


Minnesota Commanders' Task Force 2015 Legislative Agenda

THE VOICE OF 367,000
MINNESOTA VETERANS



CTF



About the Minnesota Commanders' Task Force

The Minnesota Commanders' Task Force (CTF) was created in 1988 and is comprised of elected commanders and appointed adjutants of nine congressionally-chartered Veterans Service Organizations in the state of Minnesota. Key functions of this group include:

- Developing a united veterans legislative agenda and actively advocating for it before state and elected officials.
- Serving as a non-partisan advisory group to the commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA), the Governor and Legislators on veterans' issues in the state.
- Working to seek and form Veterans Service Organization partnerships in program development (for example, the state's Veterans Day program).

Member Organizations



American Ex-Prisoners of War



Marine Corps League



American Legion



Military Order of the Purple Heart



AMVETS



Veterans of Foreign Wars



Disabled American Veterans



Vietnam Veterans of America



Jewish War Veterans

From the Chair of the CTF:

As Chair of the Commanders' Task Force —“The Voice of Minnesota Veterans,” it is with great responsibility that I define for you my “Command Philosophy.”

The noted Harvard professor and leadership theorist, Bill George, in one of many works once observed that:

“Leaders are defined by their values and their character. The values of authentic leaders are shaped by personal beliefs, developed through study introspection and consultation with others, and a life time of experiences. These values define the leader’s moral compass.”

I find this statement to be very true, and in short, I am and have been working for and associated with veterans and their interests for decades. I have watched family members and friends deal with the aftermath of our World War II and Korean veterans. I have seen the treatment of our Vietnam veterans. I have been witness to veterans created in countless conflict contingencies and wars such as the actions in Grenada, Panama, Kuwait, Bosnia, Somalia, Haiti, Afghanistan and Iraq. To this day we have troops—those who are or will be veterans—deployed across the globe creating peace, combating brutal enemies and protecting U.S. interests, and so it is through this lens and the work I have done for our veterans throughout these periods of conflict, that I will lead the Commanders' Task Force to ensure the veterans of Minnesota receive the benefits they have earned.

We must never forget the enduring words of George Washington who stated:

“The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive veterans of early wars were treated and appreciated by our nation.”

As both a state Commander of the American Legion and the Chair of the Commanders' Task Force, I will work diligently on behalf of all veterans as outlined in my vision, goals and objectives:

Vision: Create a better quality of life for Minnesota veterans

Goals: Enhance the education, employment, healthcare, housing, and the earned recognition and preferential treatment of all veterans in the state of Minnesota.

Objectives:

- Continue to support and further efforts to enhance State Veterans Home services and healthcare capacity
- Ensure Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs' budget is robust enough to support the contemporary needs of Minnesota veterans of all eras relative to programming and services
- Continue to support veteran housing efforts across the state in both the public and private sectors
- Ensure Veterans Preference law is fair and equitable for both veterans and employers
- Ensure Minnesota veterans have every possible opportunity to enhance their education, skills and training
- Continue to support all efforts to ensure veterans are employed
- Continue to support efforts to ensure Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs facilities are maintained so needed services and care can be delivered
- Continue to support Minnesota's current military service members
- Continue to support all efforts to make Minnesota a more “veteran-friendly state”

My willingness and desire to assist veterans and those who better the lives of veterans is unwavering. Do not hesitate to call upon me to provide insight, education or counsel on any issues relative to Minnesota veterans.

In closing, I would like to remind everyone of our important and ongoing responsibility toward our veterans. As stated by President Abraham Lincoln, we are *“To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan.”* This is our obligation and our guiding principle.



Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs Funding and Mission

The CTF urges lawmakers to continue support and funding of MDVA. As the nation enters its 14th year of war fighting and as we watched the Federal VA issues unfold, the role and mission of the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs has never been more important. The CTF urges the legislature to place priority on MDVA and to enable them through proper funding, the flexibility to support veterans as needed.

The CTF has watched the recent evolution of the department since the merger of its Programs and Services Division with the Veterans Homes in 2007. Many necessary improvements have taken place; however, it is the estimate of the CTF that more are needed to ensure effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability into the future. The CTF believes there is still room for improvement in the realm of professional staffing throughout the agency. The CTF supports MDVA's workforce development plans, full funding for the Little Falls Cemetery and ongoing maintenance funding for all its buildings.

Guardianship Program Removal from MN Statute



The CTF supports the removal of the Guardianship program that is contained in MN Statute. The Guardianship program allows for a district court to appoint the Commissioner of Veterans Affairs as guardian of the estate of a veteran or dependent if necessary. The Commissioner manages the accounts and all transactions that occur under that guardianship.

At its height, the program had 3 full-time employees and 1 full-time clerical staff person.

The agency was allowed to take a 5% fee on the income of any court-appointed client (averaging \$2K-\$3K per client/month). However, as non-court-appointed cases grew more common, the program became unsustainable due to a decrease in incoming fees. The guardianship program accepted its last clients in 2004, and the last cases were reassigned between 2005 and 2006, effectively shuttering the program.

Removing the program from MN Statute would eliminate an unneeded service, and allow the MN Department of Veterans Affairs to clean the books in order to best serve the state's veteran population. Veterans or families in need of help to manage their estates may do so by seeking a private fiduciary.

July Hire a Veteran Month

The CTF supports changing the May-designated "Hire a Veteran Month" to the month of July. It is suggested that the month of July would better accommodate the initiative to hire veterans. Removing distractions and prior engagements would free up veterans to make it to employment fairs, job interviews, and focus on tasks that would assist in their hiring.

The current "Hire a Veteran Month" of May coincides with a number of other calendar events, to include Memorial Day weekend, and most high school and college graduation dates. Shifting "Hire a Veteran Month" to July would allow state and private events and promotions to be more visible, and therefore more successful in the end goal of helping veterans gain employment.

Amend the "Support Our Troops" Fund



The CTF supports expanding authorized uses of the Support Our Troops Fund and placing the funds in an account that accrues interest. This proposal would amend MN Statute to provide MDVA grant-making authority and reclassify the fund account type. This is funding achieved through the sale of license plates, collected by the Department of Transportation, split between MDVA and the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) and then transferred to the respective agencies. MDVA would like to broaden eligibility criteria for whom it may award SOT grants. This would allow MDVA to award the Support Our Troops license plate funds through grants to additional veteran groups and support networks who have proved themselves legitimate and worthy of assistance. Additionally,

MDVA would like the account type reclassified to 2304 (Gift and Donations) funds in order to accrue interest on the balance.

Currently, the requirements for SOT fund awards are limited by their amount, and to whom they may be awarded. Additionally, the statute provides for four ways in which the funds can be disbursed/used within MDVA. Outside of the approved options, there are many outstanding causes that these funds could be used for. As was the original intent and development of the fund, the account should be used for as many veteran needs/issues/programming in Minnesota as the Commissioner deems appropriate.

Vehicle Reg. Tax Exemption for Disabled Veterans

The CTF supports a vehicle registration tax exemption for 100% service connected veterans. This proposal would amend MN Statute in order to exempt 100% service connected veterans from the motor vehicle registration tax. Disabled veterans who are 100% service connected often require modified vehicles in order to conduct daily living and work related activities. With such a high disability rating, those veterans are often at a disadvantage with their healthy counterparts.

The CTF believes the best way to implement this is to have MDVA certify the 100% service connection, and in doing so, it could count the number of recipients. That information can then become public as requested. This could affect 9581 veterans or 2.6% of the state's veteran population – a sliver of the greater state population, but one that is at a tremendous disadvantage compared to their healthier counterparts. This initiative would reduce income disparities for a small portion of disabled veterans making them better off.

Minnesota GI Bill Expansion

The CTF supports expansions to the MN GI Bill. This proposal would amend MN Statute to expand the use of the Minnesota GI Bill, matching the flexibility of federal Chapter 33 (GI Bill) benefits. Currently, paying for school applications, exams, licensing, and other certifications using the Minnesota GI Bill is not allowed. By allowing a broader use of the Minnesota GI Bill, the veterans could use their benefits at their discretion and in the most appropriate way. Additionally, current law precludes the veteran from using the benefits for their spouse or children, even if the veteran has no intention of using them otherwise.

This proposal would solve the problem in two ways. First, it would allow for benefits to be used on application fees, exams, licensing, or other certifications and expenses accrued in the process of self-betterment. Secondly, the proposal would allow benefits to be transferred to a spouse or children of an eligible veteran. Broadening the approved use of the Minnesota GI Bill would add value to Minnesota communities, and promote the welfare of veterans and their families.



Amend Expedited Licensing for Veterans & Spouses



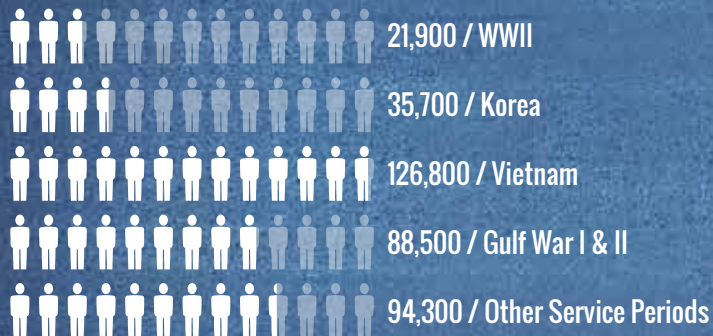
The CTF supports amending MN Statute 197.4552. This proposal would amend MN Statute concerning veteran and veteran spouse expedited licensing by including the definition of "veteran" (as per M.S. 197.447), and clarifying that eligible spouses may also qualify if they are the spouse of a veteran who is 30 percent or more service connected, or if they are the unmarried spouse of a deceased veteran.

Under current law, spouses of deceased or disabled veterans do not qualify for expedited licensing benefits. In the case of a single parent widow or widower, or the spouse of a disabled veteran, that individual may be the primary breadwinner of the family. With the unique challenges that come with those situations, those individuals may benefit by any available means to expedite licensing requirements. This would help in avoiding a break in employment or loss of income.

Veterans Preference

The CTF supports general improvements and clarification for Veterans Preference in hiring. Additionally the CTF supports funding necessary to ensure Veteran Owned Small Business can be certified at state level. In the 2014 legislative session law was passed to create a mechanism for veterans with small businesses to get certified at the state level through the Department of Administration in order to compete for state contracts however there was no funding allocated to implement that change. The CTF urges the legislature to include necessary funding this year to ensure proper implementation of the current law.

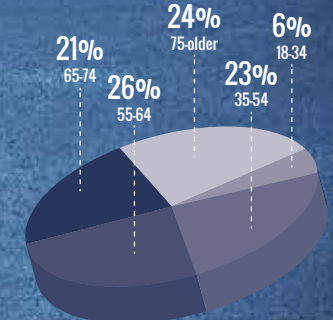
Number of MN Veterans by Period of Service



% of Veteran Population



MN Veteran Age Distribution





Thank You

for supporting Minnesota
Veterans and members
of the Armed Forces!

- Minnesota Commanders' Task Force



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