

|2020|

FORWARD MARCH

REPORT



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS

www.FloridaVets.org



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

The Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs has completed the regional assessment phase of the *Forward March* veterans' advocacy campaign. The initiative was announced by Gov. Ron DeSantis in early 2019 and aimed to unite the combined energy and resources of Florida's state agencies, veteran service organizations, private partners and local communities. The initiative kicked off in Tampa on March 29, 2019, at the University of South Florida, with regional meetings during the summer in Pensacola, Jacksonville, West Palm Beach, Ocala, Miami, Port Canaveral and Sarasota.



Veterans, elected officials, community leaders, and members of veteran service organizations were invited to attend each event where we shared our vision for the state's standard of service and support for Florida's 1.5 million veterans and their families. Participants engaged in a series of breakout sessions focusing on topics such as Community Services, Mental Health and Wellness, Benefits and Assistance, Transition and Legal Services and Veterans' Treatment Courts.

With the feedback gathered from the regional meetings, we are issuing this report of our findings and recommendations. The report will identify where Florida needs to reinforce best practices, reduce redundancies and implement solutions to fill gaps.

As an Army Reserve Captain and former state legislator, I am extremely grateful to all who participated in this monumental initiative. We value your time, dedication and input. Now let's turn your ideas into action and ensure Florida sets the national standard in veteran service and support.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Danny".

Danny Burgess
Executive Director
Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs

GOVERNOR'S MESSAGE

As a veteran myself, I am proud to be Governor of the most veteran-friendly state in the country. I look forward to working with Director Burgess, the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs and partners across our state to ensure those who have served our country are receiving the care they need and deserve.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ron DeSantis".

Ron DeSantis
Governor
State of Florida





TABLE OF CONTENTS

2 BENEFITS

6 HOMELESSNESS AND
COMMUNITY SERVICE

11 LEGAL AID &
VETERANS TREATMENT COURTS

17 HEALTH CARE/MENTAL HEALTH

22 TRANSITION SERVICES

28 RECOMMENDATIONS



BENEFITS



While in Miami, FDVA Executive Director Danny Burgess caught up with Lt. Gov. Jeanette Nuñez and State Sen. Manny Diaz Jr.

WHERE ARE THE GAPS?

The *Forward March* Benefits Group discussions provided insight into present gaps in benefits-related system and program procedures that commonly serve as barriers to veterans. While other *Forward March* breakout groups attended to need-specific topics, the purpose of the Benefits group was to discuss areas of strength, best practices, present challenges and areas of need in order to address Florida's population of veterans who are currently unengaged or under-engaged in accessing their earned benefits. Overall, the feedback from veterans, veteran service providers and advocates who participated in the discussions indicated there is a need for better outreach and education regarding eligibility for benefits, present benefits offerings and how to access earned benefits.

There is a need to actively address and decrease two common misconceptions that are presently serving as barriers to benefits engagement for veterans: 1) The misconception that the benefits system is designed to deny veterans their benefits, and 2) The misconception that veterans will be accessing the VA hospitals of their grandfather's era.

Enabling veterans to take full advantage of their VA educational opportunities, disability claims, eligibility to VA health care, housing, transition, transportation and a plethora of other benefits and assistance is foremost on the minds of veterans' advocates from many different agencies within the state of Florida. We know that better outcomes, including suicide prevention, physical health and achievable income, are directly linked to an individual's access to resources.

For that reason, our ultimate goal is to reach and counsel all wartime and peacetime veterans in the state of Florida regarding their earned benefits, and forge a clear path for them to access the benefits they need. Throughout the group discussions, community organizations and veterans' advocates repeatedly voiced that many veterans are unaware of their current eligibility for benefits.

Some former members of the Armed Forces are not aware they are veterans. Women in particular were identified as a veteran sub-population that is sometimes unaware of their benefits as a veteran, by virtue of their



Some former members of the Armed Forces are not aware they are veterans. Women in particular were identified as a veteran sub-population that is sometimes unaware of their benefits as a veteran, by virtue of their military service.

military service. Women in Native American communities are often explicitly told by their male counterparts that they are not veterans and cannot join any veterans' clubs, associations, etc. Of veterans who are aware of their veteran status, many have no knowledge of their potential eligibility for various benefits offerings.

Further, group discussion members reported there is a widespread lack of awareness of available benefits and little to no knowledge regarding where and how to access those benefits. Rural veterans were cited as having a particularly difficult time accessing benefits, occasionally due to the lack of a full-time veteran service officer in their community. Veterans repeatedly voice that they do not have a full understanding of the benefits process, where to file for benefits, or even how to get started. Discussions indicated that across Florida's military installations, the Transition Assistance Program designed to assist active duty service members with transitioning out of the military is not standardized, and service members often do not receive sufficient benefits-related guidance, or receive it too late.

Regarding current programs, the VA's present eBenefits system was identified as a tool for electronic benefits, which has several drawbacks. Veterans and veteran advocates reported the program is not user friendly, unreliable, results in a duplication of efforts, makes the benefits process difficult to understand, results in veterans failing to claim all benefits due to a lack of knowledge of available benefits, and is difficult to the point of warranting a Veterans' Service Officer's assistance in conjunction with eBenefits.

Stigma surrounding the quality and timeliness of VA health care offerings was also discussed as a barrier to benefits utilization for veterans. Some veterans are still under the unfortunate

impression that today's VA health care is that of their grandfathers, and in order to receive timely, cutting-edge services they often conclude they need to seek non-VA care.

Finally, and perhaps one of the most pervasive benefits-related gaps is the present veteran perception that the Veterans Benefits Administration, as well as individual VA Hospitals, are designed to deny veterans their potential benefits and provide the fewest possible benefits offerings necessary. Compounding this perception is the collective lack of information, misinformation and administrative complexities related to the veterans' benefits process as a whole.

EXISTING RESOURCES TO FILL THE GAPS

Current resources exist that have the potential to fill the gaps highlighted during the *Forward March* Benefits Group discussions, several of which are highlighted below.

- Manatee and Sarasota counties regularly conduct veterans' case conferences
- Mission United, which is a program that originated with the United Way of Broward County and has expanded to other counties and states, serves as a coordinated system for the care of veterans and their families and provides a wide array of benefits
- American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Veterans (AMVETS), Military Order of the Purple Heart, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Wounded Warriors Project and other congressionally chartered National Service Organizations are available as resources

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FDVA

Given the various entities involved in the veterans' benefits process, FDVA is uniquely positioned



BENEFITS

to serve as a unifying body of information and assist in identifying barriers to veterans' benefits access, establishing collective goals and disseminating up-to-date information to the veteran community. The FDVA can serve as the conduit between the Federal VA, community groups and veterans where communication and coordination is presently lacking.

BEST PRACTICES

Homeless Stand Downs are events in which homeless and at-risk veterans are provided with an array of services in one location in the span of several days. The veterans receive assistance with entering the VA benefits system, and on-site services are provided including health care, legal services, chiropractic services, financial services, transportation services, wellness services, meals, etc.

The 2-1-1 Coordinated Call Center operated by the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay was again identified as an example of a best practice because the hotline not only provides peer-to-peer veteran counseling for suicide intervention and crisis management, but also offers resources and referrals that are local to the caller's location.

In addition, Manatee and Sarasota Counties currently conduct veterans case conferences to collaboratively discuss specific veterans' struggles and brainstorm resources and solutions.

Several counties are also planning to establish Post Transition Assistance Program Classes, which would take place 2-3 months after the service member has departed from the military to enhance the information they received during the Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several recommendations aimed at improving the present state of veterans' access to and use of earned benefits resulted from the *Forward March* Benefits Group discussions. A review of gaps in access to care and present understanding of existing federal, state and local resources

led to the creation of specific steps pertaining to veterans' benefits, which are listed below.

- 1) To address the lack of knowledge and awareness regarding veterans' benefits: FDVA should lead in finding and promoting additional, varied outreach methods for veterans who are currently unengaged or under-engaged in utilizing benefits.



Veterans' outreach is key to connecting Florida's 1.5 million veterans and their families with earned services, benefits and support. FDVA veterans' claims examiners and county veteran service officers provide their services at no charge.

- FDVA should enhance its focus on reaching veteran sub-populations via methods that are compatible with their current resources. These groups might include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - o Veterans in rural communities that lack a full-time veteran service officer
 - o Veterans who, for various age, ability, or socio-economic reasons either cannot or will not engage in technology-based contact
 - o Homeless veterans who are transient and do not receive regular VA or FDVA contact nor have consistent internet and phone access



FDVA can champion for the incorporation of benefits-related education into existing transition programs

FDVA can create an easy point of entry into the service provider system and provide a one-stop shop for veterans, their families and veteran advocates to find information and resources.

- FDVA can develop and utilize a statewide, comprehensive resource directory that serves as a database of resources available to veterans based on location. On the FDVA website, veterans could access a list of regional and county services in one location. This might include creation of a tab on the FDVA website that would allow veteran groups to add information about their organization and programs.
- Specifically, this resource needs to clearly direct new veterans to the proper first-time veteran benefits enrollment process.
- The resource should also highlight the advocacy and paperwork assistance resources available to veterans having difficulty either enrolling in benefits or navigating the administrative process.

FDVA can champion for the incorporation of benefits-related education into existing transition programs,

- The lack of an adequate transition process from active duty to veteran status has repeatedly been presented as a gap in veteran care throughout the *Forward March* group discussions. FDVA can serve as a unifying body to disseminate benefits-related resources that should be included in transition programs for service members transitioning from active duty to veteran status.

FDVA can enhance its role as a liaison to the legislature and advocate for funding dedicated to benefits-based veteran outreach and benefits education programs.

- Potential targets of funding could include, but are not limited to:
 - o Hiring additional Veteran Service Officers to meet current demands

- o Enhancing training and support for veteran service officers
- o Investing in new technologies to reach veterans in rural and remote locations
- o Enhancing the Transition Assistance Program by dedicating resources to standardizing the benefits education portion and initiating Transition Assistance Program offerings up to one year prior to separation from active duty

2) To address the misconceptions that serve as barriers to accessing earned benefits:

- FDVA needs to champion efforts to increase veterans' understanding of the benefits process and cutting-edge VA health care offerings
- FDVA should explore opportunities for peer-to-peer veteran mentoring throughout the benefits education and enrollment process.
- Through the creation of a statewide comprehensive resource directory, FDVA can disseminate advocacy and paperwork assistance resources to veterans wary of the benefits process and in need of someone "on their team" to help them understand and navigate the process.
- FDVA can use social media outlets to highlight a VA Medical Center each month which offers innovative care.

FDVA should encourage VA and other outside veteran services providers to meet on a regular basis to coordinate services, identify community-specific gaps in care and work collaboratively to address benefits access barriers.

- FDVA should continue to conduct meetings such as *Forward March* so veteran advocates can share resources, connect with one another and voice community needs.
- By maintaining a comprehensive list of veteran service providers by location, FDVA will indirectly facilitate communication between the included organizations.

HOMELESSNESS AND COMMUNITY SERVICES



Gov. Ron DeSantis and First Lady Casey DeSantis met with FDVA senior leaders to discuss the need for expanded outreach for Florida's veteran community.

WHERE ARE THE GAPS?

The *Forward March* Veteran Homelessness and Community Services breakout groups discussed the challenges, gaps, best practices and areas of need regarding veteran homelessness and community services available to veterans. Overall, group discussions across the state identified that veterans and providers alike are largely unaware of the community resources and services available, particularly those that relate to mental health. Those who participated in the *Forward March* Homelessness and Community Services group discussions reported many community services are restrictive based on gender, family structure, classification of

discharge from military service, income and varying definitions of “homeless.” There is the need for additional, innovative housing and transportation resources to meet veterans’ basic needs. Finally, group discussions identified the absence of a unified effort to identify veterans in the state of Florida, specifically homeless veterans.

There is no doubt regarding the passion and compassion that the group attendees have when it comes to assisting veterans and their family members. Leadership from state, federal, city and county municipalities, civic and church groups, veteran service

In defining homeless status, many veterans in need of community services are not “homeless” in the traditional sense of having no roof over one’s head. More commonly, homeless veterans will temporarily shelter on people’s couches.



organizations, and local charities detailed a host of veteran-focused local services that augment the Federal VA benefits system. However, these community resources are fragmented, forming a patchwork that is disparately distributed across the public and private sector. As a result, there is a widespread lack of knowledge regarding what veteran services exist in the community, and veterans expressed receiving misinformation pertaining to VA service offerings

day homeless veteran. In defining homeless status, many veterans in need of community services are not “homeless” in the traditional sense of having no roof over one’s head. More commonly, homeless veterans will temporarily shelter on people’s couches (commonly termed “couch surfing”) or sleep in cars. Regarding gaps specific to homeless veteran needs, there is a distinct lack of safe, affordable housing even for veterans who do meet criteria for housing services. Breakout groups identified that already limited shelter and lodging options are most scarce for female veterans with children, single male veterans with children and veterans with service animals. *Forward March* Veteran Homelessness and Community Services breakout groups highlighted a shortage of participating landlords, reporting that often landlords whose property may have been damaged in the past no longer rent to housing program veterans, noting there is no funding mechanism in place to repair damages. Compounding the difficulties faced by homeless veterans is the fact that supportive housing voucher programs have been unable to keep pace with fluctuating housing prices.



State Sen. Aaron Bean addresses the crowd at the *Forward March* regional meeting in Jacksonville, June 6.

and enrollment. Of those available in both the public and private sector, services are often extremely limited based on various demographic, family, income and discharge factors, and as a result many veterans in need do not qualify for a majority of the services offered. Specifically, breakout groups noted veteran resource restrictions are most prohibitive for single-parent veterans with children, particularly females, veterans with a military discharge status other than “honorable,” veterans transitioning out of the incarceration system, and family members of veterans. Resources for veterans in these groups who also find themselves to be homeless are even more scarce if not nonexistent.

The results of our discussions across the state demonstrated the historical definition of “homeless” needs to be updated and standardized to better address the present

The *Forward March* discussions also revealed at present, there is no unified system or effort to track veterans in Florida, whether they be veterans transitioning out of the military or veterans who have newly moved to the state. Information on homeless veterans in Florida is even scarcer. As a result, it is difficult to identify and evaluate community wide and state-wide metrics of success.

EXISTING RESOURCES TO FILL THE GAPS

There is an array of existing resources that have the potential to fill the gaps highlighted during the *Forward March* Homelessness and Community Services group discussions, several of which are highlighted below.

- The 2-1-1 Coordinated Call Center, operated by the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, is a state-wide call line that provides supportive



While in Ocala, there were further sidebar conversations on key veterans' issues with London Rotundo, aide to Sen. Marco Rubio, former FDVA Executive Director Rocky McPherson, FDVA Chief of Staff Al Carter and FDVA Executive Director Danny Burgess.

services information and local referrals to callers, along with crisis counseling and suicide intervention support. This resource presently has veteran-specific resources available to veterans in all regions of Florida, and veterans have the ability to speak to a fellow veteran for counseling.

- Mission United is a program that developed out of the United Way of Broward and has expanded to other counties and states.
- The “100 vets off the street in 111 days” initiative, which is a joint VA/ Palm Beach County/ HUD/Stand Down collaborative effort aimed at decreasing veteran homelessness
- Stand Down events in which homeless and at-risk veterans are provided with an array of services all in one location in the span of several days. Services include health care, legal services, chiropractic services, financial services, transportation services, wellness services, meals, etc.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FDVA

While many veteran-focused services are available in local communities, there is no central registry of resource offerings. FDVA is positioned to serve as the central agency for maintaining up-to-date information regarding the veteran community, available

resources and collective goals. FDVA can serve as the conduit between the Federal VA, community groups and veterans where communication and coordination is presently lacking. See specific recommendations below.

BEST PRACTICES

As a result of speaking with community leaders and local content experts during the *Forward March* Homelessness and Community Services group discussions, several best practices were noted.

Mission United (identified as a Best Practice by other *Forward March* topic-specific groups) was highlighted as a program that effectively assists veterans and their families with case management so they can navigate community and VA resources with the goal of achieving self-sufficiency.

Secondly, the Volunteers of America, Florida Chapter, repurposed a former resort hotel in Ocala into affordable, transitional housing for veterans.

The 2-1-1 Coordinated Call Center, operated by the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, was again identified as an example of a best practice because the hotline not only provides peer-



Five Florida jurisdictions have announced an end to veteran homelessness as of Sept. 13, 2019: Flagler County, Miami-Dade County, Myers/Lee, Punta Gorda/Charlotte County and Volusia County/Daytona Beach.

to-peer veteran counseling for suicide intervention and crisis management, but also offers resources and referrals that are local to the caller's whereabouts.

Finally, the sharing of community resources and maintaining open, regular communication

a tab on the FDVA website that would allow veteran groups to add information about their organization and programs.

- This would allow both veterans and veteran providers to access an up-to-date list of referral resources. Further, this would allow for communication and collaboration between similar community organizations in the same region or across regions.
- Further, this allows VA providers to access a list of local referral resources that may benefit their patients.



State Rep. Delores Johnson was a participant in the Forward March initiative.

between organizational leaders and VA providers was identified as a best practice in the interest of facilitating better referrals to local services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In regard to the lack of knowledge of local community resources and services available to veterans:

FDVA can create an easy point of entry into the service provider system and provide a one-stop shop for veterans, their families, and veteran advocates to find information and resources.

- FDVA can develop and utilize a statewide database of resources available to veterans based on location. On the FDVA website, veterans could access a list of regional and county services in one location. This might include creation of

FDVA can lead in spreading the word to veterans about services available.

- In addition to maintaining a comprehensive list of local veteran support organizations, FDVA can send a Welcome Letter to transitioning troops as well as a quarterly newsletter as a form of outreach to veterans.
- Through the use of social media, FDVA can disseminate information to a wider veteran audience including younger veterans, as well as promote VA enrollment.
- Given that a lack of knowledge regarding mental health resources was specifically highlighted during *Forward March* Homelessness and Community Services group discussions, FDVA could rotate highlighting a state-wide veteran mental health resource each month either via social media or regular newsletters.

FDVA should support the VA in new case management and referral efforts to connect veterans to this new web of resources

- By maintaining a comprehensive list of veteran service providers by location, FDVA will indirectly facilitate communication between the VA and local organizations.
- In order to ensure warm handoffs during referrals to local community services, FDVA should encourage the VA to identify and address potential barriers and sources of provider burnout.
- Addressing potential barriers may include supporting the VA in making changes



The Department of Financial Services helps veterans and their families with extensive financial literacy initiatives and helps combat scams, identity theft and predatory lending.

necessary to allow VA providers dedicated, protected periods of time to familiarize themselves with local community services and facilitate patient referrals.

2. Regarding the restrictive nature of many veteran services and an absence of services available to specific groups:

FDVA should lead in finding and promoting additional, innovative resources to meet veterans' basic needs

- These additional services may include promoting the expansion of peer-to-peer veteran resources and development of additional services specifically tailored to the needs of women veterans, single-parent veterans, recently incarcerated veterans, etc.

FDVA should promote discussions surrounding updating the current conceptualization of 'the homeless veteran'

- FDVA can advocate for expanding the present definition of the homeless veteran to include the many veterans who manage to secure temporary shelter with friends or family members, but lack the resources necessary for sustainable housing.
- In addition, FDVA should continue to promote permanent home ownership as the ultimate goal in addressing veteran homelessness as opposed to temporary renting arrangements.

3. To address a lack of affordable, safe housing options:

FDVA should support the allocation of funding to new housing-specific initiatives

- This is not limited to but may include supporting the creation of additional housing vouchers or subsidies available to veterans, repurposing existing buildings into veteran-specific housing, and working to keep the housing trust fund in the State budget.
- Additional funding efforts will help

account for rising housing prices and bridge the gap between current service offerings and present housing costs.

- New housing initiatives should be centrally-located near metropolitan areas and public transportation to better ensure employment opportunities and transportation to and from that employment.

FDVA should encourage VA and community organizations to meet on a regular basis to coordinate services, identify community-specific gaps in care and work collaboratively to address veteran housing needs.

- FDVA should continue to conduct meetings such as *Forward March* so veteran advocates can share resources, connect with one another and voice community needs.
- Community meetings should include local landlords so that barriers associated with renting to veterans can be directly addressed.

4. To address the lack of unified effort to identify veterans in the state of Florida, specifically homeless veterans:

FDVA should serve as the central body that unifies efforts to identify veterans in Florida

- Present veteran data in Florida is largely aggregate and based on population trends and projections. "Head count" estimations of veterans in Florida are limited to past census information, car registration data, and a patchwork of additional sources that serve as an inexact science.
- Investing in a program that more accurately identifies new and existing Florida veterans will enable for a better allocation of resources and improved individual, regular contact with Florida's many veterans.
- More accurate information regarding Florida's individual veterans and Florida's veteran population as a whole will allow for better identify and evaluate community-wide and state-wide metrics of success.



LEGAL AID & VETERANS TREATMENT COURTS



The Governor's Initiative on Lawyers Assisting Warriors (GI LAW) is a new initiative to leverage the talent of Florida's leading law firms to provide pro bono services to military members. There are future plans to expand this service to veterans.

Florida is the most veteran-friendly state in the nation, with legal and court programs including providers of free or low-cost veterans legal services, established veterans treatment courts, and mentor and volunteer networks that directly support veterans with their legal and court-related needs.

Florida's large veterans' population presents us with great opportunities to increase support and services for veterans in the legal arena.

WHERE ARE THE GAPS?

When discussing gaps in veterans' services, the group discussions focused on programmatic, overall problems in services. These included:

- Lack of general urban transportation
- Rural transportation distance challenges that may require overnight travel and lodging for treatment
- No uniform and model standards for Veterans Treatment Courts (VTCs)
- No recurring, stable VTC funding for all circuits/counties

- No state funding for VTC Mentors
- Too few male and female mentors
- No recurring funding for veterans' civil legal services

There was consensus among group members regarding gaps in transportation services and their impacts on elderly and disabled veterans. The gaps impact not only access to health care appointments, but activities of daily living such as grocery shopping, personal appointments and other necessary trips. The group members also were concerned about rural veterans having little transportation services for trips that may require overnight travel and lodging.



LEGAL AID & VETERANS TREATMENT COURTS

We had judges, prosecutors, public defenders, and mentors with experience in Veteran Treatment Courts (VTCs) in our group. Our groups consistently described gaps and inconsistencies in VTC policies and procedures. The large gap in recurring state funding for VTCs (there is none) was also a main topic.

The lack of funding to create a pool of mentors comprising former and retired senior military leaders was noteworthy and impacted all 31 existing veterans treatment courts. There was also a substantial gap in the number of available female veteran mentors.

Our group also discussed the gap in funding for veterans' legal services. Veterans can receive free, pro bono legal services in larger Florida cities and urban areas, but the state has large gaps in these types of services for veterans in other areas. There is also no recurring state funding for veterans' civil legal services, although there are grant-funded programs in certain areas.

EXISTING RESOURCES TO FILL THE GAPS

Resources for Florida veterans in the legal and VTC areas grew out of a patchwork of local efforts. These local programs are now starting to expand, covering more areas of the state, and helping more veterans. State funding is beginning to make a positive difference for veterans' services, but state funds are non-recurring and must be sought anew every year. This single year non-recurring funding cycle creates uncertainty for established programs like VTCs.

Several veterans' resources stood out as fulfilling veterans' needs from the time they transition from active duty military service, to when they need help with civil legal issues, to being charged with a criminal act.

- 2-1-1 Coordinated Call Center operated by the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay
- Bay Area Legal Services expansion (Jacksonville Area Legal Aid and Legal Services of North Florida)
- Active duty to Veteran Assistance Program transition course
- Military ID to Veteran ID issue
- Detection (Department of

- Corrections, Jail, Licenses)
- Attorney General's Military and Veterans Assistance Program
- Mission United

The 2-1-1 Coordinated Call Center is a central entry point for veterans seeking services, including legal services. The Crisis Center of Tampa Bay now refers calls about veterans' civil legal services to Bay Area Legal Services. Both agencies recently received state government funding, with the Crisis Center receiving direct federal grant funding for veterans' suicide prevention programs. This additional funding allowed Bay Area Legal Services to expand its veterans' legal services network to include the Jacksonville Area Legal Assistance program and Legal Services of North Florida. The



The Orlando-based team of Corrine Cardona, Christopher Bethune and David Dixon participated in *Forward March* as part of Attorney General Ashley Moody's Military and Veterans Assistance Program.

expansion now provides low-income Florida veterans with access to free or low-cost legal services throughout the upper half of the state.

Another resource that group members brought up was a formal program for military members during their leaving active duty is to issue the service member a new Florida driver license (or state ID card) and a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs ID card at one time. Several local organizations had worked with the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles and VA to hold these licensing events and reported good turnout and feedback.



A central issue for all veterans' service organizations is locating veterans in their service area, and then tracking the veteran through the process of obtaining the services to which the veteran is entitled. The group members described various locations or programs through which they gather information about veterans. These included state programs such as veterans asking for services information during the driver license issue or renewal process, and local programs such as checking if an arrested person is a veteran during the booking procedure at the county jail.

After detection, though, a veteran's progress must be tracked, often for grant reporting purposes. Most local veterans' services providers had in-house, grant-driven service tracking systems. The issue quickly grows more complicated when several service providers and other local veterans groups are helping a veteran. Tracking a single veteran across multiple programs and services calls for close cooperation and data-sharing arrangements between stakeholder groups. This occurs more frequently in some areas and programs.

The state of Florida has several programs devoted to protecting veterans from becoming victims of financial crimes and scams. The Florida Attorney General's Office created its Military and Veterans' Assistance Program to educate military members and veterans about financial crimes and scams that target their communities. The MVAP teaches military and veterans how to protect themselves from these financial crimes and how to report scams.

In South Florida, Mission United is a central point for coordinated care and veterans' services. Mission United provides multidisciplinary services for veterans transitioning to civilian life and their families. These services include assistance with employment, education, financial stability, housing, legal services and health care.

OPPORTUNITIES

FDVA can be the leader in the state of Florida to seek out and take advantage of the opportunities for advancing veterans' services in our state. Stakeholder coordination, legislative efforts and continued emphasis on improving veterans' services can set the state on a path

to a coordinated care system for veterans that covers and extends beyond their legal and VTC needs. With early and appropriate services, our veterans' needs for legal services and VTC programs can be reduced.

Two main types of service opportunities emerged; 1) direct legal services, and 2) educational/awareness/connection services. In general, the groups described the following as these types of opportunities:

Direct Legal Services

- Florida Bar outreach/Pro Bono private firms/Government Initiatives on veterans' civil legal services
- Civil legal services assistance may reduce need for VTC/VTC diversion programs
- Veterans' Preference (VP) in government hiring/promotions
- FDVA Veterans' Preference staff receives complaint, reviews Public Employees Relations Commission testimony

Educational/Awareness/Connection

- Private employer awareness of service members' Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, and Veterans' Preference rights
- Property taxes and tax exemptions for veterans; officials education
- Create Legal Service Help Line
- Free Legal Clinic at VA facilities
- Work with family, spouse, children, and employers

The Governor's Initiative on Lawyers Assisting Warriors (GI LAW) is a new initiative to leverage the talent of Florida's leading law firms to provide pro bono services to military members. There are future plans to expand this service to veterans. Availability of such civil legal services may reduce the number of veterans entering Veterans Treatment Courts or VTC diversion programs.

Another opportunity was for state, city and local governments to increase their use of veterans' preference in hiring and promotion beyond the existing statutory requirements found in Chapter 295, Florida Statutes. At present FDVA staff receive complaints about veterans' preference issues, review the complaint and issue a report with findings. The FDVA veterans' preference staff then may testify at PERC about the findings.



The groups also discussed opportunities to educate veterans, to increase their awareness of the services available to them. The groups felt that more private employers should be educated on military transition issues concerning active duty members' and veterans' rights. In particular, USERRA, SCRA and Veterans' Preference rights in hiring and promotion were areas group members brought forward for educational efforts in the private sector.

The groups also discussed opportunities for government to increase its educational/awareness and connection services to veterans. Funding and conducting annual training for property tax appraisers and tax collectors on veterans' tax exemptions was a repeated suggestion across the groups.

In direct legal services, our groups suggested a statewide expansion of the existing 2-1-1 service connecting veterans with legal services through Bay Area Legal Services and their affiliates. BALS now covers Central and North Florida. The groups also suggested expanding the existing legal clinic programs held at VA clinics around Florida to bring in more pro bono attorneys and provide more access.

Finally, the groups continued to emphasize the need to take a holistic, multidisciplinary approach to veterans' services that not only considers the veteran, but also includes the veterans' spouse, family, children and employer. This multi-faceted approach creates broad ranging support for a needy veteran, and leads to success in services. It avoids veterans falling through program cracks and helps a community help its veterans.

BEST PRACTICES

The best practices our Legal/VTC groups advanced are grouped into two general areas; 1) communication about legal issues to veterans, and 2) processes to follow up, track and continue to support veterans after VTC or another diversion program.

Best practices in the communication area

- Legal information gates – Florida Driver Licenses, Hunting and Fishing Licenses, Eviction process documents, Arrest/booking documents, Government Licenses/Contracts/Certificates
- 2-1-1 Coordinated Call Center, operated by the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay
- Get Help Now App/Florida Veterans Foundation
- Family needs outreach/contact/services

Legal information gates are points where an inquiry of whether a person is a veteran or has served in the military can be made as part of normal governmental procedures. At present, when applying for a Florida driver license or renewal, the applicant can receive a "Veteran" imprint on the license after submitting appropriate supporting documentation. FDVA subsequently emails a Florida Veterans Benefits Guide to the license holder, including legal services information. Florida hunting and fishing licenses are popular with veterans, and are a similar potential communication channel.

Several legal service attorneys brought up the idea of including a question asking whether a person being evicted is a veteran or served in the military. If so, the eviction process documents could contain contact information for local veterans' legal services to assist a person being evicted with their legal rights as a veteran. The attorneys expressed concern over time lapsing between eviction notice service and legal deadlines, and offered the veteran question and contact as a potential solution. A county jail could implement the same veteran inquiry and criminal defense contact information as a part of any arrest booking procedure.

The groups also addressed technology best practices. Our group discussion found a best practice for direct veterans communication would be the statewide expansion of the 2-1-1 system as entry point and coordination provider

The Governor's Initiative on Lawyers Assisting Warriors (GI LAW) is a new initiative to leverage the talent of Florida's leading law firms to provide pro bono services to military members. There are future plans to expand this service to veterans.



The Florida Veterans Foundation is presently overseeing the creation and marketing of a free smart phone application called Get Help Now. The app will directly connect veterans with peer counselors at the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay with one touch of a screen button.

for all veterans' services, including legal services. The recent agreement between the 2-1-1 Crisis Center of Tampa Bay and Bay Area Legal Services is an excellent model of best practice for this type of communication channel and service coordination. The model expansion is statewide, with peer-to-peer, veteran-to-veteran, telephone communication. This includes veteran peer counselors trained in suicide prevention and available 24/7 for veterans' suicide counseling.

The Florida Veterans Foundation (FDVA's direct support charity organization) is presently overseeing the creation and marketing of a free smart phone application called Get Help Now. The app will directly connect veterans with peer counselors at the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay with one touch of a screen button. The app will also offer connections to a array of veterans' services, including legal services, health care and behavioral health services. The app will be available for iPhone and Android smart phones.

Any veterans' service must consider the family's role in the veteran's legal and other issues. Those family members also need support and services. A best practice would be to plan outreach to the families and provide them with contact information about available services that may help their veteran family member or themselves. This practice should be consistent across all veterans' service programs.

Best practices in the follow up/track/support continuity area

- Create a cross-program information system to follow up and track veterans receiving services, including legal services
- Increased state and federal funding for veterans civil legal services (e.g., USERRA/SCRA, VA claims, etc.)

There was consensus on the need for a cross-program information system to track and follow up on veterans' services; legal, health care, behavioral health, etc.

No such formal statewide system exists, although large-area care coordination providers such as Mission United in south Florida fill the role in that area. A statewide care and communication tracking solution allowing local veterans services providers to join would be of great use for all veterans and their service providers, increasing effectiveness and holding down costs.

Our Legal/VTC groups were unanimous in recommending increased state and federal funding for veterans' civil legal services as a best practice. While VA claims legal services were part of the legal needs discussed, most groups expressed the greater needs of veterans to deal with "civilian life" legal issues such as health care issues, landlord/tenant disputes, divorces and immigration. The groups also thought FDVA veterans' preference services should be expanded and receive increased state funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Five main areas of recommendations are central to increasing the quality and quantity of services to Florida's 1.5 million veterans.

- a) Create VTCs in all circuits; currently only in half of Florida counties
 - Funding - create recurring stable state funding
 - Training tracks for all Judges, Public Defenders, State Attorneys
 - Need more mentors; funded VTC mentor coordinators
 - Standard procedures and processes for all VTCs
 - More focus on VTC services for domestic violence victims
- b) Veterans' Preference in Employment, Private Employer Awareness, and Taxes
 - Veterans' Preference in government hiring/promotions
 - FDVA VP funding and staff increases; additional reports/reviews/PERC hearings



The groups' central recommendation for veterans' treatment courts is to expand courts to every judicial circuit.

- c). Private employer education and awareness of USERRA, SCRA, and veterans' rights
- d). Property taxes, veterans' exemptions, and education
- e). Find better solutions for obtaining DD-214s

The groups' central recommendation for veterans' treatment courts is to expand courts to every judicial circuit. Currently VTCs only cover about half the counties in Florida, and many rural counties have no VTC. Florida VTCs need stable, recurring state funding to continue to provide diversion programs focused on veterans. VTC court personnel need specific VTC training. There should be VTC training tracks for judges, public defenders and state attorneys to increase usage and effectiveness. And always, VTCs need more mentors. We recommend VTC funding include salaried VTC mentor coordinators to increase the number of VTC mentors, and to train more mentors. Mentors are often the most effective part of a veteran's VTC success.

The Legal/VTC groups also strongly suggested that the judicial system create standard processes and procedures for VTCs statewide. This standardization is important to insure equal protection and due process rights of veterans. It also serves to create VTCs that can be properly measured, tracked and managed as government agencies, creating a framework for stable funding.

Domestic violence charges are unfortunately often one of the legal issue that brings a veteran to VTC. The groups recommended that domestic violence victims of the veteran be part of the decision to permit the veteran to enter VTC as court diversion, and should be part of any coordinated VTC goals and reporting plan. Domestic violence victims should be contacted, counseled and provided with service contacts and providers as part of VTC processes.

The Legal/VTC groups also recommended increasing veterans' preference requirements

in state and local government hiring and promotion. In order to insure these increases are effective, the groups recommended increased funding for FDVA's Veterans Preference (VP) program, with additional employees. This would permit FDVA staff to increase the number of VP reports, reviews and appearances before PERC in VP cases.

The groups further recommend the creation of an education program to increase Florida's private employers' awareness of veterans' civil legal rights under USERRA, SCRA, and state laws. FDVA and other state agencies should coordinate an outreach effort directed at private employers with posters, brochures, emails, etc., similar to other employee rights notice requirements.

The Legal/VTC groups recommended a similar education/awareness effort directed at increasing the knowledge of veterans' tax issues, exemptions and required veterans' exemption documentation among property tax appraisers and tax collectors. The veterans' tax education effort could be provided through the associations of property appraisers and tax collectors as part of their annual training. FDVA already provides training and consultation on veterans' tax issues to local and state government agencies and associations and this effort should be increased.

The Legal/VTC groups' final recommendation is to find a better solution for obtaining DD-214 forms, the discharge document for U.S. military service. This is more complicated than it sounds, since DD-214s are a federal Department of Defense form. At present, there is no central, online database of DD-214 forms. A veteran or their legal representative must request a DD-214 from the National Personnel Records Center, a federal agency. The request form is online, but the time delay in receiving a form may be substantial. Since a DD-214 form is the basic document substantiating military service, we recommend Florida seek federal funding to increase veterans' access to their records by developing an online central database of DD-214s.



HEALTH CARE AND MENTAL HEALTH



Gov. Ron DeSantis and key advocates attended the bill signing of HB 501 and HB 427 on June 26 in Tampa.

WHERE ARE THE GAPS?

The *Forward March* Health Care and Mental Health group discussion provided insight into areas of strength and areas of need regarding veteran health and mental health care. Overall, the feedback indicated a major need for additional, innovative resources to help veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injury, Military Sexual Trauma and service-related injuries and conditions. There is also a need for better communication and coordination within the service provider and local veteran service organization community. Further, the needs of Florida's veterans are not homogenous. While local organizations largely tailor services to the demographics of the veterans in their area, both veterans

and providers highlighted the necessity of improved transitions of care, especially for veterans with mental health issues.

Florida is blessed to have a strong foundation of services for veterans of all wars and service eras, and we can do more for Florida's veterans by building on those foundations. We have a strong Federal VA presence that provides our veterans with basic and complex medical services as well as a breadth of other psychosocial services via hospitals, clinics, long-term care facilities, and Vet Centers across Florida. However, the size of the VA makes it bureaucratic and veterans report it can seem cold and uninviting, citing the impression that care comes across as generic



Bob Asztalos, chairman of the Florida Veterans Foundation, leads a group discussion during one of the *Forward March* regional meetings.

and their individuality is checked at the door. This is especially true for Vietnam-era veterans who mistrust the government because of their service experience and lack of support upon their return home, as well as many Southwest Asia conflict veterans who do not feel the VA fills their needs. Veterans voiced that when joining the military, they underwent both basic and job-specific training, but they received little to no training on how to “rewire” and transition back to the civilian world. This is especially true for veterans with mental health issues who are often reticent to seek help. As a result, some veterans suffer from homelessness, self-medication with alcohol and/or drugs, challenging emotions and behaviors that lead to crime and incarceration, and suicide.

Regarding community services, the results of our discussions demonstrate that Florida has a patchwork of veteran services that augment the Federal VA health care system and seek to fill gaps in Federal VA resources. The patchwork is locally focused, community oriented and largely tailored to the local veteran population. Because these organizations are local and inwardly focused, these groups face

issues of adequate funding, lack of proper information, inadequate resources for outreach and duplication of services. They are often insular and thus miss out on the benefits of coordination, mutual assistance and resource sharing. While a variety local services exist, group discussions revealed there is a need for increased opportunities for peer support and/or mentorship, as well as services specifically tailored to the needs of women veterans.

EXISTING RESOURCES TO FILL THE GAPS

There is an array of existing resources that have the potential to fill the gaps highlighted during the *Forward March* Health and Mental Health group discussions, several of which are highlighted below.

The first is the 2-1-1 Coordinated Call Center operated by the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, which is a statewide call line that provides suicide intervention support, crisis counseling and supportive services information to callers. This resource has veteran-specific resources available to veterans in all regions of Florida,

A disturbing number of veterans take their own lives. In Florida alone, nearly 600 veterans die from suicide each year at a rate slightly higher than the national average. Finding a solution to this public health crisis requires an aspirational, innovative, all-hands-on-deck approach.



Florida is blessed to have a strong foundation of services for veterans of all wars and service eras, and we can do more for Florida's veterans by building on those foundations.

and veterans have the ability to speak to a fellow veteran for crisis intervention support.

Mission United is a program that developed out of the United Way of Broward and has expanded to other counties and states. They assist veterans and their families with transitioning to civilian life. Mission United provides resources including housing support, employment services and legal assistance among others, and serves as a system navigation and case management entity.

An additional resource is the Florida Association of Managing Entities (FAME) system-wide behavioral health network that is made up of seven districts. The model helps to target community specific issues and respond to and fund behavioral health initiatives properly. Additionally, FAME has the ability to track data regarding users of the behavioral health system of care.

Further, developers are currently working to create a "Get Help Now" phone app that will allow veterans to connect with suicide prevention counselors instantaneously by clicking a button on their phone. The app is still in the development stages, but has the potential to link veterans directly with fellow veteran crisis counselors as part of the 2-1-1 Coordinated Call Center.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FDVA

It is evident that many veteran-focused resources are available in local communities, but there is a lack of system coordination. FDVA is uniquely poised to serve as the lead agency for providing accurate, up-to-date information to the veteran community, encouraging the partnering of local resources, identifying and addressing veteran issues and providing a collective goal. FDVA can serve as the conduit between the Federal VA, community groups and veterans where communication and coordination is presently lacking.

BEST PRACTICES

As a result of speaking with community leaders and local content experts during the *Forward March* Health and Mental Health group discussions, several best practices were noted.

Mission United was highlighted as a program that effectively helps veterans and their families navigate community and VA resources with the goal of achieving self-sufficiency.

The Crisis Center of Tampa Bay also provides suicide intervention and crisis management services to the surrounding counties via the 24-hour 2-1-1 Coordinated Call Center.

In addition, research has shown that a protective factor against suicide is the feeling that one is connected to those around them. For this reason, resources that offer peer-to-peer veteran counseling like the Crisis Center's 2-1-1 Coordinated Call Center are effectively using shared past military experience as a means to help veterans feel connected in times of crisis.

Regular meetings between local care providers were also noted as a best practice in the interest of discussing the needs of local veterans and reviewing existing and needed resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of a systematic review of topics discussed during the *Forward March* Health and Mental Health group discussions, review of gaps in care, and present understanding of existing resources, we have developed several recommendations aimed at improving the present state of veteran health and mental health resources in Florida. Specific steps are enumerated below:

1. In regard to the duplication of services, siloing of local resources and lack of dissemination of resources:

FDVA can create an easy point of entry into the service provider system and provide a one-stop shop for veterans, their families and veteran



HEALTH AND MENTAL HEALTH

advocates to find information and resources.

- FDVA can develop and utilize a statewide database of resources available to veterans based on location. On the FDVA website, veterans could access a list of regional and county services in one location. This might include creation of a tab on the FDVA website that would allow veteran groups to add information about their organization and programs.
- This would allow both veterans and veteran providers to access an up-to-date list of referral resources. Further, this would allow for communication and collaboration between similar community organizations in the same region or across regions.
- Further, this allows VA providers to access a list of local referral resources that may benefit their patients.

FDVA can lead in spreading the word to veterans about services available.

- In addition to maintaining a comprehensive list of local veteran support organizations, FDVA can send a Welcome Letter to transitioning troops as well as a Quarterly Newsletter as a form of outreach to veterans.
- Through the use of social media, FDVA can disseminate information to a wider veteran audience including younger veterans, as well as promote VA enrollment.

2. To address the gaps in care specific to the Federal VA system:

FDVA should encourage the Federal VA to improve its present practices and support the VA in those efforts.

- While the gaps at VA hospitals and clinics will vary by location, there is an

overall need to increase patient-centered, individually-tailored care in the VA. FDVA should support the VA in securing the resources necessary to train incoming VA providers on A) the unique needs and experiences of the veteran community B) effective ways of communicating with veteran patients to ensure they feel heard, and C) how to serve as an active listener.

- To allow VA providers to spend more individualized time and efforts meeting with and understanding their veteran patients, FDVA needs to support the VA in making changes necessary to eliminate undue barriers and burden on



Great to have Florida Veterans Foundation Chairman Bob Asztalos, Sen. Vic Torres, Sen. Tom Wright and Executive Director Danny Burgess participate at the Port Canaveral Forward March.

providers so they have the bandwidth to more fully serve each veteran patient and their unique needs.

- The promotion of a greater use of telehealth resources will allow for an alternative to in-person mental health treatment and may circumvent the perceived stigma surrounding seeking mental health resources that some veterans experience.

HB 501 created a pilot program focused on treating post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries in veterans using alternative therapies, to include accelerated resolution therapy, equine therapy, music therapy, service animal training therapy and hyperbaric oxygen therapy.



FDVA can lead in finding new and innovative ways to assist veterans and their families with their health care needs.

- FDVA should maintain open lines of communication with VA hospitals and clinics so that barriers to care can be identified and addressed in a timely manner.

3. To meet the unique health and mental health care needs of veterans:

FDVA should be an advocate to the Legislature and other government entities to fill gaps in the health care delivery system.

- FDVA should advocate for the continuation of 2-1-1 Coordinated Call Center veteran peer counselors so that veterans have continued access to this essential resource.
- FDVA should work with agencies at the state and federal levels to identify and address barriers that veterans and their families experience when seeking care that may include factors like transportation difficulties, program enrollment challenges and stigma surrounding veterans seeking care.

FDVA should serve as a champion for suicide prevention efforts among veterans.

- FDVA should support the Federal VA in training non-mental health VA providers to identify risk factors for veteran suicide and refer patients to relevant resources when necessary.
- As mentioned above, FDVA should advocate for the continuation and expansion of 2-1-1 Coordinated Call Center veteran peer counselors.
- FDVA should provide veteran-specific suicide prevention educational resources to community providers and organizations working with veterans, as well as referral information for instances when they identify a veteran who needs additional support.

FDVA can lead in finding new and innovative ways to assist veterans and their families with their health care needs.

- This may include promoting alternative therapies and recreational therapies for veterans, supporting

new telehealth efforts, etc.

- FDVA should promote the expansion of peer-to-peer veteran resources and the development of additional services specifically tailored to the needs of women veterans.

To address coordination of care issues and promote community support:

FDVA should promote the utilization of the behavioral health systems of care that have been established by FAME.

- This allows for the use of an existing framework to help link veterans to behavioral health resources.

FDVA can lead in educating general medicine and the public about the unique health care needs of veterans.

- In addition to providing veteran-specific suicide prevention educational resources to community providers, FDVA can disseminate information on veterans' issues to general practitioners and train and educate providers to be active listeners to veterans.
- FDVA can advocate for the training of law enforcement on how to recognize and best address veterans in the community.
- FDVA should work with the Governor's office to decrease the stigma surrounding seeking mental health treatment.

FDVA should encourage VA and other outside veteran service providers to meet on a regular basis to coordinate services, identify community-specific gaps in care and work collaboratively to address veteran needs.

- FDVA should continue to conduct meetings such as *Forward March* so veteran advocates can share resources, connect with one another and voice community needs.
- By maintaining a comprehensive list of veteran service providers by location, FDVA will indirectly facilitate communication between the included organizations.

TRANSITION SERVICES



Retired Army First Sgt. Matt Eversmann of Black Hawk Down fame joined the *Forward March* initiative in West Palm Beach, adding his signature to the ubiquitous *Forward March* poster.

Each transitioning service member retiring or separating from the military has individual goals for their post-military life. Although each veteran¹ and their transition process is different, common themes run through the feedback we gained from the *Forward March* Transition working groups.

Themes that run through the Transition

Topics listed in this report are:

- Successful transition begins and is maintained with an individual approach of tailored goals and support for each veteran. This is best achieved through peer-to-peer, veteran-to-veteran assistance. Goals of successful transition for most veterans are: access to earned benefits, fulfilling employment, entrepreneurship opportunity, and smooth family movement to their post-transition home of choice.
- Veterans desire a single or simpler point(s) of entry to access the many resources available to them. In some cases they

suffer information overload, and other times they feel they don't know where to start or know if certain resources are available to meet their goals.

- Some gaps identified through this initiative are addressed in whole or in part by existing state or local resources, but are not being communicated about extensively perpetuating a perception of a gap where one may not exist.

Successful transition is ultimately about connections for veterans. Connecting with benefits, connecting with employers, connecting with business opportunities, and connecting with other veterans who can help navigate resources. It is in the best interest of the state to undertake promoting and facilitating the building of connections that meet the individual needs of veterans. Local transition assistance solutions work best and can be facilitated and supported by state entities like the Florida Department of

¹ Veteran in this report means service members who are separating or retiring from the military, veterans who have separated or retired from active military service, and members of the National Guard or Reserves, and in some cases spouses.



Successful transition is ultimately about connections for veterans. Connecting with benefits, connecting with employers, connecting with business opportunities, and connecting with other veterans who can help navigate resources.

Veterans' Affairs and Veterans Florida. DOD TAP programs can only go so far assisting separating service members and veterans. State and local solutions and resources are best to follow through with guiding their transition process.

TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Several issues were identified with the DOD's Transition Assistance Programs. While many of these changes would need to occur at the DOD, the state could expand some best practices in other locations as well as look at ways to better utilize resources to fill gaps where possible.

What are the gaps?

- Across the state, access to transitioning service members in DOD TAP is limited, the transition assistance program managers generally do not allow state and local resources to have contact with the service members, nor do they provide contact information to create awareness of resources available to them.
- Generally, there is a lack of cultural awareness by service members as to what to expect from civilians in employment situations. They do not understand that often civilians have limited exposure to the military and most of the things they think they know are from stereotypes, media and entertainment. Even an understanding that some things that are normal in the military are in some cases frowned upon or unacceptable in a civilian setting is limited among many service members.
- It is estimated that service members should start planning for their transition at least a year before separation. DOD TAP usually targets separating service members as early as six months meaning the timelines are too close to separation to be effective.
- Transition assistance programs do not allow for resource referrals from

either paid or non-profit resources that could ease their transition.

- National Guard and Reservists usually do not participate in transition assistance programs. National Guard and Reservists also have different needs than their active duty counterparts. Many do not simply return to their civilian jobs after activation both by their own choice, possibly wanting a career change, or by no fault of their own, when an employer fails to follow the laws regarding employment. There is no well-defined resource to help National Guard and Reservists with their transition, and they can be difficult to contact after separation.

What resources exist to fill the gaps?

- Veterans Florida, a state-created nonprofit and initiative to help fill the gap, provides career services, entrepreneurship and agricultural training to veterans and transitioning service members in or moving to Florida. Career services include military skills translation, resume assistance, interview preparation and job placement.
- Regional CareerSource Offices that have Disabled Veteran Outreach Program specialists to assist certain veterans in economic hardship.
- County Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) point veterans towards local, state and federal benefits and assistance.
- Installation commanders - to support programs and encourage DOD and local collaboration with local and state resource providers.

Opportunities:

- Resources are available, but limited access to transitioning service members prevents awareness and participation. Gaining access to transitioning service members would help connect them to state and local



TRANSITION SERVICES

resources and enable a smoother transition.

- State and local resources are better equipped to educate transitioning service members on trends and opportunities in the area.
- National Guard and Reservists typically do not have the opportunity to participate in DOD TAP.

Best Practices:

- Tri-county Partnership Initiative - Partnership and collaboration between regional CareerSource, local economic development council and DOD Installation Commanders at Eglin Air Force Base.
- DOD Skillbridge ²
- Veterans Florida, described previously.

Recommendations:

- Expand partnerships between DOD TAP courses at statewide DOD installations and regional career source, economic development councils, and local resource providers to enhance training for eligible service members.
- Expand DOD Skillbridge and similar civilian training programs, encourage DOD participation during transition activities.
- Require or Enhance DOD TAP programs for eligible National Guard members and Reservists at the federal level.
- Ensure Veterans Florida funding continues. Additional resources can assist with establishing an “outside the gate TAP” administered by Veterans Florida.

STATE LICENSING RECIPROCITY AND RECOGNITION

State licensing reciprocity and recognition exists to a large degree already in Florida, most of which is provided at state and local levels with regard to reduced fees or free licensing for veterans. This is also an important factor as it pertains to family members relocating to Florida who wish to transfer a license or professional certification from another state. It would alleviate many concerns if legislation was expanded to ease the requirements for transferring a license or certification from another state for veterans and their immediate family members. Professional licensing boards also need to be open to reciprocity even as standards for licensure may be different from state to state.

What are the gaps?

- Although the state provides several license fee waivers, several state created professional boards are slow to adopt or make considerations for veterans entering a profession or attempting to seek reciprocity for a license gained in another state or through commensurate military experience. Additionally, the state’s business regulatory website does not make it clear where a veteran should go on the website to find information on available waivers and exemptions.
- Recognition of accumulated experience hours or time for trades, professional



Ed Rodriguez, Director of Veterans Affairs for Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried, was a frequent participant in the regional *Forward March* meetings.

services, and apprenticeships from other states or military service for veterans and their immediate family members.

What resources exist to fill the gaps?

- Professional licensing fees relaxed or eliminated for veterans in limited cases at the local level.
- Veterans Florida’s successful Entrepreneurship Program can provide training and resources to veterans seeking employment in licensed trades, most of which are self-employment opportunities.

Opportunities:

- Legislation is needed to recognize and accept veterans’ and family members’

² The DoD SkillBridge program is an opportunity for service members to gain valuable civilian work experience through specific industry training, apprenticeships or internships during the last 180 days of service.



Outside the VA the overwhelming majority of veterans are unable to navigate through the “sea of goodwill” unless they are connected or are networked into the cause.

licenses, experience requirements and accumulated experience obtained during military service or from another state.

- Create a statewide awareness campaign of all waivers and exemptions available for veterans and spouses.

Best Practices:

- Onward to Opportunity - Career Skills Program
- DOD Skillbridge
- Veterans Florida Entrepreneurship Program

Recommendations:

- Allow for expanded reciprocity of state license or certifications obtained by veterans or their family members in other states or during military service.
- Develop a waiver process or exception for veterans and their family members for certain professional licenses when they can prove that they satisfied an equivalent accumulation of experience or hours in military service or in another state.
- Reduce or eliminate fees or offer scholarships to relocating veterans and their family members who are transferring licenses from other states or military service.
- Expand training programs and employer incentives for initially training and certifying or licensing veterans.
- Ensure Veterans Florida funding continues. Additional resources can allow entrepreneurship training and training grants across more areas of the state as well as marketing the program to veterans and their families. Marketing efforts can also include promoting the state’s existing efforts regarding waivers, exemptions and reciprocity.

CENTRAL CONTACT OR REFERRAL SYSTEM FOR RESOURCES

It was almost universally noted that although resources exist to address many of the issues that transitioning veterans face, it is difficult to navigate through all the resources available

to them. Many veterans turn to the VA to find help or referrals to resources and service providers; however, the majority of resources are not referred out through the VA. Outside the VA the overwhelming majority of veterans are unable to navigate through the “sea of goodwill” unless they are connected or are networked into the cause. Even when service providers are aware of resources and are able to refer veterans, they usually do not know the specifics on the requirements or qualification criteria for the resource providers. It is even less likely that a follow-up would occur to determine whether or not the veteran received the assistance they were seeking.

What are the gaps?

- Resource providers typically do not know where to look for other service and resource providers available outside their scope. As a result, referrals to other providers are rare because resource providers are unaware of other resources or programs and unfamiliar with their requirements.
- Follow ups after referrals are not conducted to verify the veteran connected with the referred provider or was effectively served.
- Menus of resources are not comprehensive or complete, not validated or vetted, or, in some cases, they are presented in inaccessible manners which only serve to overload a veteran with information.

What resources exist to fill the Gaps?

- Many local communities across the state have varying levels of formalized community collaborations between nonprofits, colleges and universities, veteran service organizations, county veteran service officers, VA representatives, etc.
- Mission United, a coordinated system of care for veterans and their families, which uses software to track referrals between various service providers, is a local initiative in certain areas of the state under the United Way banner.



TRANSITION SERVICES

Opportunities:

- Resources are available, but there is a lack of system coordination or statewide database to track all available resources and frequency of use.
- Create awareness of networks that exist to help match resources with veterans in need including resource providers.
- Market resources to veterans where they are likely to see them i.e. veteran groups, VA, social media, DMV, FDVA, Mission United, etc.

Best Practices:

- Mission United—Scalable, replicable model for coordinated veteran services
- 2-1-1 Coordinated Call Center operated by the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay provides veterans with easy to remember phone number for seeking local assistance

Recommendations:

- Develop/utilize a statewide provider and resource database specific to veteran population and their families.
- Establish a call center with VSOs or counselors trained on resource referrals, who are able to determine which resources may apply to veterans using a database of resources. These counselors should also follow up with the veteran to ensure their needs were met.
- Veterans Florida and FDVA share providers discovered through their normal activities so as veterans come to Veterans Florida for career assistance, they can be referred out to services they may need in addition to employment.

CULTURAL AWARENESS FOR EMPLOYERS AND VETERANS

One of the most, if not the most, important goals of a service member's transition is gainful and meaningful post military employment as a veteran. A steady income and mission driven employment provides veterans and their families a sense of security, hope and purpose. Veterans who attain this goal are more likely to assist other transitioning service members and are less likely to rely solely on the social safety net.

There is a wide cultural gap between veterans

and civilians, even more so between veterans and their potential civilian employers. Most veterans rely on either trial and error or rumors to navigate the employment process when they transition from military culture back into their civilian lives.³ This puts the veteran at a severe disadvantage compared to civilian applicants that understand culture outside the military. Transition assistance programs do little to address or educate transitioning service members on what to expect or how to act in the current civilian climate. Additionally, the importance of their network, especially within their desired industry, is not stressed and little if any training is done on how to



Florida Veteran Support Line Staff are always happy and ready to help.

become better at networking and leveraging your network for career opportunities.

Civilian employers are often confused as to what to expect from a military employee, and, even more, what skills they have acquired in the military that could apply to their future roles within a company. There are also stereotypes and misconceptions, such as “the broken vet,” that deter some employers from considering military members for employment.

The gap needs to be bridged or narrowed between service members and employers. Many initiatives such as Veterans Florida, Hiring Our Heroes, and DOD Skillbridge do this naturally by the nature of their work, but the issue is large, and with more than 200,000 service members retiring or separating nationally each year, more resources are needed for an organized campaign to dispel myths and tie the two cultures together.

³ This is evidence of the other DOD TAP gap. Transitioning service members have dozens of out-processing activities demanding their attention, and most do not give the federally provided DOD TAP classes the necessary attention, hurting their post military employment search.



Sponsored by the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Operation Outdoor Freedom provides wounded veterans with outdoor activities at no cost as one of many transition services.

What are the gaps?

- Helping employers understand skills and mindset of veterans and overcome stereotypes and myths associated with veterans.
- Creating veteran awareness of cultural differences between military and civilian employers.

What resources exist to fill the gaps?

- Local Colleges and Universities, who train and teach students hired by industry, can effectively promote student veterans to employers. Additionally, most, if not all, Florida higher education institutions have Student Veteran Associations which can assist with promoting veterans and their talent to employers as they near graduation.
- Veterans Florida - Career services, entrepreneurship and agricultural training
- CareerSource
- Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) - Can often help find resources to point veterans in the right direction
- DOD TAP
- Mission United - Coordinated system of care for veterans and their families.
- Veteratti ⁴, Eversmann Advisory ⁵, Hiring Our Heroes ⁶, and other veterans employment and/or recruiting nonprofits
- Jacksonville Military Veteran Coalition ⁷ - dedicated local employers seeking veteran talent and assisting them with transition efforts

Opportunities:

- Expand state employment programs that incentivize employers to hire veterans
- Create a cultural awareness campaign for employers and commerce groups on the value of veterans
- Create more veteran peer-to-peer networking and mentoring opportunities. Culturally, veterans trust each other but can be suspect of civilians who offer help.

Best Practices:

- Veteratti, Eversmann Advisory, Hiring Our Heroes, and other veteran employment and/or recruiting nonprofits help educate employers and veterans and dispel myths and stereotypes as well as conduct veteran peer to peer mentoring.
- Veterans Florida - Works with and trains employers to understand how to hire and work with veterans, prepares veterans for civilian employer interviews and cultural differences. Provides workforce training grants for employers which train new or existing veteran employees.

Recommendations:

- Task Veterans Florida with and provide additional resources for administering a statewide network of local veteran-friendly employer networks. Discovered through *Forward March* events, local employer networks demonstrated a commitment to successfully assisting transitioning service members and veterans through shared experiences and best practices coordinated typically through monthly or quarterly formal or informal gatherings. Veterans Florida can identify where such local employers already exist and support them, and where such networks do not exist, Veterans Florida can assist establishing and coordinating them.
- Provide additional resources to programs that assist veterans with employment.
- Market and provide formal employer veteran skill translator and cultural awareness training. Provide financial incentives to companies that complete training and hire veterans.
- Create formal peer-to-peer mentoring groups within the Transition Assistance Programs, Vet Centers and CareerSource Veterans Resource Centers. Veterans Florida can also establish a statewide network of career and entrepreneurship mentors.

⁴ Veteratti is a digital mentorship platform which helps the military community pursue the careers of their dreams at every point in their career journey.

⁵ Eversmann Advisory trains, coaches and mentors individuals on how to build their career transition strategies, and offers military consulting services to U.S. military members and veterans.

⁶ Hiring Our Heroes, an initiative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, provides free job search assistance to U.S. military members, veterans and military spouses, and we help companies connect with opportunities to hire them.

⁷ The Jacksonville Military Veterans Coalition works with military organizations, veteran groups, industry associations, governmental entities, and Jacksonville businesses to build awareness and understanding of how these skills and cultural attributes make military veterans outstanding employees.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Below is a summary of recommendations coming from the five breakout sessions of the *Forward March* initiative.

Benefits:

1. FDVA needs to increase its presence in the military services' Transition Assistance Programs.
2. Funding is required for FDVA, national service organizations and county veterans service officers to adequately identify and contact veterans.
3. FDVA should collaborate with the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs and the seven nationally chartered service organizations such as American Legion, DAV, VFW, etc. to lobby Congress to fix the flaws in the eBenefits system.
4. FDVA should seek funding from the state legislature for a veterans' information system that can link veterans with all services provided in their communities.
5. FDVA should seek additional state funding for its outreach budget to connect hard-to-reach veterans in Florida with earned services, benefits and support.
6. FDVA should seek state funding to continue supporting the 2-1-1 Coordinated Call Center through the establishment of the Veteran Care Coordinator Program.
7. FDVA should encourage to establish county engagement boards like in Pinellas and Hillsborough.
8. FDVA should work with other state agencies and service provider

organizations to produce a comprehensive resource directory for veterans and establish a Finding Florida Veterans database.

9. FDVA should seek state funding to produce a virtual welcome packet for new veterans arriving in the state. Work with the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles to identify recent arrivals as they apply for a new registration or tag. The landing platform for this welcome packet could be the Veterans Florida website as they are already welcoming veterans to Florida and encouraging them to stay.

Homelessness and Community Services:

1. FDVA should create an easy point of entry into the service provider system and provide a one-stop shop for veterans, their families and veteran advocates to find information and resources available on the FDVA Website.
2. FDVA should lead the way in spreading the word to veterans about services available by expanding FDVA's external affairs/outreach.
3. FDVA should lead in finding and promoting additional innovative resources to meet veterans' basic needs.
4. FDVA should support the allocation of state funding to new housing specific initiatives.
5. FDVA should encourage the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and



community organizations to meet on a regular basis to coordinate services, identify community specific gaps in care and work collaboratively address veteran housing needs.

6. FDVA should serve as the central body that unifies efforts to identify veterans in Florida.

Legal Aid and Veterans Treatment Courts:

1. FDVA should work with the legislature to pass legislation that standardizes veterans' treatment courts in every judicial court and advocate for Federal funding to support VTCs.
2. FDVA works with state courts administrators and other stakeholders to create training tracks for all judges, public defenders and state attorneys.
3. FDVA should ensure that any Veterans Treatment Court funding includes money for mentors.
4. FDVA should work with the Governor's office and other state agencies to coordinate the creation of an education program to increase Florida's private employer's awareness of veterans' civil legal rights under USERRA, SCRA and state laws.
5. FDVA should advocate for the expansion of the GI LAW program from active duty members to Florida's veteran community.
6. FDVA should work with county property appraisers and tax collectors to increase their knowledge of veterans tax issues, exemptions and documents needed to support their entitled exemption. This can be accomplished through annual training that property appraisers and tax collectors associations provide for their membership.
7. FDVA should work with the VA to provide a more readily available depository of DD-214 forms. The current system is too slow.

Health Care/Mental Health:

1. FDVA should create an easy entry point into the service provider system and provide a one-stop shop for veterans, their families and veteran advocates to find information and resources.
2. FDVA should be a legislative advocate to continue funding the Crisis Center of

Tampa Bay's 2-1-1 Coordinated Call Center. Assist the legislature in passing the Veteran Family Care Act.

3. FDVA should serve as a champion for suicide prevention efforts among veterans.
4. FDVA should continue to advocate for the expansion of alternative treatment therapies for veterans and ensure adequate state funding for therapies.
5. FDVA should advocate for and support the VA and other outside veteran services providers to meet on a regular basis to coordinate services, identify community specific gaps in care and work collaboratively to address veteran needs.

Transition Services:

1. Continue to fund Veterans Florida. Additional resources can be used to establish an in-state Transition Assistance Program administered by Veterans Florida to establish and coordinate a veteran-friendly network of employers.
2. Continue to pass legislation that allows for expanded reciprocity of state license or certifications obtained by veterans or family members in other states or military service.
3. Expand the law that allows waivers for veterans and their family members for certain professional licenses when they can prove the necessary hours of experience or military service.
4. Expand training programs and employer incentives for initial training and certifying or licensing veterans.
5. Fund the operation by the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs of a database that will provide a list of all service providers in the state - a one-stop shop for services.

Forward March is the start of an ongoing effort to determine best practices and ensure the state of Florida sets the national standard for veteran services and support. We are extremely grateful to all who participated in this monumental initiative. We value your time, dedication and input. Now let's turn your ideas into action and ensure Florida sets the national standard in veteran service and support.

