

Questions for the Department of Veterans Affairs Commissioner Nominee

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March 31, 2023 | 2023-R-0079

Commissioner of Veterans Affairs

The commissioner is responsible for (1) administering all programs under the jurisdiction of the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), including the Veterans' Residential Services facility and Healthcare Center; (2) coordinating with elder care facilities for resident veterans; (3) operating a veterans' advocacy and assistance office to, among other things, assist veterans and their families claim benefits and train municipal veteran representatives; (4) collecting and disseminating information on services and facilities available to help veterans; (5) helping veterans claim benefits accruing to them under federal, state, and local laws; (6) developing and preparing a long-range plan and mission statement for the Veterans' Residential Services facility and the veterans' advocacy and assistance unit; (7) reviewing veterans' appeals of denials of admission to various department programs and benefits; (8) appointing members to serve on the Eligibility Qualifying Review Board; and (9) approving or denying applications, based on the review board's recommendations, from veterans with an other than honorable (OTH) discharge seeking eligibility for state benefits ([CGS §§ 27-102i](#), [27-103](#), and [27-106](#)).

Questions

1. What do you see as DVA's greatest strength? What do you consider to be its biggest challenge?
2. According to your biography, you joined DVA in 2015. What accomplishments or aspects of your tenure are you most proud? Have your priorities shifted over that period?
3. Have you noticed any changes in the needs of veterans during your tenure? Do you anticipate those needs will change in the future?

4. How did the residential facility and healthcare center manage the COVID-19 pandemic? Were there any processes already in place that worked particularly well? Were there any insights gleaned that can help DVA better prepare for any future widespread disruptions?
5. [Public Act 21-79](#) established the [Eligibility Qualifying Review Board](#) and a process by which individuals with an other than honorable (OTH) discharge can apply to be eligible for state benefits if they believe their OTH discharge was primarily due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. To date, how many applications has the board received and how many have been approved? Are there any changes that should, in your opinion, be made to the process?
6. Similarly, [PA 18-47](#) extended certain state and municipal benefits to veterans who received an OTH discharge due to PTSD, Traumatic Brain Injury, or a disclosed military sexual trauma. Do you know how many veterans have been able to access state benefits as a result of this change? Do you think any administrative changes are needed? For example, should the [Eligibility Qualifying Review Board](#)'s purview be expanded to cover these qualifying conditions as well?
7. It has been estimated that approximately 2,400 casket plots are left at the state veterans cemetery in Middletown, with 15 to 20 burials occurring each week and at least 1,000 individuals prequalified to be interred there. Does DVA need to expand the cemetery (or establish a new one) to meet the demand for spaces and, if so, by when must it do so? Does DVA have plans that you can discuss and, if so, how much progress has been made on those plans?
8. Over the past few years, several bills have been proposed regarding the municipal veteran representative program, which every town must have. Some people have stated that the level of service provided to veterans varies greatly by town, with some towns providing far more comprehensive information and services than others. Do you agree with this assessment and, if so, what do you see as the main reason, or reasons, for this difference? Do you think any changes to the program can be made with existing resources that would ensure equally thorough service is provided across the towns? Or would additional funding be necessary (for example, for each town to have a dedicated paid representative, rather than a volunteer or existing town employee fill dual roles)?
9. In 2014, the legislature passed a law ([PA 14-131](#)) allowing veterans' military training to substitute for certain professional state licensing, training, and exam requirements (such as apprenticeship requirements). It did so for licensing requirements that apply to police officers, security guards, EMTs, and professions licensed by Department of Consumer Protection-administered boards, such as the Electrical Work Board and Plumbing and Pipe Work Board (see [OLR's PA 14-131 summary](#) for a complete list). Are you aware of any other professional licensing requirements that overlap substantially with veterans' training that the legislature should consider adding?
10. Based on your and your office's experiences, do you think mental health services for veterans in this state (either provided by the state or federal DVA) are adequately addressing veterans' needs? Are alternative therapies, such as art or music therapy, provided at the state's facilities? If not, do you think there is a role for them?