



**MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**  
**RESPONSE TO DEPARTMENT OF LEGISLATIVE**  
**SERVICES**

**ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**FY 2016 Operating Budget**

**HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE**  
March 5, 2015

SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY AND ADMINISTRATION  
Room 145, HOB

**SENATE BUDGET AND TAXATION COMMITTEE**  
March 6, 2015

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
3 West, Miller

## Introduction

The Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) appreciates this opportunity to update the Committee on the activities of the Department over the past year to ensure that we fulfill our mission to “deliver services and programs to assist veterans, their families and survivors in obtaining Federal, State, and local benefits provided by law in recognition of their service to state and country,” and to respond to the issues raised and recommendations contained in the analysis prepared by the Department of Legislative Services.

This document contains the following information:

- MDVA agency profile.
- The Department’s response to the comments requested by the Department of Legislative Services Policy Analyst. **Responses are noted in bold type.**

**The Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs concurs with the Governor’s allowance for FY 2016.**

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## MDVA Agency Profile

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### Purpose

The mission and purpose of MDVA is to serve the veterans of Maryland, their dependents and survivors, in securing all benefits and services provided by federal and state law. The agency fulfills this mission by providing leadership and direction to the veteran community, while exercising responsible management of available resources.

Key service strategies of the department are to:

- Provide assistance to all eligible veterans, their dependents, and survivors;
- Collaborate with service providers whose efforts are coordinated by the department; and
- Continually review, revise, and build upon proven business practices to ensure the most timely, cost effective delivery of benefits and services.

### Core Functions

- Provide representation to clients pursuing claims for federal veterans benefits;
- Prudently manage all budgets, accounts and financial transactions, information technology, and human resources to meet department needs;
- Provide dignified and compassionate committal services at our five Maryland State Veterans Cemeteries; and
- Provide the highest possible assisted living/skilled nursing residential care for Veterans Home residents.

The primary functions of the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs are veterans' benefits services, veterans' cemetery services, assisted living/skilled nursing residential care for veterans, management of military monuments and memorials, and outreach and advocacy.

A successful veterans' Service program requires knowledge of VA and DOL laws and operating policies and procedures. Employees must have the skills to apply the required knowledge within the VA and DOL systems to successfully provide veterans and their families with all of the services needed to obtain their benefits and entitlements.

A successful veterans' Cemeteries program requires knowledge of VA Cemetery Administration policies and procedures, capital construction, land management building and equipment maintenance and procurement. These multiple tasks are ever demanding in maintaining the cemeteries as national shrines.

### At A Glance

Maryland Veteran Population: 437,762\*

- In FY 2014, MDVA Service Program processed 5,138 claims.
- In FY 2014, Marylanders received in excess of \$23 million in Federal veterans' benefits as a direct result of the efforts of the department's veteran's service offices.
- In FY 2014, MDVA provided 3,269 State Veterans Cemetery interments: 2,110 veterans and 1,159 dependents.
- In FY 2014, average Veterans Home occupancy rate was 89%; average census 405 of 454 available beds.

\*Source: U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs website, accessed 2/12/2015

A successful assisted living/skilled nursing residential care program for veterans requires knowledge of VA and State laws, operating policies and procedures and plant management to ensure safe and proper health care.

A successful military monuments and memorials program requires the skills necessary to maintain such landmarks as reverent symbols of the sacrifices made by veterans.

A successful veterans' outreach and advocacy program requires an understanding of the needs of veterans and communication skills to reach veterans and advocate for them.

## **History**

The Maryland Veterans Commission was created by the General Assembly in 1924. Initially it was charged with the responsibility of providing financial relief to indigent veterans and widows. The Commission's objective remained essentially the same until the beginning of World War II. At that time the Veterans Administration began to recognize the need for providing adequate counsel for veterans in claims before the Veterans Administration. To assist in providing this service, the Veterans Administration provided the Maryland Veterans Commission with free office space in their principal offices.

In 1946, the Veterans Administration eliminated all of their offices serving Maryland except for the regional offices located in Washington D.C. (which housed the claims files for Prince George' and Montgomery Counties) and the Baltimore Regional Office which serviced the veterans claims for all other counties in Maryland. To fill the void created by the consolidation, increased service had to be provided by the Commission. Today MDVA maintains 11 services offices throughout the state.

In 1973, the Legislature authorized the beginning of the State Veterans Cemetery Program.

In 1999, the Legislature created the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs as an executive agency with the mission of assisting veterans, active duty service members, their families and dependents, in securing benefits earned through military service. .

In 2006, the Legislature authorized the beginning of the State Veterans Outreach and Advocacy program.

Through all of these increased responsibilities, since 1924, there has been no material reorganization or reclassification of the positions of the Agency. We remained a small agency with a large mandate.

## What we do

### Service Program

The MDVA Service Program assists veterans and their eligible dependents in acquiring benefits rightfully earned through military service to their country. The Service Program provides general information to veterans seeking assistance, regardless of representation, in all matters pertaining to veterans' disability benefits and rights. MDVA is the designated agency of the State of Maryland to represent the State and its veterans before the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The agency represents veterans in filing VA disability claims and during VA appeals processes, and assists dependents with survivor benefits.

The Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs is tasked with helping veterans obtain the most benefits they are entitled to. The agency has 11 employees accredited by the VA to represent veterans with disability claims and appeals, as well as established relationships with 2 other accredited individuals who submit claims to the VA through MDVA. The agency's Veterans Benefits Specialists (VBS) also help veterans and their families with questions regarding benefits, survivor and dependent needs, filling out VA paperwork, and medical issues.

The Service Program currently has VBS Officers located in veteran's service centers throughout Maryland to aid and serve veterans and their eligible dependents.

Baltimore City (Federal Building and VA Service Program main office)

Baltimore City Veterans Administration Hospital

Bel Air - Harford County

Camp Springs - Prince George's County

Charlotte Hall – St. Mary's County

Cumberland – Allegany County

Easton – Talbot County

Frederick – Frederick County

Hagerstown – Washington County

Rockville – Montgomery County

Salisbury – Wicomico County

In addition, MDVA has 25 itinerant offices throughout our state to bring services closer to veterans and their dependents.

**The Department of Legislative Services, in its analysis of the Governor's allowance, requested that the Secretary "comment on improving claims service processes for veterans in Maryland and if positions can be shifted to the offices with the highest claims volume." The analysis made specific observations about the high number of claims and small number of staff at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Baltimore and in Camp Springs, and the lower number of claims and relatively higher number of staff at the Baltimore Regional Office.**

**In response, the Secretary states the following:**

**As a tenant at the VA Medical Center in Baltimore, MDVA shares office space with VA Social Workers. MDVA utilizes the office on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays and VA uses the space on Tuesday and Wednesday. The office will only accommodate one person; adding a second person at the VA Medical Center at this time is not an option.**

**The Baltimore Regional Office is the hub for the Service Program. There are only 2 benefits specialists assigned to this office, and they already fill in as needed when other program offices are unstaffed due to illness, etc. The third specialist noted in the analysis is the Deputy Director of the program, who does interview and assist veterans but is also tasked with many other functions, such as reviewing claim submissions from remote offices, compiling of stats for the program, etc. That position is unavailable for reassignment to another location.**

**MDVA was given 2 additional PINS for Camp Springs Service Center. One was filled, but the new hire did not successfully complete his probationary period. The vacancy has again been posted, with a closing date of March 9, 2015. DBM has declined to approve the hiring freeze exception for the second new PIN.**

**Other than a contractual secretary in the Baltimore Regional Office, the Service Program has no administrative support staff. The veterans benefits specialists are required to provide their own administrative support; as the number of claims filed rises, this demand is unsustainable. The Service Program has requested, through the Secretary's office, 4 new administrative support staff members, one of whom would support the Camp Springs Service Center. The Secretary has presented the request, which is awaiting response.**

**MDVA believes that, should this request for administrative support be approved, Camp Springs can be adequately staffed with 2 veterans benefits specialists, even if the agency be unable to hire the 2<sup>nd</sup> new PIN.**

**A plan for the future could be to move the second PIN authorized for Camp Springs (should the hiring freeze exception request be approved) to an area to help alleviate some business from the VAMC. MDVA would consider placing that PIN in the Howard County/Baltimore County (Ellicott City, Columbia/Catonsville) area.**

## **Cemeteries Program**

The State of Maryland, through the Cemeteries Program of the MDVA, offers Maryland veterans and their eligible dependents a final resting place at one of five state veterans' cemeteries located throughout Maryland. The program is the largest of its kind in the nation. It bases its standard of excellence on striving to ensure that our state cemeteries are maintained as a national shrine to those who have gone before.

A Pre-interment Program is available, through which veterans may indicate their desire to be buried in one of the state's cemeteries and verify their eligibility for such burial on a pre-need basis. MDVA's cemeteries provide interment services Monday through Friday year round and are open to the public 365 days each year.

There are five state veterans cemeteries located across our state:

Cheltenham State Veterans Cemetery is located on U.S. Route 301, approximately 8 miles south of Upper Marlboro, Maryland. The site consists of 112 acres and was formerly used for agricultural purposes. Currently, the Cheltenham Veterans Cemetery is conducting more than 825 burials each year and is the final resting place for over 23,300 Maryland veterans and their dependents. The cemetery opened for burial in July 1978 and is expected to provide a total of 50,000 burial sites. The Chapel at the cemetery was dedicated to the memory of Senator Edward T. Conroy, who was instrumental in the passage of legislation enabling the development of Maryland's State Veterans Cemeteries.

Crownsville State Veterans Cemetery at Crownsville is located off State Route 178 on Sunrise Beach Road. The 103-acre site, originally used for farming, is surrounded by a peaceful Severn River residential community. Near the center of the state cemetery is a one-acre old family cemetery dating back to 1875, retained by the heirs and assigns of the Carter family in perpetuity. The Crownsville Veterans Cemetery opened in 1980 and has interred more than 20,700 Maryland veterans and their dependents. When fully developed, the site is expected to provide more than 48,000 burial plots.

Eastern Shore Veterans Cemetery at Hurlock, Maryland, is located two miles south of Preston and about five miles northwest of Hurlock on State Route 331. Eastern Shore Veterans Cemetery opened for operation in December 1976 and has used approximately 6,300 of the 14,000 available burial sites. Donated by the citizens of Dorchester County, the site was formerly a 35-acre wheat field. The design of this cemetery is unique. The layout of the burial sites is based on a system of radials and concentric circles centered on the American flag in the plaza area at the Chapel.

Garrison Forest Veterans Cemetery is the most active of Maryland's five Veterans Cemeteries, conducting more than 1,225 burials per year. Currently, this cemetery is the nation's third-busiest State Veterans Cemetery. Since December 1983, when the facility opened, more than 37,000 veterans and their dependents have selected this cemetery as a final resting place of the available 46,000 burial sites at this location. The Garrison Forest Veterans Cemetery is located on Garrison Forest Road, near the former Rosewood State Hospital, in Owings Mills, Maryland. Formerly used for agricultural purposes, the site consists of 110 acres bounded by woodlands.

Rocky Gap Veterans Cemetery is a 27-acre site located within the Rocky Gap State Park, just off State Route 68 in Allegany County. The Rocky Gap Veterans Cemetery is approximately 10 miles east of Cumberland and is arguably the most beautiful of the five State Veterans' Cemeteries. Approaching the cemetery, visitors are treated to views of the park's lake and mountainous backdrop. Over 4,100 veterans and their dependents are interred at the cemetery. Rocky Gap Veterans Cemetery has approximately 6,000 burial sites available.

### **Assisted Living/Skilled Nursing Residential Care**

The Charlotte Hall Veterans Home (CHVH) provides Assisted Living and Skilled Nursing residential care for honorably discharged veterans and eligible spouses of veterans.

The Home is situated on 126 beautiful acres in St. Mary's County, and offers a continuum of care from the 168-bed assisted living program to the 286-bed skilled nursing program. Charlotte Hall Veterans Home also offers memory care in secure units. The Home is Medicare/Medicaid certified, and all veterans receive a per diem subsidy from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs that reduces their cost of care. The Home is inspected annually, as required by the Office of Health Care Quality, MD Dept. of Health & Mental Hygiene, and by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

As a benefit of residing in a certified State Veterans Home, veterans who need nursing home or assisted living care are entitled to receive a per diem grant from the US Department of Veterans Affairs towards their cost of care. This benefit is used to lower the veteran's out of pocket expenses. Needless to say, this enables veterans and their families to save significantly.

The State of Maryland, through MDVA, contracts with a private healthcare management contractor to operate the Home. MDVA works closely with the management contractor's staff to ensure our veterans receive the best care possible in a clean, caring environment. The staff understands and respects the sacrifices veterans have made and "Serving Those Who Served" is a privilege.

## **Demographic Trends & Customer Characteristics**

Two segments of the veteran population have grown at high rates:

1. Veterans over age 85; and
2. Veterans returning from the current war.

### **Veterans over age 85**

*Several unique characteristics affect service needs for these veterans:*

- Increase in number of veterans suffering from dementia;
- Presence of wartime disabilities, both physical and mental; and
- Increase in veterans considered medically indigent.

### **Veterans Returning from the Current War**

Veterans returning from the current war have unique needs and characteristics.

Maryland has experienced one of the largest mobilizations of "citizen soldiers", those individuals serving in our State National Guard or Armed Forces Reserve Units, in our nation's history. Some of the challenges returnees face is:

- Combat wounds;
- Head injuries / Traumatic Brain Injury;
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms and readjustment challenges;
- Employment or re-employment;
- Risk of becoming homeless; or
- Significant family readjustment issues following active duty.
- Veterans needing long term care
- There are over 425,000 veterans and their families living in Maryland.

As citizen soldiers return from extended overseas deployments, many will need assistance with ongoing medical, mental health or readjustment issues. Some may require assistance with re-employment, education or emergency help to overcome a financial crisis. Along with other State agencies committed to veterans' assistance programs, MDVA is helping veterans to meet these challenges.