



Appalachian
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Executive Summary of Unique Practices from Selected Offices of Veterans Affairs





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Background

The Appalachian Transportation Institute (ATI) at Marshall University designed a study for the West Virginia Department of Veterans Assistance to discover how other states were providing services to veterans. The Cabinet Secretary was specifically interested in how other states were:

- Identifying and enrolling veterans to receive benefits and services
- Operating veterans cemeteries
- Managing marketing and outreach activities
- Identifying future issues on the horizon

Telephone interviews were conducted from February-March 2018. The offices selected included the border states of West Virginia: Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia, as well as eight other states with veteran populations similar to WV: Connecticut, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Mexico and Utah. Fourteen interviews were targeted and 11 were completed. We were unable to schedule Kentucky, Connecticut and Utah.

Each interview was structured around a series of questions which were distributed in advance to each office. Dr. Diana Long, PI, conducted the interviews, and Garret Weaver, GA, sat in on the calls as his schedule would allow. Each state office determined who would participate in the interview.

This summary describes the unique and interesting information from those interviews for assisting the West Virginia Department of Veterans Assistance in strategic planning to better serve the veterans living in West Virginia. A copy of this summary will be distributed to participating states and linked on the Appalachian Transportation Institute website: www.muati.org.

Section 1: Intake

West Virginia was interested in how other states organize and manage the operation of serving their veterans. A majority of the states interviewed are organized similar to West Virginia in that they operate Veterans' Service Offices (VSOs) around the state. The hours of operation vary dependent upon the population density in the area. Most VSOs accept appointments but also try to serve walk ins.

Unique Structures

- Iowa state law requires that every county operates a VSO. The state sends \$9,600 to each county. Lottery funds are used to operate the Veterans Trust Fund. Applications for funds (processed by the state) may be used for honor guards, emergency funds for dental needs, automobile expense, etc.
- In addition to field offices, Kansas operates two full time mobile units that travel to community events and set up on parking lots at grocery stores, shopping malls, etc. The mobile units are equipped with laptops, printers, scanners, etc., so data can be processed from any location.
- Maine has a Coordinated Veterans Assistance Fund that provides funds to various veteran service organizations. The state has no authority or oversight of the services.
- Mississippi has both state and county operated VSOs. The VSOs are located within 50 miles of all veterans.

- Virginia's organization has a leadership team comprised of a director, two district managers and a training coordinator. Over the past four years, they closed their funding gap and reorganized and established a Benefits Center of Excellence, which is staffed by appeal specialists and claims specialists.
- Nebraska and Ohio's VSOs operate on a county level supported by local property taxes. The states have no authority or oversight of the offices.
- New Mexico created a Health Care Coordination Division that manages the VA, state and local health care alliances. This has been especially helpful to the VSO in handling technical medical issues.
- Pennsylvania operates the most complex system of the states interviewed. They award VSO grants (\$2.3 million) to service organizations to pay salaries for accredited VSOs scattered throughout the state. They also support nine employees in the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh areas, and there are also 67 county directors providing services.

Records and Software

West Virginia is interested in standardizing software and records. Standardized software between the states, counties and service organizations is rare.

- Veterans Information Management System (VIMS) is common. Several states indicated they are considering upgrading to new products, especially if it would be similar to those used by the American Legion or VFW.
- Kansas uses Micropact (<https://www.micropact.com/>).
- Virginia uses Benevets (<https://www.benevets.com/PublicPages/HomeNew.aspx>) and has completed their e-file initiative so the offices are paperless.
- Maine reported an intensive selection process to identify a system that would maintain all records on one secure system. They wanted a system that would connect everyone, not just a claims management process. They selected a Leidos product, IQ (Intranet Quorum) (<https://intranetquorum.com/>).
- Nebraska and Pennsylvania use VetraSpec (<http://www.dataspecinc.com/vetraspec.php>). Nebraska allows the county-based VSOs to buy into the system. Pennsylvania paid for the software and the VSOs are responsible for maintaining it.
- New Mexico uses a product by LexisNexis (<https://www.lexisnexis.com/en-us/gateway.page>).

Other

Three other issues were raised and are worth noting.

- Wait time is an issue with the clinics. In addition to their new Health Coordinator, New Mexico has monthly meetings with the Medical Centers and field offices to increase problem solving and communications.
- Kansas noted they do not take the Power of Attorney to represent a veteran when filing a claim. The state does not have the resources to follow through on appeals. They recommend using the American Legion or VFW.
- Virginia has documented the economic impact of benefits awarded to veterans. Included in this data is documentation of money put back into the state economy when disability claims are awarded and veterans are able to move off of Medicaid and onto federal VA benefits.

Section 2. Transportation of Veterans to Medical Facilities

Three of the 11 states interviewed provide funds/support to transport veterans to medical facilities (excluding residential homes), but none of the states provide support at the same level as West Virginia.

- Maryland purchases vans for use by the veteran's home, but the contractor who operates the facility is responsible for all of the transportation. There are six busses and four vans.
- In Ohio, the counties transport veterans to VA medical appointments. Some have vehicle assets, while others do not. Some counties contract or used shared services such as the Department of Aging. Some counties provide bus tickets.
- Pennsylvania awards grants (\$336,000) to Disabled American Veterans (DAV) to purchase vans, and the DAV controls the schedule, transportation and inventory. The vans are donated to the DAV to prevent liability issues. The DAV provides volunteer drivers, but no paid positions or stipends.

Other

- Iowa's lottery sourced Veterans Trust Funds may be used for emergency transportation costs.
- Iowa has established the Iowa Communication Network to offer more telemedicine services to eliminate travel for veterans.
- Kansas noted that they work with other service organizations to provide travel. They view transportation issues as a liability.
- Maine conducted a transportation study in the past, but the Director finds no immediate value. She is exploring the idea for a program using the ride share concepts Uber and Lyft. This program would be perfect for underemployed or seasonal workers, such as snow plow drivers, who could sign up to be drivers, thus creating a transportation network.
- New Mexico does not have a budget for transportation. However, two years ago, the department brought all of the transportation providers to the table to discuss the assets available and how to better serve veterans living in the rural areas. They established an 800 number to schedule rides.
- Pennsylvania supported the development of FindMyRidePA(<http://www.findmyridepa.com>), which is a service to help veterans (and others) to identify the best transportation options to meet their needs.

Section 3. State Run Veterans Cemeteries

The states interviewed were very similar in their hours of operation, high standards and operating procedures. The unique practices listed below are related to maintenance and fundraising.

Maintenance

- Maryland advised that state governments need to realize that veteran cemeteries are growing. They are not static and open fields. There are high maintenance fees and costs will be rising.
- Maryland has stopped using metal and bronze vases due to theft.
- Pennsylvania advises states to have a policy written to define "monument" and "memorial" and be very clear as to the party responsible for the maintenance.
- Iowa reported that large monuments and concrete repairs are an issue.
- Master plans are common with most states and help when dealing with loved ones wanting special headstones, benches, etc., but new issues are being raised. Iowa reports that they are now specifying policies on trees, plants and species and the location of such. They are now discussing policy as to what can be on the grave site, such as teddy bears, pin wheels, Christmas trees, etc.

The question they are trying to address is how long these items should stay on the graves before they are removed.

Fundraising

- New Mexico legislature budgets a line item to pay for military honor guards and rifle honor guards.
- Iowa charges a \$300 fee that goes into a perpetual care account.
- Maine has the support of three non-profit cemetery corporations in charge of beautification and enhancement of the cemeteries. They submit plans and requests to the Bureau for approval.
- Maine has a cemetery maintenance income check off when citizens file for a tax refund.
- Nebraska established the High Plains Veterans Cemetery Task Force when their cemetery was being planned. The task force helped raise about 10 percent of the funds. After completion, they stayed in existence and formed the Veterans State Cemetery at Alliance Foundation (<http://www.vscf.org/>). They have raised funds to provide patio heaters, lap blankets, wind screens, bell towers, etc.
- The Pennsylvania legislature has a bill pending to fund a memorial next to the cemetery and to provide maintenance funds for other memorials that need repair and maintenance.

Other

- Idaho legislature established a Veterans Recognition Fund to build a new cemetery and a proposed a fourth veterans home. The interest generated from that fund is awarded through an application process to agencies and nonprofits, with grants ranging from \$2,500-\$100,000. However, they are usually not greater than \$75,000. There is also another fund that makes awards ranging from a few hundred dollars to \$5,000.
- Idaho and several other states are promoting using Pre-Application Authorization for pre-arranged burials.
- Cremations are on the increase which means there will be more space available in established cemeteries.
- Cemetery costs will continue to rise. More graves mean more maintenance.

Section 4. Miscellaneous

Marketing

Most of the states interviewed have little or no money for marketing and outreach. The practices listed below reflect the creativity and dedication of the offices' efforts to link veterans to the benefits and service they deserve. The comments have been organized around basic public relation tips, coordination with other agencies, events and products.

Basic Public Relations Tips

- Pennsylvania discussed their approach as one where they “go to” versus “bring them in.” As most states, they take advantage of every opportunity to get in front of veterans. They differentiate between “owned” and “earned” marketing. Owned marketing examples are their materials, website, fliers, announcements, etc. Earned is taking the opportunity to get someone else to talk about veterans. They work around targeted marketing messages, usually no more than three main points/issues they want to promote and then give the media a very focused message to talk about on Veterans Day, Memorial Day, etc.
- Virginia recommends to issue press releases only when necessary.
- Several states discussed the importance of wording the question, “Have you served in the military?” versus “Are you a Veteran”?

- Maine’s PR philosophy is to be “Noticeably Present.”
- Virginia overhauled their offices to reflect a professional culture. This included relocation of offices to more desirable locations as well as the office appearance inside and out.

Coordination

Several of the states discussed their efforts to coordinate with other state agencies to identify veterans.

- Idaho established a Veterans Coordination council in 2013 to bring in the directors of the state agencies to discuss services and resources to reduce duplication of efforts.
- Iowa, by statute, requires care facilities to conduct an annual census to identify veterans and make sure they are registered to receive benefits.
- Maine established a resource tab on their website, which has been useful for many service providers, especially those that do not have their own website. They started the initiative by asking, “Would you be interested in having your organization listed on our website?” This increased the number of resources listed from 30 to over 300. The website contains maps with icons and a table organized around 16 categories. It is especially useful to congressional offices and other agencies. They are trying to mirror the Google search we are all familiar with: “restaurants near me” (<https://www.maine.gov/veterans/resources/index.html>).
- Ohio citizens seeking public assistance are asked on their forms if they are a veteran.
- Pennsylvania discussed their relationship with the Department of Transportation, Division of Motor Vehicles. If a person wants a special veterans license plate, they provide the opportunity to register.
- Nebraska shares a public affairs officer with their division of Health and Human Services department.
- New Mexico meets quarterly with all their partners (VFW, American Legion, etc.) and attends as many of their meetings as possible to communicate their message, “One Team, One Fight”. They also schedule quarterly outreach events in rural areas.
- Home Base Iowa (HBI) connects veterans and transitioning service members with businesses looking to hire skilled workers (<https://www.homebaseiowa.gov>).
- Ohio is working with employers to recruit and retain veterans. The Ohio Means Jobs initiative includes military friendly employers and streamlined processes for credentials.
- Virginia executes a Virginia Values Veterans, known as V3, initiative. This initiative educates and trains employers throughout Virginia on the value of veterans and helps employers connect these personnel assets to maximize the productivity (<https://www.dvs.virginia.gov/education-employment/employment-v3/>). Veterans can also receive services from the Virginia Transition Assistance Program to help connect with employment, education, supportive services, etc.

Events

- When possible, schedule events in Senator/Congressional offices.
- Maine’s resource tab on their website enables each partner to populate an events calendar. These are major events as well as very specific, small events like a “Dog Wash for Veterans.”
- Kansas mobile van events are very successful.
- Nebraska takes advantage of the Governor’s annual tailgate party, held once a year at the Governor’s Mansion before a Saturday football game. The setup is completed on the Friday before, so the Veterans Office hosts a Friday evening backyard cookout. They invite every veteran who has moved back to Nebraska during the past year. They send out a special invitation from the Governor on official mansion stationery that resembles a wedding invitation. Walmart donates the food and drink. The Veterans Office volunteers and all service providers are there as well. The Department of Corrections cleans up, so the facility is ready for the next day’s event.

Usually 200+ attend. The Director believes that even if a veteran is not able to come to the event, they feel recognized for their service.

- Pennsylvania has identified that there are 70,000 female veterans in the state. They are planning a series of town hall meetings to address the issues, concerns and emerging issues for female veterans. These will begin in May 2018.
- Iowa hosts an annual Veterans Day in January when the Legislature is in session.
- New Mexico is currently taking advantage of the 50-year commemoration of the Vietnam War. They have a state certificate to give each veteran, and the ceremonies are held at each VSO.

Materials

- Iowa summarizes their benefits in a 1-2-page document.
- Kansas has distributed 7,000 Vietnam Veteran Era Medallions. Veterans must be in the system to receive.
- New Mexico gives each Vietnam Veteran a state certificate commemorating the 50-year recognition of the Vietnam War.
- Mississippi has begun emailing information to veterans now that the DD214 are electronic.
- Nebraska's veterans license plate is very popular and provides a substantial portion of their annual budget.
- Virginia has a Veterans Resource Guide that is 21 pages. They print small batches of 4,000-5,000 at a time to keep the information current.
- Ohio has begun targeted Facebook ads to pop up around selected military facilities to recruit those veterans beginning the transition from military to civilian life.

Suicide

The message from every state was loud and clear. No one is in this alone. It is not just a veteran issue, or a health issue, or a drug issue. Every agency needs to work on this together. The structured questions asked if they were having issues documenting suicide and if they have supported any initiatives as a state agency. Most of the agencies reported that they support existing suicide prevention lines and provide volunteers. Budget shortfalls were discussed.

- Kansas reported that they are only authorized to spend funds on veterans' homes and cemeteries by state statute. There are no extra funds for other programs.
- Iowa uses the Veterans Trust Fund to sponsor a family grieving program, an annual retreat to help families cope with death.
- Maine's number one priority is suicide prevention. The department held an event between relevant state agencies and VA representatives. The program was a two-hour panel of four veterans who had tried to commit suicide. The conversation focused on the barriers to care and how to help "paralyzed advocates," i.e., those of us who don't know where to go for help. In closing, the participants answered pledge cards (as agency representatives, "What can you do professionally or personally to address the problem?")
- Nebraska is in the process of adding a behavioral specialist to their staff.
- New Mexico Secretary of Veterans Services maintains a strong partnership with Health and Indian Affairs and serves on other state agency committees such as the Health Council of New Mexico.
- Ohio is partnering with the National Guard and nonprofits and they are creating a Community Behavior Resource Roundtable. The guiding question, "How do we promote the seeking of help on a local basis?"
- Ohio State University conducted a study in 2010 on VFW bartenders. The purpose was to help VFW bartenders know five signs to look for mental stress. (*Anderson, Keith A; Maile, Jeffrey J and Fisher, Lynette G. The Healing Tonic: A Pilot Study of the Perceived Ability and Potential of Bartenders [online]. Journal of Military and Veterans Health, Vol. 18, No.*

4, Oct 2010: 17-24. Availability:

<https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=894569931254541;res=IELHEA>
(ISSN: 1835-1271).

- Pennsylvania has documented a very high rate of suicide among veterans and those currently serving. Veteran Affairs is a member of a subcommittee under the Governor's Advisory Committee on Behavioral Health. The purpose of the initiative is to keep veterans well before there is a crisis by addressing workforce issues and health care. The initiative focuses on three areas: anger, PTSC and drugs and alcohol.
- Virginia Department of Veteran Services is partnering with 211 Virginia (<https://www.211virginia.org/consumer/index.php>). This free call service provides information on community services available. The department provides the information and contact information to give veteran callers all of the information they need.

Issues on the Horizon

The issues on the horizon are listed as bullet points centered around demographic changes, health care, organization and business centered issues. Some are posed as questions, while some are initiatives specific states mentioned in the interviews. West Virginia can expect to see these issues in their future.

- Demographic Changes
 - There will be an increasing need for adult day care services.
 - There are not enough care givers to allow for people to age in place. There will be an increased need of care center support in homes.
 - Most veteran nursing homes are traditional. The model needs changed to serve younger veterans with disabilities.
 - New Mexico reported they want to set up better services for women veterans. They are more likely to be homeless, homeless with children, to sacrifice their own health for the benefits of their children and to have trouble finding work.
 - Service organizations are having issues with recruiting younger veterans to get involved.
 - Many veterans have not functioned as an independent adult. They went into service right after high school and then discharged. They need extra assistance with career planning, managing a family, paying taxes, etc.
 - The challenge is trying to serve veterans spanning 20-100 years old. Legacy programs will remain important but there is a need to focus on employment transitions and the education processes.
- Health Care
 - Ohio is dealing with the changing face of VA facilities and what the veterans are going to need. One of their facilities has a 33-year-old resident, but yet they are still serving WWII and Vietnam veterans. Persian Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have mental and addiction issues, but want to be independent.
 - Iowa is exploring the use of hyperbaric chambers for treatment of PTSD and brain injured veterans.
 - PTSD and TBI will continue to be a challenge and state budgets do not support programs to help.
 - Injured veterans have affected families in many ways. Concerns include who will take care of a veteran if their caregiver dies first and the financial implications of caregivers leaving their jobs to take care of injured veterans. Access to treatment is the number one complaint from a legislative perspective.
- Organization issues
 - Look for new ways to identify veterans. Questions on ER intake forms, law enforcement, etc.

- Population decline doesn't mean cheaper; more veterans need to get connected with services which can mean that more dollars will be needed in the counties to serve them.
- Kansas recommends looking into a policy regarding State Approving Agencies. In Kansas, it is housed with Veterans, but it could also be housed under Education. It brings veterans into the office, which results in more exposure and service.
- Business centered issues
 - Iowa is implementing a state designation as a "Veteran Owned Business."
 - Iowa Attorney General is cracking down on businesses that are charging hefty fees for serving veterans, especially those services available through the VSO.
 - Nebraska wants to address the returning veterans and make sure they are cared for. They plan on tracking to see if the veteran is paying taxes. If not, they will see if they are in school or need a job.