



## Department of Veterans' Affairs: Office of Advocacy and Assistance

### Background

In April 2015, the program review committee authorized a study of the Department of Veterans' Affairs Office of Advocacy and Assistance (OAA). The study's focus was to examine how well OAA provides "aid and benefit" to veterans and their families, primarily in assistance with their claims for federal veterans' benefits. Key areas of analysis included cataloguing OAA activities, evaluating OAA's outcomes, gauging veterans' satisfaction with OAA's services, and examining OAA's collaboration and coordination with public and private entities to serve veterans.

OAA serves as the state's veterans' services organization recognized by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The office primarily assists veterans who served in the United States Armed Forces and their family members in accessing government veteran benefits and entitlements under federal, state, and local laws.

To those veterans who qualify, the VA offers a myriad of benefits, but they are not granted automatically. Basic eligibility depends on the type of military service performed, the duration of that service, and the nature of discharge or separation. While a veteran can apply directly to the VA for benefits without assistance, the use of a VA-accredited professional in submitting a claim for veterans' benefits is common practice.

Committee staff interviewed OAA personnel; surveyed veterans and their families and municipal veteran contacts; had conversations with external stakeholders including VA personnel and staff from the state labor and social services departments; observed a Bridgeport Interagency Collaborative Project meeting as well as a Veterans Engagement Board Public Forum; and analyzed data from the VA and from OAA.

### Main Staff Findings

**OAA's effectiveness in assisting veterans and their families is difficult to assess.** Per the PRI staff survey, some clients were very pleased with OAA assistance, while others had complaints. Analysis of federal data shows mixed results when comparing OAA to other veterans service organizations and professionals.

**Connecticut compares poorly overall to other states in maximizing receipt of federal benefits for its veterans.** OAA, as the state's veteran service organization, is at least partially accountable for this poor performance and, with the largest number of service officers of all the state's service organizations, must be integral in its improvement.

**Self-represented claimants submit the largest share of compensation claims, but receive the lowest average monthly benefit awards.** This raises questions as to whether these claimants may have recouped higher award amounts with the assistance of accredited professionals, like OAA.

**Operations are not performance-oriented.** Accurate data on general activities and claims workloads is either not tracked or not compiled into an accessible format, preventing analysis of annual trends as well as balancing workloads across district offices.

**OAA is not using its information management system to its fullest capacity.** District offices are inputting information, but no one knows how to fully extract it. The staff person fluent in management reporting functions retired in 2013 and no one has been trained since then to fulfill the role. This critically limits the ability for program oversight and management.

### PRI Staff Recommendations

**Recommendations are proposed with a focus on operational improvements in an effort to address identified deficiencies.** Key recommendations would:

1. **Identify alternate funding and resource sharing opportunities** through exploration of potential federal grants and collaborations;
2. **Improve training and continuing education** by overhauling OAA's training program for new hires, including formalizing training specific to the main software program OAA utilizes;
3. **Establish meaningful performance standards** which should be incorporated into a functional data management system to assess staff progress on a monthly and annual basis;
4. **Develop, manage, and report on timely and relevant data** namely establishment of a formal development plan to address extensive internal data weaknesses;
5. **Enhance operational efficiencies** such as utilizing the current information management system to its full capabilities and reviewing claims before submission; and
6. **Increase awareness of and access to OAA services** by developing an annual written outreach plan and electronically tracking these activities to determine the impact of such efforts.

# Acronyms

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BVA	Board of Veterans' Appeals
CCT	Connecticut Careers Trainee
C.G.S.	Connecticut General Statutes
CVLC	Connecticut Veterans Legal Center
DAV	Disabled American Veterans
DIC	Dependency and Indemnity Compensation
DSS	Department of Social Services
DVA	Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs
FDC	Fully Developed Claim
FFY	Federal Fiscal Year
FY	Fiscal Year (state)
MOPH	Military Order of the Purple Heart
NCA	National Cemeteries Administration
NVLSP	National Veterans Legal Services Program
OAA	Office of Advocacy and Assistance
PA	Public Act
OVWD	Office of Veterans' Workforce Development
POA	Power of Attorney
PRI	Program Review and Investigations Committee
SEP	Stakeholders Enterprise Portal
VA	United States Department of Veterans Affairs
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration
VBMS	Veterans Benefit Management System
VFW	Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S.
VIMS	Veterans Information Management System
VSO	Veterans Services Officer

## LIST OF PROGRAM REVIEW COMMITTEE STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS

### Activities and Workload

- 1. The Office of Advocacy and Assistance should dedicate efforts to ensure its existing veteran information management system is used to its maximum potential. This includes ensuring relevant information is entered into the system in a timely and accurate manner. The system should be used as part of the office's routine oversight and management of veterans' benefits claims. Any necessary training should occur to ensure at least one person in each OAA district office and one in the central office have complete knowledge of the system, can extract data, and produce the reports necessary for proper program management and oversight purposes.**
- 2. The Department of Veterans' Affairs should conduct an internal review of the information management system used by the Office of Advocacy and Assistance, and should at least include key OAA staff who frequently use and rely on the system. The review should critique the system to identify whether it meets the current and future data collection and program management needs of both the office and the department. If the review finds the current system incapable of meeting those needs, the department should devise a plan for an alternative system, and work with the necessary stakeholders to implement a new system. If the review indicates system modifications are necessary, OAA should pursue those changes.**
- 3. The Office of Advocacy and Assistance should collect relevant district office activity and workload data, and use the information in the overall management of its program. The veterans' affairs department also should ensure the activity information collected is beneficial for overall departmental resource allocation strategies regarding OAA. Any necessary adjustments to the type of information collected, or how it is collected, should be made accordingly. The information should be used as part of a larger analysis by the department to determine if staff and budget resources are adequately distributed across OAA's district offices.**
- 4. The Office of Advocacy and Assistance should develop an annual written outreach plan. The plan should formally identify strategies for conducting outreach and, to the extent possible, the specific events the office will either sponsor or be a part of. OAA veterans services officers and the manager should have the ability to electronically report their outreach activities, the number of veterans and family members reached, and any formal assistance provided to veterans while at outreach events or resulting from these events.**
- 5. The Office of Advocacy and Assistance should begin tracking electronically the number of visits by veterans services officers to nursing homes and assisted living facilities. The office should also administer the internal controls necessary to ensure the number of nursing home visits is evenly shared across VSOs to the extent feasible. The office should report quarterly to the commissioner and the DVA Board of Trustees on the number of health care facility visits, the number of residents**

enrolled in veterans' benefits programs, information about the benefits veterans in the facilities currently receive, and the outcomes of the visits (e.g., number of veterans enrolled in benefits).

6. The Department of Veterans' Affairs should send semi-annual electronic reminders to health care facility administrators requesting them to notify OAA about new residents who are veterans and any benefits they receive. OAA should use this information to develop an annual visitation schedule for each VSO. The office should frequently monitor the schedules, and use the outcome results in its quarterly report to the commissioner and the Board of Trustees.

### **Performance Measurement and Oversight**

7. OAA should measure the satisfaction of its customers annually. This should ideally be done after VA completion of the client's claim. Low or no cost methods should be explored, including online survey tools, inclusion of a paper survey in other department mailings, and surveying a smaller randomized sample of the population served.
8. OAA should institute a formal system for tracking office-specific complaints. Details related to each complaint, such as the type of complaint, when it was received, when it was resolved, and relevant outcomes, should be recorded. Management should identify and analyze recurring issues and make changes to improve service delivery as needed.
9. OAA should establish fully developed claims as its recommended method of claim submission, using a standard claim submission in only limited circumstances. OAA service officers should educate veterans and their families about the advantages of submitting a fully developed claim to encourage active client participation. An annual goal for the overall use of fully developed claims should be established and measured by OAA.
10. OAA should encourage each client to register for a free eBenefits account as part of its routine intake and claim submission process. Assistance in the registration process should be provided for any clients unable to register independently.

### **Internal Operations**

11. The Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs should annually explore potential federal grant opportunities that may be suited for the Office of Advocacy and Assistance. In doing so, DVA should seek collaboration with other relevant state agencies whenever possible.
12. OAA should establish a formal data development plan to address its extensive internal data weaknesses. Current data deficiencies should be inventoried (e.g., unavailable, incomplete, poor quality). Key performance measures should be developed taking into account input from OAA service officers and administrative

staff. This plan should be submitted to the DVA Commissioner and Board of Trustees no later than June 30, 2016.

13. OAA should establish office-wide performance standards and achievement goals for both veterans services officers and administrative support staff. These measures should be incorporated into a data management system, whether by more fully utilizing the capabilities of VIMS or establishing a different tracking system, to assess staff progress on a monthly and annual basis. Quarterly reports based on key performance measures should be developed by OAA and submitted to the department's commissioner and Board of Trustees.
14. The OAA Veterans Services Officer job specification should be revised to more accurately reflect the essential duties of the position as well as the most appropriate qualifications necessary for future candidates applying for consideration.
15. DVA should partner with experts in the field of veterans benefit law to identify weaknesses in the current OAA training program for newly hired service officers. Training for all new hires within OAA should be overhauled to address any identified deficiencies, including training specific to software programs such as VIMS, and formalized. A process to capture institutional knowledge should also be undertaken in advance of anticipated senior staff retirements.
16. OAA should institute a standardized review process to ensure the quality of the claims being submitted by its service officers. This should include review by at least one colleague or supervisor other than the service officer originating the claim.
17. The Connecticut DVA should work with the VA to establish additional sites for teleconference hearings.
18. OAA should explore the possibility of moving its district offices to improve client accessibility and convenience, with particular consideration given to co-location with other relevant services for veterans and their families.
19. The online presence and functionality of the Office of Advocacy and Assistance should be significantly improved. The Department of Veterans' Affairs should undertake a review of the weaknesses of OAA's current website, with particular attention to the validity of its information on veterans' benefits. Ease of navigation and offering capabilities not currently available online, such as eligibility screenings and appointment requests, should be considered.

#### **Collaboration and Coordination**

20. An interagency workgroup should be developed to examine the services provided to veterans by state agencies, their service delivery systems, and whether ways exist to consolidate office space and/or administrative functions for a better coordinated veterans' services structure. The workgroup should at least include representatives from the state veterans' affairs, labor, and social services departments. Any recommendations produced by the workgroup should be forwarded to the

**commissioners of each agency, the governor's office, and the legislature's veterans' affairs committee by December 31, 2016. The Department of Veterans' Affairs commissioner (or his designee) should lead the workgroup.**

- 21. The Department of Veterans' Affairs should annually notify each municipality of its responsibility to designate a municipal employee as the town's veterans' service contact person (in accordance with state law). The notification should require municipalities to submit the name and email address of their contact representatives to the Office of Advocacy and Assistance on a timely basis upon receipt of the DVA's correspondence.**
  
- 22. Municipal veterans' service contract persons should be required to complete the formal training provided by OAA. The training should be completed one time only, but within three months of becoming the designated municipal veterans services contact person. Any current municipal contact person who has not received the OAA training should do so by April 1, 2016. OAA should offer its training quarterly, which should include a summary of state and federal veterans' benefits, the role of municipal veterans' service contacts, and how OAA can help the municipal contacts should questions arise. OAA should periodically collect feedback from participants as to their overall satisfaction with the training.**