



**MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS & MILITARY FAMILIES**

Office of the Secretary

WES MOORE
Governor
ARUNA MILLER
Lt. Governor
ANTHONY WOODS
Secretary

Maryland Department of Veterans & Military Families

FY 2026 Operating Budget

Response to Department of Legislative Services Analysis

SENATE BUDGET AND TAXATION COMMITTEE

PUBLIC SAFETY, TRANSPORTATION, AND ENVIRONMENT SUBCOMMITTEE

Senator Michael A. Jackson

February 21, 2025

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HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

PUBLIC SAFETY AND ADMINISTRATION SUBCOMMITTEE

Delegate Jazz Lewis

February 19, 2025

Introduction

The Maryland Department of Veterans & Military Families (DVMMF) thanks analyst Yashodhara Rai for her insightful analysis of our agency's FY 2026 budget request.

We welcome the opportunity to update the Committee on our activities over the past year. Our singular mission, the reason we were established as a State agency in 1999 and continue to exist today, 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.**

We also appreciate the opportunity to respond to the Department of Legislative Services' (DLS) analysis of the FY 2026 Governor's Allowance for DVMMF.

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

- A letter from Secretary Anthony (Tony) Woods
- A profile of the Maryland Department of Veterans & Military Families.
- A summary of services provided by the Department.
- A brief history of the Department.
- Demographic trends among Maryland's veterans.

DVMMF concurs with the Governor's Allowance for FY 2026.

Dear Senator Jackson, Delegate Lewis, and members of the Subcommittees:

In 2024, we reached significant milestones that reflect our steadfast commitment to serving those who have served. Among our proudest achievements was the passage of 24 bills aimed at improving the lives of veterans, service members, and their families. These bills expanded healthcare access, created new employment opportunities, and strengthened essential support systems statewide. To better represent the communities we serve, we renamed our department, reaffirming our dedication to supporting veterans, service members, their families, and caregivers. Additionally, we established a Deputy Secretary position focused on Military Family Policy & Programs, created the Commission on Veterans and Military Families, and designated Maryland's first Veterans Suicide Prevention Day—further underscoring our commitment to addressing critical needs.

Our Benefits Program had a record-breaking year, filing 5,073 claims—the most since 2016—resulting in over \$44 million in monetary benefits for veterans, dependents, and survivors. We expanded our reach by opening a new benefits office in Cecil County and increasing staff at other locations, ensuring more veterans and families could access the support they deserve.

This year, the Maryland Veterans Trust Fund launched its first online application process, making it easier for veterans and military families to request emergency financial assistance. In 2024, the fund awarded nearly half a million dollars in grants to help prevent foreclosures, evictions, car repossessions, and utility shutoffs, providing critical support to those in need.

Our Cemeteries and Memorial Program honored 3,302 veterans and dependents with dignity and respect. This year also marked an important change, as National Guard and Reservists became eligible for burial in Maryland Veterans Cemeteries—a meaningful step in recognizing their service.

Through Maryland Joins Forces (MJF), we continue to lead collaborative efforts that deliver tangible results. This year, we achieved 18 memoranda of agreement with partners committed to supporting military families. Highlights include hosting a “Rock Your Profile” workshop with Fort Meade and LinkedIn, and storytime events for military-connected children in partnership with Blue Star Families and United Through Reading. These collaborations also extended to higher education, with American University awarding its first MJF scholarship to a military-connected graduate student. Together, we are building a stronger community and setting a national example for supporting military families.

I want to thank you, the members of the General Assembly, and Governor Moore for your support as we strive to make Maryland the best state in the nation to be a member of the veteran and military-connected community.

Respectfully,
Anthony (Tony) Woods
Secretary

Agency Profile

Purpose

The mission and purpose of the Maryland Department of Veterans & Military Families 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; **communications, 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 **communication, 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

FY 2024 At A Glance

Maryland Veteran Population (2024 projection): 352,000*

The Service Program *filed 5,073 claims on behalf of Maryland veterans (a 13% increase from FY 2023) and achieved a record \$44.7 million in veterans benefits awards (a 15.5% increase from FY 2023.)*

The Cemetery Program performed *3,302 interments: 2,000 veterans, 54 national guard/reservist, and 1,248 dependents*. The Memorials Program continued its *100% satisfactory record* with events held at the State's veterans memorials.

Under PruittHealth's leadership, Charlotte Hall Veterans Home *increased its census, transitioned to a fully dedicated in-house nursing team, eliminating reliance on outside agency nursing staff and hired full-time personnel* to ensure consistent, high-quality care.

Among its many roles and initiatives, DVMF's small Communication, Outreach and Advocacy team *continued its vital participation in the Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide among Service Members, Veterans and Families (SMVF); set new records with 4.2 million client contacts and 2.44 million newsletters distributed; and recorded 799,728 social media views*.

DVMF continued *progress toward the longstanding goal of establishing a second State veterans home in Sykesville*.

*Source: United States Department of Veterans Affairs VETPOP2020

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.

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Summary of Services Provided

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.

Our **Communications, Outreach and Advocacy (COA) Program** requires not only a constantly growing understanding of the needs of veterans but also the communication skills and tools to reach Maryland's estimated 352,000 veterans and to advocate for them. The COA Program plays a vital role in the Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans and Families (SMVF).

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 & Military Families strives daily to fulfill its mission to a veteran constituency comprising 7.2% of the total adult population of our State⁽¹⁾, 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.

(1) Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs VETPOP2020(veteran population); www.census.gov
(accessed 2/2/2024) (Maryland population 18+ years old).

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DLS Questions and Recommended Actions: FY 2026 Operating Budget

Page 2: Fiscal 2025 - Cost Containment - Two cost containment actions impacting DVMMF were approved by the Board of Public Works at its July 17, 2024 meeting. In total, these actions reduced the department's fiscal 2025 general fund appropriation by \$900,000. One action was a fund swap shifting \$500,000 of expenses in the Cemetery program for interment fees for eligible veteran dependents from general funds to special funds. The second action swapped \$400,000 from general funds to a non-general fund appropriation in the Veterans Home program for CHVH. **DVMMF should comment on whether the funds to backfill for the general fund reductions are provided for within the current appropriation or if existing deficiency appropriations or a future budget amendment will be needed to replace these expenditures.**

Agency Response:

Funds to backfill for the general fund reductions are not provided for within the current appropriation. We do not anticipate the need to request a future budget amendment to replace the expenditures.

Page 2: Proposed Deficiency - Reduce \$2.3 million in general funds, which includes a reduction of \$3.1 million in the Veterans Home program to align funding with a decreased resident census in fiscal 2024, partially offset by an increase of \$825,000 in the Executive Direction program as a one-time expense to fund the ongoing litigation with the prior CHVH contractor. **DVMMF should comment on the status of the ongoing litigation with the prior CHVH contractor.**

Agency Response:

DVMMF is not pursuing litigation against the former contractor, HMR. HMR filed contract claims against DVMMF, alleging that the contract was improperly terminated, and DVMMF is defending those claims.

Page 3: Proposed Deficiency - Special and federal funds deficiency appropriations in both fiscal 2024 (\$6.7 million) and fiscal 2025 (\$3.9 million) add unspent balances from prior years. It is unclear why these balances continue to linger, especially as some of these balances are quite old. For example, the interment fees that DVMMF can no longer collect when burying eligible dependents of a veteran in a State Veterans' cemetery.

DVMF should brief the committees on the reason for not expending these special and federal fund balances.

Agency Response:

DVMF continues to retain allowable special and federal fund balances for future projects not covered by our Capital projects and grants and to supplement operating budgets for one-time, non-regular, or special operating expenses. These balances generally consist of (a) special funds protected explicitly in statute from reversion to the general fund, (b) special funds protected from reversion as dedicated funds, and (c) Federal funds earned at fixed rates for services rendered in prior years but not fully expended.

The Department has a strategic interest in maintaining a balance of retained funds, whenever possible, for unforeseen capital, maintenance, equipment, consultancy, and facility needs. The Department also does recognize the need to spend down these funds and not simply carry them on the books.

Retained funds have given the Department the flexibility to fund a strategic consultancy for expert recommendations on the future of staffing in the Veterans Home Program; to initiate the procurement of a facility plan for renovating Charlotte Hall; to retain a part-time subject matter expert (and former State Veterans Home Program Director) to advise on matters related to the Sykesville Veterans Home.

A constraint to spending down these funds is procurement capacity. Our dedicated procurement team is small; procurement is a complex process and takes time, whether the procurement is delegated to the Department or performed by DGS. Many of the procurements that we envision making using these retained funds are over the delegation limit, and DGS cuts off new procurements for a given fiscal year in March of that year, further constraining the time in which to use the funds.

The use of donated funds at Charlotte Hall are subject to the stated intent of the donor. The Department recognizes that the donated funds balance has grown steadily and is significant. The Department will prioritize identifying uses consistent with donor intent and putting donated funds to significant use in FY 2026.

Page 6: Proposed Budget Change - As of December 31, 2024, DVMF has no vacant positions, which is 6.19 less than necessary to meet the budgeted turnover in fiscal 2026. DVMF should comment on how the department plans to cover personnel requirements and expenses if the vacancies remain below the budgeted turnover in fiscal 2026.

Agency Response:

As of December 31, 2024, DVMF had eight (8) vacancies. With that said, each and every vacant PIN reduces our ability to complete our mission sustainably, and DVMF will continue to prioritize the reduction or elimination of vacancies. But for the time being, we are not below the budgeted turnover rate.

Page 8: Charlotte Hall Veterans Home Occupancy - In the fiscal 2024 Managing for Results submission, DVMF reports that the CHVH resident population decreased by 15% in fiscal 2024, from 278 in fiscal 2023, to 236 in fiscal 2024. As a result, the fiscal 2026 allowance reduces the estimated operating expenses for CHVH in general funds by a total of \$3.9 million to align the estimated operating expenses for CHVH with the actual expenditures in fiscal 2024. However, DVMF expects the CHVH resident population to increase by 21.6% in fiscal 2025, and by 24.2% in fiscal 2026 as compared to fiscal 2024 actuals. **DVMF should comment on the department's plan to fund these increased resident census in CHVH in fiscal 2025 and 2026 after the reduced appropriation.**

Agency Response:

The Department proposes to fund the census increase with increased revenues from the VA, Medicare, Medicaid, and private pay sources, and to continue working to reduce the level of subsidy required from the general fund through cost containment and efficiency measures without sacrificing the quality of care. The well-being of the Home's residents will always be DVMF's top priority.

DVMF will work with DBM to resolve this practical matter. In the meantime, the reduction to GF in FY 2025 should be viewed as a planned reduction of the contract subsidy, not a reduction in overall expenditures at the Home.

Page 10: As of December 2024, CHVH received an overall rating of one star in the federal CMS report, with health inspections receiving one star and staffing receiving three stars. CHVH's quality measures rating declined from three stars as of May 2024, to two stars as of September 2024, to one star as of December 2024. **DVMF should comment on the reason for decrease in its star rating for quality measures. DVMF should also discuss its strategies to improve its overall, health inspections, and quality measures ratings.**

Agency Response:

The Quality Measure rating of one star in December 2024 was for only 1 month. The most recent CMS ratings (January 2025) indicate that Charlotte Hall Veterans Home (CHVH) is two stars in quality measures and four stars in staffing.

The CMS Quality Measure (QM) Star-Rating system is based on performance on 11 (8 long-stay and 3 short-stay) of the 18 QMs that CMS currently posts on the Nursing Home Compare website. The QMs use data from the facilities' Minimum Data Set (MDS), which each nursing home submits as part of a federally mandated process for clinical assessment of all residents in Medicare or Medicaid-certified nursing homes. Further, the ratings are not real-time – they are based on MDS information from quarters/periods of time that are 6 – 12 months earlier (depending on the specific quality measure).

The short-stay measures examine the quality and care results for residents who have been at the facility for less than 100 days. CHVH Skilled Nursing Facility (SNF) did not admit any new residents from February 2023 to January 2024 – nearly a year (if not longer) due to the Immediate Jeopardy (Harm/Abuse) Tag issued to the previous operator/manager at CHVH. Accordingly, no short-stay residents or care was provided at CHVH during that period, and the number of “events” examined by short-stay measures was none.

In February 2024, the manager/operator at CHVH resumed admitting new patients (and continued to do so throughout 2024 – census increased 20.8% (from an average daily census (ADC) of 178 in January 2024 to an ADC of 215 in December 2024). Upon resuming admissions, CHVH SNF had an influx of short-stay residents during the second and third quarters of 2024, and not surprisingly, an increase in the number of “events” examined by short-stay measures – especially in comparison to the previous 12-month period (February 2023 – January 2024). As a result, the short-stay QM measures were “negatively” impacted.

DVMF and PruittHealth started their partnership in June 2023. From the start, both parties acknowledged and accepted that it would take time to improve operations and care at Charlotte Hall Veterans Home (CHVH) – especially with the volume of agency/transient staff (approximately 75-80%) in June 2023 and given the constant turnover in key facility leadership (Administrator and Director of Nursing) during the previous 18 months.

After 14 months (since August 2024), all agency staff have been eliminated at CHVH. And since August 2023, CHVH has maintained the same two leaders as Administrator and Director of Nursing at the facility.

During that same time period, PruittHealth has steadily implemented its systems and culture, and the quality and care continue to be an evolving and improving process.

With 100% permanent staff at CHVH (i.e., no agency) and consistent leadership, quality and care will continue to improve, and DVMF and PruittHealth are in agreement on the need for this continued improvement. In recognition of the commitment, PruittHealth

instituted a specific plan (with measurables) for improving to a rating of three stars in Quality Measures by the end of the second quarter in 2025 and set forth the improvement plan in a January 15, 2025 memorandum to the DVMF.

Page 10: Pursuant to Section 19-14C-02(a)(1) and (2) of the State Government Article, two survey reports were submitted on September 30, 2024. The first survey report was an annual recertification survey for all of CHVH's skilled-nursing and assisted-living facilities, conducted by the VA Office of Geriatrics and Extended Care of the Veterans' Administration from July 23 through July 26, 2024. The final survey report noted that CHVH was not in compliance with VA regulations on drugs and medicines for certain veterans, unnecessary drugs, sanitary conditions, drug regimen review, infection control, emergency power, use of outside resources, credentialing and privileging, and quality assessment and assurance. **DVMF should brief the committees on corrective actions/measures taken to address these noncompliances highlighted in the VA's annual survey report.**

Agency Response:

The VA Office of Geriatrics and Extended Care of the Veterans' Administration (hereinafter "VA") had a third-party survey team complete a VA Survey at CHVH over a four-day period (July 23-26, 2024). There were citations in various areas of operations that were annotated as being not in compliance, but it is important to note that none of the citations were at a severe or immediate jeopardy level, earning an IJ/Severe tag indicating widespread issues.

In conjunction and working with the VA and the facility's designated National State Veterans Home (SVH) Program Manager, PruittHealth developed a Corrective Action Plan (CAP) to address all of the issues and citations identified and submitted the same to the VA. The VA accepted PruittHealth's CAP in November 2021.

Page 10: The Department of Legislative Services (DLS) recommends adopting committee narrative requesting the continued submission of quarterly reports in collaboration with the CHVH contractor on the progress of CHVH's operations, including efforts to increase staffing and residency numbers.

Agency Response:

*The Department **concurs** with this recommendation.*

Page 11: Maryland Joins Forces - DVVMF has a goal of contacting service members transitioning out of the armed forces into private civilian life to educate them on how to claim and utilize their earned benefits, as well as other opportunities that the State has available. The Maryland Joins Forces (MJF) initiative was officially launched in November 2023. MJF is designed to mobilize partners across sectors to address issues affecting veterans and military families. This initiative is centered around five focus areas: employment; food and housing insecurity; education; health and wellness; and volunteer service. As of writing this analysis, 20 organizations have joined the MJF initiative, and DVVMF expects more partnerships in calendar 2025. According to DVVMF, some of the employment-related activities conducted during calendar 2024 include conducting a military spouse hiring event with Hiring Our Heroes, which is an initiative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, partnering with the Department of Budget and Management and Department of Defense to become a Military Spouse Employment Program partner and presenting the State-based programs that support military spouse employment at the Military Spouse Employment Advisory Council meeting held by Hiring Our Heroes. **DVVMF should brief the committees on the outcomes of this initiative, highlighting how many veterans and military families have been served and benefitted from this initiative to date, and the department's future plans to increase veterans and military families' participation in this initiative. DLS recommends adopting committee narrative requesting a progress report on the activities of the MJF initiatives including the number of veterans and military families who participated and benefitted from this initiative.**

Agency Response:

Launched in November 2023, Maryland Joins Forces (MJF) is a DVVMF initiative designed to mobilize partners across sectors to meaningfully address issues affecting veterans and military families. MJF is centered around five focus areas: employment, food and housing insecurity, education, health and wellness, and volunteer service. Desired outcomes include reducing veteran and military spouse unemployment, ensuring no military-connected family experiences food insecurity or homelessness, providing skill development and credentialing opportunities for the military-connected community, increasing access to health and wellness resources, and providing service opportunities for the military-connected community to serve alongside non-military neighbors.

To date, DVVMF has signed 20 Memorandums of Agreement with partner organizations and expects more in the coming year. In the last year, DVVMF has worked with MJF partners on the following employment-related activities:

- 1. Military spouse hiring event and open house in Government House with Hiring Our Heroes, an initiative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation*

2. *Maryland designated as a 4+1 State, a Hiring Our Heroes and Blue Star Families initiative to support military spouse employment*
3. *DVMF partnered with the Department of Budget and Management and the Department of Defense to become a Military Spouse Employment Program partner*
4. *DVMF partnered with Fort Meade and LinkedIn to facilitate training for transitioning service members and military spouses on how to create LinkedIn profiles*
5. *DVMF joined Hiring Our Heroes for their Military Spouse Employment Advisory Council meeting to present on Maryland-based programs supporting military spouse employment*

DVMF has partnered with MJF organizations on other activities, which include:

1. *Veterans Day holiday meal distribution for military families with Operation Homefront.*
2. *Holiday concert experience for military/veteran caregivers and their families with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra*
3. *Maryland was designated as a Hidden Heroes state to elevate awareness of caregivers and resources with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation.*
4. *DVMF partnered with the Maryland Stadium Authority and Elizabeth Dole Foundation to host military/veteran caregivers and their families at local baseball games.*
5. *Maryland joined the National Governor's Association and Blue Star Families to launch their Do Your Part initiative to support military family policy and programs.*
6. *DVMF capitalized on the National Association of Counties' Operation Greenlight initiative to run a social media campaign highlighting MJF partners who provide military/veteran caregiver support.*
7. *DVMF has partnered with Elizabeth Dole Foundation to facilitate a caregiver support webinar to educate caregivers on the availability of support resources*
8. *DVMF held its first MJF convening in November 2024 and strategized plans for 2025*
9. *DVMF held its Q1 2025 MJF meeting, identified a mission and vision statement, and established two workgroups, one to focus on April's Month of the Military Child and a second to focus on a September community building service campaign*

Ongoing/Upcoming MJF activities:

1. *DVMF is partnering with the Modern Military Association of America to create an LGBTQ+ resource guide for military families*
2. *Five pending MOAs (Hire Heroes USA, Veteran and Military Support Alliance, Maryland Coalition of Families, and University of Maryland Global Campus, Heroes on the Water, Civil Air Patrol)*

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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 DVMF maintains 15 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 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. Also, 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.

In 2024, to better represent the communities we serve, our department was renamed Department of Veterans & Military Families (DVMF), reaffirming our dedication to supporting veterans, service members, their families, and caregivers. Additionally, we established a Deputy Secretary position focused on Military Family Policy & Programs, created the Commission on Veterans and Military Families, and designated Maryland's first Veterans Suicide Prevention Day—further underscoring our commitment to addressing critical needs.

How We Serve Veterans

Service Program

The DVMF 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. DVMF 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.

DVMF employs Veterans Benefits Specialists accredited by the USDVA to represent veterans with disability claims and appeals and enjoys relationships with a handful of other accredited individuals outside the agency, who submit claims to the USDVA through DVMF. 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.

Veterans Benefits Specialists are located throughout Maryland: Baltimore City, Bel Air, Camp Springs, Charlotte Hall, Cumberland, Easton, Elkton, Frederick, Gaithersburg, Glen Burnie, Hagerstown, Laurel, and Salisbury. Many of these offices have just a single benefits specialist; a few have an office secretary to assist with administration. This small team does a remarkable job with incredible discipline and efficiency. **In FY 2024, Maryland veterans and their families were awarded nearly \$44.7 million in benefits. Initial benefits claims were accepted at a rate of 94% and appeals at 65%. With a budget of just over \$2.4 million (FY 2024), the DVMF Service Program is arguably one of the State's best investments.**

DVMF maintains a strategic 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 and **has now expanded to a total of seven (7) Service offices co-located at MVA centers (Bel Air, Cumberland, Elkton, Gaithersburg, Glen Burnie, Hagerstown, and Salisbury).** DVMF greatly appreciates the support of MVA in this collaboration, which provides veterans with easy access to benefits services while they are already at the MVA to take care of other business.

Cemetery Program

The State of Maryland, through the Cemetery Program of the Maryland Department of Veterans & Military Families, 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. DVMF'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 was formerly used for agricultural purposes. **In FY 2024, the Cheltenham Veterans Cemetery laid 1,023 veterans, eligible dependents, reservists, and members of the National Guard to rest,** bringing its total through FY 2024 to 32642 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 28,730 Maryland veterans and eligible dependents, and now reservists and members of the National Guard, through FY 2024. **In FY 2024, the Crownsville Veterans Cemetery laid 754 veterans, eligible dependents, reservists, and members of the National Guard 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 8,747 veterans, eligible dependents, and now reservists and members of the National Guard through FY 2024. **In FY 2024, the Eastern Shore Veterans Cemetery laid 248 veterans, eligible dependents, reservists, and members of the National Guard 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 2024, laying 1,094 veterans, eligible dependents, reservists, and members of the National Guard to rest, bringing its cumulative total through FY 2024 to 47,843 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 2024, the Rocky Gap Veterans Cemetery laid 191 veterans, eligible dependents, reservists, and members of the National Guard to rest.** Through FY 2024, a total of 5,990 have been laid to rest at the cemetery.

The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs publishes a formula for recommended staffing of veterans cemeteries. This formula considers number of interments performed, number of maintained gravesites, and cemetery acreage.

As recently as FY 2018, the Cemetery Program's grounds maintenance team was staffed at just 42% of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA)-recommended level. Thanks to the efforts of our agency leadership, the Department of Budget and Management, the Legislature, and the Governor's Office, the grounds team has grown to roughly 70% of recommendations but is still short of the ultimate goal of 100%.

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Memorials Program

The Maryland Department of Veterans & Military Families 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 assisted living to skilled nursing. 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, and by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

The State of Maryland, through DVMF, contracts with a private healthcare management contractor to operate the Home. DVMF 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."

Communications, Outreach & Advocacy Program

The Communications, Outreach & Advocacy (COA) 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.

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 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

The COA team is often asked to implement new, including unfunded, legislative mandates for programs and other services that naturally fit nowhere in the agency's existing programs.

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 DVMF 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.

Demographic Trends

A projected 352,000 veterans live in Maryland as of 2024, 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 & Military Families is helping veterans to meet these challenges.