially leading to the explosion, Blumenthal said. He added, however, that only a full investigation could determine the precise cause of the explosion in the basement of a maintenance building on Nov. 13.

With 75 pages of emails and documents provided by the whistleblowers, Blumenthal said he likely only has a partial accounting of the data that would be available to the independent inspector general who oversees incidents in the VA system. The complaints covered requests for better fire protection and improved safety.

Reading an excerpt of a complaint that was made to top management regarding unsafe working conditions between March and May 2019, Blumenthal said, “Some

Birthday Wishes

Birthday wishes go to our members born in January. May you have many more!

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Vernon Biederman</i> | <i>Stephen Brown</i> |
| <i>Andrew Crafa</i> | <i>Arthur N. Desrosiers</i> |
| <i>Stanley T. Duro</i> | <i>Henry E. Jackson</i> |
| <i>Helen McDonald</i> | <i>Thomas Parker</i> |
| <i>William M. Quirk</i> | <i>Penny Siggia</i> |
| <i>Jim Tackett</i> | |



of the management commented: 'This matter requires urgent consideration and immediate action to prevent serious bodily injuries or even death.'

The documents "provide powerful evidence that complaints of unsafe conditions were either disregarded or dismissed by some of the top VA management," Blumenthal told reporters Tuesday. "I want to emphasize that these whistleblowers also endured retaliation or threats of retaliation, and I want the inspector general to look into those reports as well."

He added, "These whistleblower complaints are so deeply serious and searing as potential evidence of a failure to respond to legitimate complaints about unsafe working conditions. I am heartbroken that such unsafe working conditions may have contributed to the explosion that caused the deaths of these two dedicated VA workers — one an employee of the VA and the other a contractor."

One of the deceased was plumbing supervisor Euel T. Sims, Jr. of Milford.

Sims was among those making complaints, telling top officials that "I would be happy to escort you or any of our leadership" to show them conditions such as inadequate lighting in work places, Blumenthal said.

"Mr. Sims himself made a very pertinent complaint on Saturday, Oct. 26," Blumenthal said, noting that the explosion occurred less than three weeks later. "To our knowledge, Mr. Sims never had the chance to show the spaces, but we will honor that offer now to make sure that there is light on this problem - and my hope is that this investigation will proceed promptly and make findings and conclusions as quickly as possible."

Some of the documents mentioned that the problems could lead to injury or death, but Blumenthal declined to say whether Sims was the worker who made that charge.

"I don't want to identify the individual who made that particular complaint," Blumenthal said.

Blumenthal said he might eventually release the documents, but he first wants to talk to the VA Office of Inspector General — which has not yet officially opened an investigation.

VA Secretary Robert Wilkie traveled to the 44-acre West Haven campus to inspect the maintenance building where the tragedy occurred and meet the officials who are mourning the loss of the workers as they still search for the precise cause of the explosion. Even though the deaths involved a steam pipe explosion, Wilkie said that upgrades would likely still include that same type of infrastructure.

"Most of the federal government runs on steam," Wilkie said. "That probably would not change, regardless of the upgrades to the building. As a former naval officer, if you go to the naval base in Norfolk, it's all steam."

POW/MIA News



Extracted from Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA)

Bringing Soldiers Home

When Nicole Rhoton's investigation team removed the top layer of dirt from a crash site in former East Germany, they immediately saw evidence of a full skeleton.

The team decided to continue excavation until the remains were fully exposed, digging until 4 o'clock in the morning. The nearby town was overwhelmingly supportive, with the mayor and volunteer fire department providing a generator to keep the area well lit.

Within the year, the remains were identified by circumstantial evidence and dental comparison as U.S. Army Air Forces 2nd Lt. John W. Herb, a serviceman missing since World War II.

More than 81,900 Americans remain missing from World War II, the Korean War, the Cold War and the Vietnam War — and it's Rhoton's job to find them.

The Cal State Fullerton alumna is one of about 30 historians working with the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA). In her decade of experience, she's worked on approximately 500 cases and conducted missions in seven countries.

In the case of Herb, his P-51D Mustang aircraft crashed during an attempted landing in an open field southeast of Hamburg, Germany. A pilot assigned to the 368th Fighter Squadron,

359th Fighter Group, Herb was reported killed in action. But his remains were not recovered during the war.

Six decades later, in 2014, Rhoton helped interview more than 10 people who had slightly different estimated positions of Herb's crash site. Taking the average of those locations, the team determined its survey area.

After the remains were unearthed and identified by the DPAA laboratory, Rhoton met with the Herb family, shared the recovery story and even attended his burial with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery.

The Herb family story has a special place in Rhoton's heart, but there are many others as well. Time, patience and "wrong" locations often are part of the recovery process, she says.

"They make us better investigators."

In fact, patience sometimes is the only key, as Rhoton discovered when she met an elderly German man who at first could not bring himself to disclose where he had dug two American airmen's graves when he was just 10 years old.

“He really did not — but also really did — want to tell me where he buried the two fliers,” says Rhoton. “I went to his house every day at coffee and cake time, and we sat there and pretended like we weren’t going to talk about the burials.

“After a week of this, he told me.”

DPAA’s herculean work of reuniting the missing and dead with their families is one that has deep American roots.

“Americans place great value on honoring their fallen by giving them a proper burial. This has been an American tradition since Abraham Lincoln dedicated the Soldiers’ National

Cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, at the height of the Civil War in 1863,” explains Volker Janssen, professor of history, who teaches the course “American Military History.”

“When Nicole and her colleagues search for troops missing in action, they unearth not just bones and fragments of military garb and gear, but memories. For the parents, spouses and descendants of the missing, these wars never came to a close and their grief never got closure,” he says.

“Their successful recoveries are somber triumphs — reminders of the sacrifice of service members, the pain and suffering of their survivors, and occasions for more peaceful relations with other nations.”

On The Hill



From Stars & Stripes

Congress passes sweeping end-of-year bill impacting 'every corner' of the veteran community

Congress approved a bill Wednesday Dec. 16 that increases resources for homeless veterans, creates a Department of Veterans Affairs advisory committee for Native American veterans and mandates that every VA hospital hire a dedicated women’s health provider, among dozens of other measures.

The legislative package, which lawmakers described as an end-of-year omnibus bill for veterans, is over 340 pages long and includes numerous provisions for female veterans, Native

American veterans, homeless veterans, student veterans, veterans experiencing the effects of toxic exposures and those affected by the coronavirus.

Following the Senate’s approval last week, the House passed the bill Wednesday afternoon by voice vote without any objections.

It now heads to President Donald Trump’s desk for his signature. The vote comes as Congress is wrapping up its 116th legislative session.

“This is the culmination of two years of bipartisan work,” Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tenn., said on the House floor Wednesday. “There is something in this bill for just about every one of our nation’s veterans and their loved ones.”

The bill is named for Roe, who didn’t seek reelection this year, and Sen. Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., who resigned from the Senate at the end of 2019. Both men were leaders on the Senate and House veterans’ affairs committees.

“I’m proud that one of my last votes of Congress will be in support of this bill, and I’m also humbled it bears my name and that of my friend,” Roe said. “Helping to serve my fellow veterans in Congress these past 12 years has been the honor of a lifetime.”

In an effort to improve services for women veterans, the bill creates a dedicated Office of Women’s Health at VA, provides \$20 million to retrofit VA hospitals with women’s health spaces and makes permanent a program to provide childcare at VA facilities, among other measures.

Women are the fastest-growing demographic in the military, with the number using VA health care almost tripling since 2000, from 160,000 to 475,000, according to VA data. Veterans’ advocates have criticized the department for being slow to adapt to treating more women.

One piece of the bill aims to prevent sexual harassment and assault at VA facilities. It would require the department to create an anti-harassment and anti-sexual assault policy and designate someone at each VA facility to receive reports of harassment. A working group will be created to help implement the policy.

Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif., chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, said the measure was timely. He noted a VA Office of the Inspector General report last week that found VA Secretary Robert Wilkie and other senior VA officials ignored problems of sexual harassment at the Washington DC VA Medical Center and attempted to discredit the credibility of the woman who reported an assault. Takano, as well as many other Democrats and national veterans’ organizations, have since called for Wilkie’s resignation.

“Women are the fastest growing demographic in the veteran community, and the VA must be prepared to welcome them,” Takano said on the House floor Wednesday. “[The report] emphasized the need to address a toxic culture.”

The bill also aims to help veterans suffering from military sexual trauma. In 2018, the VA Office of Inspector General reported that the department wrongfully denied benefits to thousands of veterans who filed claims for military sexual trauma – rejection that potentially caused stress and psychological harm, the IG said.

The legislative package would require teams who specialize in military sexual trauma to process those benefits claims. It would also allow veterans who must be examined during the claims process to choose the sex of the medical provider examining them.

House Speaker Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said the measures for female veterans were the “crown jewel” of the omnibus bill, which she described as the “most comprehensive bill for women veterans in over a decade.”

In addition to women, the package contains dozens of measures to aid student veterans, including more protections against for-profit colleges and a restoration of education benefits to students whose colleges closed or were disapproved by the VA. The bill also works to ensure veterans’ education benefits aren’t negatively affected by fallout from the coronavirus pandemic.

A few provisions offer help for veterans affected by the coronavirus. The bill would ease the process for organizations that aid homeless veterans to receive grant money from the VA.

The money would be used to help renovate shelters and help veterans get into housing.

The bill also requires state-run veterans’ homes to regularly report to the VA about their coronavirus cases and deaths. The homes, which are operated by states but overseen by the VA, currently do not report information about their coronavirus cases to the department, and it’s uncertain how many residents of those homes have died. Many of the homes have experienced deadly coronavirus outbreaks.

Additionally, the bill gives eligibility to VA benefits for service members who have contracted the coronavirus on military duty.

The package also made strides for Native American veterans by prohibiting the VA from charging them copayments and by creating an advisory committee that will advise the VA secretary about the unique challenges facing tribal veterans.

Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., the leader of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee, said the bill would “impact every corner of the veteran community.” Sen Jon Tester, D-Mont., the ranking Democrat on the committee, said it “sends a clear message that Congress is willing to come together to do what’s necessary and follow through on our responsibility to support all veterans.”

The bipartisan bill was backed by several national veterans’ organizations. Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans for America pushed Congress to approve the measures for women veterans for nearly four years.



Veterans Affairs News



From The Hill

Six largest veterans groups call for VA secretary's firing

The country’s six largest veterans groups on Wednesday Dec.16 called for Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Robert Wilkie to be fired over a watchdog report revealing

that he disparaged a congressional aide who said she was sexually assaulted at a VA facility.

The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans (DAV), AMVETS, Paralyzed Veterans of America and Vietnam Veterans of America wrote in a letter to the White House that Wilkie had lost the trust of veterans over the conclusions in the bombshell report and that his actions could prevent people from seeking care from the VA.



VA Secretary Robert Wilkie

“This is a tremendous breach of trust among veterans and Secretary Wilkie must be held accountable,” they wrote. “His actions not only threaten to deter veterans from seeking care at VA, but also undermine the efforts of VA staff who have been working to bring an end to sexual harassment throughout the department.”

“[S]exual assault and harassment have no place in the VA or our society as a whole,” the groups added. “As the Secretary has refused to take responsibility for his documented wrongdoing in this matter, we, the leaders of the undersigned veterans service organizations, call on you to take further action by immediately removing him from office.”

The letter is the latest salvo in a growing campaign to press the White House to push Wilkie out of the administration. DAV and AMVETS had already called for Wilkie’s ouster, and high-profile lawmakers such as Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) have called for Wilkie to resign.

The pressure campaign comes after the VA inspector general found that Wilkie sought to discredit Andrea Goldstein after she said in September 2019 that a man at a VA facility in Washington, D.C., sexually assaulted her. A report specifically underscored that Wilkie’s comments branding Goldstein a repeat complainer and his tone regarding her allegations led staff to spread negative information about her.

The internal watchdog also found that visits to the medical center where the aide was allegedly assaulted "increased pressure on the VA police and risked interfering with or

introducing bias to the criminal investigation had it not been transferred to the independent OIG."

Wilkie and other senior VA officials did not cooperate with the internal investigation, which ultimately could not conclude if Wilkie had violated government policies or laws.

The VA dismissed the calls for Wilkie's ouster, telling The Hill "Secretary Wilkie has led VA to achieve landmark improvements in Veterans' trust, quality of care and employee satisfaction. He will continue to lead the department, including its historic response to the COVID-19 pandemic."

From CBS This Morning

Acting Defense Secretary drafts executive order to help those who served at toxic base: "Let's err on the side of the veteran"

A newly-drafted executive order would open the door to medical help and financial relief for veterans who believe their rare cancers and other illnesses stem from their time served on a remote military base.



The veterans were assigned to the base in the former Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan following the September 11, 2001 attacks and have spent years struggling for recognition.

Since then, more than 2,000 current and former service members have reported illnesses, including rare forms of cancers, that they believe are linked to the former Soviet base otherwise known as K-2, a CBS News investigation has revealed.

Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller told CBS senior investigative correspondent Catherine Herridge in his first network television interview that he's getting directly involved in the case.

"[I'm] throwing the kitchen sink at this," Miller said.

Miller was one of the first to go to Afghanistan after September 11 as an Army Special Forces commander. He launched from the former Soviet airbase, Karshi-Khanabad, or K-2, in neighboring Uzbekistan. The acting secretary said the K-2 reports are personal for him.

"It's very personal. I feel that I have an obligation to help those that went through there and are suffering illnesses," he said.

Of the 15,000 service members who passed through K-2 between 2001 and 2005, more than 2,000 have flooded a Facebook page used for self-reporting illnesses, including rare cancers.

"What I want is let's err on the side of the veteran, and not get caught up in bureaucracy and endless studies like we've done in the past. That's my commitment. There's something going on undoubtedly," he said.

Miller said he hopes to provide help for K-2 veterans by January 20, 2021 by drafting an executive order for President Trump's consideration. He says he is confident the order will be signed by the president.

"That's my fundamental goal and desire, and we'll sprint to the very end to try to make this happen," he said.

A CBS News investigation documented new evidence of toxic conditions at the base, including soil saturated with jet fuel, a running track marked with warning signs, high levels of radiation, a 1993 explosion that dispersed toxic material across the base as well as the existence of a Soviet era chemical weapons decontamination unit. A site was even nicknamed "Skittles Pond" for its changing shade.

Among the affected veterans is Doug Wilson, a former Air Force mechanic, who says he can no longer work or drive after a rare form of cancer caused brain damage.

"I had no idea that at 40 this would be my life," Wilson said.

Miller said seeing Wilson's story "drove [him] to take this on more rapidly."

Miller, who is working with the Veterans Affairs Department, said the executive order he drafted would add Uzbekistan to the toxic exposure registry, alongside Afghanistan. This would allow K-2 veterans, like Jackson and Miller, to access preventive screenings and financial support.

"This [executive order] will recognize their service as being involved with the operations in Afghanistan and open up programs and benefits to them that currently they are not able to access," he said.

Asked about the K-2 widows who have already lost their spouse to cancer, they believe is linked to toxic exposure at the base, Miller said they would not be left behind.

A recent Congressional hearing on the K-2 issue was held last month to address health concerns from sick service members.

Motivated by a new sense of momentum, Miller hopes to use his ability to have some influence and break through what he calls “bureaucratic logjams.”

A White House spokesman said he would not speculate on the potential executive action. If President Trump declines to sign the draft order, President-elect Joe Biden could take up the issue in office.

Both Jackson and Wilson told CBS News they would support an executive order.

From the Service Rep's Desk



1-800-MyVA411 (800-698-2411) Is the Number One Number to Reach VA

With one phone call, veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors can easily access information on VA benefits and services or be

connected to an expert for answers to questions. 1-800-MyVA411 is a national, toll-free number that serves as a “front door” to VA. You can still reach VA at any other direct or contact center numbers, but 1-800-MyVA411 offers the simplicity of a single number to call when you don’t know who to call.

The Veterans Crisis Line is still available 24/7 at 1-800-273-8255 and pressing 1, by Chat, or by Texting 838255.

You can also call the White House VA Hotline at 1-855-948-2311 to share your compliments or concerns.

From The VVA Veteran Editor, Michael Keating

The VVA Veteran Still Here - And Free

Due to the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, The VVA Veteran is no longer available in print. But the online edition continues to be published bimonthly at www.vvaveteran.org

Yes, it can be hard to read while sitting in your easy chair. But the online edition offers some real advantages, including expanded coverage, clickable links, adjustable type sizes, and a shorter turnaround time.

The best news, however, is that The VVA Veteran is now free and available to everyone. There are no subscription fees and no secret passwords.

Go to www.vvaveteran.org then sign up at the "Notify Me" box in the right margin. We'll send you an email the instant a new issue is uploaded. Urge your friends, spouses, and kids to sign up, too.

Will the print version return? I sincerely hope so, although it might have fewer pages or a smaller format. But online-only is

the future - at least the immediate future - and The VVA Veteran staff is committed to making it the best.

From Vietnam Magazine

‘Swedish K’ Submachine Gun

In early 1969, Reconnaissance Team Illinois of the Studies and Observations Group, an elite covert operations unit, encountered North Vietnamese Army soldiers while on a battle damage assessment mission in northeast Cambodia. As the SOG team retreated to its extraction landing zone, Sgts. George Bacon and Newman Ruff laid down suppressing fire.

Whenever Bacon stopped firing his CAR-15 carbine, the NVA rushed forward and were shot by Ruff’s sound-suppressed Karl Gustav submachine gun. Unsure of the shooter’s location, the North Vietnamese held back, which enabled the team to escape.

Commonly known as the “Swedish K,” the Karl Gustav m/45 was created by weapons designer Gunnar Johnsson for the state-run Karl Gustav rifle factory. The gun entered service in 1945—the 45 in its designation. It incorporated features from several World War II-era submachine guns to provide the Swedish army with a robust and easy-to-use automatic infantry weapon. It was cheap to manufacture with a simple, no-frills design limited to firing only in automatic. It employed a straight blowback firing system with a fixed firing pin.



The Gustav had a low cyclical firing rate, the number of rounds fired if you held the trigger for a full minute, which reduced the recoil and made the gun easy to control. Soldiers could fire single shots by releasing the trigger before the second round engaged. The Gustav fired over an open bolt to facilitate cooling. Sliding the cocking handle into a short side-slot above the main (lock) slot or placing a removable cover over the ejection port put the Gustav in safety mode. The Gustav had an innovative straight two-row 36-round box magazine with a tapered feed that all but prevented jamming.

The Gustav’s compactness and reliability made it popular with SOG and other U.S. special operations units. The SEALs loved the gun’s ability to fire immediately upon breaking the water’s surface. American forces often added sound suppressors and removed all markings so the weapon’s origins could not be traced to a lot purchased by the U.S. The CAR-15 carbine began to replace the Gustav in 1966. Retired from U.S. service by 1972, it was used by Sweden’s Home Guard until the late 1980s.

Helping Hands for Our Fellow Veterans



Won't You Please Give a Helping Hand to a Brother or Sister Veteran?

Several veterans have contacted Chapter 120 asking for help in paying the most basic of needs for themselves and their families. These veterans are those who do not qualify for regular federal, state or local assistance – they fall into that financial category where they make too much to qualify for assistance, but not enough to afford basic needs for their families, like food, fuel for heat, or clothing for their children.

Chapter 120 has decided to ask you – our members – to lend a helping hand to your fellow veterans and their families. Won't you please consider donating for this worthy cause? Even a small amount of \$5 can make a difference – or more if you can afford to help a fellow veteran and his or her family.

Please send your generous gift, made out to Connecticut Chapter 120, to:

Vietnam Veterans of America, Inc.
 Connecticut Chapter 120
 Attention: Helping Hands for Veterans
 P.O. Box 4136
 Hartford, CT 06145

Chapter 120 has established a separate line item in the budget to collect donations to assist these fellow veterans and their families in need. *And don't forget, your donations are tax deductible.*

Newsletter articles/ stories/photos

Any articles, stories and/or photos submitted for the newsletter must be received by the "cut off" date for any given month. Photos must be accompanied by text which describes the event, names, dates and any other pertinent facts so our readers understand the story behind the photo(s). The newsletter editor will announce the "cut off" dates at each Chapter meeting. The "cut off" date for our February 2021 newsletter is 22 January 2021. Due to space availability, the editor reserves the right to include or not include photos for a given month.

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