



Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs

Office of the Secretary

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Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs

FY 2023 Operating Budget

Response to Department of Legislative Services Analysis

HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

PUBLIC SAFETY AND ADMINISTRATION SUBCOMMITTEE

Delegate Tony Bridges

February 10, 2022

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SENATE BUDGET AND TAXATION COMMITTEE

PUBLIC SAFETY, TRANSPORTATION, AND ENVIRONMENT SUBCOMMITTEE

Senator Cory McCray

February 11, 2022

Introduction

The Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) wishes to thank Andrew Garrison for his analysis of our agency's FY 2023 budget request. 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 2023 Governor's Allowance for MDVA.

This document contains the Department's response to recommendations or questions formally presented in DLS's analysis. It also 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.

MDVA concurs with the Governor's Allowance for FY 2023.

***DLS Questions and Recommended Actions:
Agency Response***

Page 5: MDVA should comment on current and ongoing efforts to improve recruitment and retention within the cemetery positions.

From January to December 2020 (that is, two years ago,) MDVA's census of caretakers and equipment operators increased 13%, from 39 to 44. The average elapsed time since hire for these personnel increased nearly 18%, from 4 years to 4.7 years.

The Cemetery Program continued to overcome stubborn vacancy challenges in calendar year 2021. From January to December 2021, the Program's staff of veterans cemetery caretakers and veterans cemetery equipment operators increased 9%, from 44 to 48. Retention stabilized with the average elapsed years since hire date for these personnel dropping only slightly from 4.7 years to 4.5 years.

These statistics demonstrate a 23% increase in census and a 13% increase in employment longevity across a two-year period.

MDVA appreciates the cooperation of the Department of Budget and Management in some key initiatives that have allowed this progress, including the following:

- A one-time bonus eligibility program, effective for workers hired through December 31, 2020, that provides up to \$2,000 in retention bonuses to Veterans Cemetery Caretakers, Veterans Cemetery Equipment Operators, and Motor Equipment Operators who remain employed for up to two years.
- Ongoing/continuous recruitment of veterans cemetery caretakers; temporary streamlining of process for interviewing caretaker candidates
- One-time bulk hiring freeze approval for cemetery laborer positions
- Standardization of above-base salaries for initial appointments of cemetery laborers

MDVA has used alternative recruitment avenues in the recent past couple years: advertising in local news publications (print and online), advertising on Craigslist.org, and seeking to partner with a Baltimore nonprofit to place some of their clients at Garrison Forest. In addition, the Cemetery Program is focusing on training, improving its equipment, and providing uniforms as well as cold-weather and hot-weather gear for its employees.

*DLS Questions and Recommended Actions:
Agency Response, continued*

Page 12:

Add the following language to the federal fund appropriation:

, provided that \$2,000,000 of this appropriation made for the purpose of grants to the Charlotte Hall Veterans Home (CHVH) contractor may not be expended until the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs submits a report to the budget committees on CHVH's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including justification for continued revenue support for the contractor in fiscal 2023. The report shall be submitted by October 1, 2022, and the budget committees shall have 45 days to review and comment. Funds restricted pending the receipt of a report may not be transferred by budget amendment or otherwise to any other purpose and shall be canceled if the report is not submitted to the budget committees.

MDVA concurs with this recommendation.

Agency Profile

Purpose

The mission and purpose of the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs is to assist veterans, active duty service members, and their families and dependents in securing benefits earned through military service. The agency fulfills this mission through **veterans benefits services**, a robust **veterans cemetery program**, maintenance of the **State's veteran memorials**, provision of **skilled nursing and assisted living care** for veterans and eligible spouses at the State's veterans home, **outreach and advocacy**, and administration of the **Maryland Veterans Trust Fund**, all while exercising responsible management of available resources.

Core Functions

- Provide the most effective possible **statewide benefits services** 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 through providing interment in **State veterans cemeteries** that will come to be considered as national shrines.
- Maintain and protect the **State's veteran memorials**.
- Provide the finest assisted living and skilled nursing residential care to qualified Maryland veterans and eligible spouses at the **Charlotte Hall Veterans Home**.
- Ensure through effective **outreach and advocacy** that veterans and their dependents, including Maryland's **women, minority, and underserved veteran populations**, are increasingly informed and educated about the various benefits and services to which they are entitled as a result of their service.
- Provide **non-emergency, temporary monetary assistance** to veterans facing financial hardship, through the Maryland Veterans Trust Fund.

FY 2021 At A Glance

Maryland Veteran Population (2021 projection): 378,000*

- The Service Program **filed 2,804 claims and achieved \$30.6 million in veterans benefits awards**.
- The Cemetery Program performed a **record 3,736 interments: 2,329 veterans and 1,407 dependents**.
- The average Charlotte Hall Veterans Home occupancy rate was 68%, an average census of 301. This decline was attributable to COVID: a heightened hesitancy by families of eligible veterans to place loved ones in a nursing home, staffing challenges, and deaths.
- MDVA achieved **substantial progress toward the longstanding goal of establishing a second State veterans home**; a suitable site was identified and facility plans created.
- **Governor Larry Hogan created the Women Veterans/Inclusion Program within MDVA**.

*Source: United States Department of Veterans Affairs

Our **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 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.

Our **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.

Our **Memorials Program** requires the skills necessary to maintain such landmarks as reverent symbols of the sacrifices made by veterans.

Our **Veterans Home Program**, which provides assisted living and skilled nursing residential care program for veterans and eligible spouses, 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. The challenge of providing this care has increased exponentially during the COVID pandemic, and our team has risen to meet it.

Our **Outreach and Advocacy Program** requires not only a constantly growing understanding of the needs of veterans but also the communication skills and tools to reach Maryland's nearly 400,000 veterans and to advocate for them.

The **Maryland Veterans Trust Fund** exists to help meet non-emergency, temporary financial needs of veterans in hardship situations, with the goal of helping veterans in need to achieve self-reliance.

The Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs strives daily to fulfill its mission to a veteran constituency comprising 6% of the total population of our State, as well as to the eligible dependents and survivors of those veterans. 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 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.

In 2021, Governor Larry Hogan created the Women/Veterans Inclusion Program within MDVA. This initiative aims to raise awareness of the needs of Maryland's women, minority, and underserved veteran populations.

And in 2021, MDVA identified the site of the State's second veterans home and developed facility plans for this vital capital addition, which will expand our ability to serve those who served.

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.

VA acceptance rates of initial claims filed by the MDVA Service Program have been trending upward, reaching 91% in FY 2020. This success rate reflects the focus the Service Program has placed on training and quality control.

MDVA is excited to expand further 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 provides veterans with easy access to benefits services while they are already at the MVA to take care of other business. This partnership has grown to include MDVA's service offices in Salisbury, Bel Air, Gaithersburg, and Hagerstown, where our offices are now co-located at the respective local MVA branch, and most recently to Cumberland.

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, one of the largest of its kind in the nation, 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 2021, the Cheltenham Veterans Cemetery laid 1,089 veterans and eligible dependents to rest, bringing its total through FY 2021 to 29,592 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 26,248 Maryland veterans and eligible dependents through FY 2021. In FY 2021, the Crownsville Veterans Cemetery laid 859 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 8,019 veterans and eligible dependents through FY 2021. In FY 2021, the Eastern Shore Veterans Cemetery laid 270 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 in FY 2021, laying 1,285 veterans and eligible dependents to rest, bringing its cumulative total through FY 2021 to 44,497 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 2021, the Rocky Gap Veterans Cemetery laid 233 veterans and eligible dependents to rest. Through FY 2021, a total of 5,364 veterans and their dependents have been laid to rest at the cemetery.

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 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".

CHVH was forced to temporarily halt new admissions on March 27, 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and saw its resident census fall approximately 25% to below 300 by August 2020, the month that admissions were reauthorized by the St. Mary's County Health Department. A rebound in the census has proven difficult to achieve due to the ongoing effects of the pandemic: not only the initial halting of admissions noted above, but also admissions hesitancy on the part of veterans and their families; the loss of visitation privileges (recently restored), which both increased admissions hesitancy and thwarted outreach to potential residents; and, sadly, COVID-related deaths. Even absent those factors, COVID has created a challenging environment for recruiting and retaining staff due to the ongoing stress of the job and sometimes better offers elsewhere (within or outside healthcare). CHVH has had to consolidate residents in specific units of the facility and close others because of staff shortages, which both the State and the contractor are seeking to alleviate.

On a separate front: MDVA is delighted to report that, in collaboration with the Department of General Services (DGS) and the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS), we have identified and chosen a suitable site in Sykesville for a second State veterans home. In FY 2021, MDVA funded and DGS procured contractual services to develop the required facility plans for the new veterans home. These plans have paved the way to what we hope will be the imminent design of the new home in FY 2023.

Outreach & Advocacy Program

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

In FY 2021, Governor Larry Hogan announced the creation of the Women Veterans/Inclusion Program within MDVA. This initiative has been successfully incorporated into the Outreach & Advocacy Program, and MDVA was delighted to hire Roslyn Jones in August 2021 to lead the Women Veterans/Inclusion Program, whose aim is to raise awareness of the needs of Maryland's women, minority, and underserved veteran populations.

The Program is also responsible for:

- The Department's Public Information Officer (PIO) function and point of contact for all public information requests
- 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
- 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
- Participation in Commissions and Councils, including
 - Maryland Veterans Commission
 - Maryland College Collaboration for Student Veterans Commission
 - Governor's Commission on Suicide Prevention
 - Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH)
- Leading and/or participation, including drafting regulations, in other initiatives and mandated programs, including
 - Governor's Challenge to prevent service member, veteran and families suicide/PREVENTS
 - Comprehensive Statewide Veterans Suicide Prevention Plan
 - Governor's Customer Service Initiative
 - Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program
 - Veterans Services Specialist Program
 - Joint County Veterans Commission meetings

Maryland Veterans Trust

The Maryland Veterans Trust (the Trust) has been designated as an organization exempt from Federal income tax under section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code. The Trust provides non-emergency, temporary financial assistance program to veterans facing short-term financial crises such as rent assistance following the loss of a job. The program aims to assist those that will be self-reliant after receiving the assistance and cannot address chronic issues. A Board of Trustees governs the organization, and the Secretary of MDVA serves as chair of the Board. One staff member, the Grant Administrator, manages the Trust and the associated Maryland Veterans Trust Fund (the Trust Fund).

The Trust is funded by private donations but now also has more permanent funding sources through donations collected at Maryland casinos and slot revenue received from Veteran Service Organizations under the State Lottery.

The Trust Fund is mostly used for assistance with rent/mortgage and utilities. The Trust does not assist with taxes, child support, speeding tickets, legal fees, payday and interpersonal loans, credit card debt, home repairs, food, appliances, and vehicle purchases. Further, the Trust does not find housing for veterans.

All applicants must be Maryland residents for at least 24 months at the time of application. Applicants must be eligible for burial in a Maryland State Veterans Cemetery and must have an honorable discharge or general discharge under honorable conditions. Applicant income may not exceed 250% of the federal poverty guidelines. (Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this threshold had been 200%, but the Board increased it temporarily to 250% during the pandemic and has since voted to make the new threshold permanent.) Benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Social Security, and Social Security Disability count as income.

Widows and widowers may apply if they have both the discharge papers and a certificate of death from the deceased veteran.

All awarded grant money goes to the vendors in payment of the veteran's liabilities, and none goes directly to the veteran.

FY 2021 was a record year for the Trust, which awarded \$230,829 in grants during that time. And the Board recently approved a plan to expand the Trust Fund's reach, allowing it (within prescribed limits) to fund other organizations that assist veterans.

Demographic Trends

A projected 378,000 veterans live in Maryland as of 2021, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA). According to the USDVA, two segments of the veteran population are growing at annual rates of 3-5%:

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.