

# Department of Veterans' Affairs



## *At a Glance*

**SEAN M. CONNOLLY, Commissioner**

**Chief of Staff & General Counsel, Thomas J. Saadi**

***Established - 1986***

***Statutory authority - C.G.S. Sections 27-103 through 27-137***

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

***Number of full-time employees - 236***

***Recurring operating expenses 2015-16 - \$29,603,591***

***Agency generated revenue 2015-16 - \$34,911,750***

**Organizational structure**

## **History**

**Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs is the Nation's first and longest operating state Veterans' home.**

Connecticut has the distinction of being the first state in the Nation to have a home dedicated to Veterans. Benjamin Fitch, a wealthy Connecticut businessman, promised Soldiers serving in the Civil War a place to call home when they returned from battle. A man of his word, the Fitch's Home for Soldiers and their Orphans was opened in 1864 and concurrently incorporated into the Connecticut General Assembly.

In 1940, the home was moved to its current location in Rocky Hill and 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 and 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 (DVA) in 1987. Today the DVA provides residential and rehabilitative services for more than 200,000 Veterans who call Connecticut home. The DVA is also responsible for the Office of Advocacy and Assistance with officers located in each Congressional District to help Veterans navigate services and benefits they have earned. The Department also maintains cemeteries in Darien, Rocky Hill, and the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown.

## **Mission**

*“Serving Those Who Served”*

*Enhance the lives of Connecticut’s Veterans by providing:*

*Advocacy and assistance to Veterans, their spouses or eligible dependents in obtaining benefits to which they may be entitled to under federal, state, and local laws; long-term and chronic disease healthcare; and cemetery and memorial services for Veterans and eligible dependents.*

*Collaborate with local, state, and federal agencies, Veteran service organizations, community partners, volunteers, and Veteran supporters.*

*Cultivate a work environment of compassion, teamwork, professional development, and employee engagement.*

## **Vision**

Provide Connecticut’s Veterans and their dependents proactive, world-class, and values-based service excellence.

## **Statutory Responsibility**

### **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 more than 200,000 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) assists Veterans and their families in accessing federal, state and local benefits and entitlements. Veterans Service Officers are accredited by the US Department of Veterans Affairs and 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 with offices in Bridgeport, Waterbury, Milford, Newington and Norwich and include bilingual staff and a woman Veteran services coordinator.

Additionally, advocacy work is performed throughout the state on a staff available, rotating basis at satellite office locations and through numerous 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.

### **The John L. Levitow Healthcare Center**

The Sgt. John L. Levitow Healthcare Center (HCC) provides continuous comprehensive long-term chronic disease healthcare to Veterans across the age continuum. To be eligible for admittance, a Veteran requesting care at the HCC must be a resident of Connecticut and have served honorably. Applications for admission are required to be submitted in advance. A total of 213 Veterans were admitted to the HCC in 2015-2016. That number included 23 new long term admissions, 6 Respite Care, 155 re-admissions, 29 Veterans admitted from the Residential Facility, and 94 Veterans were transferred to the HCC from the Residential Facility for observational care.

### **Residential Program**

The Residential Program consists of the main domicile building, the Veterans Recovery Center at the Fellowship House (VRC), and Patriot's Landing (Veteran family housing) and is available to Veterans seeking assistance to improve their overall quality of life with some having suffered from the effects of homelessness, unemployment, substance abuse, medical and mental health problems. Veteran Residents in the domicile have the opportunity to utilize a continuum of support and rehabilitation services which includes communal housing, all meals, an initial issuance of basis clothing and essential personal products, social workers, clinic services, recreation, compensated vocational work therapy program, education counseling, and job search assistance.

Additional case management services are available to Veteran residents through a Memorandum of Agreement with the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS). Veteran residents requiring support with substance abuse addiction have access to treatment provided by DMHAS through a Memorandum of Understanding. Collaboration with federal and state partners and local non-profits ensure the Veteran resident has access to benefits and services for which they are eligible.

### **Veterans Burial Services/Cemetery System**

The Department operates a full-time Burial Services Office based in Rocky Hill and operates three state Veterans cemeteries.

The Burial Services Office is responsible for coordinating burial benefits and assistance to thousands of Veteran families with burial plot coordination, ordering the Veteran headstone and foot markers, consultation on available benefits, assistance with interment ceremonies, processing of federal reimbursement payments and coordination of memorial ceremonies.

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 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 10,000 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.

## **Public Service**

### **The Office of Advocacy and Assistance**

This year OA&A serviced 2,800 walk-in Veterans and/or dependents; answered over 16,500 telephone inquiries; acquired 650 new clients and filed 1042 new claims and reopened hundreds of existing claims. OA&A attended more than fifty 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 \$3.5 million in new income and benefits to Connecticut Veterans and their families.

In Fiscal Year 2015-2016, the Office of Advocacy and Assistance also reviewed the eligibility status of more than 1,000 Veterans and/or dependents of Veterans in the state’s 344 skilled nursing homes and 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 manages the Connecticut Veteran Wartime Service Medals and Connecticut Veterans Electronic Registry. This year, more than 3,000 medals were awarded bringing the total number of Wartime Service Medals for eligible Veterans to 34,628 since 2006. Additionally, 694 Posthumous Medals were awarded during the Fiscal Year. The Agency has also helped coordinate and support over 30 award ceremonies across the state enabling Veterans to be presented their medals in person. Currently there are over 100,000 Veterans registered with the Connecticut Veterans Electronic Registry.

The office is also responsible for the management of the Veteran designation Program on CT Driver’s Licenses which includes verifying the service of the Veteran and transmitting that information to the CT Department of Motor Vehicles. Since the inception of the program in January 2013, the DVA has processed more than 11,000 applications.

OA&A provides training for all town, city and municipal Veteran representatives. This program provides a single source point of contact in the Veteran’s hometown to act as a liaison for benefits and services a Veteran has earned. To date, more than 130 towns have appointed a Municipal Veterans’ Service Contact Liaison and nearly 175 volunteers have completed a benefits training seminar since the training was first offered in October 2012.

OA&A and the DVA General Counsel are responsible for reviewing and certifying Veteran Owned Micro businesses in accordance with Public Act 16-184. Any certified Veteran Owned Micro businesses is eligible for a 15% state contract bidding preference. The law is effective on October 1, 2016.

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.

## **Sgt. John L. Levitow Healthcare Center**

The HCC offers 24-hour care and is licensed by the State Department of Public Health as a Chronic Disease Hospital. The 125 bed facility opened its doors to a growing Veteran patient community in October 2008, providing ongoing comprehensive medical and rehabilitation services in order to improve every aspect of care for each Veteran served. A total of 213 Veterans were admitted to the HCC in 2015-2016, including 23 new long-term admissions, 6 respite care admissions, 155 re-admissions, 29 admissions directly from the DVA Residential Facility, and 94 transferees from the Residential Facility for observational care.

The HCC offers a progressive, caring continuum of healthcare based on the Rehabilitative Model of Care by 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 HCC's medical team consists of two Board Certified Physicians and three Advanced Practice Registered Nurses who specialize in caring for Veterans with multiple complex conditions such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), Congestive Heart Failure (CHF), End Stage Renal Disease, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Accident (CVA), Parkinson's disease, and Alzheimer's disease. The medical team provides healthcare management and primary care clinics for all Veterans at the Healthcare Center as well as those residing in the Residential Facility.

Additional services offered at the HCC include physical, occupational, speech, and recreational therapy; mental health and psychological counseling; social workers; contracted dental and radiology services.

The Respite Care Program has been reinvigorated at the HCC and is 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 12 month period at no charge.

End of Life at the HCC provides special medical, psychological and spiritual care to the terminally ill Veteran patient. Pain management, special nursing visits, alternative therapies and volunteer companions are provided to comfort the Veteran patient. Support and counseling services including individual and grief counseling, spiritual counseling, resource planning and assistance with end-of-life issues as needed are available for both the Veteran patient and their loved ones.

## **Residential Program**

For the 2015-2016 fiscal year, 70 Veterans were admitted and 58 Veterans discharged back into the community from the Residential program. The average daily census for 2015-2016 was 217 Veterans.

## **Veterans Recovery Center at the Fellowship House**

On July 1, 2015 the staff of the VRC, formerly known as the Recovery Support Program, was transferred to DMHAS as required by state law. In November 2015, the DVA and DMHAS signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the continuation of recovery support services provided to Veteran residents residing at the DVA and additionally, now Veterans throughout the state. Changes to programming at the VRC were implemented in accordance with best practices for outpatient treatment

standards. The program is staffed by a Clinical Psychologist, three Substance Abuse Counselors, one

Community Clinician and Secretary. For FY 2015-2016, a total of 36 Veteran residents participated in the program.

### Patriots' Landing

The Patriots' Landing Program has been in operation since 2014 and offers temporary housing to Veterans and their families who are homeless or at risk for homelessness with physical housing for up to five Veteran families. All five houses are fully furnished and maintained with utilities covered by the Agency.

Residential Facility staff work collaboratively with a program and case manager provided through a Memorandum of Agreement with DMHAS. Case management services ensure that each Veteran family obtains the necessary benefits and services needed to successfully transition to permanent housing as soon as possible.

### **Veterans Burial Services/Cemetery System**

The State Veterans' Cemetery in Middletown is open for burials six days a week and contains over 10,860 remains of Connecticut Veterans. The Col. Raymond Gates Cemetery was recently opened after traditionally being reserved for the burials of Veterans residing at the Rocky Hill campus. The Spring Grove Cemetery closed for internments in 1964.

From July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016, 632 internments were performed at Connecticut State Veterans' Cemeteries.

### **Projects and Operations**

The Agency's Directorate of Projects and Operations office activated in October 2015. The following functions are now teamed together: Safety and Security, Facilities Management, Information Technology and Project Planning.

The Directorate is responsible for three state Veteran cemeteries and a 92 acre campus with more than 600,000 square feet of facilities. The establishment of this directorate is a new teaming concept bringing together the operational support functions in a more efficient, reliable, and coordinated direction oriented on supporting the Agency's: mission, core functions, and customer satisfaction.

## **Improvements/Achievements for Fiscal Year 2015-2016**

### DVA-Wide 2015-2016

- The DVA partnered with the Missing in America Project and area funeral homes to bury the unclaimed remains of 12 Veterans with full Military Honors in two memorial services at the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown.
- Connecticut became the first state in the nation to end chronic Veteran homelessness and became the second state to end Veterans homelessness this summer through the combined efforts of the Governor Dannel P. Malloy, Lieutenant Governor Nancy Wyman, the Department of Housing, the

US Department of Housing and Urban Development, the US Department of Veterans Affairs, the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, and other federal, state, and local partners. This does not mean there are no longer any homeless Veterans in the state but procedures are now in place to rapidly rehouse Veterans within 90 days (often much sooner) of experiencing homelessness.

- Expanded internship opportunities at DVA with Connecticut colleges and universities including the University of Connecticut, University of Saint Joseph's, Quinnipiac University, Manchester Community College, Yale University, and Northeastern University.
- Entered into Memorandum of Agreements to expand support and programs for Veterans with several Federal and state agencies including:
  - Federal Veterans Affairs for a pilot program to rapidly rehouse Veterans who are experiencing or in danger of experiencing homelessness.
  - The Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services assuming operation of the Veterans Recovery Center at the Fellowship House with continued support for our Veterans.
  - Partnered with the State Department of Labor to assign an employment specialist to hold office hours at DVA two days per week.
- Developed new training program with the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center for DVA Veteran Service Officers.
- Improved outreach and communications with website updates, on-line donation application, social media presence, and updated benefits forms on line.
- Established a permanent plaque in the Legislative Office Building's Veterans Alcove recognizing members of the Veterans Hall of Fame which was unveiled at the 2015 induction of new members ceremony.
- Expanded collaborations and partnerships with Veteran Service Organizations throughout the state and hold quarterly meetings with these organization at the DVA.

#### Office of Advocacy and Assistance 2015 – 2016

- Veteran Service Officer (VSO) training with the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center to improve service to Veterans.
- Assigned laptops and mobile phones to VSOs to increase mobility, allowing the VSOs to travel to meet with Veterans with limited mobility.
- Veterans Express Bus is now Wi-Fi enabled and operates as a mobile office for VSOs with regularly scheduled stops throughout the state.
- More than 3,000 Connecticut Veterans Wartime Service Medals were presented to Veterans this year. To date, more than 34,500 medals have been awarded with nearly 700 awarded posthumously.
- Conducted Municipal Veterans Representative training with 70 towns and cities participating. Additional training is scheduled for next fiscal year and twice a year thereafter.

### Sgt. John L. Levitow Healthcare Center 2015 – 2016

- Launched Electronic Medical Record (EMR) project that will allow for Veterans at the DVA to go paperless. Currently Veterans have separate records for the Residential Program and the HCC. Once completed in January 2017 patient records will be in one electronic database.

### Residential Programs 2015 – 2016

- The Residential Program's Patriot's Landing reached 100% occupancy for the first time. Applications for the program continue to be accepted and Veteran families approved are placed on a waiting list until an opening is available.
- 14 Veterans Residents obtained either full time or part time employment.
- One Veteran Resident passed his E-1 Electrical Licensing exam.
- Five Veteran Residents attended either community college or a state university

### Veterans Burial Services/Cemetery System 2015 – 2016

- Burial Services Office answered more than 15,500 inquiries and saved Veterans' families more than \$2,400,000 by utilizing DVA burial services.

### Safety and Security 2015 – 2016

- Teaming with Facilities Management, addressed fire alarm system requirements and upgrades.
- DVA Campus traffic pattern adjustments and line striping project for all roads and parking areas.
- Instituted a community type "policing" program through assigning Building and Grounds Patrol Officers to roving vehicular and foot patrols.
- Conducted multiple fire alarm drills throughout the Campus.
- Conducted numerous inspections for safety and security concerns reported by users of the facilities.
- Officers supported daily operations 24 hours a day and seven days a week with critical responses daily for assistance, fire/security alarms, special transportation requests, missing persons, and other safety policy violations.

### Facilities Management 2015 – 2016

- Significant construction and improvements were completed in 2016 on the Middletown Cemetery to include: A 3,000 niche columbarium for the interment of cremated remains, improvements to parking areas, sidewalks and landscaping, the installation of a grave locator kiosk and repairs to the administrative building. These improvements were funded with a nearly \$ 3,000,000.00 grant from the National Cemetery Administration and will extend the availability of the facility for an additional 20 years.
- Completed removed two 30,000 gallon underground storage tanks formerly used to hold fuel oil for the Campus' four central boilers.

- Completed painting and curtain replacement in the Main Dining Room.
- Began design phase of a campus wide fire alarm upgrade and sprinkler installation in the main dining room.
- Brought to construction phase the replacement of an almost 50-year old 500 kw generator with a 1000kw generator meeting current electrical and fire codes for a health care environment.
- Repaired and replaced fire hydrants after several became inoperable due to age and environmental impacts.
- Provided transportation services for resident Veterans to medical appointments, and activities with a total ridership for the year estimated at 5,200.

#### Information Technology 2015 – 2016

- Designed, installed and activated an online donation option.
- Installed a Kiosk at the Middletown Veterans Cemetery to provide gravesite location services to visitors.
- Updated the look and features of the DVA website.
- Installed and upgraded network fiber on campus enabling connectivity to the Nutmeg network increasing MAN bandwidth by 5 times and providing a substantial cost savings.
- Completed moving file storage to a centrally supported location, increasing capacity and access speed.
- Continued the Electronic Medical Records project meeting goals ahead of schedule with completion anticipated for July 2017.
- Staged forms Veterans regularly use in online formats ready to go live in September 2016.
- Installed mobile computers, phones, and printing capabilities in the Agency's Veteran Express Bus.

### **Information Reported as Required by State Statute**

Veterans requesting care from the DVA 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](http://www.ct.gov/ctva).

#### **Human Resources**

The Human Resources department provides support and assistance to employees. This includes recruitment, staffing and personnel transactions such as position vacancies, employee leaves, retirement, Family and Medical Leave Act, 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 DVA'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 DVA is strongly committed to 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 DVA continues to monitor and improve its practices in employment and contracting, giving special consideration to affirmative action goal attainment.

## **Fiscal Updates**

Our Fiscal Office continues to work with departments within the agency to achieve reductions and savings in FY16, as it was a fiscally challenging year. The DVA continues to innovate strategic service models to meet the challenges of budget constraints and reductions in both Operating Expenses and Personal Services, both of which were reduced in FY16. The DVA closed FY16 with a balanced budget across all appropriated fund categories.

## **Special Events**

Veterans Hall of Fame- Since its inception in 2005, we have received over 100 nominations annually for this award that recognizes Veterans who no longer wear the uniform but continue their selfless service to their communities. Nomination packets must be submitted to the DVA by September 23<sup>rd</sup> at 4:00 p.m. to be considered for the honor. Visit our site for an application and for nomination qualifications: [www.ct.gov/ctva](http://www.ct.gov/ctva).

Connecticut State Veterans Memorial Dedication- the DVA was a part of the grand opening of the first state-wide Veterans Memorial.

"Heroes for Hire" – The DVA continues to partner with the Department of Labor in organizing and supporting Veteran job fairs around the state in an effort to match qualified Veterans with businesses and organizations interested in hiring them.

Platform to Employment- the WorkPlace's "Platform to Employment" Training Program was held on the DVA Campus exclusively for Veterans. Eight Veteran residents from the DVA Campus and ten Veterans from the community attended a Kick Off/Orientation ceremony on Thursday, May 5, 2016, with the official training starting on Friday, May 06, 2016. Veteran participants were provided laptop computers, instruction in resume writing, cover letter development, job application completion, mock interviews and many more valuable tools to be successful in their job search efforts. The training was completed in five weeks, with graduation taking place on Thursday, June 2, 2016. At graduation, two Veterans had already obtained employment.

Veterans Day Ceremony- the DVA held a ceremony on campus for Veterans residing on the campus that brought state and local officials out to celebrate Veterans.

## **Volunteer Services**

Volunteers logged over 5,475 hours in support of activities at the DVA. Volunteers are comprised of individuals who volunteer their time with Veterans on campus, as well as community groups who come in to complete specific projects on the grounds of the DVA to include the three Veteran cemeteries.

This program is expanding in the coming year (2016-2017) with Volunteer Services becoming more formalized. The procurement and implementation of an on-line, web-based Volunteer computer program will allow Volunteers access to the system from computers on campus as well as personal home computers. Volunteers will be able to view the areas at the DVA as well as times Volunteers are needed and schedule their own hours. The system will track volunteer hours and allow volunteers to communicate with DVA staff and be more readily updated with upcoming events and news.

Stand Down 2016: A state-wide outreach held at the DVA campus providing services to Veterans in need. Last year's event was another success with more than 1,000 Veterans in attendance. Over 50 state, federal and private agencies attended and provided assistance and resource information to Veterans in need. In addition, there were over 200 volunteers supporting the event along with numerous monetary and in-kind donations.