



**Response to Department of Legislative Services Budget Analysis**

**FY 2021 Operating Budget**

**SENATE BUDGET AND TAXATION COMMITTEE**

**February 6, 2020**

**PUBLIC SAFETY, TRANSPORTATION, AND ENVIRONMENT SUBCOMMITTEE**

**Miller Senate Building, Schweinhaut Room, 4th Floor**

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**HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE**

**February 5, 2020**

**PUBLIC SAFETY AND ADMINISTRATION SUBCOMMITTEE**

**House Office Building, Room 120**

## Introduction

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The Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) welcomes the 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 value this chance to respond to the Department of Legislative Services' (DLS) analysis of the FY 2021 Governor's Allowance for MDVA.

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 2021.**

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## Operating Budget Recommended Actions

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*The Department of Legislative Services recommends deleting 4 of the new caretakers allocated to the veterans' cemeteries, reducing new positions from 7 to 3.*

The Secretary of the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) objects to this recommendation and urges this legislative body not to derail a carefully constructed plan, supported by the Governor, to achieve grounds maintenance staffing levels consistent with the recommendations of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA), for the first time in MDVA's 21-year history.

The Department of Legislative Services (DLS) is presuming to replace an analysis based on MDVA's decades of experience, expertise, and long-standing relationship with the USDVA, with its own abbreviated online research. Specifically, the recommendation to reduce the Governor's Allowance is based on a chart from the website of the USDVA that speaks primarily not to staffing levels but to space requirements. Further, the basis for comparison to that chart is from an internal analysis of in-ground plot needs and completely ignores the significant number of cremains interments performed by MDVA.

The methodology employed by the NCA to determine grounds maintenance staffing levels is based on three factors: annual interments (including cremains), number of gravesites, and maintained acres. The Governor's Allowance is based on a plan that applied this formula at each cemetery.

- 1 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) per 250 interments
- 1 FTE per 7,844 gravesites
- 1 FTE per 10.7 acres maintained

These values are cumulative; that is, they do not overlap. In other words, a cemetery with 31,400 gravesites and 44 maintained acres would require 8 grounds maintenance employees even if there were not a single additional burial performed.

The following chart summarizes the ultimate goal of this plan as submitted to the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) one year ago, which formed the basis for the plan the Governor has supported, a plan ultimately to nearly double the grounds maintenance census from 35 to 66 employees.

Cemetery	# Interments (Annual)	# Maintained Sites FY 18	# Acres	# Grounds Maintenance PINS	<i>NCA Minimum # PINS FY 20</i>
Cheltenham	973	23922	112	11	18
Crownsville	874	20782	103	5	16
Eastern Shore	240	5830	51	5	7
Garrison Forest	1118	37230	110	9	20
Rocky Gap	184	3988	27	5	5
	3389	91752	403	35	66

**MDVA’s plan, supported by both the DBM and the Governor, to achieve this level of grounds maintenance staffing, was submitted following an unsatisfactory review in 2018 of Cheltenham Veterans Cemetery by the USDVA, which threatened to cut off millions of dollars of funding to the State of Maryland if immediate improvements were not achieved to the visual appearance of the cemetery. To the Governor’s credit, the Administration responded promptly with one of the largest general fund deficiency appropriations ever made and gave its support to the staffing plan proffered by MDVA.**

**It is true that, in a robust economy, it is difficult to staff positions at grade 8 and grade 9 when those positions entail difficult outdoor labor in any and all weather conditions. Maryland’s veterans cemeteries, unlike almost any other entity in State government, are open to the public 365 days per year and perform interments in snow, sleet, rain, and blistering heat. MDVA has taken many steps to address the recruitment and retention issues we face and to improve compensation for these workers. During the Administration’s first term, MDVA was successful in requesting an Annual Salary Review to increase compensation for these classifications by two salary grades across the board. More recently, in late 2019, MDVA proposed a bonus program to reward cemetery workers who successfully completed a six-month probation, one year of service, and two years of service. This program was bargained with AFSCME and adopted effective January 1, 2020. MDVA has standardized starting offers for grounds maintenance workers at midpoint for the three largest cemeteries, which is the most aggressive compensation stance the agency can take across the board on the sole**

authority of its Secretary. We have advertised our positions with our own newsletter, with Craigslist, with the Baltimore Sun Group. We have solicited temporary cash assistance candidates from the Department of Human Resources, contractual workers seeking permanent employment from the (Federal) Baltimore National Cemetery, and even nonprofit beneficiary candidates from Paul's Place in Baltimore. Our DBM recruitment partners are constantly advertising. And we have had moderate success: of the 17 new PINS approved one year ago, 12 have been filled. They have been offset by retention challenges, and these are what the bonus program seeks to address.

The requirements of the National Cemetery Administration continue to become more stringent. The cost of compliance continues to rise, as contractual services costs for mowing and edging services has exploded, motivating MDVA to use its new employee capacity to bring these services in-house. The cemeteries continue to grow every year, as the agency annually inters 3,200 to 3,600 veterans and eligible dependents.

MDVA readily acknowledges the fact that we have grown over the past three years, and grown at a rate that stands out in a fiscally conservative Administration. The fact that the Hogan Administration has supported this growth should itself testify to the validity of that need. The Secretary of the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs strongly urges this body not to accept DLS's recommendation to eliminate 4 (relatively inexpensive) PINS from the Governor's Allowance.

## Agency Profile

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### 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 (2020 projection): 362,000\*

- In FY 2019, Veterans Affairs' Service Program filed 4,917 claims, **up nearly 2% from the prior year and a 4-year high**.
- In FY 2019, Maryland veterans received \$33.6 million in Federal veterans' benefits as a direct result of the efforts of the Department's veterans service offices, **up 12% from the prior year**.
- In FY 2019, Veterans Affairs provided 3,262 State Veterans Cemetery interments: 2,004 veterans and 1,258 dependents.
- In FY 2019, average Veterans Home occupancy rate was 90%; average census 408 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 veteran constituency comprising approximately 6% of the total population of our State (not counting eligible dependents). We are proud to honor Maryland's veterans by bringing our best to their service every day.

## History

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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 12 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**

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### **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 and in Glen Burnie (Anne Arundel County) in FY 2020. VA acceptance rates of initial claims filed by the MDVA Service Program have been trending upward, reaching 90% in FY 2019. This success rate reflects the focus the Service Program has placed on training and quality control. MDVA is excited to be expanding into a partnership with the Motor Vehicle Administration (MVA) that started with placing the new Anne Arundel County service officer at the MVA facility in Glen Burnie. This collaboration will provide tremendous ease of access to veterans who are already at the MVA to take care of other business. We are currently making similar transitions to MVA locations in Salisbury, Bel Air, and Hagerstown, with the goal of doing the same in Allegany and Howard Counties in the near future.

## **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 was formerly used for agricultural purposes. In FY 2019, the Cheltenham Veterans Cemetery laid 914 veterans and eligible dependents to rest, bringing its total through FY 2019 to 27,544 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 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 24,625 Maryland veterans and eligible dependents through FY 2019. In FY 2019, the Crownsville Veterans Cemetery laid 796 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 7,521 veterans and eligible dependents through FY 2019. In FY 2019, the Eastern Shore Veterans Cemetery laid 234 veterans and eligible dependents to rest. Donated by the citizens of Dorchester County, the site was formerly a 35-acre wheat field and has since expanded. 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 2019, laying 1,163 veterans and eligible dependents to rest, bringing its cumulative total through FY 2019 to 42,117 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 is bounded by woodlands.

Rocky Gap Veterans Cemetery is 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 2019, the Rocky Gap Veterans Cemetery laid 155 veterans and eligible dependents to rest. Through FY 2019, a total of 4,949 veterans and their dependents have been laid to rest at the cemetery.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has nearly eliminated the historical backlog of plot allowance payments due to MDVA. In FY 2020, the VA moved the management of plot allowance claims to their Pension and Fiduciary Service. Each veteran interment now represents a single claim. MDVA has worked diligently and successfully in collaboration with the VA to transition to the new claims process.

MDVA is deeply grateful to the Governor and the Legislature for approving the addition of seventeen (17) new grounds maintenance positions for the Cemetery Program for FY 2020. This action, as well as the seven (7) new positions in the Governor's Allowance for FY 2021, get us much closer to the staffing recommendations of the VA's National Cemetery Administration. Filling the new positions has been challenging due in part to low unemployment in the economy at large; MDVA has taken a variety of actions, in collaboration with DBM, to improve recruitment and retention efforts. These actions include a one-year bonus program, bargained with AFSCME, to pay bonuses totaling up to \$2,000 to grounds maintenance employees who complete probation and one or two years of service.

## **Memorials Program**

The Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs manages three veteran memorials and the Gold Star Family Monument. The Maryland World War II Memorial is in Annapolis, and the Vietnam War and Korean War Memorials are in Baltimore. The Gold Star Family Monument is our newest addition and is in Annapolis, adjacent to the Maryland World War II Memorial. Additionally, the Department shares joint responsibility with the City of Baltimore for the War Memorial Building in Baltimore. The memorials recognize the contributions of the men and women who fought for the principles of freedom, both abroad and at home. They also serve to educate present and future generations about the sacrifices made by members of the Uniformed Services of the United States.

## **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".

MDVA continues to work with the Department of General Services (DGS) to identify a suitable site to locate a second State veterans home.

## **Outreach & Advocacy Program**

The Outreach & Advocacy Program's mission is to develop innovative ways to seek out and inform Maryland's veterans about benefits and services that are available from federal, state, and local organizations, as well as solicit feedback from veterans regarding their requests and needs for additional services.

To accomplish its mission the Outreach & Advocacy Program works closely with multiple local, state and federal agencies and non-profit organizations to coordinate efforts to locate and inform Maryland's veterans as well as to expand benefits and services available to Maryland veterans.

The Program is also responsible for:

- The Department's electronic newsletter, a bi-weekly publication comprised of notable veteran and military related events across Maryland
- The Department's website, [veterans.maryland.gov](http://veterans.maryland.gov)
- Welcome Home Maryland Veterans mailings, an informational packet sent to all veterans returning to Maryland
- The Department's social media presence
- Communications and public relations

In addition, the Outreach and Advocacy Program provides briefings on MDVA programs and benefits available to Maryland Veterans and their families. The Program also staffs tables at various community events to provide education and outreach materials pertaining to Maryland benefits and MDVA programs.

## Demographic Trends

A projected 362,000 veterans live in Maryland as of 2020, 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.