REPORT TO THE HONORABLE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS, JEFFERSON COUNTY, WI

This office functions under the direction of the County Veterans Service Officer (CVSO), who is appointed by the County Administrator. The CVSO office also employs a full-time Deputy Veterans Service Officer and a part-time (19 hours per week) Veterans Clerk. Starting in January of 2022—we welcome the funding of the full-time Veterans Benefits Specialist position which has been vacant since 2012 when the Deputy VSO position was filled. Policy oversight for local aid to Veterans in need is provided by the County Veterans Service Commission. The following report covers the years of 2019 and 2020.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION AND SERVICES:

Chapter 45 of the WI Statutes requires each County to have a County Veterans Service Officer and establishes duties of the Veterans Service Officer. The position is funded by County tax revenue and receives a $13,000 annual grant provided through the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) Veterans Trust Fund which is to be used according to ss 45.82(1) “for the improvement of service to former military personnel of the county”. In 2022—the WDVA CVSO grant will increase to $14,300—which is the first increase since 1997.

All Jefferson County resident Veterans and their dependents may receive assistance through the Veterans Service office. This office provides information and processes applications for both state and federal benefits such as disability compensation, non-service-connected pension, vocational training, educational programs, insurance, domiciliary care, and death benefits. We also help Veterans with enrollment in the VA healthcare system and further assist as personal advocates if the Veteran is having trouble accessing care or resources within the system. This is accomplished not just from office visits, but home visits, nursing home/assisted living facilities visits, and numerous outreach events.

On a case-by-case basis—Veterans and dependents experiencing temporary financial emergencies can apply for assistance from the Veterans Service Commission. In accordance with WI State Statute 45.86 – “Every county board shall annually levy, in addition to all other taxes, a tax sufficient to carry out the purposes of this section. The tax shall be levied and collected as other county taxes for the purpose of providing aid to needy veterans, the needy spouses, surviving spouses, minor and dependent children of the veterans, and the needy parents of veterans entitled to aid under ss 45.81 to 45.84 and to carry out the purposes of s.45.85.” The WI State Statute does not specify how much should be allocated to provide aid—nor does it detail the parameters of such aid.
Counties in Wisconsin allocate up to as much as $60,000 of tax levy annually to comply with the statute. The Jefferson County Veterans Service Commission (VSC) policy (adopted in 2008 and revised in 2019) defines the purpose of assistance as providing emergency aid to needy Veterans and/or their dependents which must be of a temporary nature. This might be due to the Veteran having an interruption of income and waiting for a paycheck or other source of income (such as unemployment compensation, sick pay, or other governmental payment such as education, disability, or pension benefits.) The need could be due to a medical emergency, automobile accident, fire, or other disaster. Often the need is for food, or gas for transportation to a veteran’s facility, for a job or housing search. The policy allows for other purposes that may be deemed appropriate by the Commission.

In 2019, $4,858.74 in aid was expended by the Veterans Service Commission in the form of food and gas gift cards, payments directly to utility providers, landlords, etc. In 2020, $3,845 of aid was expended. Although there was more need in 2020 due to the economic disruptions caused by COVID-19, there were also more resources through stimulus programs that helped bridge gaps. The Jefferson County Veteran Service Commission is annually allocated with an average of $3,500 in tax levy funding. To help supplement and fill gaps we are fortunate to have partnerships and receive generous donations from both service organizations and private citizens. In 2019, cash donations totaled $4,151.47 in a combination of cash and gift cards. In 2020, donations to the Veterans Service Commission totaled $1,457 in cash and gift cards.

The decrease in donations to the Veterans Service Commission is directly related to the creation of the Jefferson County Veterans Foundation (JCVF) which was incorporated as a 501c3 organization in August of 2019. Most donations are now funneled through this organization.

The creation of a non-profit entity was strategic to address bigger issues and seize opportunities such as being able to qualify in December 2019 for the donation of a 2004 Lexus SUV from Charity Cars, Inc. through the National Auto Body Council in partnership with Miller Auto Body CARSTAR of Milwaukee. This gives us the much-needed additional capacity to transport Veterans to the VA hospitals and clinics.

Prior to receiving the Lexus—almost all transportation of Veterans to the Madison VA Hospital and clinics was provided in partnership with the Federal VA through a Government Services Administration (GSA) contract which allows the County Veterans Service Office to lease an 8-passenger van for $2,808 annually. We continue this partnership to this day—as the federal VA covers the cost of fuel and vehicle maintenance.

Jefferson County must provide the volunteer drivers—and we are grateful to the Jefferson County Human Services Transportation Office for their assistance in coordinating the volunteer drivers and scheduling rides for Veterans—and especially to the dedicated volunteer drivers who literally make the program go! Recruiting volunteer drivers is a constant challenge as the number of volunteer drivers has fluctuated from as many as 15 to as few as four drivers to cover an average of 20 travel
days per month. Driver shortages mean Veterans will miss and/or must reschedule VA hospital appointments. We continue to actively and continuously recruit volunteer drivers.

**A. ECONOMIC IMPACT OF VETERANS BENEFITS IN JEFFERSON COUNTY IN 2019/2020**

The Federal Veterans Administration’s *Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures (GDX)* report details statistics for every County in the US. According to the 2020 federal report, Jefferson County, presently has an approximate resident population of 4,773 live Veterans out of a total of 352,072 Veterans in Wisconsin. In 2019—the federal report estimated 5,591 Veterans lived in the County—compared to 6,057 ten years ago.

It is interesting to note that our internal case management database (VetraSpec) currently includes 12,157 live Veterans of the 20,000+ digital files which include deceased Veterans. I cannot explain the difference in the number of Veteran residents estimated by the federal VA other than to say that I believe their estimates are less accurate than our own case files which are updated as Veterans move into or out of the County.

In addition to the Veterans themselves, other residents of Jefferson County are also potential recipients of Veteran’s benefits -- including Veteran’s spouses, dependent parents, and dependent children under age 18. Children who are or become disabled before age 18 can receive benefits for their lifetime.

**THE SUBSTANTIAL ECONOMIC IMPACT TO THE COUNTY IS OUTLINED BELOW:**

1. **The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)** is currently dispensing compensation and/or pension benefits to over 1,785 Veterans, widows, and families in Jefferson County.

   The federally reported “Total VA Expenditures” for (FY19) was $40,465,000 and the (FY20) report reflects that $45,744,000 in federal financial benefits were expended for Jefferson County Veterans through disability compensation, pensions, education, vocational rehabilitation, health care and life insurance. Compared to the $20,938,000 expended in the 2010 fiscal year—the VA’s expenditures have more than doubled in a decade despite showing a decreasing Veteran population in the same time period.

   The *Summary of Expenditures by County* report can be found at: [http://www.va.gov/vetdata/](http://www.va.gov/vetdata/)

2. **The State of Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs Aid to Needy Veterans Grant** dispensed $12,535.62 to Jefferson County Veterans in 2019 and $9,530.00 in 2020.

   The grants for subsistence aid assist Veterans who lost work due to an illness or injury and the health care grants are mainly for dental care. These numbers do not include the value of the tuition remission provided under the WI GI Bill. We processed 92 new WI GI Bill applications in 2019 and 2020.

   These figures also don’t include state funds expended for care of Jefferson County residents that may be residing at the Wisconsin Veteran’s Home at King, Union Grove, or Chippewa Falls Wisconsin. It also does not include the value of the Department of Revenue Veterans and Surviving Spouse Property Tax Credit program that remits property tax for a primary home and one acre of land to 100% service-disabled veterans. The CVSO office processed 57 new applications for the property tax credit that were approved in 2019/2020.
B. MAJOR TRENDS IN THE VETERANS SERVICE BUSINESS

For sure—COVID-19 has been a game-changer as we had no choice but to innovate to continue to provide services through the pandemic shutdown. This has led to some revelations in efficiency and convenience as we moved to embrace video conferencing and use secure email regularly to gather information and signatures on documents. In general—we saw a decrease in requests for some services in 2020—but those areas were offset by increased demand in other areas such as claims work for Veterans suffering from “presumptive conditions” related to Agent Orange, Gulf War and burn pit exposure, asbestos and radiation exposure, as well as the list of cancers attributed to contaminated water at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

The largest group of claimants has been the Blue Water Navy Veterans who were finally able to apply for service connection as a result of The Blue Water Navy (BWN) Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019 (PL 116-23) which extended the presumption of herbicide exposure (Agent Orange) to Veterans who served in the offshore waters of the Republic of Vietnam between January 9, 1962, and May 7, 1975.

Beginning on January 1, 2020, Veterans who served as far as 12 nautical miles from the shore of Vietnam, or who had service in the Korean Demilitarized Zone, were presumed to have been exposed to herbicides and became entitled to service connection for any of the (now 17) conditions related to herbicide exposure.

We continue to assist many Veterans with enrollment into the VA Healthcare system, especially for mental health services. National Guard and Reserve Veterans — especially those deployed over the last two decades to Iraq and Afghanistan continue to come in to establish contact, place discharge papers on record, sign up for healthcare and education benefits and to file disability claims.

Wisconsin is in the top tier of states offering some of the most extensive benefits available which translates into additional work on our part to facilitate access to those benefits. Here in Jefferson County—we aim to set the standard for serving those who served!

C. WORKFLOW AND INITIATIVES IN THE JEFFERSON COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICE

The biggest news in 2019/2020 is the work done by the Veterans Service Commissioners with the help of Jefferson County Administration and Corporation Council to breathe life into the Jefferson County Veterans Foundation which achieved its 501c3 designation in August of 2019. I invite your attention to the Jefferson County Veterans Foundation Initiatives document attached herewith.

We continue to scan all incoming and outgoing mail and upload it to our online database (VetraSpec). This technology has improved our efficiency in that we are able to call up a Veterans file quickly if they phone or stop by. Having a copy of all correspondence is also important because occasionally we’ve been asked by the Federal VA to resend claims that have been lost to the digital ether.

The Federal VA continues to improve the timeliness of the claims process and most of the disability and pension claims are being processed in 90 to 120 days. The VA promotes the idea that Veterans can file their own claims through the Vets.gov website – however — statistically Veterans who apply for benefits online are less successful overall. Many Veterans are confused by the array of documentation needed to support their disability claim.
Because the individual Veteran is not an expert on what or how issues can be claimed—the outcome of their claim may be a lower rating or worse, a denial of the benefit. The value of the County Veteran Service Office is our ability to help Veterans and their families navigate the complex and confusing VA system.

Our office continues to partner with the Community Action Coalition through the Supportive Services for Veterans Families (SSVF) grant program to provides case management and temporary financial assistance to low-income veterans and their families to help them maintain stable housing or alleviate homelessness. We continue to see an up-tick in homeless cases but are fortunate to have a variety of resources to help.

Respectfully Submitted,

Yvonne R. Duesterhoft