



**Department of Veterans Affairs
Response to DLS Budget Analysis
Fiscal Year 2011 Operating Budget**

Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
Health and Human Services
January 26, 2010

House Appropriations Committee
Public Safety and Administration
January 27, 2010

Introduction

The Department of Veterans Affairs appreciates this opportunity to update the Committee on the activities of the Department over the past year to ensure that we fulfill our mission to “deliver services and programs to assist veterans, their families and survivors in obtaining federal, state, and local benefits” and to respond to the issues raised and recommendations contained in the analysis prepared by the Department of Legislative Services.

This document contains the following information:

- State of the Department of Veterans Affairs and discussion of key priorities.
- The Department’s response to the issues raised by the Department of Legislative Services.
- The Department’s response to the recommended actions by the Department of Legislative Services.

Vision Statement:

The Department is as an advocate of veterans’ issues and will dedicate itself to the preservation and enhancement of benefits, rights, and entitlements to ensure those veterans and their families live productive and successful lives.

At A Glance

FY 2009 Maryland Veteran Population: 476,202*

Total 2009 US VA disbursements \$1.3 billion

In FY 2009 3,627 claims were represented before the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

In FY 2009, Maryland veterans, their widows and orphans received in excess of \$15 million in new veterans’ benefits as a direct result of the efforts of the Department claims office.

In FY 2009, Cemeteries interment services provided: 3,188

In FY 2010, Charlotte Hall Veterans Home resident population Jan 2009: 390

462 Available beds

84% Occupancy

In FY 2009 Charlotte Hall operating revenue \$29 million

* Source: United States Department of Veterans Affairs, Veteran Population as Of 9-30-08

Mission:

The mission and purpose of the Department of Veterans Affairs is to serve the veterans of Maryland, their dependents and survivors, in securing all benefits and services provided by federal and state law. The department fulfills this mission by providing leadership and direction to the veteran community, while exercising responsible management of available resources and through these efforts strengthen Maryland's economy.

Key service strategies of the department are to:

- Provide assistance to all eligible veterans, their dependents, and survivors;
- Collaborate with service providers whose efforts are coordinated by the department; and
- Continually review, revise, and build upon proven business practices to ensure the most timely, cost effective delivery of benefits and services.

Core Functions

- Actively help veterans and their dependents become aware of and access any service or benefit to which they are entitled to;
- Provide representation to clients pursuing claims for federal veterans benefits;
- Provide dignified and compassionate committal services at our five Maryland State Veterans Cemeteries; and
- Provide the highest possible quality for health care and supportive service for Veterans Home residents.

Issues Raised in DLS Analysis

1. *Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS) Implementation Status: the agency should comment on the implementation status, including the configuration of the server and provide an estimate date as to when the system will become operational. The agency should also comment on the ways in which it envisions the system will enhance care at the home including staff efficiencies that may lead to reduction in operating expenses.*

Response: Maryland is the first state to use US Veterans Affairs' electronic health record system and as such has had to confront obstacles specific to state-specific implementation. Other states have expressed interest in the system as well and have contacted Charlotte Hall to receive guidance on how the MOU for the system was developed. MDVA is proud that it will be the first to participate in CPRS as it will provide enhanced benefits to Charlotte Hall residents and allow the home to provide more efficient medical care.

CPRS programming is 90% complete according to the on site Certified Network Engineer. The plan is to roll out CPRS in the Assisted Living Unit in March 2010. There is an operational interface issue involving the lab/prescription provider and the VA's CPRS system. This will not interfere with the implementation as we can add that piece once it is resolved. CPRS will allow better coordination of care between CHVH doctors and those at the VA Medical Center; it will relieve the nursing staff of many documentation chores allowing them to spend more time with the resident which will improve the quality of care. CPRS will reduce medication errors and improve communication among health care professionals by having immediate knowledge of veteran's chronological health record.

The actual costs of the benefits of having CPRS have not been documented in over 10 years by the VA, but in 1999 the VA did say that Cost Benefits of CPRS include: eliminate transcriptions errors, eliminates proofreading, improves quality of care, enhances compliance, improves physician satisfaction, improves nurse satisfaction and reduces nurse attrition which came to \$320,000 yearly per site.

There is no direct cost savings to the State as we are in a fixed contract – but if State was operating the Home it could be – you are not saving money but buying a more efficient system to maintain health records to care for veterans. The savings to the State are incorporated in a contractor who is better able to manage and implement direct care to veterans with less medication errors, physician satisfaction, reducing nursing attrition, more accountability in record keeping.

2. *Veterans Behavioral Health Initiative: the agency should comment on the progress of this initiative, including the number of veterans that the program has reached and the success rate of matching individuals with the USDVA funded treatment.*

Response:

- During the first 6 months of FY10, the program has received 443 calls from veterans and family members inquiring about services, compared to 462 calls for all of last year
- In terms of behavioral health services, during the first 6 months of FY10, 55 veterans have been provided services as a result of the initiative (also called Maryland's Commitment to Veterans), compared to only 17 for all of last year
- Of the 55 so far this year, 38 received services from the USVA, and 17 received services through the public mental health system or from a private provider
- MDVA's role in this initiative is to assist the Regional Resource Coordinators in their outreach efforts to veterans in need of behavioral health services. MDVA provides contact names, numbers, and other information so that the Coordinators can answer questions on veterans benefits and services that are not related to behavioral health.
- MDVA is also leading the effort to establish agreements with local transportation providers to provide transportation services. One agreement was signed in Mid-November with Del Marva Community Transit on the eastern shore, and 5 veterans have already received round trip transportation to their behavioral health appointments. We

Recommended Actions in DLS Analysis

- 1. Delete one new position within the Executive Direction Program, the administrative arm of the agency. This position serves as Chief of Staff to the Secretary of the agency. The office is already sufficiently staffed to carry out the duties of the agency.**

Response: Oppose

The MDVA strongly disagrees with the DLS recommendation to abolish the Chief of Staff position. Based on the following, MDVA asks the committee to reject this recommendation.

One of the charges given to me when I came on board in September was to enhance, improve and increase outreach to veterans. Not only does this Administration want to serve veterans by ensuring that they receive the benefits to which they are entitled, but both the Governor and LT Governor know the economic benefits that accrue to the state through these payments. In addition, the Governor and LT Governor have requested that MDVA coordinate outreach efforts and services with other State and Federal agencies that provide services to veterans.

Our newest veterans, especially those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are much like my generation of Vietnam veterans. Although they get better briefings on their benefits when they return than we did, they often are not interested at that point in time All they want to do is get out and get home.

We all know that the needs of this generation of veterans are great – both in terms of health with post-traumatic stress disorder being a major issue, and economic issues. But connecting with this generation of veterans requires direct engagement and use of the range of new media forms. Like Vietnam veterans, this generation is also not a generation of “joiners.” As a result, to connect with these veterans, my department has had to undergo a thorough realignment of our outreach and administrative functions in order to get achieve big outcomes with limited resources.

The Chief of Staff was brought on to increase the Department’s capacity to accomplish this mission.

MDVA is a relatively small department. We have less than 80 employees, most of who are engaged in providing direct services to veterans and their families through the Benefits and Cemetery Programs. All administrative responsibilities, planning, coordination and outreach including our web site, newsletter, and the veterans’ musters which we conduct are done by 6

people: Me, the Deputy Secretary, the Chief of Staff, my executive assistant, and the Director and Deputy Director for Outreach Programs.

The Department's top three priorities are:

- Veterans Behavioral Health Initiative (Maryland's Commitment to Veterans)
- Enhancing employment opportunities for veterans by sponsoring the first ever small business conference specifically for veterans and working with professional and community groups who wish to establish training and employment programs such as Helmets to Hardhats.
- Expanding outreach through involvement with faith-based organizations, other community organizations including those providing services to homeless individuals, and business and professional organizations.

The Chief of Staff is intricately involved in all three priorities:

- Under the Veterans Behavioral Health initiative: he leads the effort to establish written agreements with local transportation providers to help veterans get to and from their behavioral/mental health appointments; as well as increasing the Department's resources and analytical abilities by working with our Regional Resource Coordinators to get better information to veterans about the services available to them beyond behavioral health;
- He serves as the agency's point person in coordinating with U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs; and
- He oversees MDVA's efforts to help veterans find jobs by coordinating with other state agencies, like DLLR and GOMA, federal agencies and non-profit organizations to share information and coordinate services.

More specifically, the Chief of Staff is currently:

- Coordinating with Baltimore County, U.S. Veterans Affairs Veterans Justice Outreach Program, and the Judicial Branch of Maryland State Government to prepare training session for Circuit and District Court Judges to deal with veteran offenders;
- Leading the effort to streamline inventory procedures throughout the department which create efficiencies and enable the department to save money; and
- Developing policies and procedures for the newly established Veterans Trust Fund, which will enable MDVA to help veterans hurt by the current financial crisis.

In conclusion, the chief of staff role is filled by an individual who possesses the skills needed to accomplish the projects we are undertaking. When I assumed this position, the Governor and Lt. Governor gave me the tools necessary to be successful. The Chief of Staff role, though new in the department, was one of those tools, and over the past five months he has become an invaluable asset and critical player in enabling MDVA to accomplish its goals and objectives.