

Report on the Response of the  
Department of Veterans Services  
To the Impact of the Aging of Virginia's Population

November 15, 2007

Pursuant to legislation enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia, the Department of Veterans Services submits this report of its progress in addressing the impact of the aging of Virginia's population.

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Vincent M. Burgess  
Commissioner  
November 15, 2007

## **Executive Summary**

The mission of the Department of Veterans Services (DVS) is to ensure Virginia's veterans receive the benefits, support, quality care, and recognition they have earned through service and sacrifice. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) estimated that there were 728,755 veterans in Virginia on September 30, 2007, of whom 229,314 were aged 65 and older. The USDVA forecasts that the overall veterans population will drop to 500,199 by 2033, of whom 216,571 will be aged 65 and older. The number of veterans aged 65 and older will thus hold roughly steady over the next 25 years, but as a percentage of the overall veteran population, they'll grow from 31 percent of Virginia's veterans today to over 43 percent by 2033.

The Department serves Virginia's veterans at 23 Benefit Field Offices, two veterans care centers, and two veterans cemeteries. A third veterans care center and a third veterans cemetery are in the planning stages, and a recently completed study points to the need for additional veterans care centers to meet the long-term care needs of Virginia's veterans. As might be expected, the majority of those served by the care centers and cemeteries are aged 65 and older. The veterans cemeteries and the Virginia Veterans Care Center (Roanoke) draw almost exclusively from within a 50-mile radius of the facility. While DVS has the capacity to serve veterans in these areas, additional facilities will be needed if the Department is to serve a greater percentage of Virginia's veterans.

### **Agency Description**

The Department of Veterans Services serves Virginia's veterans and their beneficiaries by ensuring they receive the benefits, support, quality care, and recognition they have earned through service and sacrifice.

The Department is responsible for the establishment, operation, administration, and maintenance of offices and programs related to services for veterans of the armed forces of the United States and their Virginia-domiciled surviving spouses, orphans, and dependents. Such services include:

- Assistance in developing and filing claims for federal disability compensation benefits. Service is offered at 23 Benefit Field Offices statewide
- The operation of veterans care centers (nursing homes) in Richmond and Roanoke
- The operation of state veterans cemeteries in Amelia and Suffolk
- The certification that programs of post-secondary instruction meet G.I. Bill eligibility requirements

## Data Requested

1. *To the extent such data is available, the number of persons who received services from the agency in the past fiscal year who fell into each of the following age ranges: 65-74; 75-84; and 85 and older.*
  - a. The Benefit Services Section filed 20,427 disability compensation claims on behalf of Virginia veterans in FY2007. However, data is not readily available to show how many of these veterans were aged 65 and older.
  - b. Virginia's two state veterans cemeteries performed 738 burials in FY2007. While exact figures are not readily available, DVS believes that the vast majority of the 738 burials were of persons aged 65 and older.
  - c. In FY2007, the Virginia Veterans Care Center (VVCC) provided:
    - i. 20,056 patient days of Assisted Living (Domiciliary) Care, out of a capacity of 21,900 patient days – a 91.6% occupancy rate. There are 60 Assisted Living beds at the VVCC (60 x 365 = 21,900).
    - ii. 63,407 patient days of Nursing/Alzheimer's Care, out of a capacity of 65,700 patient days – a 96.6% occupancy rate. There are 180 Nursing Care/Alzheimer's beds at the VVCC (180 x 365 = 65,700).
    - iii. Exact figures are not available on the number aged 65 and older, but given the nature of the services provided, it is almost certain that all were senior citizens.
2. *Identify the agency services that are utilized by senior citizens 65 and older in significant numbers.*
  - a. **Benefit Services:** As there is no statute of limitations on the filing of a disability claim, veterans and dependents aged 65 and older continue to seek assistance from the Department with the filing of new claims or with modifications to existing claims.
  - b. **Care Center Services:** The population served by the Virginia Veterans Care Center (Roanoke) is almost exclusively aged 65 and older. The same is expected of the Sitter & Barfoot Veterans Care Center (Richmond), which will accept its first residents in December 2007.
  - c. **Cemetery Services:** Like the care centers, the vast majority of those served by the Virginia Veterans Cemetery (Amelia) and the Albert G. Horton, Jr. Memorial Veterans Cemetery (Suffolk) are aged 65 and older.
  - d. As shown in a recently completed study on long-term care needs for veterans (see below), most of the veterans served by the VVCC come from within 50 miles of the facility. The same is true of the cemeteries. These facilities have adequate capacity to serve the veterans population of their respective service areas, but in order to serve those veterans who do not live in relatively close proximity to a DVS facility, additional facilities will be required.
3. *Identify current agency programs, specifically designed to serve seniors 65 and older, that fall into any of the following six categories: Health Care/Wellness; Education; Public Safety; Recreation; Financial Security (including Housing); and Transportation.*

- a. Health Care/Wellness: The long-term, Alzheimer's, and domiciliary care provided by the veterans care centers serves seniors 65 and older.
4. *Identify the extent to which your agency provides "consumer-oriented" publications and websites online that are designed to be "senior-friendly." If the information you currently provide is not readily accessible to seniors, identify any steps your agency is taking to improve accessibility.*
    - a. DVS has not produced any "consumer-oriented" publications designed specifically for, or specifically targeted to, seniors. Brochures promoting Department services are designed for all veterans. The Department's website ([www.dvs.virginia.gov](http://www.dvs.virginia.gov)) is WAI Level A compliant in order to serve the veteran population with disability or accessibility issues.
  5. *Describe the effect that the aging of the agency's own workforce will have on its ability to deliver services.*
    - a. The bulk of the Department's employees work at the two veterans care centers. The care centers face the same staffing, training, and workforce issues faced by the health care industry.
    - b. The veterans cemeteries have a relatively young workforce, and do not currently face the issue of an aging workforce.
    - c. The Benefit Services section experienced a large turnover in the last three years, with many older, experienced Benefit Service Officers being replaced by younger, less experienced personnel. DVS has implemented an extensive training program to bring the new employees up to speed, but this process can take two years or more due to the detailed nature of the claims process.
    - d. The Education section has a relatively older workforce, but the section is small with limited turnover. When vacancies have occurred, attracting new employees has not been an issue.
    - e. DVS has traditionally relied on recruitment of new personnel to replace retiring personnel, even though the replacements are invariably less experienced. Retirees have sometimes been used to bridge the gap between a retirement and a new hire, or to provide training or mentoring to new hires.
    - f. At present, all service delivery sections have vacancies. When an employee retires, the savings generated by hiring a replacement at a lower salary are used to fill vacant positions, in order to provide the level of service expected by Virginia's veterans.
  6. *Describe any other services or programs that the agency has implemented or plans to implement in the future to address the impact of the aging of Virginia's population.*
    - a. In 2007, DVS commissioned two studies – one on future long-term care needs for veterans, the other on future memorial (cemetery) needs for veterans.
    - b. The long-term care study, completed in October, identified a need for three additional veterans care centers (over and above the two existing centers and the planned Hampton Roads Veterans Care Center).

- i. The construction of the Hampton Roads Veterans Care Center and up to three additional care centers would provide between 600 and 800 additional long-term care beds for veterans.
  - ii. The study also recommended that the Commonwealth begin to build a continuum of long-term care for veterans.
  - iii. The study can be accessed at <http://www.wm.edu/publicpolicy/schroederhome.php>.
- c. The cemetery study will be completed on December 1, and is expected to recommend the construction of an additional veterans cemetery (over and above the two existing cemeteries and the planned Southwest Virginia Veterans Cemetery).
- d. In addition to claims development assistance provided at 23 Benefit Field Offices, DVS Benefit Service Officers also travel to itinerant service points at least one day per week, providing greater access for Virginia's veterans.
- e. The Sitter & Barfoot Veterans Care Center (SBVCC) – which will begin accepting residents in December 2007 – will have 120 nursing care beds and 40 Alzheimer's/dementia care beds, for a potential capacity of 58,400 patient days per year.