



JEFFERSON COUNTY VETERANS' SERVICES OFFICE



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REPORT TO THE HONORABLE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS, JEFFERSON COUNTY, WI

This office functions under the direction of the Veterans Service Officer, who is appointed by the County Administrator. Policy oversight for local aid to Veterans in need is provided by the County Veterans Service Commission.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION AND SERVICES:

Chapter 45 of the WI Statutes requires each County to have a County Veterans Service Officer and establishes duties of the Veterans Service Officer. The position is funded by County tax revenue and offset by a \$13,000 annual grant provided through the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Trust Fund.

All Jefferson County resident veterans and their dependents may receive assistance through the Veterans' Service office. This office provides information and processes applications for both state and federal benefits such as disability compensation, non-service connected pension, vocational training, educational programs, insurance, domiciliary care and burial benefits. We also help veterans with enrollment in the VA healthcare system and further assist as personal advocates if the veteran is experiencing difficulty accessing care or resources within the system.

On a case by case basis--Veterans and dependents experiencing temporary financial emergencies can apply for assistance from the Veterans Service Commission. In accordance with WI State Statute 45.86 – *“Every county board shall annually levy, in addition to all other taxes, a tax sufficient to carry out the purposes of this section. The tax shall be levied and collected as other county taxes for the purpose of providing aid to needy veterans, the needy spouses, surviving spouses, minor and dependent children of the veterans, and the needy parents of veterans entitled to aid under ss 45.81 to 45.84 and to carry out the purposes of s.45.85.”* The WI State Statute does not specify how much should be allocated to “provide aid” – nor does it detail the parameters of such aid.

Other Counties in Wisconsin allocate anywhere from \$500 to over \$50,000 of tax levy annually to comply with statute. The Jefferson County Veterans Service Commission policy (adopted in 2008) defines the purpose of assistance as providing emergency aid to needy veterans and/or their dependents which must be of a temporary nature. This might be due to the Veteran having an interruption of income and waiting for a paycheck or other source of income (such as unemployment compensation, sick pay or other governmental payment such as education, disability or pension benefits.) The need could be due to a medical emergency, automobile accident, fire or other disaster. Often—the need is for food--or gas for transportation to a veteran's facility or--for job or housing search. The policy allows for other purposes that may be deemed appropriate by the Commission.

In 2017, \$5,116.14 in aid was expended by the Veterans Service Commission in the form of food and gas gift cards, payments directly to utility providers, landlords, etc. This amount was down slightly from 2016's

expenditures of \$7,131.57. This is not because there was less need – it reflects the fact that partnerships with other agencies are being leveraged to fill the gaps. The Jefferson County Veteran Service Commission is annually allocated with an average of \$3,500 in tax levy funding which is supplemented by private donations. We are fortunate to receive generous donations from both service organizations and private citizens. In 2017, donations totaled \$10,083.53 compared with \$5,534.73 donated in 2016. A total of \$25,423.79 from past donations was carried forward into the 2018 Veterans Service Commission budget and \$376.89 was carried forward for Veterans transportation expenses. Work is underway to create a loan guarantee fund to further assist Veterans who are struggling financially. This program will come on-line in 2018.

Transportation of Veterans to the Madison VA Hospital is provided in partnership with the Federal VA through a Government Services Administration (GSA) contract which allows the County Veterans Service Office to lease an 8 passenger van for \$250 per month. The Federal VA covers the cost of fuel and vehicle maintenance; Jefferson County must provide the volunteer drivers. We are grateful to the Jefferson County Human Services Transportation Office for their assistance in coordinating the volunteer drivers and scheduling rides for veterans--and especially to the dedicated volunteer drivers who literally make the program go! In the last year, the number of volunteer drivers has fluctuated to as few as four drivers to cover an average of 20 travel days per month. This critical shortage meant that veterans are missing and/or have to reschedule appointments at the Madison VA Hospital. We have been actively and continuously recruiting volunteer drivers—and I am happy to report that we currently have 14 drivers on the roster.



Photo at right: Volunteer driver, Gary Lembrich, shows off the new Veterans Transport Van which is a vital link for many veterans to access healthcare.

A. ECONOMIC IMPACT OF VETERANS BENEFITS IN JEFFERSON COUNTY IN 2017

The Federal Veterans Administration's *Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures (GDX)* report details statistics for every County in the US. According to this report, Jefferson County, Wisconsin presently has an approximate resident population of 5,873 (live) veterans out of a total population of 363,898 in Wisconsin (down from 397,821 in 2016). In addition to the Veterans themselves, other residents of Jefferson County are also potential recipients of veteran's benefits -- including veteran's spouses, dependent children and dependent parents. The attached economic impact to the county is substantial:

1. The **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs** is currently dispensing compensation and/or pension benefits to over 1,700 veterans, widows and families in Jefferson County. The federally reported "Total VA Expenditures for (FY17) reflects that \$36,939,000 in federal financial benefits were paid to Jefferson County veterans through disability compensation, pensions, education, vocational rehabilitation, health care and life insurance. This is up slightly from the FY16, total of \$34,915,000. The *Summary of Expenditures by County* report can be found at: <http://www.va.gov/vetdata/>

2. The **State of Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs** dispensed \$21,248.89 in financial benefits to Jefferson County veterans in 2017 – of which \$6,346.89 was granted as subsistence aid to veterans who lost work due to an illness or injury. The balance of \$14,902 was expended for dental care. These numbers

do not include the value of tuition remission provided under the WI GI Bill. We processed 51 new WI GI Bill applications in 2017.

These figures also don't include state funds expended for care of Jefferson County residents at the Wisconsin Veteran's Home at King, and Union Grove, Wisconsin—or the value of property tax remitted to 100% service-disabled veterans. We processed 26 new applications that were approved in 2017. The Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs personal/home improvement loan programs continue to be in hiatus due to lack of funding.

B. MAJOR TRENDS IN THE VETERANS SERVICE BUSINESS

The Federal VA continues to improve the timeliness of the claims process. The majority of claims are being processed in 90 to 120 days. We are still submitting most claims by fax to the Janesville "Evidence Intake Center" --which is one of two contracted facilities in the US that scan everything into the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS). For reference, the other scanning center is in Georgia. The "paperless" environment continues to improve in reliability – but even as the turn-around time on a "fully developed" claim has decreased -- the number of appeals have increased due to errors occurring in the National Work Cue environment.

We are now able to upload some claims and evidence directly to the Federal VA system through the "Direct Mail Upload" (DMU) portal. This development is a game changer for speeding up the claims process. We are able to submit certain claims through an initiative called "DRC" (which stands for "Decision Ready Claims") —which allows an experienced advocate to prepare a claim in such a way that the VA will literally be able to make a decision in an average of 30 days.

The VA reinvented the "e-benefits" website into a one-stop-shopping format and continues to promote the idea that Veterans can file their own claims through the Vets.gov website – however -- statistically-- Veterans who apply for benefits online are less than successful overall. Many Veterans are confused by the array of documentation needed to support their disability claim. Because the individual Veteran is not an expert on what or how issues can be claimed—the outcome of their claim may be a lower (or denied) benefit. The value of the County Veteran Service office is our ability to help navigate the VA system.

C. WORKFLOW AND INITIATIVES IN THE JEFFERSON COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICE

We continue to scan all incoming and outgoing mail and upload it to our online VETRASPEC database. This technology has improved our efficiency in that we are able to call up a veterans file with a moment's notice if they phone or stop by. Having a copy of all correspondence is also important because occasionally we've been asked by the Federal VA to resend claims that have been lost to the digital ether.

Our office continues to partner with the Community Action Coalition through the Supportive Services for Veterans Families (SSVF) grant program to provides case management and temporary financial assistance to low-income veterans (single individuals and those with families) to help them maintain stable housing or alleviate homelessness. We are seeing an up-tick in homelessness cases.

I am happy to report that Jefferson County Veterans continue to enjoy the private counseling room in our office-suite to meet with counselors from the Madison Vet Center and the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program Representative from the Department of Workforce Development.

Respectfully Submitted,

Yvonne R. Duesterhoeft