

STATE OF COLORADO

DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

Division of Veterans Affairs

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27 November 2023

David Callahan
Director

County Commissioners

Re: State Board of Veterans Affairs Annual Report to the Governor

Executive Summary

The division experienced increases in new powers of attorney from 7,735 to 9,834; claims 10,086 to 15,511; and property tax exemption applications 16,066 to 21,066 in 2023, while health care enrollment reported a slight decrease from 114,878 to 113,890. Decision reviews remained steady at 2,671 compared to 2,694 in 2022, while appeals to the Board of Veterans Affairs experienced a decrease from 164 to 156 and BVA hearings from 413 to 274 during 2023. See Table 1 for 2022-2023 comparison.

Implementation of the Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxins (PACT) Act of 2022 expanded and extended eligibility for VA health care for Veterans with toxic exposures and Veterans of the Vietnam era, Gulf War era, and Post-9/11 era. Colorado Veterans filed 21,380 distinct PACT Act related claims with a sum of awards totaling \$51,412,643 million.

Colorado veterans continued to make a positive impact on local economies with more than \$4.8 billion in total VA expenditures distributed within the State. The Colorado Division of Veterans Affairs assisted with facilitation of direct payments to veterans in the form of compensation and pension benefits exceeding \$2.7 billion. In other benefits, nearly \$352 million went to education and employment readiness and more than \$1.6 billion was expended on medical care. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reported the Colorado veteran population at 374,233, which is a decrease from last year of 13,385. This decrease reflects the loss of aging veterans, many from World War II and Korea.

The division has moved forward and made progress with several recommendations identified during the VSO Performance audit of September 2022. Development and implementation of the 30-60-90 day VSO training and certifications program, VSO accreditation, information system security, uniformity of CVSO hourly voucher payments, expansion of regional field service offices, and development of a division strategic plan with supporting key measures has postured the division to further prompt and efficient services to all Veterans across Colorado on a uniform basis.

Table 1

COLORADO DIVISION OF VETERANS AFFAIRS		
Summary of Program Assessment		
ITEM	2022	2023
New Powers of Attorney	7,735	9,834
New Claims	10,086	15,511
Health Care Enrollment (statewide)	114,878	113,890
Decision Reviews	2,694	2,671
Appealed to BVA	164	156
BVA Hearings	413	274
Veteran Property Tax Exemption Applications	16,066	21,066

Significant Activities and Accomplishments

The division recently published its first policies and procedures manual which provides written policies and procedures for appointment, training, certification, and accreditation of VSOs; managing and securing sensitive data; processing of support payments to counties; deploying division resources to help ensure uniform service; and strategic planning and governance. Training, certification, and accreditation of our Veterans Service Officers is foundational in ensuring we are providing uniformed services across the state to those we assist in filing claims for federal and state benefits. The Colorado Board of Veterans Affairs-approved VSO training curriculum will assist in certifying newly appointed CVSOs in a prompt, efficient and uniform manner, while also meeting VA training requirements for those CVSOs eligible for VA accreditation. This is a team effort between the counties, the state and federal VA agencies. Counties select and hire Veterans Service Officers, the state certifies, and the VA Office of General Counsel accredits.

The General Assembly approved eight additional FTEs in 2023, which included an additional Regional VSO, Division Training Officer, VSO Liaison, Appeals Program Assistant, Grants Specialist, Veteran Memorial Cemetery Program Assistant, VMC Grounds Crew Supervisor, and a Program Assistant to manage the Veteran Community Living Center outpatient mental health program. A Women’s Veteran Service Office Coordinator, originally appropriated in 2022, was also filled during 2023.

Further assessment of the division’s resources resulted in the addition of a Claims and Benefits Supervisor to support the regional field officers and a Division Operations Officer to coordinate and synchronize the division’s state-wide activities. The WROS increased its administrative support with one additional administrative assistant and two DEERS operators to assist Veterans.

Challenges and Opportunities

Current state-wide VSO resources remain inadequate in meeting the claims and benefits assistance of approximately 374,000 Colorado Veterans, which have brought in nearly \$2.7 billion in compensation and pension assistance and \$1.6 billion in medical care, with a total VA expenditure for all programs exceeding \$4.8 billion. The division is advocating for additional full-time state and county VSO’s to address the division’s statutory directive of furthering prompt and efficient services to all Veterans

across Colorado on a uniform basis, while also addressing an additional 21,380 distinct PACT Act claims. It is estimated that these additional PACT Act claims will further increase VA Dependency and Indemnity Compensation claims for the surviving spouse, children or parents of Veterans who die from a PACT Act related illness. Additional state and county VSOs will assist in reducing appointment wait times, currently more than 45 days, for higher density Veteran populations across the state. Additional VSOs will enable the division to reduce appointment wait times to two weeks or less across the state and be more closely aligned with the Colorado Revised Statute §28-5-705 of furthering prompt and efficient service to all Veterans across Colorado on a uniform basis.

Identifying the number and location of our state Veterans remains a challenge. The division currently uses the VA Geographical Distribution of Expenditures as reported by the National Center for Veteran Analysis and Statistics; however, this data only reports those Veterans in the VA system, which by some estimates is 20 percent less than the actual count. To address this disparity and to locate those currently outside the VA system, the state will contract with a provider who can provide contact information for those Veterans outside the VA system.

The state currently lacks a veteran resource information clearinghouse as directed by Colorado Revised Statute §28-5-711 and has received appropriations to create a veteran resource information clearinghouse for our state's Veterans by June 30, 2024. Ongoing annual appropriations will be required to fund an FTE to maintain the currency of resources.

The military funeral honors stipend has been well received by participating veteran service organizations across Colorado; however, current program funding is not sufficient to meet the growing demand. The division plans to pursue additional funding for supporting the military funeral honors stipend program on an ongoing basis.

The division has identified a need to establish a Southern Region One Source in Pueblo that will improve access to resources and services for rural Veterans residing in southern Colorado. The vision for this Southern Region One Source Center is to collaborate with Mt. Carmel in creating a private-public partnership based on the best practices and lessons learned from the Mt. Carmel Veterans Service Center in Colorado Springs and Western Region One Source in Grand Junction.

Administrative Condition

The division will continue to pursue an increase in spending authority from the Veterans Trust Fund that will assist in addressing more requests for assistance across the state. Restoration of the \$4,000,000 swept from the division's Veteran Trust Fund and Veterans Assistance Grant programs in 2020 will remain a division priority until restored. These funds are essential in addressing additional services, such as the Southern Region One Source, ongoing resourcing of the veteran resource information clearinghouse, fulfilling resource needs and amenities for veteran community living centers, state veterans cemeteries expansion, and the health and well-being of our Veterans.

The recently completed Colorado Office of Policy, Research and Regulatory Reform Sunset Review of the Veterans Assistance Grant program recommended a seven-year continuance of the grant program, until 2031. The Veteran Assistance Grant, combined with the Veteran Trust Fund, provides over \$1.8 million dollars to veteran service organizations, nonprofits, and governmental agencies that provide services to ensure the health and well-being of Veterans, capital improvements or needed amenities for veterans community living centers, costs incurred by state veteran cemeteries, and costs incurred by the division in support of veteran assistance and services. The division was successful in increasing the Veterans Trust Fund appropriation by \$250,000 and receiving an appropriation of \$500,000 to create

and operate the veterans resource information clearinghouse, which has been an unfunded mandate since 2009.

The Veterans Memorial Cemetery is fully staffed and continues to provide a dignified final resting place for our Veterans and their eligible dependents, with 6,045 internments since beginning operations on September 5, 2002. The Western Region One Source is fully staffed and has served 26,823 Veterans, service members, and their families since opening their doors on May 9, 2019.

Short- and Long-Term Goals

Short-term goals:

- Staff all DVA organizational structure vacancies by March 31, 2024
- Improve DVA Veteran's net promoter score satisfaction with DMVA services 5% by June 30, 2024
- Improve accreditation of eligible VSOs 10% by June 30, 2024
- Increase VBMS access for eligible VSOs 20% by June 30, 2024
- Conduct 20 community outreach events by June 30, 2024
- Identify and resolve five gaps in Veterans services by June 30, 2024
- Improve overall grant execution rate 6% by June 30, 2024
- Obtain/sustain 100 percent occupancy of WROS leased office space by June 30, 2024
- Field a veteran's resource information clearinghouse by June 30, 2024
- Identify and locate those Veterans currently outside the VA system by June 30, 2024

Long-term goals:

- Improve DVA customer service experience another 5% by June 30, 2025
- Increase accreditation of eligible VSOs an additional 5% by June 30, 2025
- Increase VBMS access an additional 10% by June 30, 2025
- Conduct 40 community outreach events by June 30, 2025
- Identify and resolve 10 gaps in Veterans services by June 30, 2025
- Improve overall grant execution rate an additional 4% by June 30, 2025
- Provide following WROS services: Housing, Employment, Training, DEERS, Education, Counseling, Life Skills, Wellness, Transition, and VSO services by June 30, 2025
- Implement Women Veterans Study recommendations by June 30, 2025
- Partner with Mt. Carmel Veterans Service Center in standing up and resourcing a Southern Region One Source for Veterans in Pueblo by June 30, 2025

The Colorado Division of Veterans Affairs is grateful for the opportunity to serve our Colorado Veterans and remains committed, along with the assistance of our local, county, state, and federal partners in delivering the highest levels of service and assistance to our Veterans and their families. I would like to personally thank each organization and individual who has made a difference in the life of a Veteran in 2023. "One Team, One Fight!"

David Callahan

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Director

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