

MINNESOTA

COMMANDERS' TASK FORCE



2010 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA



Message to our elected officials

The Minnesota Commanders' Task Force (CTF) extends a warm *“thank you”* to Minnesota's governor and legislators for all the support given to veterans and active duty members of the armed forces.

The work of Minnesota's elected officials on veterans and active duty armed forces issues over the past several years has been unprecedented. As CTF members travel to other states and meet with fellow veteran service organizations, they resoundingly hear how Minnesota is far ahead of other states in providing vital benefits and services.

The CTF has prepared this booklet to remind legislators of the 2010 legislative priorities for the organization.

Given Minnesota's (and the nation's) continued budget challenges, CTF members understand that difficult funding decisions will have to be made. We ask that our elected officials continue to support programs that provide assistance and services to veterans, and look forward to working together over the course of the legislative session.

About the Minnesota Commanders' Task Force

The CTF was created in 1988 and is comprised of elected leaders from the nine congressionally-chartered veterans service organizations. Key functions of the CTF include:

- Developing a unified veterans legislative agenda and actively advocating for it before state and federal elected officials,
- Acting as an advisory board to the commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, and
- Working to seek and form veterans service organization partnerships in program development (for example, the state's Veterans Day program).

Commanders' Task Force Member Organizations

American Ex-Prisoners of War

American Legion

AMVETS

Disabled American Veterans

Jewish War Veterans

Marine Corps League

Military Order of the Purple Heart

Veterans of Foreign Wars

Vietnam Veterans of America

CAPITAL INVESTMENT PROJECTS

The CTF supports funding for the following projects:

- Minneapolis Veteran's Home Building 17 – \$9.45 million to rebuild a 72-bed, single-occupancy, “person-centered care model” structure.
- Luverne Entrance Enclosure – \$450,000 to enclose the front entrance of the Luverne Veterans Home. The enclosure would provide protection from the elements, and will enable staff to load and unload residents in a more controlled, safer environment.
- Veterans Homes Asset Preservation – \$6.49 million to renovate and upgrade more than 50 buildings statewide, including: roof replacement, tuckpointing, sanitary sewer repairs, mechanical and electrical updates.
- Military Affairs Asset Preservation – \$9.9 million for life safety, ADA improvements and asset preservation at military facilities, including armories and training and community centers (TACCS), statewide.
- \$5.5 million to renovate the Cedar Street National Guard Armory on the State Capitol campus.
- \$1.1 million to renovate the troop support activity facility at Camp Ripley.

HIGHER EDUCATION VETERANS PROGRAM

The CTF supports repeal of the June 30, 2011 sunset date for the Higher Education Veterans Assistance Program. This program has created on-campus Veterans Resource Centers throughout the state, providing an environment where veterans, military members and their families can gain support and encouragement from others with similar backgrounds, experiences, and circumstances.

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; providing information about services and resources, as well as referrals to appropriate service providers; and, facilitating communication between departments and staff who regularly interact with veterans - admissions, financial aid, counseling, disability services, career services.

This program is funded through June 30, 2011. Making it permanent would require \$1.050 million in funding per year.

HOLD MDVA PROGRAMS AND SERVICES HARMLESS FROM BUDGET CUTS

The CTF supports maintaining current funding levels for the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA). MDVA has built a strong structure of programs and services to support its mission of serving Minnesota's veterans and their families. 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.

Total FY 10-11 General Fund spending for MDVA Programs and Services is \$29.304 million. The American Legion, AMVETS, 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.

HOME MARKET VALUE PROPERTY TAX EXCLUSION EXTENSION

The CTF supports legislation that repeals the time limit for a surviving spouse to receive the market value exclusion for property tax purposes, for veterans with 70 percent to 100 percent level of service-connected disabilities. Under current law, when a veteran passes away the market value reduction is applied to the property for the balance of that calendar year, and for the next full calendar year. After that, property taxes are based on the normal assessed value of the property.

This exclusion has been of great benefit to World War II, Korean and Vietnam War veterans. The CTF supports extending this exclusion to the surviving spouse until he or she remarries, sells the home, passes away, or no longer homesteads the property.

EXCLUDE COUNTY TAXING AUTHORITY FOR CVSO'S FROM LEVY LIMITS

The CTF supports legislation that allows counties to levy for County Veteran Service Office (CVSO) functions. Under current law, (Minnesota Statute 197.60, Subd. 4) counties are allowed to levy a tax to *"defray the estimated cost of all salaries and expenses necessarily incident to the performance by the veterans service officer of duties..."* However, Minnesota Statute 275.71, Subd 1 states, *"Notwithstanding any other provision of law or municipal charter to the contrary which authorize ad valorem taxes in excess of the limits established by sections 275.70 to 275.74, the provisions of this section apply to local governmental units for all purposes other than those for which special levies and special assessments are made."* The Department of Revenue's interpretation is that Minnesota Statute 275.71 takes precedence. It is the belief of the CTF that legislators intended to have CVSO functions funded, and supports clarification of these conflicting statutes.

VETERANS HOME FUNDING

The CTF strongly urges the Legislature to hold Minnesota's Veterans Homes harmless from budget cuts. The Homes strive to provide high-quality care to every resident in a therapeutic, highly adaptive and dignified environment. In addition to current operations, a 21-bed specialty care/Alzheimer's unit at the Fergus Falls Veterans Home is scheduled for completion in late 2010. This is ahead of schedule due to federal AARA funding. New funding for operational costs will be needed. If funding is not provided, the State will be required to reimburse the federal VA for its 65 percent share of construction costs.

Likewise, the Minneapolis Veterans Home Adult Day Care Program (which received the federal VA 65 percent match) is expected to be completed in April of 2011. New funding is needed to cover operational costs of this program.

CVSO WORKING GROUP

The CTF supports amendments to CVSO statutes, as developed and approved by the CVSO Working Group. Key changes included in the Group's recommendation include: improving state oversight of CVSOs, clarifying training policies, requiring CVSOs to be certified by the MDVA, additional data collection/reporting, requiring the MDVA to set performance goals, and identifying best practices for enhancement grants.

VETERANS HOME STUDY

The CTF supports construction of a new Veterans Home in Minnesota if key issues are adequately addressed, including: appropriating long-term funding for ongoing operating costs, and locating the Home in an area that will provide the best possible benefits to Veterans.

VETERANS TREATMENT COURTS

The CTF supports the Judicial Branch and its partners in working towards establishing Veterans Treatment Courts (VTC) both as a pilot program in Hennepin County and throughout the state. These courts will provide an important step in helping Minnesota's veterans facing challenges reintegrating into society after military deployments, especially when some face additional complications like Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Veterans benefit from restorative justice by a legal system that recognizes their unique issues and problems, and works appropriately and fairly to address them.

"BEYOND THE YELLOW RIBBON" PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

Serving as the model for the national initiative, Minnesota's "Beyond the Yellow Ribbon (BTYR)" provides vital resources to service members and their families before, during and after deployments. **The CTF supports legislative and community-based initiatives involved with BTYR,** including extending the requirements for Veteran Resource Centers on college campuses, providing benefits to military members, veterans and retirees, the First Lady's Military Families Initiative, sustaining the tuition reimbursement program for the Guard, and the base programs and funding that rely on the continued support of the legislative and executive branches.

CURRENT DEPLOYMENTS

The CTF extends its support and best wishes to the men and women of Minnesota's National Guard that have been – and will be – deployed, and asks for continued legislative support.

In 2009, the Minnesota National Guard performed superbly all three of its missions. For the federal mission, more than 2,000 soldiers and airmen deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. For its state and community missions, the Minnesota National Guard fought back the flood waters of the Red River, assisted local authorities with search and rescue, civil support, counterdrug and forest fire suppression. As always, the Minnesota National Guard stands ready to assist civil authorities throughout the state of Minnesota.

Starting this February, eight Minnesota National Guard units will return to Minnesota following overseas deployments: 34th Infantry Division (1,100 soldiers), 1st Battalion, 151st Field Artillery (550 soldiers) E Battery, 151st Field Artillery (90 soldiers) Operational Mentoring Liaison Team (13 soldiers), Operational Support Airlift Detachment 39 (5 soldiers), 114th Transportation Company (170 soldiers), 204th Area Support Medical Company (80 soldiers) 148th Fighter Wing (60 airmen). The CTF joins the veterans community and entire state in welcoming them home!

*Thank you for supporting
Minnesota Veterans and
active duty members of the
Armed Forces!*

~Minnesota Commanders' Task Force

