Legislative Program Review
& Investigations Committee

OFFICE OF ADVOCACY & ASSISTANCE

STAFF FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Dec
16TH
2015

PRESENTATION

1. Activities and Workload
2. Performance and Oversight
3. Collaboration and Coordination
4. CT Performance

STUDY FOCUS AND SCOPE

- Who does OAA serve and what is OAA's workload?
- How well does the Department of Veterans' Affairs Office of Advocacy and Assistance (OAA) serve veterans and their families?
- How efficient are OAA's internal operations?

ACTIVITIES/WORKLOAD

OFFICE OF ADVOCACY & ASSISTANCE

CONNECTICUT'S VETERANS

- Just over 206,000 veterans statewide: 2015 (~6% of state pop.)
- Projected 2016 veteran pop ~199,000 (-10% from '13)
- Number of male veterans down 7%, to just under 190,000
- Number of female veterans steady at ~16,500

CONNECTICUT'S VETERANS

- Most veterans within 65-69 age range
- Veterans in all age ranges declining, except those 70-74 (+18%)
- Most veterans w/ VA disability ratings of 20% or less, followed by ratings of 70-100%

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

- OAA data for analysis insufficient – almost all data for this study from the VA
- DVA and OAA recognize data limitations
- OAA's information management system designed to contain relevant data, but currently not used to capacity
    - Critically limits program oversight and management

RECOMMENDATION #1

- **OAA should fully use its information management system for oversight and management of benefits claims**

- **Appropriate training is needed so staff know how to use the system and produce all necessary management reports**

INFORMATION SYSTEM

- System seems to meet most of OAA's data immediate needs, but difficult to fully determine whether current system is long-term solution

- Some say OAA's information management system is old and lacks certain information

RECOMMENDATION #2

- **DVA should conduct internal review of OAA's information management system; focus on current and future data needs**
- **Include staff who use the system**
- **If necessary, devise a plan for an alternative system; work with key stakeholders to pursue any needed modifications**

ACTIVITIES/WORKLOAD

- Precise activity data not available from OAA

- OAA recently began collecting certain activity information to submit to DVA Board of Trustees
    - 2,750 calls for assistance (~11,000/year)
    - 525 voicemails (~2,100/year)
    - 190 office visits (~800/year)

RECOMMENDATION #3

- **Collect all relevant activity and information from its district offices for program management purposes**

- **Use the information as part of a broader analysis of resources to ensure even distribution across OAA's district offices**

Table II-3. Office of Advocacy and Assistance – VA claims filed volume: SFYs 11-15

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Overall % +/-[1]
Disability Compensation Claims						
Total	850	705	717	635	875	3%
Original	179	147	187	139	203	13%
Supplemental	635	535	505	474	648	2%
Dependency and Indemnity	36	23	31	22	24	-33%
Fully Developed Claims	-	-	26	130	320	1,130%
Electronic Claims	-	-	32	389	832	2,500%
Issues[2]	-	31	74	81	79	154%
Appeals (all levels)	143	110	113	107	115	-20%
Pension Claims						
Total	553	421	315	511	341	-38%
Veteran	269	222	107	208	125	-54%
Survivor	284	199	208	303	216	-24%
Issues	-	-	5	3	1	-80%

[1] Figures are rounded

[2] Veterans who are homeless, terminally ill, former Prisoners of War, under financial hardship, or Medal of Honor recipients.

Source: PRI staff analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs: Office of Performance Analysis and Integrity data.

OUTREACH

- No electronic record-keeping within OAA of its outreach efforts
- OAA is performing outreach to veterans and family members, and recent efforts have been made to strengthen presence in community presence
- No formal, written outreach plan exists with implementation strategies and measureable goals

RECOMMENDATION #4

- **Develop an annual written plan identifying outreach strategies**
- **Veterans services officers should electronically report outreach activities to central office for more efficient tracking and review**

CARE FACILITIES

- The number of nursing homes generally the same across OAA districts, yet visits to care facilities inconsistent among VSOs
    - Imbalance may negatively impact veterans' services
- Annual visits to care facilities limited by finite staff resources
- More structured planning process necessary

RECOMMENDATION #5

- **Begin tracking electronically the number of visits to care facilities by VSOs**
- **Implement internal controls to ensure visits are evenly shared across VSOs**
- **Report quarterly on visits, including outcomes**

RECOMMENDATION #6

- **Send semi-annual electronic reminders to care facilities requesting they notify OAA of new veterans or family members admitted to the facility and benefits they receive**

- **Use information to develop annual visitation schedule for VSOs; frequently monitor**

HOW WELL IS OAA PERFORMING?

RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

SATISFACTION LEVEL OF VETERANS SERVED BY OAA NOT BEING MEASURED

- Per OAA – most important performance measure is veteran satisfaction.
  - OAA has not been surveying customers for feedback on claims process experience.
  - No formal centralized system to collect or analyze feedback.

RECOMMENDATIONS #7 & #8

- **Measure customer satisfaction annually.**
  - **Ideally after VA claim completion**
  - **Low or no cost methods should be explored**

- **Institute formal complaint tracking system**

SURVEY RESULTS

VETERAN SATISFACTION SURVEY

VETERAN SATISFACTION SURVEY RESULTS

- 89% rated general customer service positively.
- 86% rated technical skills positively.
- 82% thought VSO clearly explained claims process.
- 80% were satisfied with representation of claim.
- 81% would use OAA again to file a future claim.

VETERAN SATISFACTION SURVEY COMMENTS

Satisfied Customers

"…I cannot say enough good things about her. She is very caring, very professional and very knowledgeable…She was very helpful….With the benefits I am receiving, I can now stay in my own home!! Thank you for the assistance. God Bless America!"

"They were so helpful and lawyers wanted thousands of dollars to navigate the application process, where [service officer] provided us the valuable knowledge at no cost. Thank you State of Connecticut and Department of Veterans' Affairs!"

VETERAN SATISFACTION SURVEY COMMENTS

Missing or Delayed Paperwork

"Claim was continually scrutinized for missing or inappropriate evidence resulting in a 6-7 month delay in services."

Frustration with Lack of Communication

"I didn't understand anything about this claims process. No one ever called back after that visit at [the nursing home]. I just gave up. I am too old to deal with this."

Timeliness of VA Decisions

"Would have been nice if they would call you to let you know the progress during the claims process for federal benefits."

Lack of Assistance Upon Denial

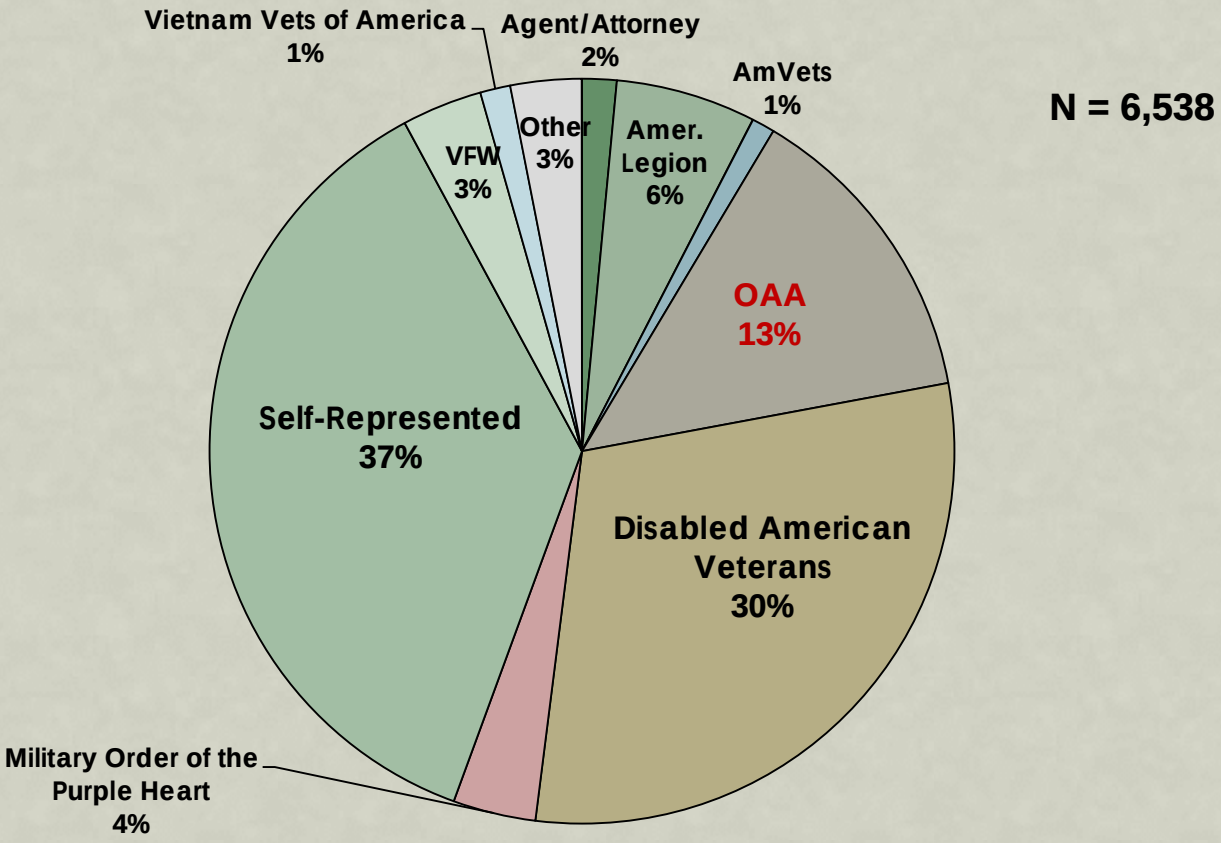
"Claim was rejected with copy to OAA. Indicated a form not received. OAA did nothing."

BENCHMARKING PERFORMANCE

OAA VS. OTHER CT ACCREDITED PROFESSIONALS

SELF-REPRESENTED CLAIMANTS SUBMITTED THE LARGEST SHARE OF COMPENSATION CLAIMS IN FY 15.

Connecticut Compensation Claims by Representation for FY 15



Source: PRI staff analysis of Veterans Benefits Administration Business Intelligence data.

OAA HAD THE LOWEST AVERAGE COMPENSATION CASELOADS WHEN COMPARED TO THE STATE'S OTHER FOUR PRIMARY SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS.

Average Annual Volume of Compensation Claims Completed Per VSO for FY 15	
Selected Veteran Service Organizations / # VSOs	Average Caseload / VSO
CT Office of Advocacy & Assistance (OAA) (8 VSOs)	**109**
Military Order of the Purple Heart (1 VSO)	147
American Legion (2.5 VSOs)*	186
Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) (1 VSO)	217
Disabled American Veterans (3 VSOs)	655

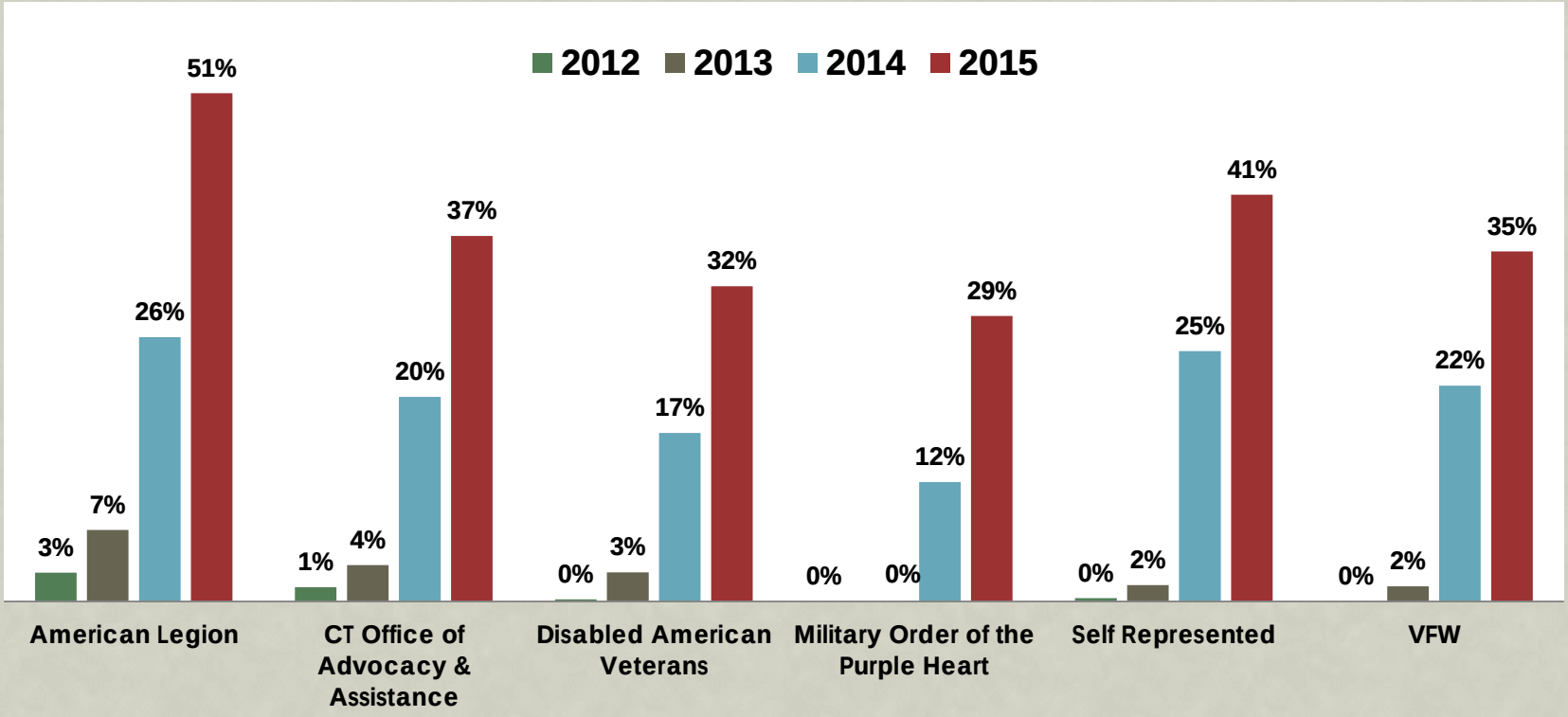
Service organizations selected are the only service offices co-located with the VA's Hartford Regional Benefit Office. Number of VSOs is a point-in-time figure and does not account for any long-term leaves of absence or any other factors possibly affecting output.

* Includes 1 VSO who works part-time as a volunteer for American Legion.

Sources: PRI staff analysis of Veterans Benefits Administration Business Intelligence data; CT veterans services organizations.

OAA'S UTILIZATION OF FULLY DEVELOPED CLAIMS IS BELOW AMERICAN LEGION AND SELF-REPRESENTED CLAIMANTS

Percentage of Fully Developed Compensation Claims Filed FY 12 - FY 15 by Representation

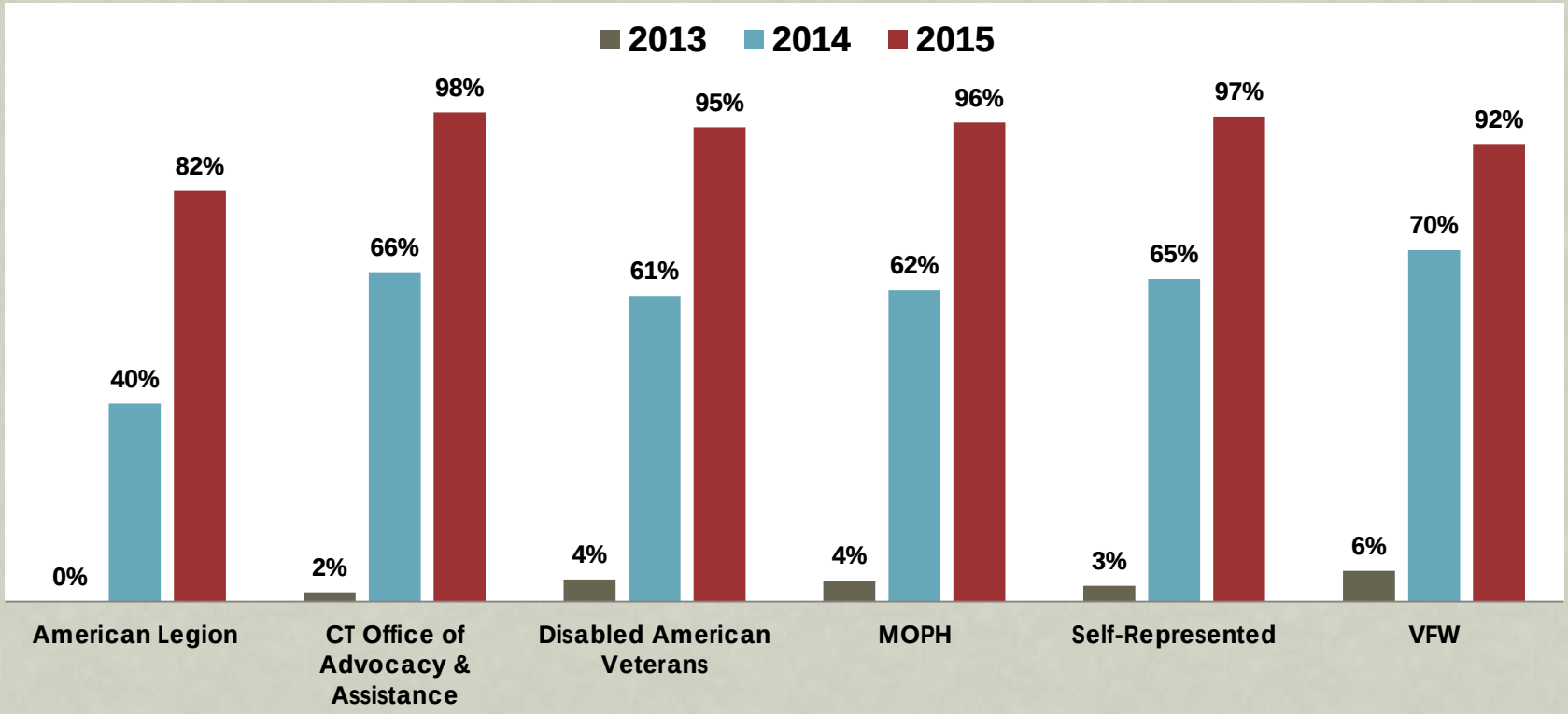


RECOMMENDATION #9

- **Establish Fully Developed Claims as recommended method of claim submission**
  - **Educate clients about FDC advantages**
  - **Establish and measure an annual goal for FDC use**

OAA SUBMITTED 98% OF COMPENSATION CLAIMS ELECTRONICALLY IN FY 15

Percentage of Electronically Submitted Claims Filed FY 13 - FY 15 by Representation



RECOMMENDATION #10

- **Encourage clients to register for an eBenefits account as part of routine intake and claim submission process**
  - **Provide assistance for any clients unable to register independently**

MONTHLY COMPENSATION AWARDS CONSISTENTLY BELOW STATE AVERAGE FOR SELF-REPRESENTED CLAIMANTS

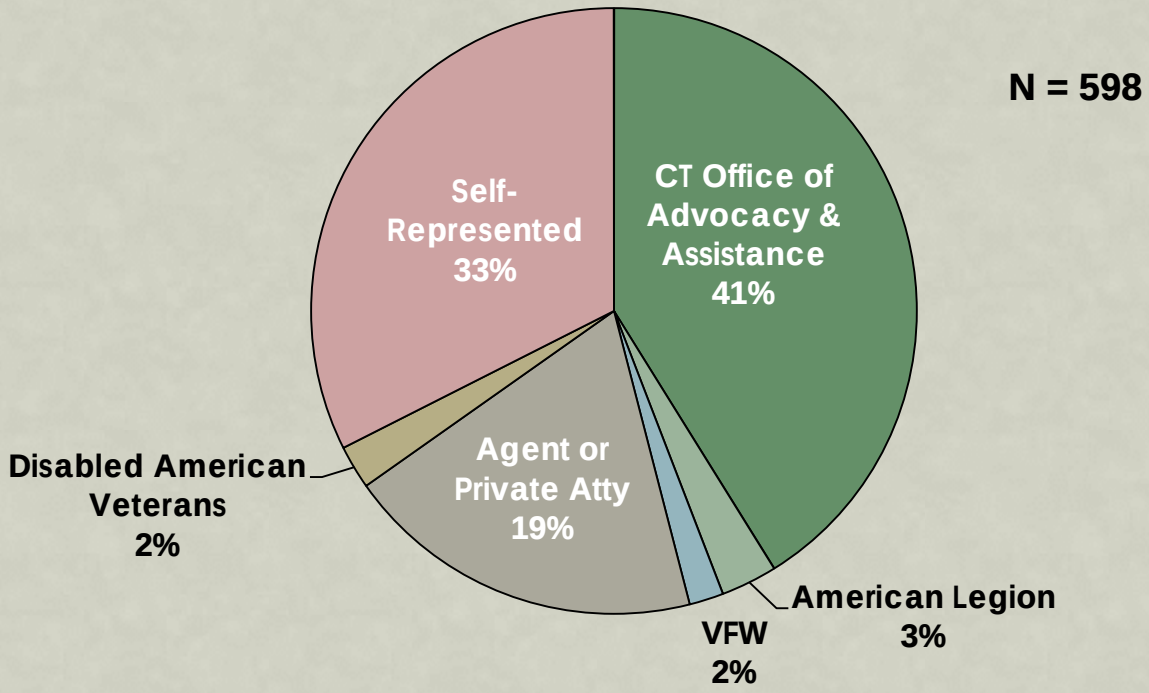
Average Monthly Compensation Award by Representation vs. State Average FY11-FY15					
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
CT State Average	**$1,044**	**$1,137**	**$1,258**	**$1,223**	**$1,185**
Agent or Private Attorney	$1,198	$1,227	$1,326	$1,436	$1,118
American Legion	$1,380	$1,506	$1,437	$1,453	$1,306
CT OAA	**$1,182**	**$1,280**	**$1,369**	**$1,427**	**$1,267**
Disabled Amer. Veterans	$1,160	$1,274	$1,445	$1,393	$1,319
MOPH	$959	$1,151	$1,321	$1,337	$1,282
Self-Represented	$740	$825	$975	$910	$970
VFW	$1,018	$1,233	$1,124	$1,247	$1,282

Results below the state average are highlighted.

Source: PRI staff analysis of Veterans Benefits Administration Business Intelligence data.

OAA HANDLED THE LARGEST SHARE OF CONNECTICUT PENSION CLAIMS FOR FY 15.

Connecticut Pension Claims by Representation (FY15)



Source: PRI staff analysis of Veterans Benefits Administration Business Intelligence data.

OAA HAD THE HIGHEST AVERAGE ANNUAL PENSION CASELOADS WHEN COMPARED TO THE STATE'S OTHER THREE PRIMARY SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS.

Average Annual Volume of Pension Claims Completed Per VSO for FY 15	
Selected Veteran Service Organizations / # VSOs	Avg Caseload / VSO
American Legion (2.5 VSOs)*	10
Disabled American Veterans (3 VSOs)	11
Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) (1 VSO)	23
CT Office of Advocacy & Assistance (8 VSOs)	43

Service organizations selected are the only service offices co-located with the VA's Hartford Regional Benefit Office with *appreciable* pension claims in FY 15. As a result, Military Order of the Purple Heart is not included. Numbers of VSOs is a point-in-time figure and does not account for any long-term leaves of absence or any other factors possibly affecting output.

* Includes 1 VSO who works part-time as a volunteer for American Legion.

Sources: PRI staff analysis of Veterans Benefits Administration Business Intelligence data; CT veterans service organizations.

OAA AND DAV WERE THE ONLY GROUPS CONSISTENTLY BELOW THE STATE AVERAGE EACH YEAR FOR FYS 11-15.

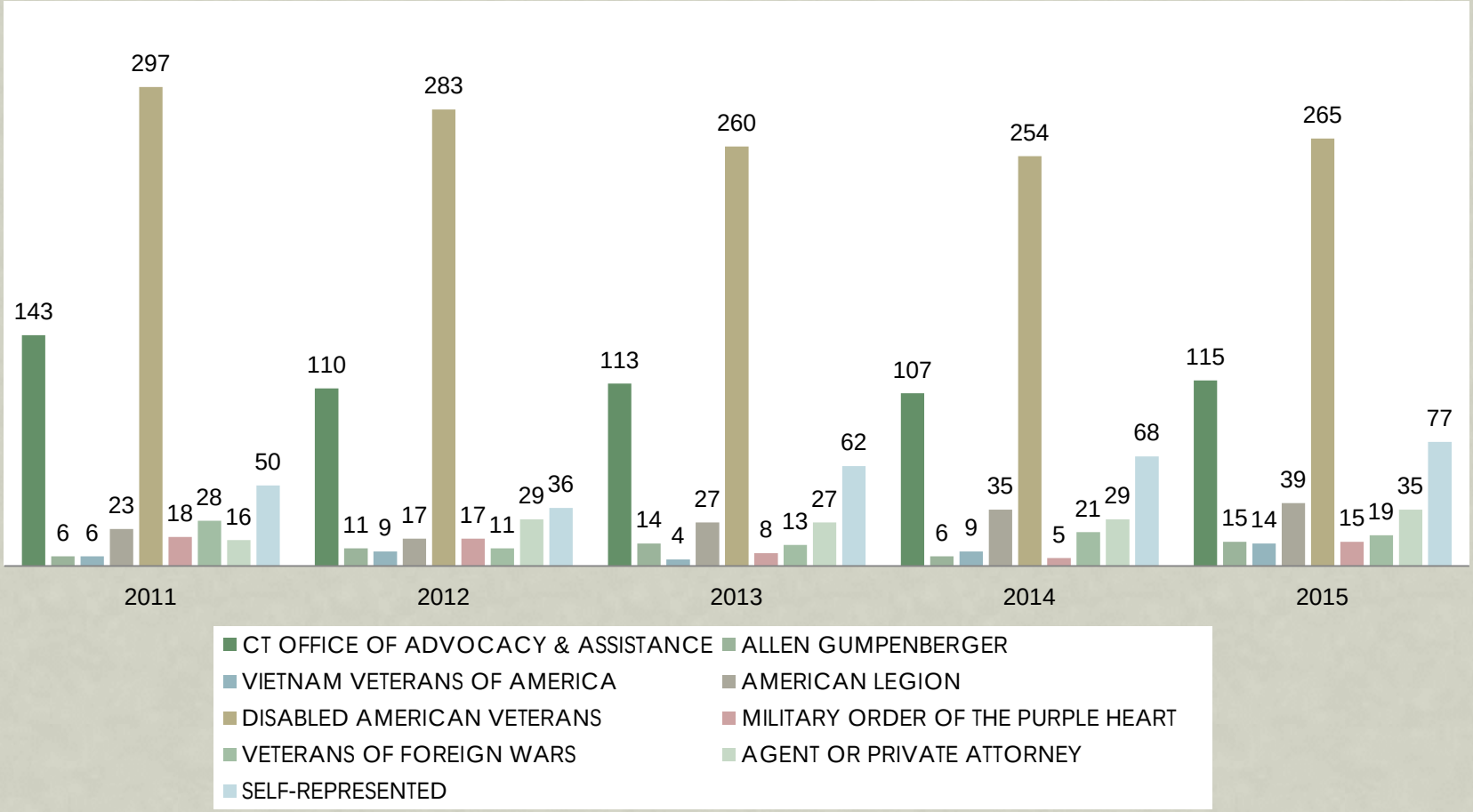
Average Monthly Veterans Pension by Representation vs. State Average FY 11-F Y15					
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
CT State Average	**$969**	**$1,010**	**$1,103**	**$1,047**	**$1,133**
Agent or Private Attorney	$1,399	$1,582	$1,531	$1,636	$1,509
American Legion	$1,398	$1,165	$1,175	$1,198	$1,382
CT OAA	**$776**	**$770**	**$844**	**$805**	**$963**
Disabled Amer. Veterans	**$953**	**$999**	**$1,003**	**$613**	**$628**
Self-Represented	$1,038	$1,035	$1,163	$1,102	$1,119
VFW	$1,147	$1,797	$1,194	$1,290	$453

Results below the state average are highlighted.

Source: PRI staff analysis of Veterans Benefits Administration Business Intelligence data.

FOR FYS 11 – 15, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS CONSISTENTLY HAD THE HIGHEST VOLUME OF CT APPEALS, FOLLOWED BY OAA.

Resolved VBA Appeals by Representation
FY 11- FY 15

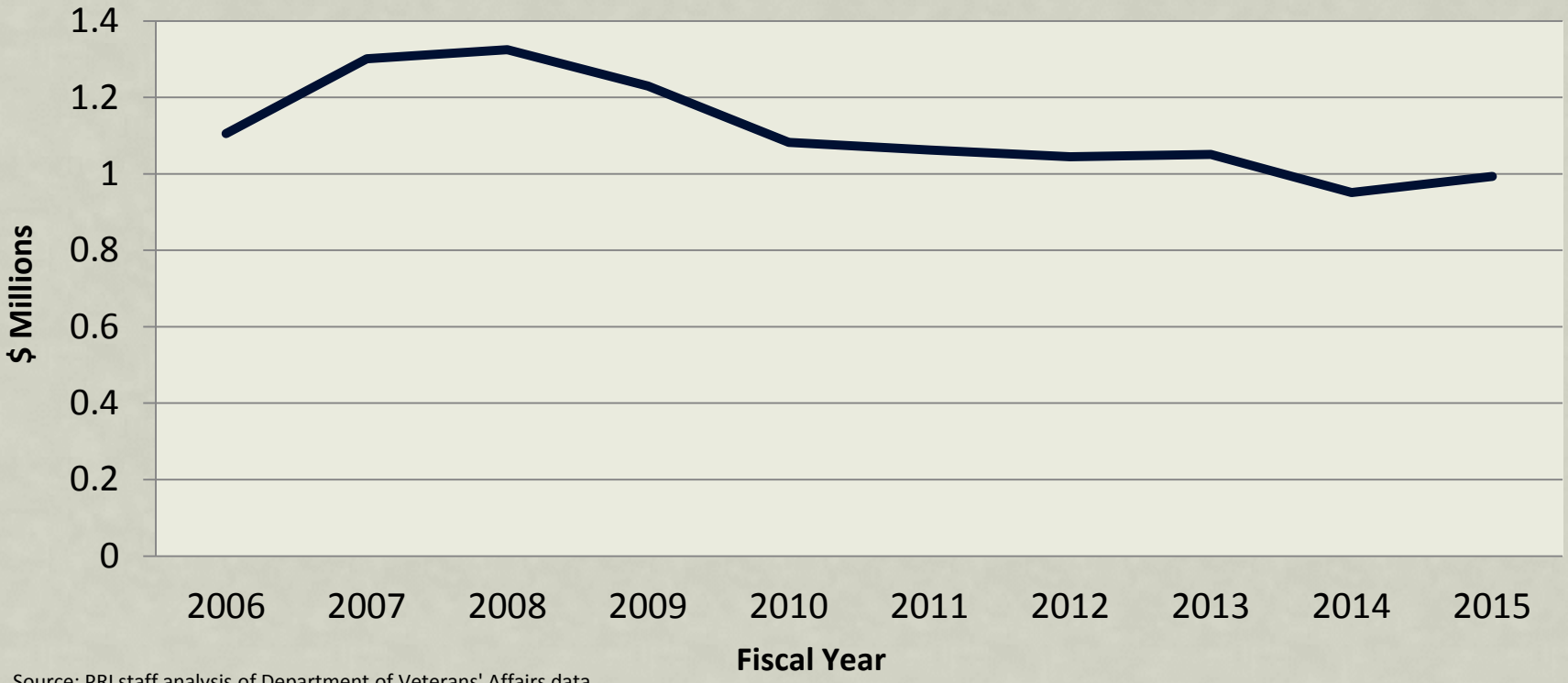


INTERNAL OPERATIONS

OFFICE OF ADVOCACY & ASSISTANCE

OAA IS OVER RELIANT ON STATE FUNDING WITH NO EMPHASIS ON PURSUING FEDERAL GRANT OPPORTUNITIES

Office of Advocacy and Assistance Expenditures, FYs 06-15 (in FY 15 dollars)



Source: PRI staff analysis of Department of Veterans' Affairs data.

RECOMMENDATION #11

- **DVA should annually explore potential federal grant opportunities for OAA, seeking collaborations with other state agencies whenever possible**

RECOMMENDATION #12

- **Establish formal data development plan to address extensive data weaknesses**
  - **Inventory current data deficiencies**
  - **Develop key performance measures**
  - **Submit to commissioner and Board of Trustees by June 30, 2016**

WITHOUT PERFORMANCE STANDARDS OR ACHIEVEMENT GOALS, OAA PRODUCTIVITY CAN BE INCONSISTENT.

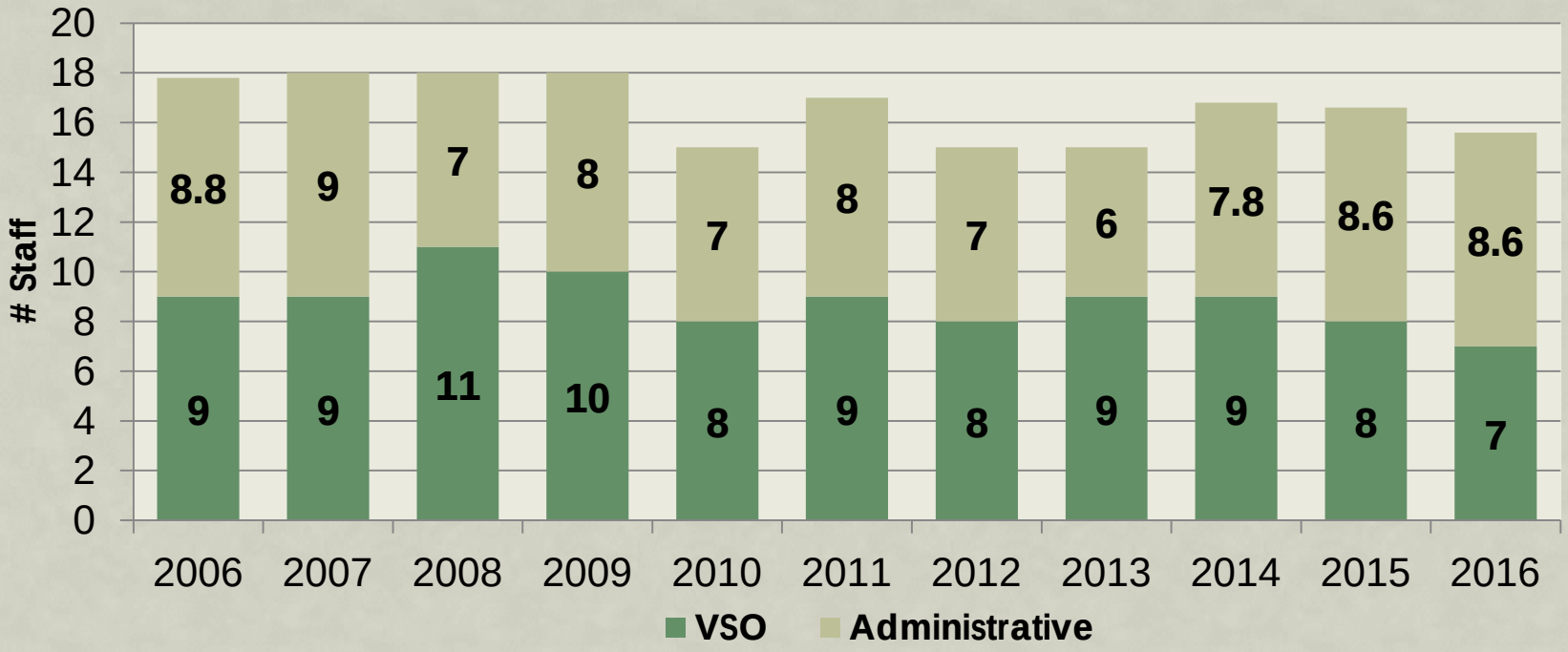
- Staff unsure or unaware of any performance measures
  - # of new claims / year discussed in evaluations
    - Inadequate measure
      - does not capture full VSO workload (e.g. re-opened claims, appeals, outreach)
- OAA acknowledged # of new claims was primary measure
  - Agreed not the truest measure of VSO work

RECOMMENDATION #13

- **Establish performance standards and achievement goals for OAA staff**
  - **Incorporate into data management system to assess monthly and annual staff progress**
  - **Submit performance reports quarterly**

OAA STAFF RESOURCES

Office of Advocacy and Assistance Staffing Levels, FYs 06-15



Source: PRI staff analysis of Department of Veterans' Affairs data.

RECOMMENDATION #14

- **Revise Veterans Services Officer job specification to more accurately reflect**
  - **essential duties of the position; and**
  - **most appropriate qualifications**

RECOMMENDATION #15

- **Overhaul and formalize new hire training program to address deficiencies, incl. training on software programs (e.g. VIMS)**
- **Undertake a process to capture institutional knowledge**

RECOMMENDATION #16

- **Institute a standardized review process by at least one colleague or supervisor to ensure the quality of the claims being submitted**

RECOMMENDATION #17

- **Establish additional sites for teleconference hearings**

RECOMMENDATION #18

- **Explore the possibility of moving district offices to improve client accessibility, particularly co-location with other relevant veterans' services**

RECOMMENDATION #19

- **Improve the functionality of OAA's website**
  - **Validity of veterans' benefits information**
  - **Ease of navigation**
  - **Expanding online capabilities**
    - **eligibility screenings**
    - **appointment requests**

COLLABORATION/ COORDINATION

OFFICE OF ADVOCACY & ASSISTANCE

COLLABORATION/COORDINATION

- Federal VA
  - OAA has VSO on-site at VA's Hartford Regional Benefits Office in Newington; works with VA benefits staff and coordinates with other OAA offices
  - OAA manager and Newington office VSO meet monthly with the VA; includes other veterans service organizations
  - VA training for VSOs, while infrequent, has occurred; most recently in October
  - Coordination/collaboration between OAA and the VA seems adequate and lines of communication exist

COLLABORATION/COORDINATION

- Veterans Service Organizations
  - Veterans service organizations and OAA offer similar services to veterans and the families – primarily, assistance with VA benefits claims
  - Veterans organizations and OAA have a working relationship, including making referrals across organizations, but there seems to be little formal collaboration/ coordination among the entities beyond the monthly meetings with the VA

COLLABORATION/COORDINATION

- State Agencies
  - DSS' interaction with OAA mainly includes a presence at the Veterans' Home and a 2009 Memorandum of Agreement for information sharing
  - DOL draft report outlines potential benefits of co-locating two agencies' veterans services offices ; nothing formal done with the recommendations
  - OAA manager sits on several statewide committees to discuss veterans' issues

RECOMMENDATION #20

- **DVA establish an interagency workgroup to examine veterans' services, service delivery systems, and if office space should be consolidated; complete work by end of 2016**

COLLABORATION/COORDINATION

- Municipalities
  - Under certain circumstances, municipalities required to designate an employee to serve as local veterans service contact person; OAA required to a provide training course, but municipal contacts not required to take it.
  - OAA does not have information to fully determine total number municipalities required to have a local veterans service contact person or if all *current* municipal staff have attended OAA's training
  - DVA commissioner sent letter to municipalities in 2013

RECOMMENDATION #21

- **Annually notify municipalities of their statutory responsibilities for veterans services representatives**

- **Municipalities submit basic contact information of their veterans service staff to OAA**

RECOMMENDATION #22

- **Make the OAA training course a requirement for municipal veterans service contact staff; must be completed only once, but within certain timeframes**

- **The training course should be offered quarterly**

- **Periodically gauge participants' satisfaction**

HOW WELL IS CONNECTICUT ASSISTING VETERANS?

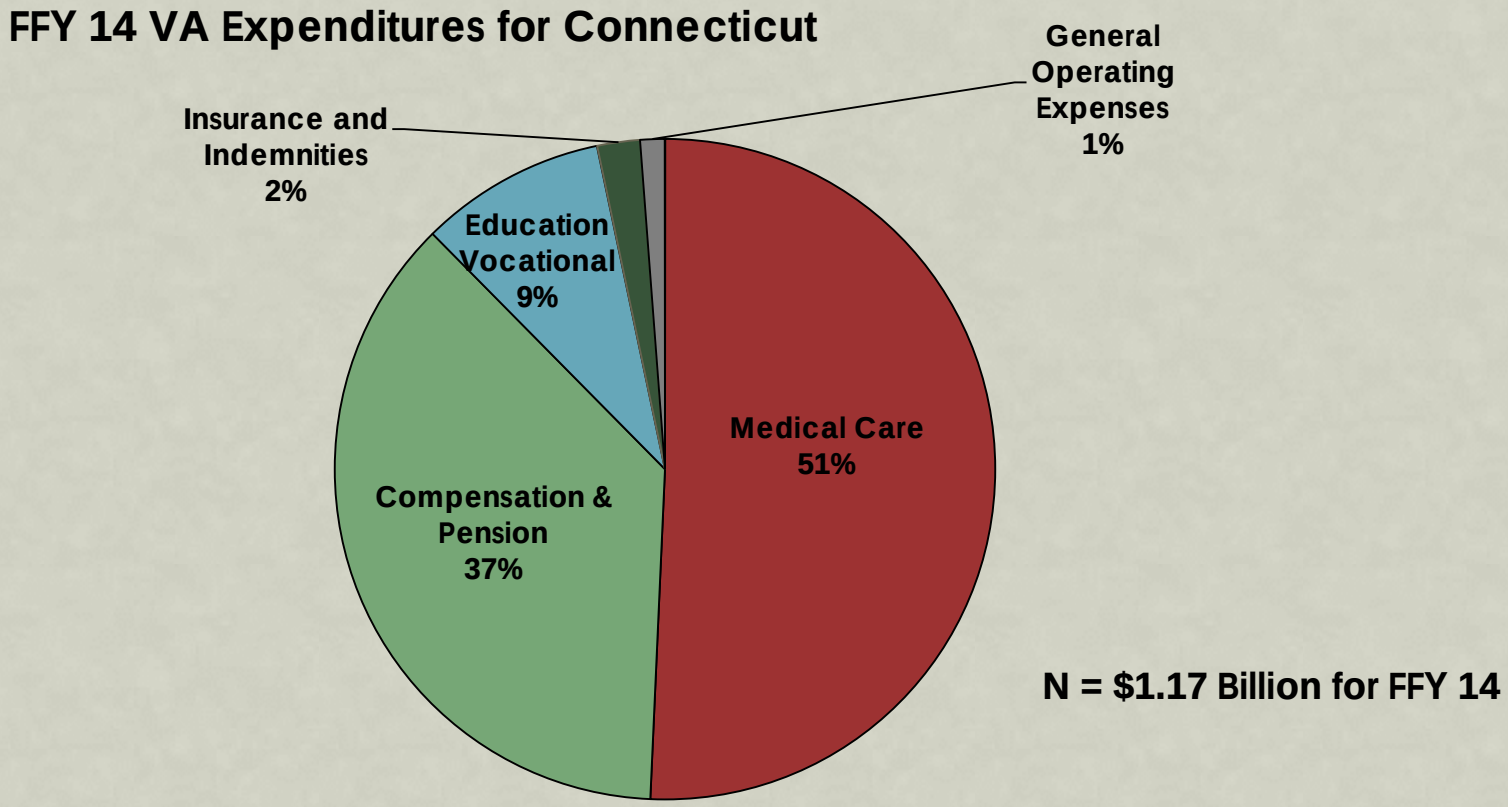
THE STATEWIDE VETERANS SERVICE SYSTEM

CONNECTICUT COMPARES POORLY TO OTHER STATES IN SECURING THE MAXIMUM FEDERAL BENEFITS FOR ITS VETERANS.

- In a variety of metrics, Connecticut ranks well below the national average and often ranks low or lowest when compared to surrounding states (NE, NY, and NJ).

- 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.

VA EXPENDITURES FOR CT VETERANS



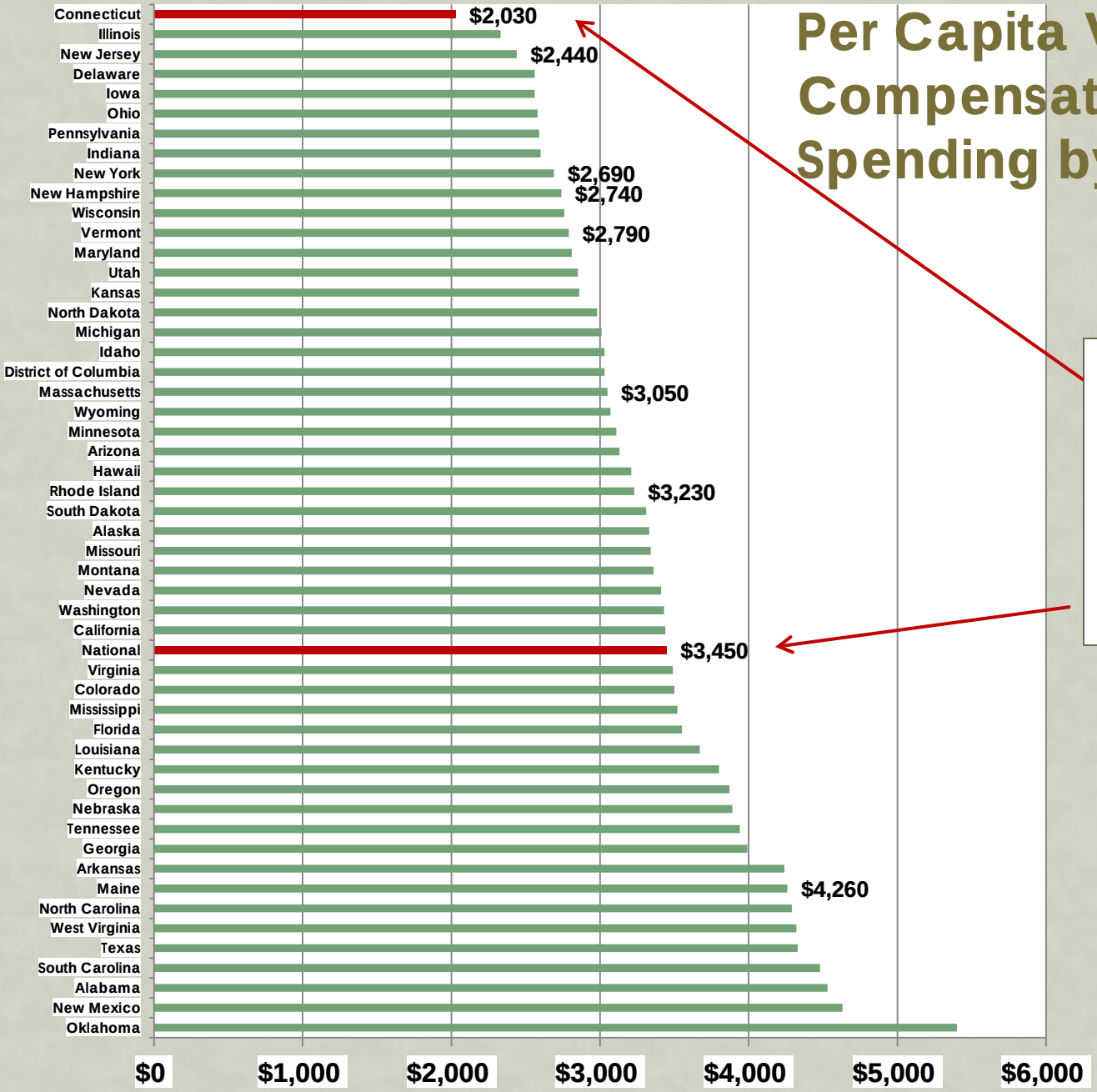
Source: National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics

CT 3RD LOWEST IN NATION IN PER CAPITA TOTAL VA SPENDING

Per Capita Total VA Spending: Surrounding States vs. National Average (2014)	
New Jersey	$4,940
Connecticut	$5,490
New Hampshire	$5,930
Vermont	$6,080
Massachusetts	$6,830
New York	$6,860
National	$7,360
Rhode Island	$7,360
Maine	$7,540

Source: PRI staff analysis of NCVAS data, "FY14 Summary of Expenditures by State."

Per Capita VA Compensation & Pension Spending by State FFY 14



CT veterans received the ***lowest per capita VA compensation and pension spending in the nation*** – more than 40% below the national average.

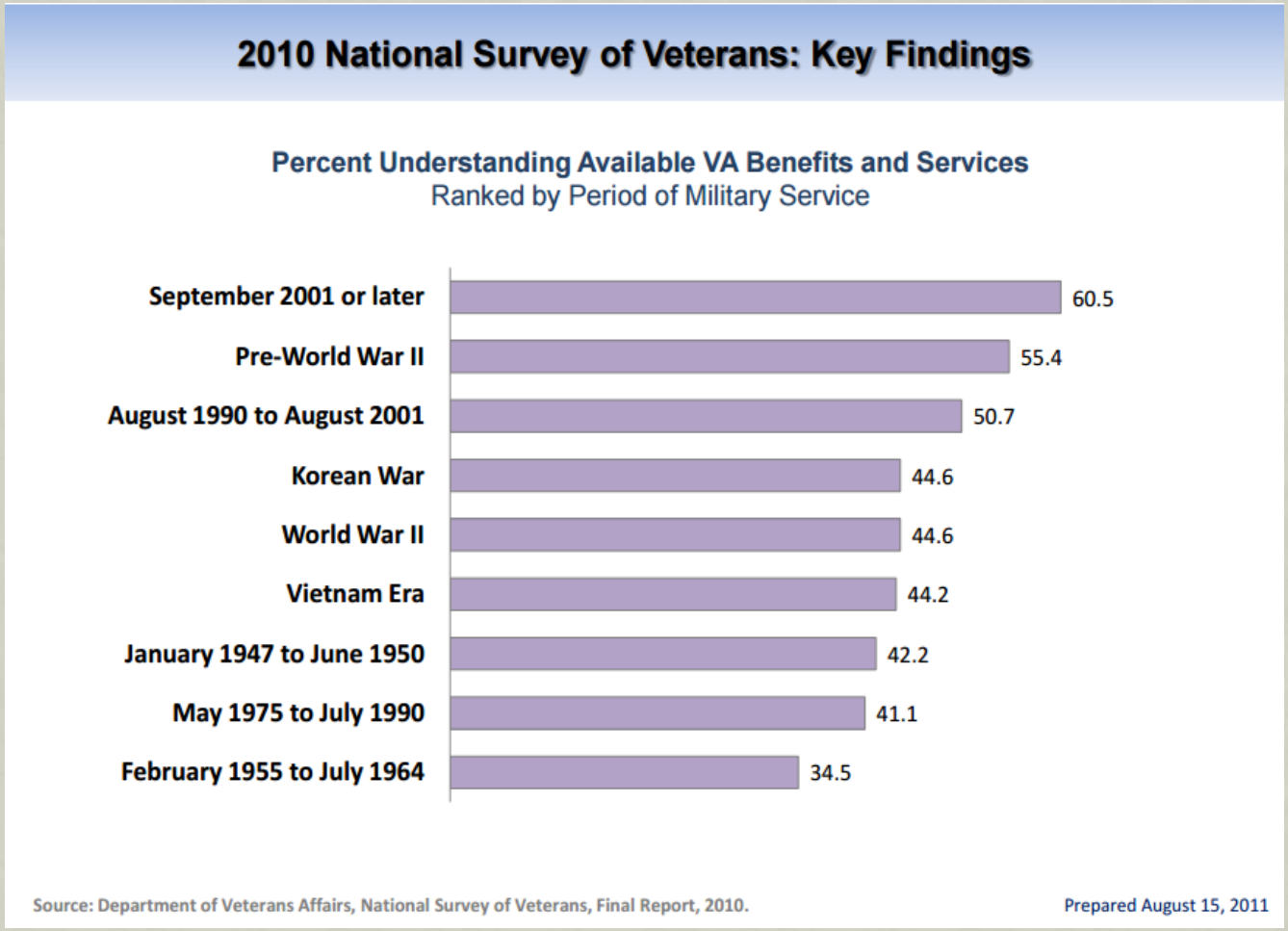
Sources: VetPop 2014; USASpending.gov

CT RANKS 42ND IN VA HEALTHCARE ENROLLMENT

Veteran Utilization of VA Health Care – National vs. Selected States (2014)					
	Total Veteran Population	# Enrollees in VA Health Care	% Enrolled in VA Health Care	# Unique Patients Treated	% Unique Patients Treated
National	22,000,000	9,106,480	41.4%	5,869,487	26.7%
Connecticut	213,000	78,942	37.1%	51,070	24.0%
Maine	127,000	57,294	45.1%	39,859	31.4%
Massachusetts	380,000	137,592	36.2%	83,919	22.1%
New Hampshire	114,000	44,120	38.7%	28,962	25.4%
New Jersey	428,000	146,348	34.2%	77,114	18.0%
New York	892,000	408,856	45.8%	230,155	25.8%
Rhode Island	72,000	28,918	40.2%	19,951	27.7%
Vermont	49,000	21,182	43.2%	14,918	30.4%

Source: VA National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics State Summary Fact Pages

IMPROVING UTILIZATION BY INCREASING AWARENESS



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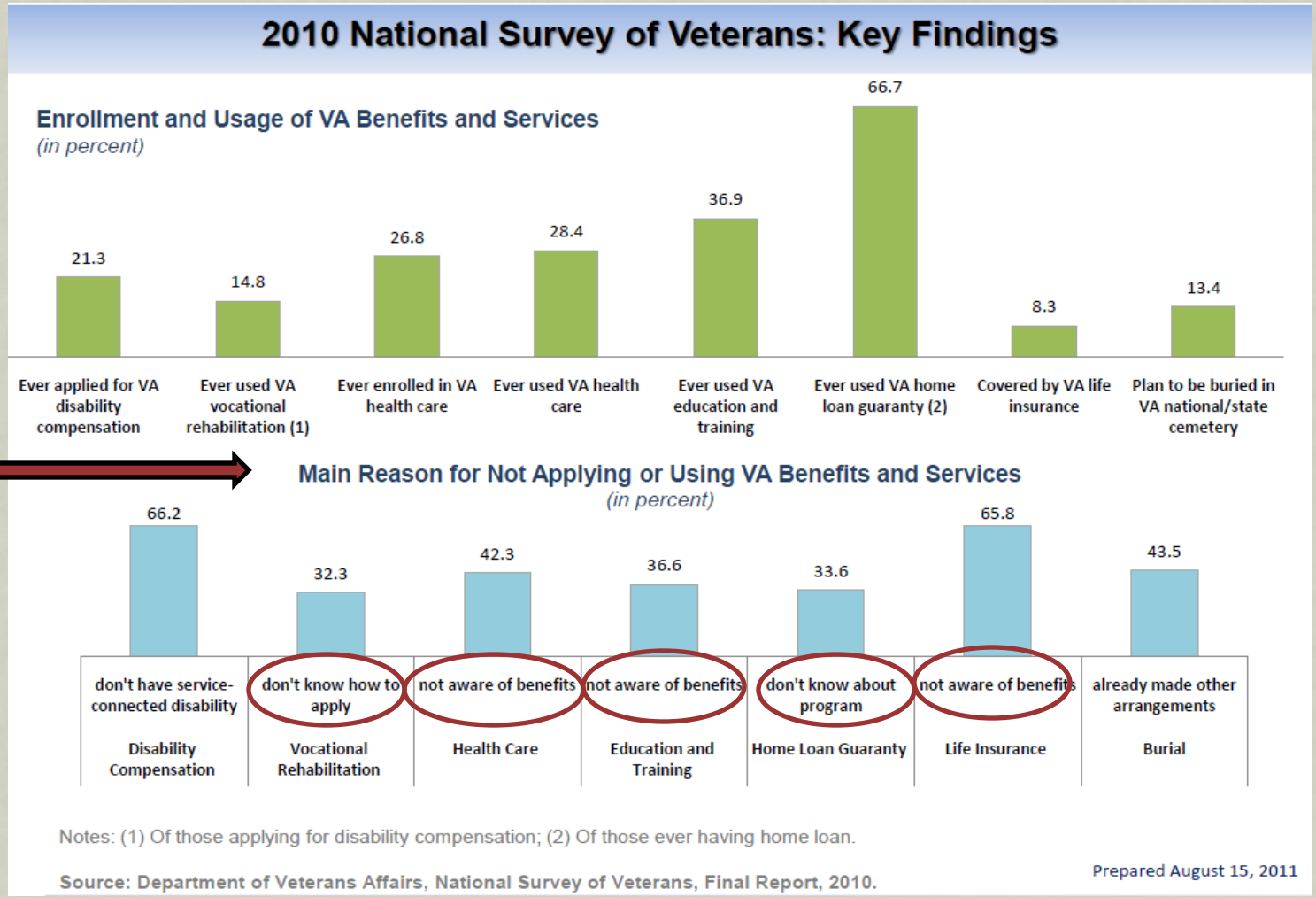

ARE 367 ACCREDITED PROFESSIONALS SUFFICIENT TO MEET THE NEEDS OF CT VETERANS FILING BENEFIT CLAIMS?

Accredited Attorneys, Claims Agents, & Veterans Service Organization Representatives by Surrounding States (2015)

State	Veteran Population	Attorneys	Claims Agents	Veteran Services Reps	Total Accredited	Per Capita Accredited	Per Capita Reps Only
Connecticut	213,420	302	18	47*	367	0.17%	0.022%
Massachusetts	379,772	425	9	77	511	0.13%	0.020%
Maine	127,234	72	1	47	120	0.09%	0.037%
New Hampshire	113,660	36	3	19	58	0.05%	0.017%
New Jersey	428,396	381	6	137	524	0.12%	0.032%
New York	892,221	1,568	4	394	1,966	0.22%	0.044%
Rhode Island	71,966	67	2	27	96	0.13%	0.038%
Vermont	48,602	20	0	21	41	0.08%	0.043%

*Adjusted from 52 due to 2 OAA retirements, 1 separation, 1 double count, and OAA Manager, who does not handle claims;

Source: PRI staff analysis of U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Accreditation Search data.

RATIO OF VETERAN SERVICE REPS TO ACCREDITED ATTORNEYS & CLAIMS AGENTS

1. Vermont (1:2)
2. Maine (1:2.5)
3. New Hampshire (1:3)
4. Rhode Island (1:3.5)
5. New Jersey (1:4)
6. New York (1:5)
7. Massachusetts (1:7)
8. Connecticut (1:8)

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