



**MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
RESPONSE TO DEPARTMENT OF LEGISLATIVE SERVICES
ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

FY 2020 Operating Budget

HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
February 6, 2019

PUBLIC SAFETY AND ADMINISTRATION SUBCOMMITTEE
Room 145, HOB

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SENATE BUDGET AND TAXATION COMMITTEE
February 11, 2019

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES SUBCOMMITTEE
William Amoss Room, 4th Floor, 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 as 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. We also welcome this chance to respond to the Department of Legislative Services' (DLS) analysis of the FY 2020 Governor's Allowance.

This document contains the following information:

- A profile of the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs.
- A brief history of the Department.
- A summary of services provided by the Department.
- Demographic trends among Maryland's veterans.

This document also contains the Department's response to any recommendations or questions formally presented in DLS's analysis. The **recommendations or questions are in bold type, and *the Secretary's responses in bold underlined italics.***

MDVA concurs with the Governor's Allowance for FY 2020.

MDVA also gratefully acknowledges the Governor for his support of veterans, most recently demonstrated in his decision to proclaim 2019 the Year of the Veteran.

Operating Budget Recommended Actions

In its analysis, DLS recommends increasing the turnover rate to 15.5% for all new positions. The analysis states as follows:

“Currently, the new positions for MDVA are uniformly budgeted at 6.01% turnover. These are brand new positions, and the standard turnover rate for new positions is 25%. However, MDVA and the Department of Legislative Services (DLS) acknowledge that many of the new cemetery positions are “interview and hire” with a less formal recruitment process than other State employees, which will likely shorten the recruitment timeframe. However, the 6.01% turnover rate is still an aggressive recruitment timetable of a little over three weeks. Further, a 6.01% turnover rate may also be unrealistic, considering the current vacancy rate for both caretakers and machine operators is 20%. **Therefore, DLS recommends increasing the turnover for the new FTEs to 15.5%, which more closely reflects the anticipated recruitment timetable and existing vacancy rate within these positions classifications.**”

The Secretary opposes any reduction of the Governor’s Allowance through an increase in the turnover rate for new positions. Recruitment is a critical function. MDVA needs every single authorized position and does not engage in intentionally maintaining vacancies as a budget-conservation practice.

The Secretary appreciates the support of the Department of Budget and Management, the Governor, and the Department of Legislative Services in recommending approval of vital new positions in both the Service and Cemetery Programs.

Agency Profile

Purpose

The mission and purpose of the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs is 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. The agency fulfills this mission by providing leadership and direction to the veteran community, while exercising responsible management of available resources.

Core Functions

- Provide the most effective possible **statewide benefits counseling** to veterans, their dependents and survivors; assist in the preparation, development, and submission of claims for adjudication to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Honor the memory of Maryland veterans in **State veterans cemeteries** that will come to be considered as national shrines.
- Provide the finest assisted living and skilled nursing residential care to qualified Maryland veterans and eligible spouses at the **Charlotte Hall Veterans Home**.
- Maintain and protect the **State's veterans memorials**.
- Ensure through effective **outreach and advocacy** that veterans and their dependents are increasingly informed and educated about the various benefits and services to which they are entitled as a result of their service.

At A Glance

Maryland Veteran Population (2019 projection): 371,000*

- In FY 2018, Veterans Affairs' Service Program filed 4,827 claims, **up over 20% from the prior year**.
- In FY 2018, Marylanders were awarded nearly \$30 million in Federal veterans' benefits as a direct result of the efforts of the Department's veterans service offices, **up 10% from the prior year**.
- In FY 2018, Veterans Affairs provided 3,389 State Veterans Cemetery interments: 2,213 veterans and 1,176 dependents.
- In FY 2018, average Veterans Home occupancy rate was 89%; average census 404 of 454 available beds.

*Source: United States Department of Veterans Affairs

A successful veterans' **Service Program** requires knowledge of relevant US Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) rules and operating policies and procedures. Employees must have the skills to apply the required knowledge within USDVA systems to successfully provide veterans and their families with all of the services needed to obtain their benefits and entitlements. Each veterans benefits specialist must be certified as a veterans' services counselor by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.

A successful veterans' **Cemetery Program** requires knowledge of relevant U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration policies and procedures regarding capital construction, land management, and building and equipment maintenance and procurement. These increasingly demanding standards provide direction for the Program's operations and the pursuit of national shrine status for Maryland's veterans' cemeteries.

A successful **Veterans Home Program** providing assisted living and skilled nursing residential care program for veterans requires knowledge of relevant U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and State of Maryland laws, operating policies and procedures, and facility management standards to ensure safe and proper health care to an aging, predominantly male, veteran resident population.

A successful **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.

The Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs strives daily to fulfill its mission to a constituency comprising over 6% of the total population of our State. We are proud to honor Maryland's veterans by bringing our best to their service every day.

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 Veterans Affairs maintains 11 service offices across 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.

How We Serve Veterans

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. Veterans Affairs is the designated agency of the State of Maryland to represent the State and its veterans before the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA). The agency represents veterans in filing USDVA disability claims and during USDVA 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 employs Veterans Benefits Specialists accredited by the USDVA to represent veterans with disability claims and appeals. Veterans Affairs enjoys established relationships with other accredited individuals outside the agency, who submit claims to the USDVA through Veterans Affairs. The agency's Veterans Benefits Specialists also help veterans and their families with questions regarding benefits, survivor and dependent needs, USDVA paperwork, and medical issues.

The Service Program currently has Veterans Benefits Specialists located in veterans' service centers throughout Maryland to aid and serve veterans and their eligible dependents. In addition, Veterans Affairs has itinerant offices throughout our State to bring services closer to veterans and their dependents.

Veterans have benefited from the opening of a Service Program office in Laurel, Maryland (Howard County) in FY 2017; from the addition in FY 2017 of four (4) new office secretary positions located in Service Program offices around the State that have freed up capacity for veterans benefits specialists to focus more on serving veterans and less on administration; and from a continued focus on training.

MDVA is grateful that the Governor's Allowance for FY 2020 includes a new veterans benefits specialist position for Anne Arundel County, where the Program currently has no physical presence. MDVA anticipates that the new office intended for the Glen Burnie area could become one of our busiest.

Cemetery Program

The State of Maryland, through the Cemetery Program of the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs, 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 national shrines 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. Veterans Affairs' 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. In FY 2018, the Cheltenham Veterans Cemetery laid 973 veterans and eligible dependents to rest, bringing its total to over 26,600 since opening in July 1978. 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, which opened in 1980, provides a final resting place for over 23,800 Maryland veterans and eligible dependents. In FY 2018, the Crownsville Veterans Cemetery laid 874 veterans and eligible dependents to rest.

Eastern Shore Veterans Cemetery in Hurlock, Maryland, is located two miles south of Preston and about five miles northwest of Hurlock on State Route 331. Eastern Shore Veterans Cemetery, which opened for operation in December 1976, is the final resting place for over 7,200 veterans and eligible dependents. In FY 2018, the Eastern Shore Veterans Cemetery laid 240 veterans and eligible dependents to rest. Donated by the citizens of Dorchester County, the site was formerly a 35-acre wheat field. The cemetery has now expanded to 51 acres. 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 was again the most active of Maryland's five Veterans Cemeteries (and among the busiest nationwide) in FY 2018, laying 1,118 veterans and eligible dependents to rest, bringing its total to approximately 40,900 since its opening in December 1983. 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. In FY 2018, the Rocky Gap Veterans Cemetery laid 184 veterans and eligible dependents to rest. Approximately 4,800 veterans and their dependents have been laid to rest at the cemetery.

The historical backlog of plot allowance payments due from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) continues its dramatic reduction in FY 2018, as MDVA received payment from the VA for nearly 2 years' worth of claims totaling just under \$3.0 million, between July 1, 2017, and June 30, 2018. MDVA has also further reduced the average time required to produce a monthly plot allowance claim to 20 days.

An unplanned visit in April 2018 by an Under Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to the Cheltenham Veterans Cemetery provided feedback demonstrating some mandatory improvements in the appearance of the cemeteries. MDVA is deeply grateful to the Governor for his team's prompt response in providing an initial deficiency appropriation of \$2,000,000; and further, to DBM and the Governor for approving the addition of seventeen (17) new positions for the Cemetery Program.

Veterans Home Program

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 of the Maryland Department of Health & Mental Hygiene, and by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

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

Demographic Trends

A projected 371,000 veterans live in Maryland as of 2019, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Two segments of the veteran population have grown at high rates:

1. Veterans over age 75 (accounting for the aging Korea and Vietnam Era Veterans, as well as those of the World War II Era); and
2. Returning veterans

Veterans over age 75

Several unique characteristics affect service needs for these veterans:

- Increase in number of veterans needing long-term assisted living care;
- Presence of wartime disabilities, both physical and mental; and
- Increase in veterans considered medically indigent.

Returning Veterans

Veterans returning from the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan 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. Along with some of Maryland's returning citizen soldiers, a number of veterans of the active duty component will face challenges, including the following:

- Combat wounds;
- Head injuries / Traumatic Brain Injury;
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD);
- Reintegration and transition;
- Employment or re-employment challenges;
- Risk of becoming homeless;
- Significant family readjustment issues following active duty; or
- Long-term care needs.

As service members transition following overseas deployments, many will need assistance with ongoing medical, mental health or reintegration 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, the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs is helping veterans to meet these challenges.