

# Department of Veterans' Affairs

## *At a Glance*

**DR. LINDA SPOONSTER SCHWARTZ, Commissioner**

**Joseph T. Perkins, Deputy 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 - 239**

**Recurring operating expenses – 2013-14 - \$28,568,369**

**Agency generated revenue 2013-14 - \$33,464,399**

## **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 275,000 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 2000 walk-in veterans and/or dependents; answered over 10,000 telephone inquiries; acquired 1,200 new clients and filed 909 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 \$4.5 million in new income and benefits to Connecticut veterans and their families.

In Fiscal Year 2013-2014, 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 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 2,000 additional medals – bringing to 30,454 the total number of Wartime Service Medals awarded to eligible veterans since 2006. Additionally, 486 Posthumous Medals were awarded during the Fiscal Year. The agency has helped coordinate and support over 80 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 10,000 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 115 towns have appointed a veteran's representative and nearly 100 have completed a benefits training seminar.

The Connecticut Veterans INFO line (1-866-9CT-VETS) continues to receive an average of 25 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 Healthcare 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 healthcare services are provided to assist the veteran reach his/her maximum potential. The Healthcare Center provides a complete array of services as identified below.

### *Program Descriptions*

The Veterans' Healthcare 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 Healthcare program 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 Healthcare 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 of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) offers twenty-four hour quality healthcare 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 Healthcare 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 healthcare management and primary care clinics for all veterans at the Healthcare Center clinic 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 Respite Care Program is intermittent care designed to provide occasional periods of relief to the family member or caregiver of the disabled. Veterans are eligible for 28 days of respite care per calendar year. During the past year this program served 23 veterans and their families.

End of Life and Palliative Care provides special medical, psychological and spiritual needs 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 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 ninety (190) veterans were admitted to the Health Care Center in 2013-2014. That number included nineteen (19) new admissions, one hundred and thirty nine (139) readmissions and thirty-two (32) veterans admitted from the Residential Facility.

### **Recovery Support Program**

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 75 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 three (3) months of intensive substance abuse recovery programs followed by nine (9) months of additional residential support. The Recovery Support Program 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. A total of 45 veterans took part in this program in the last fiscal year. Veterans admitted to this service that successfully completed the program, remains at 80% or better.

### **Residential Facility**

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 2012/13 fiscal year, 61 veterans were admitted and 37 veterans successfully completed the program and returned to independent living in the community. The average daily census for 2012/2013 was 281 veterans.

## **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 16,500 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 \$2,100,478 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 9,352 remains of Connecticut veterans. The Spring Grove Cemetery closed for internments in 1964.

From July 1, 2013 through June 30, 2014, 596 internments were performed at Connecticut State Veterans' Cemeteries. During the same period, the Burial Services Office collected \$184,866 in federal reimbursement burial allowances for the General Fund. Also, installation payments for 2,753 federal veteran headstones/foot markers were processed totaling \$272,780.

## **Improvements/Achievements 2013-14**

- 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. During the summer of 2012, 3 veterans attended educational programs, 11 attended in the fall of 2013 and 15 attended in the spring of 2013. There were 18 veterans enrolled in degree based educational programs at the local state community colleges or universities. One veteran completed certificate training from the Advocacy Unlimited Recovery Support Program; one successfully graduated from technical school as a Licensed Practical Nurse Program; and two veterans were enrolled in Adult Education Services from literacy and basic skills instruction.

During the 2012/2013 fiscal year, 5 veterans in the Residential Facility successfully obtained gainful employment in the following career areas: Nurse Aide, truck driver, manufacturing, customer service and food service.

- The Department of Veterans' Affairs continues to support a Veteran Color Guard Group. The Color Guard participates in events hosted by local towns and cities such as Veteran Day Parades, Memorial Day Ceremonies and local funding raising events. This group is organized and supervised by the Residential Staff and consists of a total of six to eight veterans at any given time.
- 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 \$4,830 for FY13/14.

### **Planning Division:**

The agency planning division works closely with the Commissioner and the entire management team in the short-term and long range goals of the agency, and identifying strategies for implementing improvements. Recent such improvements include the study of nurse staffing and the implementation of recommendations with positive fiscal outcome for the agency.

- **Electronic Health Records**

The planning division continued work with the information technology section in implementing its strategic plan of modernizing the agency's computer network infrastructure. Initial planning has begun in identifying strategies for acquiring electronic health records.

- **Domicile Renovation**

Work is ongoing in the renovation of the Domicile complex – new roof, HVAC, sprinklers, and handicap accessible bathrooms. The bi-weekly meetings with DCS project managers and the contractors continue to be beneficial to the agency in monitoring the progress of the projects and ensuring that they are being carried out cost-effectively.

- **Energy Cost Savings**

The agency continued to participate in the State's Energy Demand Response program in collaboration with the Office of Policy and Management and the Dept. of Energy and Environment Protection. Whenever a Demand Response event is dispatched this program enables the agency to implement its energy use reduction plan involving a combination of actual energy use curtailment by staff as well as the use of emergency generator. The emergency generator enables the agency to switch electricity supply to some of the buildings off of the public electric grid system. The agency accumulates energy efficiency fund at OPM (currently at \$25,173.48) which can be requested for energy improvement projects.

Upgraded DVA Lighting for Energy Conservation completed in 2009 - The post installation report presented to DVA by DPW shows that the estimated energy savings is \$1,016,592.80 over the lifetime (10 years) of the fixtures. Estimated reduced oil consumption is 37,216.7 gallons per year. It was further documented that estimated Power Plant Emissions would be:

CO2 (a "greenhouse" gas) = 629,447.12 lbs/Year  
 SO2 (a cause of acid rain) = 447.68 lbs/Year  
 NOx (a cause of acid rain) = 388.35 lbs/Year

Efforts are also ongoing to consolidate space use in appropriate buildings and thereby reducing energy use.

**Medical Gas Delivery System:** A new automatic medical gas delivery system has been installed in the healthcare center. This new system replaced the need for manual hauling of oxygen tanks between buildings on the campus. It has also enhanced safety and contributing in eliminating overtime in the cardiopulmonary department.

### **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.
- **Stand Down 2013**, which is a state-wide outreach event providing services to homeless and needy veterans, was another success. More than 900 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 in-kind donations. Stand Down 2014 is scheduled for Friday, September 12, 2014.

### **Safety and Security Department Accomplishments for 2013-14**

The Commissioner of Veterans' Affairs continues to implement a comprehensive, wide-range effort to upgrade safety and security problems, and to improve the general condition of the Rocky Hill facility.

In order to meet the Commissioner's effort to upgrade the safety and security posture, the following have been implemented:

- Implement an accountability system (ID Cards with bar code reader) for the Healthcare Center patients.
- Created a more robust system for managing and investigating theft in the HCF
- 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

- The telecommunication department now falls under the safety and security program
- Upgraded the security uniform
- Implement a system for visitors accountability, tracking and sign in and out procedure
- Utilizing the Department of Probation to conduct training of our Officer and, also their attendance in such training as Crisis Intervention, Officer Awareness Safety program and Use of Force Training.
- Coordinate 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
- Created two video conferencing unit with more to follow

### **Agency Administrated Projects**

#### **Residential Area**

- Upgrading the lighting, lowering the ceilings, replacing the floor tiles, replacing windows, upgrading the heating, A/C and painting in the Residential Facility.
- Installation of air conditioning of residential domicile areas is 50% complete.
- Renovations of the softball field completed.
- Phase I Renovations of the Winner's Circle complete.

#### **Fiscal Updates**

FY14 was a fiscally challenging year at both the State and Agency level. The DVA's Operating Expenses (OE) continued to be reduced and Personal Services (PS) appropriation remained at the same level despite the statewide wage increases. DVA continues to accept the challenges of fiscal budget constraints by employing a fiscally conservative model/approach to managing our bottom line. The agency implemented a plan for expenditure control/monitoring of the OE and PS budgets – cost savings were achieved through monitoring the fuel/energy costs, implementing budgetary/ cost saving measures at the departmental level, streamlining/ reorganization of services internally, and generating offsetting revenue streams. All contracts and purchasing requisitions were reviewed to be consistent with the actual needs of our veterans at Rocky Hill. The Agency closed FY14 after completing its ninth (9th) 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](http://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.