

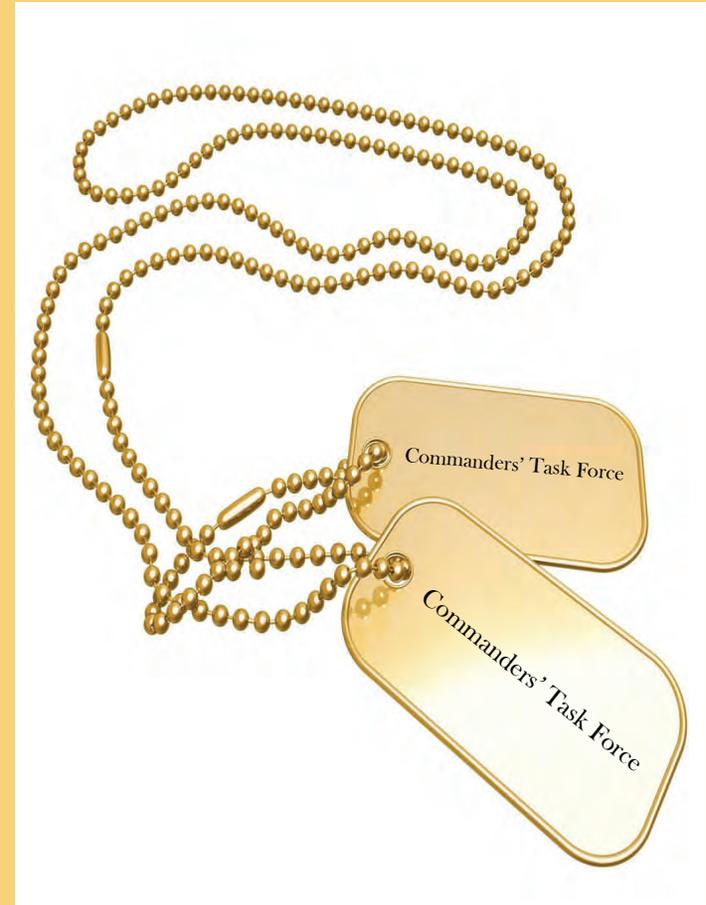
LinkVet is a toll-free, one-stop customer service line for all Minnesota veterans. The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, along with Crisis Connection, will provide information referral, immediate crisis intervention and psychological counseling 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

If you, or a veteran you know, have questions about benefits or need assistance, please call LinkVet at: 1-888-546-5838.



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(546-5838)

MINNESOTA COMMANDERS' TASK FORCE



2009 Legislative Agenda

Who is the Commanders' Task Force?

The Minnesota Commanders' Task Force is comprised of the nine Congressionally Chartered Veterans Service Organizations listed below. As the elected leaders of each respective organization, we meet regularly to discuss the issues affecting veterans and their families.



American
Ex-Prisoners of War
David Claypool
Commander



American Legion
Tom Conway
Commander



AMVETS
Allen Weyaus
Commander



Disabled American
Veterans
Dean Aschman
Commander



Jewish War
Veterans
Sid Schmuckler
Commander



Marine Corps
League
Bernie Thompson
Commandant



Military Order of
the Purple Heart
Richard Jenkins Sr.
Commander



Veterans of
Foreign Wars
Stan Kowalski
Commander



Vietnam Veterans
of America
Maynard Kaderlik
President

VSO Legislative Designees

American Legion

John Cox
658 Echo Shores Court
Mahtomedi, MN
Cell: 612-210-7156
genjohncox@comcast.net

American EX-POW

Dick Carroll
4171 Starbridge Court
Eagan, MN 55122

AMVETS

Michael Cook
20 West 12th St.
3rd Floor
Veteran Service Bldg.
St. Paul, MN 55155
cookkitt@aol.com

Disabled American Veterans

Hank Sadler
28926 W Lake Dr.
Madison Lake, MN 56063
Home: 507-931-9331
h.sadler@mchsi.com

Jewish War Veterans

Tom Shaw
2285 Stewart Ave.
Apt. 2224
St. Paul, MN 55116

Marine Corps League

Xavier Gagnon
22 E 22nd St. #503
Minneapolis, MN 55404

Military Order of the Purple Heart

William Wroolie
1111 Lakeview Lane
Brainerd, MN 56401
Cell: 218-330-9504
wawroolie@charter.net

Veterans of Foreign Wars

Al Loehr
VFW Room B-1
20 West 12th St.
St. Paul, MN 55155
Work: 651-291-1757
mnvfw@qwestoffice.net

Vietnam Veterans of America

Maynard Kaderlik
11200 Shieldsville Blvd.
Montgomery, MN 56069
Work: 612-609-4107

CTF Members

American Legion

Tom Conway
PO Box 71
Argyle, MN 56713
Cell: 218-201-0672
toma406@hotmail.com

American EX-POW

David Claypool
PO Box 38
Hampton, MN 55031
Cell: 612-245-2247
claypool@bevcomm.net

AMVETS

Allen Weyaus
PO Box 647
Onamia, MN 56359
Cell: 320-384-7743
kellymnguyen@comcast.net

Disabled American Veterans

Dean Ascheman
20 W. 12th Street, 3rd Floor
Veteran Service Bldg.
St. Paul, MN 55155
Work: 651-291-1212
dean@davmn.org
dascheman1@frontiernet.net

Jewish War Veterans

Sid Schmuckler
1101 Sibley Memorial Hwy,
Apt. #609
St. Paul, MN 55118
Home: 651-454-6541

Marine Corps League

Bernie Thompson
410 McKinley Ave.
North Mankato, MN 56003
Home: 507-388-6404
bdthomps@charter.net

Military Order of the Purple Heart

Richard Jenkins, Sr.
2250 Larry Lane
Newport, MN 55055 -1518
Cell: 612-250-2183
jenksgrace2001@usfamily.net

Veterans of Foreign Wars

Stan Kowalski
VFW Room B-1
20 West 12th St.
St. Paul, MN 55155
Work: 651-291-1757
mnvfw@qwestoffice.net

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11200 Shieldsville Blvd.
Montgomery, MN 56069
Work: 612-609-4107

Purpose of Booklet

The purpose of this booklet is to highlight veteran focused issues we believe state legislators will be addressing during the 2009 legislative session. Each page identifies a veteran issue along with a statement of support from the Task Force.

We first want to say "Thank You". Thank you for all the support you have given veterans and current serving members of the Armed Forces with your positive votes and authorship of veteran legislation.

What the state Legislature, in partnership with the Governor, has done for all the veterans in the great state of Minnesota is unprecedented. As we travel to other states and meet with our fellow VSO members, we resoundingly hear how Minnesota is far ahead of other states in benefits and services. Minnesota is envied for what it does for its men and women who have worn a uniform representing one of the branches of the United States Armed Forces.

We provide legislators with this booklet so that throughout the session you can remind yourselves of the important work that has been done for veterans and how we cannot turn back and undo any of the vital changes to veterans benefits. We provide this booklet to remind legislators of the 2009 legislative priorities for Minnesota's Veterans Service Organizations.

The Commanders' Task Force does understand the difficult task facing the 2009 Legislature, and we appreciate the tough choices each of you will have to make to ensure Minnesota's budget is structurally sound for Fiscal Years 2010-2011.

Request

Keep MDVA funding whole. The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs has built a strong structure of programs and services to support its mission of serving Minnesota's veterans and their families. The Department fulfills its mission by providing proven and innovative programs and services to maximize quality of life; collaborating with Veterans Service Organizations; implementing timely, cost effective delivery of benefits and services; providing high-quality health care to those in its care; evaluating care and services to be responsive to changing needs; representing clients pursuing claims for federal veterans benefits; offering dignified and compassionate committal services at the Minnesota State Veterans Cemetery; and, promoting effective communication and management of people, technology, business processes, and financial resources.

Support

The Commanders' Task Force urges legislators to keep MDVA's funding whole. The Department's programs are non-duplicative of other benefits and services provided by the federal government or counties. The State Soldiers Assistance Program provides direct, emergency financial assistance to veterans, their dependents and survivors. In the first two quarters of FY09, with financial assistance from this program 260 veteran families were able to stay in their homes. As a direct result of the Veterans Service Organizations' Claims Offices and the Department's Claims and Outreach offices, Minnesota's Veterans received just over \$1 billion in compensation, pension, education benefits and medical care.

Fiscal Impact

The Veterans Services division General Fund biennial budget is \$36.5 million. The Veteran Health Care division General Fund biennial budget is \$88.4 million. The American Legion, AM-VETS, Disabled American Veterans, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Vietnam Veterans of America, and Veterans of Foreign Wars receive pass through funding from MDVA.

Veteran Legislation

The Commanders' Task Force supports the following legislation:

SF109 (Lourey) / HF 161 (Thissen): This bill has several provisions for emergency medical services programs. The Commanders' Task Force supports the veterans paramedic apprenticeship program provision. The cost for FY2010 is \$200,000; however, the funds are appropriated from the Cooper/Sams volunteer ambulance trust so no funding from the state's General Fund is required. The program will implement a veterans paramedic apprenticeship program to reintegrate returning military medics into Minnesota's workforce in the field of paramedic and emergency services, thereby guaranteeing returning military medics gainful employment with livable wages and benefits.

SF199 (Skogen) / HF452 (Murdock): This bill creates a Gold Star License plate for the surviving spouse, biological or adoptive child, sibling, parent, or grandparent of a person who has died while serving honorably in active service. The cost of the plate is covered with a \$10 fee to those wanting a plate, with the exception of the spouse or parent of the military member.

SF885 (Erickson Ropes) / HF541 (Juhnke): This bill removes the time limit for a surviving spouse to receive the market value exclusion for property tax purposes for veterans with 70% - 100% level of service-connected disabilities. Upon remarriage by the surviving spouse, the person's eligibility for the market value exclusion does terminate.

SF861 (Gerlach)/HF557 (Severson)/HF715 (Newton): This bill directs the Commissioner of Administration to provide veteran-owned small businesses, including those owned by disabled veterans, with up to a six percent preference in the amount bid on state contracts for certain goods and services being procured by state agencies.

Request

Study for Medicare. Senate File 502 and House File 629 requires the Commissioner of Veterans Affairs to apply to the federal government for certification of the Veterans Homes for participation as providers in the Medicare program. The bills mandate that the Veterans Homes in Fergus Falls, Luverne, and Silver Bay apply by October 1, 2009; and the Veterans Home in Minneapolis by July 1, 2010.

Oppose

The Commanders' Task Force strongly opposes the time line placed on the Homes. The Commanders' Task Force does support appropriating money for the Department to conduct a study on the implications, increased costs for the Homes, and cost savings, if any, for the state by having the Homes become Medicare certified.

Fiscal Impact

The fiscal impact to the Homes is unknown at this time. The Homes would need funds to remodel to become Medicare Life/Safety compliant. The Commanders' Task Force recommends \$250,000 for the Homes to conduct a complete study on the impact of implementing Medicare.

Request

Repeal Sunset Date for the Higher Education Veterans Assistance Program. The Higher Education Veterans Assistance Program supports Minnesota's higher education campuses in creating on-campus Veterans Resource Centers for the purpose of providing an environment where veterans, military members and their families feel welcome; they interact with other students who are veterans, military members and/or their family members in order to gain support and encouragement from others with similar backgrounds, experiences, and circumstances.

The campus coordinators work with colleges to enhance or develop "veteran friendly" policies and procedures which may include: payment deferments while awaiting properly applied for educational benefits; military transfer credit; veteran resident status; registration – flexibility and withdrawals due to deployments; provide information about services and resources, as well as referrals to appropriate service providers; and, facilitate communication between departments and staff who regularly interact with veterans - admissions, financial aid, counseling, disability services, career services.

Support

The Commanders' Task Force supports MDVA's request and the Governor's recommendation to repeal the June 30, 2011 sunset date for the Higher Education Veterans Assistance Program. This program needs to be permanent in order to meet the anticipated increase in the number of veterans and their families seeking education benefits as a result of the new federal Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008.

Fiscal Impact

For the continuation of this program, \$1.050 million is being sought in each year for FY2012-2013. The program is funded through June 30, 2011. The program has 57 operational sites and has served over 5,200 veterans (unduplicated count) at Minnesota's higher education institutions.

Request

Information Technology. When the Veterans Homes Board merged with the Department of Veterans Affairs in November 2007, the Department realized the immediate need to combine the IT platforms from two independent agencies into one operating system; however, the lack of updated technology for the Veterans Homes has impaired the Department's ability to interact technologically as one agency.

The recommendation is seeking to hire additional IT staff. The most pressing of positions is an Information Systems Manager who can make recommendations for evaluation of all wiring; determine the advisability of installing Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) at all work sites; evaluate work site wireless capabilities; develop a system for central purchasing, inventory control and licensing for IT needs; and develop a computer replacement system since 80 percent of the computers within the Department have not been replaced within the past three years.

Support

The Commanders' Task Force supports the Department of Veterans Affairs need for a funding increase for Information Technology. The recommendation will allow the Department of Veterans Affairs to enhance the information system's integrity, ensure confidentiality of information, and increase system availability.

Fiscal Impact

This recommendation is an increase of \$980 thousand in each year of the FY10-11 biennium to support the information technology needs of the Department.

Request

Repair and Betterments. The Veterans Homes program operates five separate campuses across Minnesota - including 44 separate buildings totaling over 800,000 square feet. Of the five Veterans Homes campuses, three of the homes are located in aging buildings which require special repairs and modifications to maintain their integrity and comply with standards of care for elderly residents. Any funding received to facilitate repairs will be spent on projects by priority of need. The requested funding will be used for the repair of interior building deficiencies; provide updates for life/safety compliance; fund replacement of ongoing wear-related items like floors and ceilings; and provide routine mechanical repairs.

Support

The Commanders' Task Force supports this initiative as requested by the Governor's FY10-11 budget. The repair and maintenance of aging buildings is critical for the life safety of the residents in each Home.

Fiscal Impact

The Governor recommends a General Fund appropriation to the Department of Veterans Affairs of \$2.5 million in FY2010-2011 for Repair and Betterment projects at the five state run Veterans Homes. The Commanders' Task Force supports the Governor's recommended levels of funding.

Request

Minnesota Veterans Homes Maintenance of Current Service Levels. The continuing improvements of the Minnesota Veterans Homes has been very positive. Increased demand for services continues to place pressure on the Minnesota Veterans Homes system, and Minnesota's veteran population continues to change. The changes add new complexities to the demand for beds and services provided by the Minnesota Veterans Homes.

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 supplemental funding request. The Department continues to review contracts and explore more cost effective ways to obtain goods and services, but it is no longer possible to absorb cost increases without reducing the quality of life and standard of care for residents at the facilities.

Support

The Commanders' Task Force feels strongly that the Legislature must approve funding to maintain current service levels for the Veterans Homes. It is imperative that the Homes are equipped to manage the fundamental needs of the Home without sacrificing the level of care. The Legislature must be aware of the changing needs of each Minnesota Veterans Home and the positive impact MDVA's leadership has provided.

Fiscal Impact

The Governor recommends an increase of \$1.8 million in FY2010 and \$3.4 million in FY2011 to the Department of Veterans Affairs for the Veterans Homes program to maintain current service levels. However, the Commanders' Task Force is recommending funding of \$9 million for the biennium for the Homes to stay current within the home industry standards for the cost of doing business.

Request

Hastings Mental Health Program. The Hastings Veterans Home provides 200 domiciliary beds for veterans meeting the requirements for care. Domiciliary care is a residential rehabilitation program that provides rehabilitative and long-term psychosocial care for veterans having a medical need for care at the board and care level. The Hastings resident population often requires ongoing treatment and therapy for mental health and/or substance abuse disorders. Dual diagnosis (mental health and substance abuse) services are available to veterans with the goal of reintegration into society.

The Hastings Veterans Home provides the following health care services: 24-hour on campus medical services, dental and eye emergent care, pharmacy services, a licensed psychologist, dietetic and nutritional services, social services, therapeutic recreation, and corrective therapy. The Hastings Veterans Home also provides the following special services: sobriety maintenance, vocational rehabilitation services, mental health services, educational services, and transportation provided to medical appointments.

Support

The Commanders' Task Force supports MDVA's request and the Governor's recommendation to increase the mental health professional hours at the Hastings Veterans Home campus.

Fiscal Impact

To expand mental health services at Hastings, \$220 thousand is needed in each year of the biennium. These funds will allow the Hastings Veterans Home to expand their mental health program to meet the increased need for psychiatric care by providing annual mental health training for staff and hiring one licensed psychiatrist and one psychiatric nurse practitioner.