



Department of Veterans Affairs

Fiscal Year 2020-2021



Thomas J. Saadi
Commissioner

At a Glance

Commissioner: Thomas J. Saadi

Established: 1986

Statutory Authority: C.G.S. Chapter 506 Sec. 27-102I - 27-137

Central Office: 287 West Street, Rocky Hill, CT 06067

Number of Full-Time Employees: 201

Recurring Operating Expenses 2020-2021: \$26,152,326

Agency Generated Revenue 2020-2021: \$19,248,681

Organizational Structure: Executive Branch State Agency- Office of the Commissioner oversees all aspects of the agency which has the four core function areas of Long-Term Skilled Nursing Healthcare, Residential Programs & Services, Office of Advocacy & Assistance and Cemetery and Memorial Services. These four core functions are supported by additional agency divisions as follows: Projects & Operations, Facilities, Food Services, Human Resources, Fiscal and Procurement, Safety and Security, and Intergovernmental and Community Affairs. Each division has a manager who reports directly to the Commissioner.

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 is currently 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 healthcare 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 1986. Today the DVA provides Connecticut's nearly 180,000 Veterans with four core services: (1) Skilled Nursing Healthcare Center, (2) Residential Facility with Rehabilitative Programs and Services, (3) Cemetery and Memorial Services with cemeteries in Darien, Rocky Hill, and the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown; and (4) Office of Advocacy and Assistance with Veteran Service Officers located in each Congressional District to help Veterans navigate services and benefits they have earned.

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 under federal, state, and local laws; skilled nursing 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 agency. 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, healthcare 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 180,000 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 (VSO) are accredited by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and assist Veterans and their families with documentation and filing of claims for disability, compensation and/or pension. OA&A offices are located in each of the five Congressional Districts with offices in Bridgeport, Waterbury, Milford, Newington, and Norwich and include bilingual staff and female VSOs.

Additionally, advocacy work is performed throughout the state on a staff available, rotating basis at satellite office locations and through numerous jobs, senior and health fairs throughout the state. DVA VSOs also conduct interviews in skilled nursing facilities and Stand Down events and in response to referrals throughout the state and ascertain the type and level of assistance and representation those Veterans need in order to apply for and obtain the benefits to which they are entitled.

Sgt. John L. Levitow Healthcare Center

The Healthcare Center provides continuous professional comprehensive healthcare to Veteran Patients requiring twenty-four hour nursing care. An individual Plan of Care is developed and continually updated throughout the Veteran Patient's stay to ensure that quality healthcare services are provided to assist the Veteran Patient reach his/her maximum potential. In addition, the focus is on patient centered care whereby the Veteran's preferences are honored and reflected in the plan of care.

Healthcare Center Program Descriptions:

The Veterans' Healthcare program is a major element of the agency's operations. The program offers progressive care including social, recreational and rehabilitative services dedicated to professional excellence. The Healthcare 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 Healthcare Center is licensed by the State of Connecticut Department of Public Health as a 125-bed Skilled Nursing Facility. The Healthcare Center opened the doors to its current brand new, state-of-the-art facility to the growing Veteran Patient community in 2008. Under the direction of the Healthcare Services Administrator, the medical, nursing, spiritual and rehabilitation professionals provide ongoing patient-centered care to Veterans.

The Healthcare Center offers twenty-four hour quality healthcare to Veteran Patients who require skilled nursing care. We treat a wide array of diagnoses including, 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, and End of Life and Palliative Care. The Healthcare Center's medical team consists of Board Certified Physicians and Advanced Practice Registered Nurses who specialize in caring for Veterans who present with multiple complex conditions.

The Rehabilitation Program offers physical, speech, and occupational therapy where Veterans can increase strengthening and physical function under the supervision of professionals. The rehab program also contributes to increased quality in their overall mental health and well-being. The gym is well equipped and features large windows and a beautiful view of the picturesque campus.

The End of Life program 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 Patient at end of life. A wide range of support and counseling services are available for Veteran Patients and their loved ones.

To be eligible for admittance, a Veteran requesting care at the John L. Levitow Healthcare Center must be a resident of the State of Connecticut and have served honorably. Applications for admission

are required in advance and contain both a financial and medical component. Applicants are screened in accordance with state and federal guidelines as well as DVA policies.

Residential Facility

The Residential Facility is available to Veterans seeking assistance to improve their overall quality of life after having suffered from the grave effects of being homeless, unemployed and challenged with addiction, medical and mental health problems. Veteran Residents have the opportunity to utilize a continuum of rehabilitation services which include shelter, food, an initial issuance of basic clothing and essential personal products, social work, clinic services, recreation, compensated work therapy program, vocational training, 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 also provided by (DMHAS) through a Memorandum of Understanding. Collaboration with our federal and state partners, as well as local non-profits ensures Veteran Residents have access to any and all benefits and services for which they are eligible. Individualized goals are established with regular follow up to ensure the greatest success possible in preparing Veteran Residents to return to independent living. For the 2020-2021 fiscal year, 13 Veteran Residents were admitted, and 15 Veteran Residents successfully discharged back into the community. The average daily census for 2020-2021 was 109.60 (Residential Facility and Patriot's Landing combined) and 105.15 (for the Residential Facility only).

Veterans Cemetery and Memorial Services

The Department operates a full-time Cemetery and Memorial Services Office at the DVA Rocky Hill Campus which operates three state Veterans cemeteries.

The Cemetery and Memorial Services 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 DVA Veteran 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 12,884 remains of Connecticut Veterans. The Col. Raymond Gates Cemetery is reserved for the burials of Veterans residing at the DVA Residential Facility and Healthcare Center. The Spring Grove Cemetery closed for interments in 1980.

Public Service

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 (VSOs), 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 female VSOs. 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.

In Fiscal Year 2020-2021, OA&A continued its advocacy work despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The OA&A team shifted to a remote environment fielding all requests for service via email, telephone, and video conference if necessary, without a degradation in services. Additionally, the Office of Advocacy and Assistance started a Virtual Outreach Town Hall due to no in-person events and appointments being performed for most of this period. The virtual outreach enabled CT DVA to stay connected with the Veteran community through monthly sessions with topics ranging from CT DVA services to federal providers like the Small Business Administration and the US Dept. of Veterans Affairs. These advocacy and outreach efforts resulted in over \$2.6 million in new income and benefits to Connecticut Veterans and their families.

In Fiscal Year 2020-2021, the Office of Advocacy and Assistance also reviewed the eligibility status of more than 1000 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 also manages the Connecticut Wartime Service Medals and Registry program and this year awarded over 712 additional medals – bringing the total number of Wartime Service Medals awarded to eligible Veterans since 2006 to over 40,000 recipients.

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 with 1681 applications processed during this period. Since the inception of the program in January 2013, more than 13,000 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 148 towns have appointed a Veteran's representative and over 250 volunteers have completed a benefits training seminar since the training was first offered in October 2012.

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.

Residential Facility Programs/Services

New or Revised Policies

- Veteran Residential Facility Policy Omnibus Update effective September 4, 2020.
- Temporary Residential Inspections Policy updated October 16, 2020.
- Veteran Resident Transportation Policy updated March 13, 2021, which addresses transportation needs of Veterans on the DVA Campus in Rocky Hill.

- Personal Property Policy for Veteran Residents updated March 31, 2021, which details permitted and prohibited items on Campus.
- COVID-19 Residential Isolation Procedures updated effective June 21, 2021, which provides detailed process to follow for residents placed in Isolation.
- Health and Safety Protocols to Mitigate Risk of Exposure to COVID-19, initially issued on March 12, 2020 with various revisions made during the COVID-19 pandemic with the latest updated revisions completed July 13, 2021.
- Marijuana Policy effective date July 1, 2021 providing the use and possession of marijuana in any form is prohibited on campus.

Vocational & Educational Services

- 6 Veterans Residents from the Residential Facility obtained full or part-time community gainful employment
- 2 Veteran Residents from the Residential Facility attended college degree programs – one completed his Bachelor’s Degree in December 2020
- 1 Veteran Resident attended a technical school training program – Porter & Chester HVAC program
- 4 Veteran Residents discharged to the community with full or part- time employment

The Vocational Department continues to make referrals for Resident Veterans to receive employment readiness and job search assistance from our community partners at the CT Department of Labor and Easter Seals Veterans Rally Point.

The Vocational Department continues to provide transportation services to Veteran Residents to assist them in commuting to work, attending college or other training program, court appointments, probation appointments and housing appointments.

During the fiscal year, the impact of the pandemic on society as a whole created some difficult challenges for those Veteran Residents who were enrolled in school, who were employed and out of work for a time, and those seeking employment. The Vocational Department continued to provide support and guidance to the Veteran Residents to achieve their educational and vocational goals. Support and guidance were also provided to those who were employed to assist them in maintaining their current employment.

Veteran Vocational & Therapeutic Program

The Veteran Vocational & Therapeutic Program (VVTP) had 35 participants for the 2020-2021 fiscal year. VVTP is designed to address the needs of the diverse Veteran Resident population residing at the Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) Residential Facility. The Vocational component is designed to assess a Veteran Resident's ability to return to gainful community-based employment, improve basic work skills, and to assist them in transitioning to independent living in the community. The Therapeutic component is intended to assist Veteran Residents not planning to return to gainful employment an opportunity to engage in purposeful activity for social and therapeutic purposes as they plan to return to independent living.

Time Limits: Veteran Residents participating in the Veteran Vocational & Therapeutic Program (VVTP) will have a maximum of twenty four (24) months participation.

If at the end of a twelve (12) month period, a Veteran Participant has not found outside employment and wishes to continue with the VVTP, the Veteran Participant must provide the following:

- Documentation of a “good faith effort” in the pursuit of finding outside employment at regular intervals;
- Documented attendance at employment skills classes, such as resume writing or computer training;
- Be compliant with either IEP or IAP;
- Be compliant with any other recommended courses of action as directed by the Residential Facility Director or designee; and
- Be compliant with monthly Residential Facility program fees.

After twelve months VVTP Participants who are in compliance with the above can apply for an additional twelve (12) months of program participation. An initial extension request shall be subject to review and approval by the Residential Facility Director or designee.

Extended Program Participation: In circumstances where a Veteran Participant has been unable to secure lasting and sustainable community based employment at the end of their twenty four (24) months of participation, due to circumstances beyond Resident Veteran’s control including, but not limited to:

- Past criminal convictions;
- Age limitations;
- Medical, Mental Health or Physical limitations, and wishes to continue with the VVTP, the Resident Participant may request consideration for Extended Program Participation (EPP).

Veteran Participant may be eligible for Extended Program Participation (EPP). The EPP allows the Veteran Resident to continue to perform basic moderate vocational activities, to improve their economic situation and to continue to engage in purposeful activity for social and therapeutic purposes.

The request for EPP participation will be reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Treatment Team which will make a recommendation to the Residential Facility Director. The Residential Facility Director will take the recommendation to the Commissioner or designee thereof, for review. The Commissioner or designee may waive the 24 month period and allow the Veteran Participant to continue under the EPP.

Continued Extended Program Participation will be reviewed quarterly by the Interdisciplinary Treatment Team to determine continued participation.

Hours of Participation: The maximum number of hours bi-weekly for participants under the VVTP is set at sixty (60) hours with no more than six (6) hours per day.

The maximum number of hours bi-weekly for participants under the Extended Program Participation is set at forty (40) hours with no more than four (4) hours per day.

Substance Abuse Treatment/Recovery Support:

Through a Memorandum of Understanding between the Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs and The Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services (DMHAS), substance abuse treatment and recovery support has continued to be provided to Veteran Residents residing at the

Residential Facility. The Veteran's Recovery Center provides Outpatient programming and various outpatient services to DVA Veterans as well as to CT Veterans and National Guard members in the community. The program is staffed by a Clinical Psychologist, one Substance Abuse Counselor, and one Secretary. In 2020-2021 fiscal year, 48 clients were served, of which 18 were DVA Veteran Residents, and 30 National Guard Service Members.

Patriots' Landing Temporary Housing Program (Veteran Families):

The Patriots' Landing Program has been in operation since 2014. This program offers temporary housing to Veterans and their families who are homeless or at risk for homelessness. The Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs provides physical housing for up to five Veteran families. All five houses are fully furnished, and maintenance and utilities are covered by the agency. Residential Facility staff work collaboratively with a Program and Case Manager provided through a Memorandum of Agreement with the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS). Case management services ensure that each Veteran family obtains the necessary benefits and services needed to successfully transition to permanent housing. For 2020-2021 fiscal year, we had 4 discharges to independent living and 5 admissions to the program with the average occupancy rate for Patriots' Landing during this period of 87.41.

Cemetery and Memorial Services Office

The State Veterans' Cemetery in Middletown is open for burials six days a week and contains nearly 11,500 remains of Connecticut Veterans. The Col. Raymond Gates Cemetery has more than 1600 Veterans interred on its grounds. The Spring Grove Cemetery closed for interments in 1980.

From July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021, 770 interments were performed at Connecticut State Veterans Cemeteries.

Improvements/Achievements for Fiscal Year 2020-2021

DVA-Wide 2020-2021

- The DVA began a self-help program in 2019 to improve the quality of life (QOL) in the Residential Program. This Residential QOL Program focused on configuring living spaces to semi-private living quarters from four beds to a room to two beds separated by a T wall. The program is also improving common spaces with enhanced cleaning and painting. As the COVID-19 pandemic arrived at the DVA, this program became critical to complete. The work continued during this fiscal year to a point where now approximately 78 beds are in this new semi-private configuration. The DVA will continue this effort in the Fall of 2021 with completion of all residential wings anticipated by Winter 2022.
- The DVA Residential QOL program is also improving the safety and appearance of other areas of the residential complex. The DVA auditorium is receiving upgrades which will enhance its flexibility as a multi-purpose center. Upgrades in progress are the following: new curtains, hardwood floor repairs and refinishing, new lighting, painting, and ADA accessibility improvements. Completion of all improvements to the auditorium is scheduled for Fall 2021.
- To improve accessibility to all Veteran Residents, Staff and Guests to the Residential Facilities, the DVA received a 65% grant of \$1,617,000 in Federal funding from the U.S. VA State Home

Construction Grant Program. The grant purpose was to upgrade the Residential Buildings 2, 3 and 4 consistent with the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA). The project timeline fell directly in the pathway of the COVID-19 pandemic. The contractor continued to execute without interruption during the pandemic, finishing this project on time in February 2021.

- As part of the continued effort to improve safety campus wide, the DVA completed a campus-wide fire alarm upgrade project and sprinkler installation in the Residential Facility Main Dining Room. This project was made possible through more than \$2,000,000 in federal funds from the U.S. Veterans Administration State Home Construction Grant Program.
- At the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown, the DVA completed two major projects: 1) all existing headstones were raised, realigned, and cleaned, and 2) the cemetery burial capacity was expanded within current boundaries to preserve burial options for Veterans for the next decade or more. These projects totaling \$8,628,989 were 100% federally funded by the U.S. Veterans Administration National Cemetery Administration.
- The DVA Cemetery and Memorial Services Program continued to work on executing its comprehensive master plan that was completed in March of 2019. This plan focuses on the capacity of current cemeteries in Middletown and Rocky Hill. This master plan revealed a window of 10-12 years of burial services availability. If burial services increase, this window will close sooner at possibly 8 – 10 years. The DVA is now actively looking at options disclosed in this master plan to increase the cemetery capacity so that it may serve Connecticut's more than 180,000 Veterans and spouses for at least the next 50 years.
- Public Act 21-79 directs the DVA to establish a Qualifying Review Board (which the DVA is administratively referring to as the Eligibility Qualifying Review Board "EQRB") for the purpose of restoring eligibility for State Veterans Benefits to Veterans who have an Other-Than-Honorable (OTH) characterization of discharge due to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Military Sexual Trauma (MST), Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Gender Expression. The DVA is in the process of setting up the board, procedures and processes to follow. The EQRB is expected to be established by October 1, 2021.

Office of Advocacy and Assistance 2020-2021

- OA&A shifted to remote environment to support the 185,000 Veterans in CT
- As of July 2021, in-person events have resumed; district offices have resumed in person meetings
- More than 712 Connecticut Veterans Wartime Service Medals were issued this year totaling more than 40,000 medals awarded since 2006.

Veterans Cemetery and Memorial Services 2020-2021

- Burial Services Office answered more than 7,100 inquiries and saved Veterans' families more than \$2,000,000 by utilizing DVA burial services.
- Burial Services Office collected \$492,195 in federal reimbursement burial allowances for the General Fund. Also, installation payments for over 2,100 federal Veteran headstones/foot markers were processed totaling \$210,000.
- Burial Services continued to support dignified burial services six days a week at our State's two active Veterans' cemeteries.

Safety and Security 2020-2021

- Conducted several fire drills throughout the agency.
- Conducted in-service training for all employees.
- Supported Middletown cemetery for multiple events by assisting with parking detail.
- All Officers trained on the administration of Naloxone (Narcan) have been recertified.
- All expired Narcan boxes have been replaced in East and West Barracks, as well as in the security vehicles medical bags.
- Restocked Medical Emergency Response Bags. Locations: All security vehicles, Security HQ, Security Gate House, Administration Building.
- Part-time Building and Grounds Patrol Officer hired into Full-time position; Building and Grounds Patrol Officer was promoted into a Building and Grounds Lead Patrol Officer Position; Building and Grounds Lead Patrol Officer was hired into a Special Investigator Position.
- Submitted for two full-time Building and Grounds Patrol Officers and one part-time Building and Grounds Patrol Officer; posted an Operator Position.
- Reinstalled Facility Use Request Form
- Worked alongside Legal and the Physical Plant Department to update the Respiratory Protection Program Policy to be compliant with OSHA.
- Obtained an Emergency Equipment Locker, equipped with flashlights, walkie talkies, batteries, flip phones, glow stick, security road vest, etc.
- Used the Nuclear Safety Emergency Fund Grant to purchase the Safety and Security Department new Radios and two Utility Terrain Vehicles.
- Assessment of the Radio Equipment performed by Utility Communications.
- Began the process to update the Securities SOP.
- Officers completed Bloodborne Pathogen Training, First Aid Training, CPR Training, and AED Training.
- Assisted in reinstating the Threat Assessment Team for the Agency.
- Continued our frontline work through the COVID-19 pandemic and were available for assistance for all security needs across campus.

Projects and Operations Management 2020-2021

The DVA Projects and Operations Division staffs the following agency disciplines: emergency management, facilities maintenance, building services, transportation, environmental management, strategic planning, information technology, energy efficiency and project management with the collective responsibility for three state Veteran cemeteries and a 92 acre campus with approximately 800,000 square feet of facilities. Projects and Operations functions to synchronize and coordinate these functions to support the DVA's mission, core functions, and customer satisfaction.

Projects and Operations Management Accomplishments for 2020-2021

- Managed the emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic impact on DVA operations and Veteran residential environments. Instituted operational measures to provide the best possible protection to Veterans and staff during the first two phases of maximum infectivity of the virus.
- Completed an annual update to a comprehensive Emergency Preparedness Program and Plan covering community risks to the operating environment. This plan was essential to maintaining the DVA on a focused common path in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, all Facilities Branch Staff continued to render support

services to the Veterans and staff. Transportation, repairs, maintenance, power generation, and many more support services were rendered without interruption. Facilities Branch also established and operated two COVID-19 quarantine and isolation wings set up in the Skilled Nursing Facility and Residential Facility.

- The entire Operations Management Staff responded to, mitigated, and completely restored DVA operations following Tropical Storm Isaias in August of 2020. The entire campus was impacted by high winds knocking down major power distribution lines to the main campus. Power was out for more than 7 days. Trees fell on facilities and cars.
- Information Technology Branch supported DVA Operations during the COVID-19 pandemic with information technology updates including early adoption of the virtual telework environment. All current computer assets were upgraded to Windows 10® and ensured telehealth connectivity was established and maintained. Lastly, this branch supported all information technology environments with 24/7 response to every issue related to connectivity or program use.
- The Information Technology Branch is also in the process of a self-help project to upgrade all Wi-Fi platforms throughout the Main Campus. The Sgt John L. Levitow Healthcare Center upgrades were completed. The Residential Facility is in progress with anticipated completion in Fall 2021. The upgraded wiring and wide area platforms will improve the quality of life for Veteran Residents by improving access to web based environments.

Information Technology Accomplishments for 2020-2021

- Upgraded all desktop and laptop computer devices to the Windows 10® platform
- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, DVA staff began to operate in Microsoft Teams and Office environments allowing a smooth transition for staff to telework and maintain communications in support of operations
- Maintained the electronic medical records system to improve clinical service delivery to residents
- Continued improvements and updating of the DVA website to better inform Veterans and their families
- Continued improving one of the best Veterans “Apps” which provides fingertip access to vital services for Veterans and those wanting to support Veterans

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.portal.ct.gov/DVA.

Human Resources

The Human Resources (HR) Department has been centralized with DAS with a Human Resources Business Partner and Human Resources Generalist assigned to the DVA and located on the DVA Campus in Rocky Hill. The HR Department provides support and assistance to employees. This includes recruitment, staffing, ergonomic assessments, ADA accommodations and staff transactions such as management of all position actions in CORE- CT. The HR 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 annually, however due to staff retirements and human resources restructuring, the DVA did not file a formal plan this year. However, the DVA is working closely with DAS Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity staff to ensure compliance with both the letter and spirit of Affirmative Action and to submit a formal plan next year to 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 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

Fiscal Office continues working with agency departments to prioritize expenditures to conservatively manage budgeted funds while meeting the challenges of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The DVA's FY21 Operating Expenses (OE) increased 6% and Personal Services (PS) increased 5% compared to FY 20 expenditures.

DVA continues to be innovative applying a fiscally strategic service model to meet the challenges of budget constraints by employing a fiscally conservative approach to managing our bottom line and to meet our core mission of "*Serving Those Who Served.*"

Special Events

Stand Down 2021 - Stand Down is the DVA's signature event bringing together federal and state agencies, community providers, Veteran service organizations providing medical screenings, employment and education assistance, legal and motor vehicle help, Veterans benefits information, and housing referrals. Stand Down 2021 will be the second year in a row using a new approach. The new platform is a three-day event with virtual informational sessions held on the first two days and in-person sessions at five regional locations (Bridgeport, Danbury, Rocky Hill, Norwich and Willimantic) on the third day, where personal needs items will be distributed and Veteran services available. The event in 2020 was widely attended with more than 600 attending both the in-person and digital sessions. The feedback was very positive on the new platform.

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. 41 nominations have been submitted for 2020's inductee ceremony, which is scheduled for July 29, 2021. 2021's inductee ceremony will be scheduled for December 2021.

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. Ceremony will continue this year, Nov. 11th.

Vietnam & Korean Veteran Ceremonies – The DVA in conjunction with the Lieutenant Governor's office have been traveling the state honoring Vietnam & Korean Veterans weekly. Vietnam Veterans are presented with the Vietnam Veteran Pin. These events will continue throughout the next fiscal year

as well. Korean Veterans on campus were also honored with a special ceremony with the Ambassador of the Republic of Korea in attendance.

Volunteer Services

Volunteers continued to log several hours prior to the pandemic in support of Veterans Home activities. Volunteers are comprised of individuals who volunteer their time with Veterans on campus, as well as community groups who come to complete specific projects on the grounds of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Stand Down, the DVA's yearly statewide outreach event, is conducted with the assistance of multiple volunteers. Volunteers are currently being welcomed back on campus after the pandemic.

Community Partnerships

Saluting Branches – Arborists from around the east coast spent the day at the Middletown Veterans Cemetery providing approximately \$100,000.00 worth of in-kind services from cutting down trees, grinding and removing tree stumps, trimming trees and hedges, planting new trees, etc. Plans had been on hold for 2020 due to COVID-19, however they will be working on the DVA campus in Rocky Hill in September 2021 taking care of tree/shrub needs.

Giving Days – Companies and organizations from across CT consistently provide a day of service on the grounds of DVA and at the Middletown and Rocky Hill Veteran Cemeteries. This service consists of grounds work, weeding, planting flowers, trimming grass and hedges, cleaning up fallen debris, painting and assisting with basic administrative duties such as filing, storing old document, purging documents to be sent to storage or destroyed. These services are priceless and enhance the quality of life and appearance of our grounds for Veterans on the DVA campus and those utilizing the State Veterans Cemeteries. Current Giving Days have begun with our first organization being the Boy Scouts out of Rocky Hill doing a wonderful job landscaping around the monument located in front of DVA.

Donations – Community partners continue to donate funding and personal needs items for Veterans on campus. During the pandemic, donations of face masks (surgical and handmade), bottled water, coffee, beverages, snacks, toiletries, electronics and various other needed items have been provided.