

Department of Veterans' Affairs

At a Glance

SEAN M. CONNOLLY, Commissioner

Established - 1986

Statutory authority - CGS Chapter 506 Sec: 27-103-27-137

Central office - 287 West Street, Rocky Hill, CT 06067

Number of full-time employees - 234

Recurring operating expenses 2014-15 - \$29,641,638

Agency generated revenue 2014-15 - \$29,833,556

History

Connecticut has the distinction of being the first State in the Nation to offer shelter and support for soldiers of war, their widows and orphans. This tradition harkens back to 1863 when Mr. Benjamin Fitch, a wealthy Connecticut businessman, promised soldiers recruited for Connecticut Regiments serving in the Civil War that he would care for them should they be injured during their military service and care for the families of soldiers killed in the war. This promise led to the establishment of the Fitch Home for Veterans in Darien, which was incorporated by the Connecticut General Assembly in 1864. With each succeeding period of war, new generations of veterans presented unique needs and hardships, which required the development of a comprehensive system of health care, social and rehabilitative services. In order to better serve these and future generations of veterans, the Connecticut General Assembly created the Department of Veterans' Affairs in 1987.

Mission

The mission of the Department is "serving those who served" by assessing the problems of veterans and their families as they emerge and identifying resources which address these needs. To advocate for the full benefits of federal, state and local laws affording claims representation, counseling, employment services, financial rights, privileges and benefits to Connecticut veterans and their families who are and have been members of the Armed Forces of the United States.

Organization

Office of the Commissioner

The Commissioner is appointed by the Governor and is responsible for the administration of the Department. The Commissioner is specifically tasked with assisting veterans, their spouses, eligible dependents and family members in the preparation, presentation, proof and establishment of such claims, privileges, rights and other benefits accruing to them under federal, state and local laws,

disseminating information and assisting eligible individuals to access these services and programs which include but are not limited to: educational, training, employment and reemployment programs; health care and rehabilitation programs; housing services, home loans, and burial benefits. The Commissioner is also responsible for outreach to veterans and community agencies; liaisons with legislature, statutory and legislative authorities and veteran service organizations; assessment of the efficiency of programs and evaluation and development of new initiatives to better serve the 240,000 Connecticut veterans and their families. The Commissioner of Veterans' Affairs also oversees development of an agency-wide long range plan; the review of all appeals and final decisions made by veterans regarding adverse decisions affecting benefits to veterans participating in state programs; the enforcement of all regulations and procedures enacted in accordance with the provisions of General Statutes Chapters 54 and 506.

The Office of Advocacy and Assistance

The Office of Advocacy and Assistance (OA&A) is responsible for assisting veterans and their families in accessing federal, state and local benefits and entitlements. Veterans Service Officers, accredited by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, assist veterans and their families with documentation and filing of claims for disability, compensation and/or pension. Staff offices are located in each of the five Congressional Districts (Bridgeport, Waterbury, Milford, Newington and Norwich) and include bilingual staff and a woman's veterans' services coordinator. Additional advocacy work is performed throughout the state on a staff available, rotating basis at satellite office locations and through numerous outreach events (Job/Senior and Health Fairs throughout the state). Veterans Service Officers also conduct interviews in skilled nursing facilities throughout the state to determine the number of veterans admitted and ascertain which benefits these veterans are currently receiving and/or entitled to receive.

This year OA&A serviced 2,500 walk-in veterans and/or dependents; answered over 9,500 telephone inquiries; acquired 550 new clients and filed 940 new claims and reopened hundreds of existing claims. Special outreach included 50 community outreach events including benefit fairs, seminars, and numerous "Yellow Ribbon" briefings for Connecticut National Guard and Reserve Units prior to, and immediately upon returning from deployment. These advocacy efforts resulted in over \$2.8 million in new income and benefits to Connecticut veterans and their families.

In Fiscal Year 2014-2015, the Office of Advocacy and Assistance also reviewed the eligibility status of an additional 1100 veterans and/or dependents of veterans in the state's 330 skilled nursing homes and 89 assisted living facilities. These benefits have provided a direct savings to the state where the clients are Medicaid recipients and in other cases served to delay the time when clients may be forced to rely on state funded services.

OA&A also manages the Connecticut Wartime Service Medals and Registry program and this year awarded over 1,000 additional medals – bringing to 31,398 the total number of Wartime Service Medals awarded to eligible veterans since 2006. Additionally, 519 Posthumous Medals were awarded during the Fiscal Year. The agency has helped coordinate and support over 90 award ceremonies across the state enabling veterans to be presented their medals in person. Currently there are over 90,000 veterans registered with the Connecticut Veterans electronic registry.

OA&A manages the Veterans Identity on the CT Driver's License Program. The office is responsible for verifying the service of the CT Veteran and transmitting that information to the CT-Dept. of Motor Vehicles. Since the inception of the program in January 2013, more than 110,000 applications have been processed by this office.

OA&A provides training for all town, city and municipal veterans representatives. This program provides a single source point of contact in the veteran's hometown to act as a liaison for veteran's benefits and services. To date, more than 130 towns have appointed a veteran's representative and nearly 175 volunteers have completed a benefits training seminar.

The Connecticut Veterans INFO line (1-866-9CT-VETS) continues to receive an average of 30 calls per day. This popular number provides veterans an easy access to general benefit information, assistance with requesting military records, referrals to other state agencies, and helpful information on the location and availability of the Congressional District Offices.

The John L. Levitow Health Care Center

The Health Care Center provides continuous professional comprehensive healthcare to veterans across the age continuum diagnosed with chronic disease illnesses. An individual Plan of Care is developed and continually updated throughout the veteran's stay to ensure that quality health care services are provided to assist the veteran reach his/her maximum potential. The Health Care Center provides a complete array of services as identified below.

Health Care Center Program Descriptions:

The Veterans' Health Care program is a major element of the Department's operations. The program offer a progressive, caring continuum of health care and social and rehabilitative services dedicated to professional excellence. The Health Care Center has adopted a Rehabilitative Model of Care based on the definition of care developed by the noted nurse theorist, Virginia Henderson (Army School of Nursing). "To assist the individual, sick or well, in the performance of those activities contributing to health or its recovery or to a peaceful death that they would perform unaided if they had the strength, the will or knowledge. And, to do so in such a way as to help them gain independence as rapidly as possible."

The Health Care Center is licensed by the State Department of Public Health as a Chronic Disease Hospital with 125 beds. The Center opened its doors to the growing veteran community in October, 2008. Under the direction of the Health Care Services Administrator, the medical staff and nursing department provides ongoing comprehensive medical and rehabilitation services in order to improve every aspect of care for each veteran served.

The Department offers twenty-four hour quality health care to veterans with chronic and disabling medical conditions whose needs require specialized care. The available programs in place are there to treat veterans suffering from, but not limited to; Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), Congestive Heart Failure (CHF), End Stage Renal Disease, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Accident (CVA), Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, End of Life and Palliative care, and Pain Management. The Health Care Center's medical team consists of two Board Certified Physicians and three Advanced Practice Registered Nurses who specialize in caring for veterans who present with multiple complex

conditions. The medical team provides health care management and primary care clinics for all veterans at the Health Care Center as well as those residing in the Residential Facility.

Programs include general medical care, Alzheimer's and related dementia care, end of life care, palliative care, long term care, rehabilitation, respite care, mental health and psychological counseling. In addition to Medicine and Nursing, specialty areas include Physical, Occupational, Speech, and Recreational Therapy, Laboratory, Pharmacy, Social Work, Cardiopulmonary, and contracted Dental and Radiology services.

The Department offers a Respite Care Program designed to provide occasional periods of relief to the family member or caregiver of Veterans living in the community. Veterans are eligible for 28 days of respite care per calendar year.

End of Life and Palliative Care provides special medical, psychological and spiritual care to the terminally ill. Pain management, special nursing visits, alternative therapies and volunteer companions are provided to comfort the veteran at end of life. A wide range of support and counseling services are available for veterans and their loved ones. These services include individual and grief counseling, spiritual counseling, resource planning and assistance with end-of-life issues as needed.

To be eligible for admittance, a veteran requesting care at the John L. Levitow Health Care Center must be a resident of the State of Connecticut and have served honorably. Applications for admission are required to be submitted in advance. A total of one hundred and seventy-five (175) veterans were admitted to the Health Care Center in 2014-2015. That number included seventeen (17) new admissions, one hundred and twenty-three (123) readmissions and thirty-five (35) veterans admitted from the Residential Facility.

Residential Program

The Residential Facility is available to homeless and needy veterans seeking assistance to improve the overall quality of their life. In addition to providing assistance with shelter, food, and clothing, the Veterans' Improvement Program (VIP) offers a continuum of rehabilitation services designed to assist veterans in achieving educational and or employment goals necessary to prepare them to return to independent living. Emphasis is directed toward developing an individualized rehabilitation plan which identifies a veteran's goals. Quarterly treatment team meetings are held whereby Social Workers and Vocational staff monitor and assist veterans in achieving their goals. Additional components of the program include medical care, psychiatric care, substance abuse treatment, a compensated work therapy program, vocational counseling services, social work services, recreation services and various educational programs. For the 2014/2015 fiscal year, 55 veterans were admitted and 37 veterans successfully completed the program and returned to independent living in the community. The average daily census for 2014/2015 was 226 veterans.

Residential Program Descriptions:

The Vocational Department of the Residential Facility continues to provide assistance to veterans seeking to enhance their educational skills to improve their opportunities for satisfying gainful employment in the community. There were 16 veterans enrolled in degree based educational programs at the local state community colleges or universities (two summer session, ten fall 2014 and four spring 2015). There were nine veterans enrolled in other training programs (six fall 2014 and three spring

2015). One veteran attended the Middletown Adult Education GED program. One veteran successfully graduated from Capital Community College with an Associate Degree in Social Services and is scheduled to begin classes in pursuit of his bachelor's degree at CCSU in the fall of 2015. One veteran completed the Nurse Aide training and passed the certification exam. During the 2014/2015 fiscal year, 8 veterans in the Residential Facility successfully obtained gainful full time employment and 2 veterans obtained part time employment in the following career areas: Nurse Aide, Clerical, Customer Service, Painting and Food Service.

Recovery Support:

Connecticut has had an active substance abuse recovery program specifically for veterans since 1995. This is a clinical program which is administered through the Residential Facility and has a capacity of 80 veterans. This program is available to any veteran residing at the Department of Veterans' Affairs that meet the eligibility criteria. Veterans who are serious about their recovery from drug and/or alcohol addictions receive a concentrated program of treatment, work opportunities and community service. This program is staffed by a Clinical Psychologist and Substance Abuse Counselors. The program is six (6) months of intensive substance abuse recovery programs followed by six (6) months of additional residential support. The Recovery Support Program (RSP) also offers an extended residence/alumni status to any resident that successfully completes one year in the Recovery Support Program. During the alumni period, veterans are actively working on discharge planning which may include competitive employment, education, and housing goals. In addition, the Recovery In Motion Program (RIM) has been developed which provides RSP alumni a third year of recovery-based activities, while living in a sober environment at the Fellowship House. A total of 42 veterans took part in the RSP program in the last fiscal year. Veterans admitted to this service that successfully completed the program, remains at 80% or better.

Patriots' Landing (family housing):

The Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs implemented a new program early in the year of 2014. This program offers temporary housing to veterans and their families who are homeless or at risk for homelessness. A special Memorandum of Agreement with the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) provides case management services to these families so they can be successful in transitioning to permanent housing within a two-year period. Since February 2014, a total of 4 veteran families and one single female veteran have utilized this valuable program, with two transitioning to independent living.

Veterans Burial Services/Cemetery System

The Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs operates a full-time Burial Services Office based in Rocky Hill that delivers burial benefits and assistance to thousands of veteran families, answering more than 16,000 inquiries each year. Services provided include burial plot coordination, ordering of veteran headstones and foot markers, consultation on available benefits, assistance with interment ceremonies, processing of federal reimbursement payments and coordination of memorial ceremonies. The savings to veterans' families when utilizing CT DVA burial services is substantial, totaling over \$2,138,400 this year.

The Connecticut State Cemetery System consists of three state cemeteries: the Connecticut State Veterans' Cemetery, located in Middletown; Col. Raymond Gates Cemetery, located in Rocky Hill; and

Spring Grove Cemetery, located in Darien. The CT DVA is responsible for the care, maintenance and development of all three cemeteries and installs all headstones. The State Veterans' Cemetery in Middletown is open for burials six days a week and contains over 10,228 remains of Connecticut veterans. The Col. Raymond Gates Cemetery is reserved for the burials of Veterans residing at the State Veterans Home & Hospital at Rocky Hill. The Spring Grove Cemetery closed for internments in 1964.

From July 1, 2014 through June 30, 2015, 600 internments were performed at Connecticut State Veterans' Cemeteries. During the same period, the Burial Services Office collected \$409,578 in federal reimbursement burial allowances for the General Fund. Also, installation payments for 2,609 federal veteran headstones/foot markers were processed totaling \$258,345.

Planning Division & Agency Administrated Projects

The Department's planning division works closely with the Commissioner and the entire management team in establishing the short-term and long-term goals of the agency, and identifying strategies for implementing these goals and overall improvements. The following projects/programs are within Planning's purview:

- Policy development and recommendation – assisting in the development and implementation of programs improvement.
- Grants Administration: Successful in obtaining \$2.6 million federal grant for the expansion of the Middletown Veterans State Cemetery together with renovation of the Administration building to include computerized records of burial and handicapped accessible restrooms.
- Capital Project: Completion of the new boiler blow-down system installation project in the Power plant
- Completion of the installation of new roof on the Veterans Recovery Center building.
- Completed all planning phases and commenced the construction phase of the Middletown State Veterans Cemetery expansion federal grant project.
- Ongoing campus study for additional housing for veterans and reimagining of future capital development and programs for the benefit of veterans statewide.
- Information Technology Electronic Health Records: The planning division has continued work with DAS/BEST in implementing its strategic plan of modernizing the agency's computer network infrastructure. Planning has continued in identifying the appropriate technology application strategies for acquiring electronic health records system. The application system has been purchased and the Department has begun implantation phase of the project. This application will be used to provide integrated and coordinated health care services and electronic documentation of care.
- In-kind donations. Stand Down 2015 is scheduled for Friday, September 18, 2015.

Additional Agency Projects:

- In East Domicile Residential Facility conducted Asbestos Abatement and Retiling of C&D wings, dayrooms, and common hallway. The A& B wings, dayrooms and common hallway to be completed at a later date.
- Residential Integrated Pest Management Plan: Developed January 2015 in response to a bed bug infestation within the residential living areas. Quarterly canine inspections were implemented.

Treatment of the identified living areas were completed by Agency Pest Management Vendor. Agency purchased preventive equipment: Heat Treating Unit and Climb ups.

- Conducted a heavy duty deep cleaning of extensive areas of the Domicile and Dining facility using both Department staff and contracted services when necessary to address areas not covered by regular daily/weekly cleaning.

Safety and Security Department Accomplishments for 2014-15

The Department continues to implement a comprehensive, wide-ranging effort to upgrade personal and physical safety and security at the Rocky Hill campus with many new procedures and policies carried out by the Safety and Security Department.

- Implementation of an accountability system (ID Cards with bar code reader) for the Healthcare Center patients.
- More robust system for investigating allegations of theft at the Department of Veterans' Affairs.
- Created the position of a Field Training Officer and investigator who is responsible for the training of Agency personnel and investigation of violation of policies, procedures, rules regulations and State Statutes.
- Created, implemented and is presently training employee and veterans on an active shooter program.
- Placed the telecommunication department under the Safety and Security program.
- Updated the visitors accountability system for tracking and sign in and out procedures for visitors.
- Utilizing the Department of Probation to conduct training of Department security Officers in areas of Crisis Intervention, Officer Awareness Safety program and Use of Force.
- Greater coordination with external Law enforcement organization such as SWAT, FBI and K9 units and other local law enforcement to training on the grounds of the Veterans Affairs.
- Hire a Supervising Buildings and Grounds Patrol Officer to supervise the security department.
- Established a law Enforcement internship program with Manchester Community College.
- Coordinate with DAS on Connecticut Education Academy program—all Department employees to complete the Active Shooter Program.
- Work with the Governor's Office on Emergency Management and Homeland Security on managing the Transportation Staging Area.
- Conducted Active Shooter (healthcare specific) training for all employees.
- Exceptional performance on the 2014 FEMA evaluation of the (TSA) Transportation Staging Area.

Fiscal Updates

FY15 was a fiscally challenging year both at the State and Agency level. The DVA's Operating Expenses (OE) was reduced 3.84% from the approved budget and the Personal Services (PS) appropriation was cut 4.14% from the original appropriated budget. DVA continues to innovate strategic service models to meet the challenges of budget constraints by employing a fiscally conservative approach to managing our bottom line. The Agency closed FY15 after completing its tenth (10th) consecutive year with a balanced budget across all appropriated fund categories.

Information Reported as Required by State Statute

Veterans requesting care from the Department must be residents of the State of Connecticut at the time of application. A veteran must have been discharged with other than a dishonorable discharge and be a current resident of the State of Connecticut. Application for admission may be requested in advance. Fact sheets detailing admission requirements are available along with a general information booklet, or consult our website at www.ct.gov/ctva.

Human Resources:

The Human Resources Department is responsible for providing support and assistance to employees. This includes recruitment, staffing and personnel transactions such as position vacancies, employee leaves, retirement, FMLA, Workers Compensation and management of all position actions in CORE-CT. The Human Resources department also oversees all labor relation activities including collective bargaining, discipline, investigations as well as providing guidance to managers and supervisors regarding employee relation issues.

Affirmative Action:

The Department's Affirmative Action Plan is filed biennially and is in compliance with the requirements of the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, pursuant to the Regulations for Affirmative Action by State Government, Sections 46a-68-31 to 46a-68-74. The Department is strongly committed to an aggressive and comprehensive affirmative action plan to assure equal employment. Affirmative action and equal employment are immediate and priority objectives and they play an important and necessary role in all stages of the employment process. The Department continued to monitor and improve its practices in employment and contracting, giving special consideration to affirmative action goal attainment.

Special Events

Veterans Hall of Fame- Since its inception in 2005, each year we have received over 100 nominations for this award. Ten veterans are inducted into the Veterans Hall of Fame annually.

CT DVA continued to partner with the CT Department of Labor in organizing and supporting "Heroes for Hire" veteran job fairs around the state in an effort to match qualified veterans with businesses and organizations interested in hiring them.

Volunteer Services

Volunteers logged over 5,222 hours in support of Veterans Home activities. The volunteers are comprised of individuals who volunteer their time with our patients, as well as community groups who come in to complete specific projects on the grounds of the Department of Veterans' Affairs. This program is expected to expand in the coming year (2015-2016) with volunteer services reaching further into the Domicile and out into the community.

Stand Down 2014: A state-wide outreach held at the Department providing services to homeless and needy veterans, was another success. More than 1,123 veterans attended the event which was held on the grounds of the Veterans' Home in Rocky Hill. Over 50 state, federal and private agencies attended

and provided assistance and resource information to veterans in need. In addition, there were over 150 volunteers supporting the event along with numerous monetary and

Improvements/Achievements 2014-15

- The Department of Veterans' Affairs continues to support the annual Veterans' Day Parade in Hartford, CT by providing refreshments to the parade participants and the Commissioner continues to play a role in the parade itself by marching in the parade and placing the wreath.
- During this Fiscal Year, CT DVA fully resourced a new Burial Services Office with two full-time staff members to coordinate and deliver veterans burial benefits and services to the families of Connecticut's estimated 250,000 veterans. (OA&A)
- With the cooperation of the Connecticut Funeral Directors Association (CFDA) and the Missing in America Project (MIAP), the CT DVA established a protocol to honor deceased veterans whose cremated remains have never been claimed for burial. Since this protocol was established, two sets of cremated remains of U.S. World War II veterans were identified and buried at the State Veterans' Cemetery with full military honors. These veterans' cremated remains had gone unclaimed by family members for 21 and 41 years respectively. The Connecticut protocol has since been used as a model by several other states. (OA&A)
- The Temporary Emergency Assistance Fund was established by Commissioner Schwartz in response to the overwhelming financial needs expressed by recently returned veterans deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. The program is funded by private donations from individuals and organizations with aid totaling \$12,769 for FY14/15.