

GUIDE TO

MINNESOTA

*Department of
Veterans Affairs*

1999

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November 1998

Department of Veterans Affairs

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STATE OF MINNESOTA

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
130 STATE CAPITOL
SAINT PAUL 55155

ARNE H. CARLSON
GOVERNOR

To the Incoming Administration:

Welcome to state government and the Department of Veterans Affairs. As you begin your administration many challenges will be on your agenda. Among the most important will be providing services to Minnesota's 450,000 veterans and their family members. Totalling over one million persons, this is one of the largest constituencies in the state. During the past eight years I have had many meetings with the veterans service organizations representing these people who have taken time from their lives to serve in the armed forces in support of their state and country. We have worked in concert to promote many programs which serve these veterans.

Among our accomplishments:

- Signing of legislation calling upon Congress to stop the desecration of the United States flag.
- Supported and signed legislation which includes \$75,000 for grants to County Veterans Service Officers to improve the efficiency and services provided to Minnesota's veterans and their families.
- Supplemental funding of \$146,000 was approved for the department's State Soldiers Assistance Program. This program provides a safety net of food, shelter, utility payments, and, in some cases, preventive medical care during times of temporary disability and financial need.
- A State Veterans Cemetery was authorized and funded in the amount of \$251,000.
- Minneapolis Veterans Home capital improvement bill approved funding of \$10.63 million!
- A portion of Minnesota Highway 212 is to be renamed Minnesota Veterans Memorial Highway.
- A new Veterans Home was authorized in Fergus Falls.
- Assistance was approved for families with parent(s) activated for duty during Persian Gulf War.
- Approved tuition assistance program in technical colleges for Persian Gulf Veterans.
- Persian Gulf Bonus was approved.

At this time, we are fortunate not to be in major conflict anywhere in the world. However, this does not diminish the needs of our veterans and we must continue to promote programs which address their problems. I believe the work of the last eight years gives you a solid base to begin building your administration with veterans.

Best wishes to you and your administration for the future.

Warmest regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Arne H. Carlson".

ARNE H. CARLSON
Governor



State of Minnesota
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
VETERANS SERVICE BUILDING
ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA 55155-2079
(612) 296-2562

Bernie Melter
Commissioner

To the Incoming Commissioner:

Congratulations on your appointment!

As I leave with the Carlson Administration, I am reminded how much we accomplished in our eight years. You can learn of our accomplishments in the Governor's letter of 4 January 1999 and in the booklet prepared for you.

I believe it is imperative that you condition yourself with the fact that you and only you represent ALL of the Veterans and their dependents that reside within the state borders. The Commanders and Presidents of the several Veterans Service Organizations (VSO's) can only represent those veterans and family members enrolled with them.

You have inherited an excellent staff. Rely on them and trust them. They have succeeded in retaining veteran entitlements both on the state and the federal level and have kept pace with demands for services as the veteran population ages. We have good, solid programs that the Legislature has consistently supported.

The good will that we have managed to maintain with our counterparts at the Federal Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as the partnership we maintain with the County Veterans Service Officers, is unequaled throughout this country. Frankly, Minnesota has the best system of service providers anywhere in the nation. You must maintain and, if possible, improve on these relationships as we compete with other agencies for the funds to do the job in the coming millennium.

It is important that you or your deputy become familiar with the key legislators and committee staffers who play a very important part in veterans affairs. The staff within the Governors/Lieutenant Governors office, from the Constituent Affairs Office to the Scheduling Office, will be important contacts as you enlist their assistance in helping you in your mission.

Again, you are only as good as your staff, and you have inherited fine, dedicated individuals who have been a "family" over these past years as we have supported our Veterans and their Dependents. Good Luck and May God Bless your endeavors.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bernie Melter".

Bernie Melter, Commissioner

Summary description

The Department of Veterans Affairs is comprised of 3 programs for budgetary purposes. The programs are Benefits, Services and Operations, which are supported by 40 FTE. These programs are comprised of 12 activities serving Minnesota Veterans and their families. Detailed information on each program and activity are included in this document.

Agency history

The Department of Veterans Affairs was created in 1943 to meet the needs of returning World War II veterans. Since its creation, the department has served veterans from the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Southwest Asia (Persian Gulf) War and other conflicts. The department is organized into three program areas: state benefits and grants, services, and departmental operations. These program areas give assistance to eligible veterans and their dependents. In addition, the department operations program provides administrative services for the department.

Vision

The department's vision is to assist all eligible veterans and dependents to ensure that:

- veterans have an advocate to ensure that they receive the benefits and services available to them from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs
- our children will not live in poverty
- people thrown into temporary economic hardship will regain their independence
- dependent persons or those in temporary need will have their basic needs of life met
- families will provide a stable environment for their children
- Minnesotans will have the skills for lifelong learning and good citizenship

Mission

The mission of the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) is to serve Minnesota veterans, their dependents and survivors in securing those benefits provided by federal and state laws. This mission is very important to the over 450,000 veterans and their eligible family members numbering nearly one million additional persons.

Key legislators and committees:

Veterans programs continue to be supported by a bipartisan coalition of legislators. This coalition includes veterans and non-veterans who are interested in supporting the needs of former members of the armed forces. Often these legislators have a friend or relative who served and this shared experience has formulated their reasons for supporting veterans issues.

The primary committees in the House of Representatives are the General Legislation, Veterans Affairs and Elections, which is chaired by Bob Milbert from South St. Paul, and the State Government Finance Division, chaired by Tom Rukavina from Virginia, of the Governmental Operations Committee. Key legislators on these committees include Betty Folliard (DFL), Betty McCollum (DFL), Jim Rostberg (R), and Mike Osskopp (R). Many others are strong supporters.

The primary committees in the Senate are the Government Operations and Veterans Committee chaired by Jim Metzen (DFL) from South St. Paul, and Governmental Operations Budget Division chaired by Len Price (DFL) from Woodbury. Key legislators on these committees include Chuck Wiger (DFL), Dick Cohen (DFL), Dan Stevens (R) and Martha Robertson (R). Again, many others are strong supporters.

Cooperation

The department maintains a close working relationship with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA), the Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers (MACVSO) and all Veterans Service Organizations (VSO's) such as the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Vietnam Veterans of America, Jewish War

Veterans, American Ex-Prisoners of War, American Veterans of World War II, Korea and Vietnam, and those smaller veterans organizations connected by the United Veterans Legislative Council (UVLC) such as the Navy League, the Naval Enlisted Reserve Association, the Retired Officers Association, the Fleet Reserve Association, the National Guard, the Women Marine Association, WAVES National, and the Marine Corps League, as well as others.

Key issues and constituencies:

Primary representation for veterans is provided by the veterans service organizations. Major organizations include Disabled American Veterans (DAV), The American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). There are a number of other very important veteran service organizations that work in concert with these to form the Commanders Task Force and/or the United Veterans Legislative Council.

These organizations are very active in the support of many state issues which include:

- Minnesota Veterans Homes
- Homeless programs in the Department of Veterans Affairs
- Veterans preference
- Lawful Gambling
- Persian Gulf Bonus
- Environmental Hazards and their effect on veterans (Agent Orange is probably best known, also included are radiation and Persian Gulf veterans medical needs).

The Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers is also very active in their advocacy for veterans. Every county in Minnesota is required to have a County Veterans Service Officer. These persons serve as the local advocate for their veterans and are often key players in veteran service organizations as well.

Boards

The Minnesota Veterans Homes Board of Directors is the operating entity for all veterans homes. The Commissioner of Veterans Affairs is an ex-officio, non-voting member of the board. Even though a non-voting member, the Commissioner is the Governor's

member of the cabinet who has the sole responsibility of representing all veterans in all issues.

Priority projects:

The biennial budget and all legislative initiatives have been submitted for consideration and are included in the information in your office.

A **capital budget request** is pending for the 2000 session. Cemetery Administrator David Swantek is in the process of developing the proposal and associated funding requirements. It is hoped that a federal state veterans cemetery grant will be available to provide 50% of these requirements. This request should be completed no later than August 1, 1999.

The **Persian Gulf Bonus** program has a statutory deadline of June 30, 1999. This deadline requires that the department no longer accept applications from veterans for the bonus. It also allows the department to continue processing and paying all applications received by the deadline. Appropriations are "carried" to the next biennium per statute. We understand that legislation may be introduced extending the deadline.

Upcoming events

The Veterans of Foreign Wars Midwinter Conference is scheduled for the middle of January and is held in Minneapolis. Conventions of the various veteran service organizations at their departmental (state) level begin in May and extend through July. Invitations will be received detailing time and place. National conventions of these organizations begin in late July.

Strategic plans

The strategic plan for department computerization is included in the information in your office. The strategic planning committee meets monthly to discuss changes and requirements for continued successful implementation throughout the state.

Organization chart

The department's organization chart is attached as a separate page.

Budget and personnel overview

Benefits program

Director: Terry Logan

The Benefits Program is composed of the following activities:

- Benefits Administration
- State Soldiers Assistance
- Persian Gulf Bonus
- Education Programs
- Vinland Grants

This program is staffed by 12 fte, comprised of

- one director, who supervises all activities carried out by the program
- five veterans assistance coordinators
- six clerical

Program profiles:

The Benefits program provides benefits and services to Minnesota's 450,000 veterans, their dependents and survivors, under the State Soldier's Assistance Program in the form of:

- subsistence benefits; financial assistance to meet the daily living needs such as food, shelter and utility payments
- emergency medical benefits
- dental benefits
- optical benefits

Program discussions:

State Soldier's Assistance program (SSAP)

Funding: \$1,544,000.
Staffing: 3 Veterans Assistance Coordinators
3 Clerical

Subsistence benefits are provided to veterans, their survivors and dependents in those cases where

applicants are temporarily disabled to the point that they cannot follow their normal occupation. Applicants are limited to 6 consecutive months of assistance unless certified as being ineligible for other forms of assistance. All applicants are required to meet strict financial eligibility standards. This assistance is intended to provide a safety net of services while clients are seeking or returning to employment and to assist children in staying in school.

Emergency medical benefits are limited to \$1,000. and are provided to applicants who experience a medical emergency and who lack adequate insurance coverage or who do not have the financial resources to pay the bills.

Dental and Optical benefits are limited to one treatment per year and are intended to assist applicants who lack the financial resources to maintain basic dental and optical health.

The education grant provides assistance to veterans who have exhausted all federal education benefits to which they were entitled. Assistance is in the form of a one time grant of \$350. Assistance to war orphans is in the form of a yearly grant of \$350. until the child receives a bachelors degree or equivalent. Assistance is only provided to applicants who attend an approved institution in Minnesota.

The Vinland National Center provides rehabilitation services to veterans seeking to overcome barriers to employment.

Budget: \$275,000.

The Persian Gulf Bonus was established by the legislature to provide payments to Minnesota veterans who served on active duty during the Persian Gulf war period. Veterans who served in the theater are eligible for a payment of \$600; those who served elsewhere during the period are eligible for a payment of \$300. Survivors of those killed in action are eligible to receive a payment of \$2,000.

Staffing: 1 Veterans Assistance Coordinator
2 Clerical support

Budget: \$17,900,000; including administration

The Homeless veteran initiative provides an intensive program of treatment and housing options to assist homeless veterans in their struggles to reintegrate themselves back into society.

Budget: \$250,000.

Services Program

Director: Dennis Forsberg

The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs Services Program consists of two distinct activities:

Claims Representative Services
Guardianship Services

Claims services

The Claims representation services provides accredited representation before the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) benefits division to ensure that Minnesota veterans and their dependents obtain full measure of federal veterans benefits, to which they are entitled. This service begins with the development and filing of initial claims. For those claims that may be denied, this will also include assistance and possible personal appearances before a USDVA appeal board.

Claims may eventually be appealed to the Board of Veterans Appeals in Washington D.C. At this level our claims services only assists the veteran claimant; we do not provide personal appearances. At present we have been appointed to provide claims representation to some 102,000 Minnesota veterans or their dependents. We have two claims offices; both located in the regional office of the USDVA at:

Fort Snelling, USDVA Regional Office, St. Paul, MN
Fargo USDVA Regional Office, Fargo, ND

Fort Snelling Office

This office currently has five (5) claims representatives and three clerical staff. The claims handled by this office originate throughout Minnesota, except for the northwest corner of Minnesota. Operating expenses are approximately \$446,000.

Fargo Office

The Fargo Office has one (1) claims representative and one (1) clerical staff. They provide service to that northwest corner of Minnesota which includes about twenty-three (23) counties. The operating expenses are approximately \$196,000. Note this amount also includes the Director of the Services Program position.

This activity accounts for approximately \$105 million dollars in VA compensation and pension benefits awarded annually to Minnesota veterans or their dependents. The total annual compensation and pension benefits awarded to Minnesota veterans and their dependents is near \$261 million dollars.

Guardianship program

The guardianship activity program provides financial management services for veterans or their dependents who have been adjudicated by district court or other jurisdiction to be incompetent to handle their financial affairs. Nearly all clients have severe and persistent mental health and/or chemical dependency issues.

Currently this activity manages:

100 clients' estates

\$1.7 million dollars in annual income

\$2.2 million dollars in cash assets

\$0.5 million dollars in real and personal property

This activity generates nearly 8,500 personal needs and maintenance checks annually.

Staffing: 2 financial guardianship advisors
 1 clerical staff

Additional support is received from the department's accounting activity.

Operating Cost:

\$131,000.00

Note that this activity generates about \$37,000. In approved guardianship fees.

The Services program also provides department liaison with the County Veterans Service Officers (CVSOs) and assists in providing training and accreditation of the CVSOs.

Operations Program

Director of Administrative Services

Kathy Schwartz

13 fte

The operations program is responsible for the following activities:

- County Veterans Service Officer Grants
- Administrative Services
- Cemetery Maintenance and Development Account
- Cemetery Operations

County veterans service officer grants

This activity administers grants to counties to improve the efficiency and delivery of service to veterans and family members. Funding for these grants and related educational activities is \$232,000 per year.

Administrative services

This activity is responsible for the day to day operations of the department and includes the:

- commissioners office
- human resources
- information systems
- purchasing
- financial management and budget (Annual, Biennial and Capital)
- financial transactions for guardianship and benefits
- receipt, management and expenditure of donated funds
- staff training and education (includes county veterans service officers)

9.0 fte are assigned to this activity with an annual budget of \$693,000. Additional staff have been requested in the biennial budget to support increases in demand from other budgetary initiatives for outreach, guardianship and

cemetery activities.

The Cemetery Maintenance and Development Account is the activity which is responsible for the receipt and deposit of special revenues paid to the cemetery for burial services. Donations for designated items also are deposited in this account.

The Cemetery Operations State activity provides maintenance and operation of the state veterans cemetery. A long range plan is being developed that meets the perpetual developmental needs of the cemetery ensuring that dignified burial services and maintenance of the property meet the rigid demands of its constituency. 3.0 fte are currently assigned to this activity with a budget of \$200,000 per year.

Additional funding for staff and a challenge grant with proceeds being deposited in a perpetual trust account have been proposed in the biennial budget.

