



# Somerset County Veterans Services Update



*Presentation by Veterans Services Director Peter Niemiec  
to the Board of Chosen Freeholders  
July 24, 2018*

Of the 21 counties in the State of New Jersey, 14 have dedicated county Veterans Service Offices like ours. This allows veterans to apply for benefits locally rather than having to travel to the Newark Regional Office for help. In 2017 our division had 868 office visits.

## **Accreditation**

[Veterans Services](#) is unique among Somerset County divisions because we require specialized training and federal accreditation by the Department of Veteran Affairs General Counsel. You are required to complete several VA-certified courses of instruction, complete a background check and pass their bar exam; the process can take up to two years.

Having accreditation by the VA grants us special privileges such as offsite access to our claim files in the [Veterans Benefits Management System](#). We can represent our veterans at local hearings and also with the Board of Veterans Appeals. In many cases we can also sign documents on the veteran's behalf.

Our accreditation is through the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers and we need mandatory continuing education credits annually to remain in compliance or our accreditation will be revoked.

## **Current Veterans Statistics**

The State of New Jersey now has 398,000 veterans, with approximately 33,000 being female. At last count Somerset County has approximately 13,000 veterans. However, our posted population does not include National Guard and Ready Reserve.

The largest group in Somerset County we currently serve is Vietnam and Vietnam-era veterans. But with current trends, we anticipate the surge of Iraq, Afghanistan and Southwest Asia Veterans seeking additional services. The statistical data we collect annually documents the requirements of veterans by periods of war.

Key areas addressed for these two populations include:

### **Vietnam War Veterans**

- Health care
- PTSD treatment
- Agent Orange-related treatment
- Wellness programs and alternate therapies
- Widows' benefits

## **Iraq/Afghanistan**

- Suicide prevention (average of 22 per day)
- Health care
- Employment
- Legal assistance
- GI Bill
- PTSD treatment and alternate therapy
- Financial aid
- Affordable housing

## **Compensation**

What we do most commonly is disability compensation and low-income pensions with aid and attendance.

Compensation is paid for wounds and disabilities incurred as a result of service. Amounts range from \$136 per month to over \$3,000 per month for a veteran who is 100-percent disabled. Also our 100-percent wartime veterans receive a full property tax exemption from the State of New Jersey.

In many cases our office is recovering a higher dollar amount per veteran than other counties in the state. The last VA Geographic Distribution of Expenditures report by county and congressional districts shows over \$28 million was paid to the veterans of Somerset County for compensation and pension alone in 2016.

## **Disabilities**

Our most common disabilities are PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) and Agent Orange-related claims.

The signature disability from the War on Terror is traumatic brain injury because of the roadside bombs. TBI was frequently misdiagnosed and many were discharged for personality disorders. Unfortunately, that is not ratable by the VA.

For veterans of Iraq, respiratory problems are surfacing from burn pits. The military used burn pits to dispose of pretty much everything from tires to batteries. All was burned near where soldiers lived and worked. So which way the wind was blowing determined the amount of polluted air you were breathing.

Fortunately, returning veterans are eligible for treatment through the VA Health Care System. And we encourage all to enroll.

Unfortunately, most of our Vietnam veterans are suffering from chronic disabilities related to herbicide exposure commonly known as Agent Orange. This includes many respiratory cancers, type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

Keep in mind that Vietnam veterans are now at retirement age and rely more on VA benefits and our services.

## **New Programs**

Some recent new programs we are working with in partnership with the [Richard Hall Community Mental Health Center of Somerset County](#):

- Vets in Tune – Vietnam-era veteran Jim Hilt is volunteering to teach veterans with PTSD how to play guitars. Music is now being used as an alternate therapy to help veterans cope with stress, with great results.
- Wellness programs
- Court diversion assessments
- Widows' grief therapy sessions
- An office where we can sit down and meet with veterans
- Facility for claims clinics and VA Town Hall meetings

Our thanks to Richard Hall for all of the above!

The VA has a tendency provide medication, but we want to provide alternatives. We have veterans participating in [Spring Reigns of Life](#) equine-assisted therapy, yoga, art therapy, fly fishing, kayaking and aquatic exercising. All good stuff!

### **Veterans Directed Community Based Services Program**

This program provides disabled veterans funding to remain in their homes instead of long-term care facilities. This program was started in 15 states but only in Somerset, Morris and Bergen counties in New Jersey. This is a highly desired program with a waiting list.

Our county [Office on Aging & Disability Services](#) does the assessments for the VA and the Veterans Services Division handles pensions and transportation and assists with enrollment in the VA Health Care System. Currently we have nine veterans in Somerset County participating in this program.

### **Veterans Court Diversion Program**

Most veterans have never been involved with the criminal justice system. Because of what they have witnessed and experienced during their deployments in a combat zone, too many self-medicate with alcohol and/or drugs in an attempt to deal with a society they feel neither accepts nor understands them. Some wind up butting heads with the criminal justice system.

The Veterans Court Diversion Program was created to direct state officials to work with federal counterparts on a system designed to connect eligible service members with appropriate behavioral healthcare instead of sending them to jail. The program links veterans with existing services so they can get screening, counseling and other treatment.

Upon completion of the program, which can take up to two years, veterans can have their criminal cases dismissed and their arrest records expunged.

## **Outreach Program**

Our Outreach Program is always ongoing. In that regard we:

- Provide presentations to educate the public on veterans' issues and benefits.
- Present to care providers, nutrition sites, veterans' organizations, assisted-living facilities and hospital social workers.
- Host numerous VA Claims Clinics and Town Hall meetings with the director of the Newark VA Regional Office.
- Work with the New Jersey Department of Labor, [New Jersey VA Health Care System](#) and our veterans' centers.
- Develop many partnerships with veterans' organizations and nonprofits that deal with homelessness and employment.
- Belong to the Central New Jersey veteran stakeholders group that meets monthly at the Rutgers Behavioral Health Care Center to share information and discuss veterans' issues. This is also the home of the New Jersey Vet-to-Vet Hotline that is available 24 hours a day.
- Work with our student veterans at Raritan Valley Community College, who recently organized to form the [Raritan Valley Veterans Alliance](#), currently with over 80 participants.
- Maintain a solid relationship with the [Rutgers Office of Military and Veterans Programs](#) to make sure our student veterans get all the benefits they are entitled to ease their transition back to school. Veterans are now returning home and enrolling in higher education institutions at unprecedented numbers.

## **At Veterans Services Our Reach Is Far**

We are engaged at every level of government and Veterans Administration leadership.

I am currently the vice president of the New Jersey Association of Veteran Service Officers; county Veterans Services Officer Betsy Haluszczak is our state delegate to the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers. We also maintain close liaison with state elected officials and congressional staffs.

We were invited by the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City to attend and participate in the Renewing America Series to discuss public and private efforts in employment, education and health care to aid with the transition of veterans from the battlefield to civilian life.

Recently I was in Washington, DC, meeting with the chairman of the board of Veterans Appeals and Betsy represented our state association at the National Conference in Reno, NV.

## **Planning for the Future**

It's apparent that the requirements are rapidly changing for the post-9/11 veterans who served in Southwest Asia.

Early intervention is critical, but unfortunately, fewer than 20 percent of all veterans use the services of the Veterans Affairs medical facilities or clinics.

The last national survey on substance abuse and health found approximately one out of six veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan has substance-abuse problems due to PTSD.

The issues affecting veterans also impacts their families and generates higher reliance on government programs.

Health care, financial aid and employment are among the top priorities urgently needed.

Knowing the full scope and magnitude of the future for our Somerset County veterans, we must not only prepare, but plan and react accordingly and, more importantly, think outside the envelope.

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**Contact the Somerset County Office of Veterans Services**

Location: 27 Warren Street, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor, Somerville, NJ 08876

Mailing Address: P.O. Box 3000, Somerville, NJ 08876-1262

Telephone: (908) 704-6329

Email: [Veterans@co.somerset.nj.us](mailto:Veterans@co.somerset.nj.us)

Website: <https://www.co.somerset.nj.us/veterans>