



**MINNESOTA
COMMANDERS'
TASK FORCE
2007 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA**

What is the Minnesota Commanders' Task Force?

The Minnesota Commanders' Task Force was created in 1988, and is comprised of the elected leaders from the nine congressionally chartered veterans service organizations. The organizations are: The American Legion, American Ex-Prisoners of War, Jewish War Veterans, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, AMVETS, Marine Corps League, and Vietnam Veterans of America

We meet regularly to discuss the issues affecting veterans and their families; we facilitate communication among veteran service organizations; and we track state and federal legislation that is important to all veterans and their families.

The Purpose and Benefit of this Booklet

The benefit of this booklet is to summarize the issues you, as state legislators, will be addressing in the 2007 legislative session on behalf of Minnesota's 460,000 veterans and their dependents.

This pamphlet identifies a veteran issue along with details of each proposal. We hope you will find this booklet helpful and the information useful as you structure Minnesota's 2008-2009 biennial budget.

We thank you for your service to the citizens of Minnesota.

Emblems of the Veterans Service Organizations



Commanders' Task Force 2007 Legislative Initiatives

Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs Budget (MDVA)

In the past, appropriations to the department have not been sufficient to fully fund the many needed and vital veterans programs and, while the department received an increase in funding in 2006, more financial support is needed to complete the job. Therefore, we support the following budgetary requests.

State Soldiers Assistance Program (SSAP)

The State Soldier's Assistance Program provides temporary cash assistance in the form of shelter payments (rent and mortgage), utilities, and personal needs grants to veterans who are unable to work as a result of temporary disability. SSAP also provides assistance with dental and optical needs for veterans and their dependents who meet strict income and asset guidelines. Applications for the State Soldiers Assistance Program must be made through the County Veteran Service Officer.

An increase in funding will allow MDVA to continue to provide temporary cash assistance in the form of shelter payments, utilities, and personal needs grants to veterans who are unable to work as a result of a temporary disability, while expanding benefits for special needs cases. The biennial cost, \$2 million.

The following list is an example of some of special needs requests from veterans: housing for veterans; washer and dryer replacement; outstanding medical bills; vehicle repairs; wheel chair ramp; home flooring for handicapped vet; hot water heater replacement; funeral expenses; and refrigerator for insulin storage

The department expects this program will heavily utilized when the now deployed troops return home in mid 2007 and therefore will require additional funding.

Veterans Affairs Outreach and Communication

Less than 50% of veterans apply for and receive the benefits to which they are entitled. This increase in funding will focus on several key areas of outreach: Tribal Veteran Service Offices (\$1.5 million); Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (\$2.0 million); and state-wide marketing plan to communicate and conduct outreach to veterans (\$500,000). Total biennial cost, \$4 million.

MDVA's Outreach Office is a visible presence in communities throughout the state. Outreach staff is in attendance at veteran specific gatherings across the state. Examples are annual homeless veterans' stand-down events and town-hall meetings. The department's outreach staff was critical to the success of the 2006 Minnesota Veterans Summit.

Outreach staff will continue to attend reintegration programs for the returning veterans to inform them of their eligibility for benefits, programs, and services.

Higher Education Offices on Campus

The 2006 Legislature allocated \$600,000 in Fiscal Year 2007 to the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs for the creation of the Higher Education Veterans Assistance Program to serve the needs of students who are veterans attending or enrolled in Minnesota's higher education institutions.

The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) in consultation with the Adjutant General, and representatives from: Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU), University of Minnesota, Private Colleges and Universities, Office of Higher Education, Department of Employee and Economic Development and the County Veterans Service Officers Association, implemented the Higher Education Veterans Assistance Program.

Since August 2006, campus representatives have served nearly 1,700 veterans (unduplicated count). This requested increase in funding will provide additional on-campus offices, add twelve new FTE regional coordinators, and provide partial reimbursement to campus sites for the use of office space. This program will ensure veterans, military members and their families have access to all possible educational benefits and get information about other veterans' benefits. Biennial cost \$1.8 million with a one-time appropriation of \$500,000.

County Veterans Service Office Grants

The Minnesota County Veteran Service Officers (CVSOs) are the first contact veterans have throughout our state. In 2006, the legislature created the Grants to Counties program. The grant monies are to enhance programs and services provided to veterans.

An increase in funding for the grant program will aid CVSOs in bolstering their mission. Through a competitive grant request process, service officers will be able to expand the services that focus on outreach, reintegration of combat veterans and reducing homelessness among veterans while encouraging collaboration with social service agencies, educational institutions, and other relevant community resources. Total General Fund spending is \$2.8 million with a one-time appropriation of \$500,000 in the biennium.

Funding for Veterans Service Organizations

Since 1944, Minnesota has provided funding to Congressionally Chartered Veterans Service Organizations to support their programs, which reach out and serve our veterans. MDVA has always viewed the service organizations as an extension in the offering of services for veterans. Additional spending authority will replace one-half of the current funding mechanism (revenue from the sale of Support Our Troops license plates) for these organizations and it will allow other organizations that have existing programs serving the veteran community to seek funding. Total biennial General Fund spending = \$500,000.

Information Technology Increase

Additional spending authority will allow the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs to enhance information systems' integrity, ensure confidentiality of information and increase system availability. It will allow for a reconfiguration of the network to include a demilitarized zone where MDVA's public web sites and domain name server and email server are hosted; additional firewall software specifically designed for web traffic, additional software to analyze firewall and server logs, and intrusion detection and prevention systems. Total biennial General Fund spending = \$200,000.

State Veterans Cemetery

The State Veterans Cemetery in Little Falls provides dignified burial services for veterans and their eligible dependents. An increase in funding will allow for the proper maintenance of the renovations, perpetual care of gravesites, grounds beautification, and preserving the current staffing levels without the department transferring funds to the cemetery for these operations. Total biennial General Fund spending = \$150,000.

War Orphan Act

This initiative expands the current war orphan benefit to spouses of deceased, service-connected veterans and military service members. The cost to expand this benefit to spouse is estimated at \$105,000 for the biennium. This additional cost can be absorbed within the requested increase in funding for the State Soldiers Assistance Program.

Minnesota GI Bill for Veterans

The Minnesota GI Bill would supplement the federal GI Bill by providing eligible veterans or eligible dependents \$1,000 per semester for up to 5 years (\$10,000 total) of higher education. These benefits are "last dollar in" and would be paid to Minnesota veterans after they have received Pell Grants and other state and federal financial aid. Veterans could attend any Minnesota college, university or technical school to receive these benefits. Total biennial General Fund spending = \$30 million; this appropriation will be tracked in the Higher Education Service Office's Budget.

Exemption from State Income Tax for Military Pay and Pensions

Previous to the 1978 legislative session, Minnesota's military retiree pay was exempt from income tax. Therefore, to reward service and to help recruit future soldiers, Minnesota soldiers and veterans will once again be allowed to subtract 100 percent of their pay for military service, military pensions and retirement payments when computing state income tax. These payments are currently considered taxable income.

The total cost to the General Fund will be phased-in over a four year period and is expected to save veterans and military members \$16.5 million in taxes in the next two-year budget period (FY 2008-09) and \$42.3 million when fully phased-in. This change item will be tracked by the Department of Revenue.

Commanders' Task Force Recommendation

It is the recommendation of the Commanders' Task Force that additional funding should be made available to the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs to expand upon and ensure that department programs continue to meet the demands of our diverse veteran population. The Legislature should favorably consider and support a comprehensive veterans' initiative package because they provide high-quality, sound remedies for many veteran related concerns and issues. Budget increases should be made during a time of increased demand for services from Minnesota's veteran population.

The Legislature should exempt military retirement benefits and military pay from state taxation. Many military retirees choose a location for retirement based, at least in part, on how their retired pay is taxed at the state level. Many retirees originally from Minnesota choose to retire in a state which does not fully tax their retirement benefit. Minnesota communities are losing these highly sought after individuals and their retirement benefits to other states which treat this income differently.

Many military retirees go on to start a second career (for which they pay an income tax), purchase homes (for which they pay property tax), start a new business (for which they pay taxes and employ people), and volunteer in their communities. This revenue, which is currently being lost, will more than make up for the initial cost of providing this tax incentive that will help attract military retirees back to Minnesota.

Minnesota Veterans Homes Budget

The continuing development of the Minnesota Veterans Homes has been very positive. Increased demand for services continues to place pressures on the Minnesota Veterans Homes system. Minnesota's veteran population continues to change. These changes add new complexities to the demand for beds and services provided by the Minnesota Veterans Homes. Continued renovation and new construction will be required to meet this increased demand.

The Minnesota Veterans Homes must be equipped to provide the highest quality of care to every resident in a therapeutic, highly adaptive and dignified environment.

A lack of increased funding, rising acuity levels, and inflationary pressures, combine to require a funding request of \$9.3 million from the state legislature for the next biennium. \$1.3 million will maintain operations at the current level, and \$8.0 million will restore repair and betterment funds to properly maintain the facilities in our care (the latter activity is not eligible for capital funding). To not receive the supplemental request would have a significant impact on the effective operations of the five homes and agency, overall.

Commanders' Task Force Recommendation

The Governor and Legislature must approve funding levels for the Veterans Homes. It is imperative that the homes are equipped to manage the needs of the home without sacrificing the level of care. The Legislature must be aware of the changing needs of each Minnesota Veterans Home. The Governor and Legislature must be prepared to respond positively to challenges of maintaining homes that are well over 100 years old.

Policy Initiatives Supported by Commanders' Task Force

Ensuring Firearms Certification for Returning Veterans

The shooting exercise will not be required for veterans seeking firearms safety certification. The certification also is extended to service members mobilized into federal service preventing service members from losing their certification.

Preferred State Contracting for Veteran-owned Business

Veteran owned businesses would be included as a preferred group by the State of Minnesota in awarding state contracts.

Other Issues CTF Supports

We, the Commanders' Task Force, also offer our support to the Minnesota Department of Military Affairs. The measures we support are:

- Establishing the State Reintegration Program - Beyond the Yellow Ribbon
- Establishing the State Achievement Ribbon
- Armory Maintenance Program
- General Support Base Appropriation Increase
- Payment of Special Assessments levied against military facilities
- Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Fund at Camp Ripley
- Incentive Refinement
- Declaration of 148th Fighter Wing Fire Fighters as essential employees
- "Support Our Troops" License Plate refinement
- Increase funding for Minnesota Military Museum
- Preservation of Historic Flags

2006-2007 COMMANDERS

American Legion

John Cox

Military Order of the Purple Heart

Clayton Irmen

American EX-POW's

Veterans of Foreign Wars

AMVETS

Gene Degier

Vietnam Veterans of America

Maynard Kaderlik

Disabled American Veterans

Dan Hill

Jewish War Veterans

Sid Schmuckler

Marine Corps League

John Mauritz