

Department of Veterans' Affairs

I. Internal Scan

a) The increase in Utah's aging population will affect our agency in many different ways. The Utah State Department of Veterans' Affairs is designed to assist any and all veterans within Utah. Aging veterans are no exception. Many older veterans are not aware of the benefits they may be entitled to, and only attempt to obtain benefit information when they reach retirement. Veterans of World War II, Korea and now Vietnam, find themselves retired with less money saved than anticipated, along with reduced or discontinued retirement programs. Many of these veterans seek help from our agency, most often, enrollment for medical treatment and prescription drug benefits offered by the VA medical center. It is the goal of our office to ensure that these veterans obtain the benefits for which they have sacrificed so much.

Utah, especially southern Utah, is known for its' retirement communities. Many older people choose to retire to the warmer climate and leisure life offered in communities such as St. George and Moab. Most World War II veterans are now in their 80s, Korean War veterans are in their 70s and most Vietnam veterans are between 55 and 70. Note that the draft had been issued for all of these periods in our nation's history. This means a large number of men that are retired or preparing to retire are veterans. As I previously stated, it is during retirement that veterans often seek aid from our office to assist with rising medical costs to include prescription drugs. Another large effect the aging population has on our agency, is added strain to the veterans' nursing home. As of now there are approximately 50 veterans waiting to get into the nursing home. Having veterans waiting that long for assistance compromises the effectiveness of the nursing home as well as the mission of our office.

A growing aging population will also cause strain to our veterans' cemetery, which our office oversees. We do not realistically foresee the cemetery reaching capacity within the next 20 years. The staff at the veterans' cemetery consists of only six people. With an expanding aging population of veterans and rising costs of burials, it is realistic to expect to see more families taking advantage of veterans' death benefits. A larger staff will almost definitely be required as more veterans pass away.

In order to ensure the integrity of our office programs, overarching policies will need some tailoring within the next 20 years. It is safe to say that the number of aging veterans will continue to spike for at least the next ten years as the remainder of the Vietnam veterans reach retirement. It is also safe to say that after the spike, the number of aging veterans will decline because of the retraction of the draft in the 1970s. This does not mean there won't be any veterans reaching retirement after the next ten years, but we should be able to serve these younger veterans effectively with programs already in place. We foresee that the next ten years will be the true test for our agency to serve retired and retiring veterans as well as the younger veterans currently serving in our military.

It would be foolish to overlook some of the other demographics which will affect our agency and, in turn, aging veterans. While the population may not be changing at an

unpredictable rate, the number of veterans is. Many generation Y people have joined the military this decade. This can be attributed to many factors, but a few that stand out are the rising cost of education, cash bonuses, and commitment to country. Our resources go toward making these people aware of their entitlements, as well as to provide help to veterans returning from combat zones. The programs put in place to assist these younger veterans can take away resources from the aging veterans.

Our office strives to assist veterans of all ages. With our limited resources, it is a constant struggle to make sure everyone is getting the assistance they need. Different demographics require different forms of assistance, and at certain times, our resources are stretched pretty thin. We feel that the best way to deal with this issue is to create programs that can assist as many veterans as possible. With more programs, we can assist many veterans at once while pursuing other initiatives to improve our programs.

b) Our agency has begun to address the issue of a rising aging population in Utah. There are various ways to assist aging veterans such as; building a new veterans' nursing home in Ogden, providing a veterans outreach program throughout the state, and trying to make people aware of the benefits they, or their loved ones, may be entitled to. With all of our programs, we try to assist a broad range of veterans rather than cater to one specific age group. Obviously, there are some programs offered where this is inevitable. The veterans nursing home is one of these. However, our outreach and benefit briefings are designed to assist all veterans regardless of age. This is done because of our tight budget and strained manpower, and we have been highly successful.

As mentioned earlier, there are approximately 50 veterans waiting to get into the veterans' nursing home. It is hard to give an exact time frame for a veterans admittance, because a resident either needs to pass away, or be released in order for a space to become available. With the current waiting list as long as it is and with the increasing number of veterans who will need to be admitted, we have begun to develop plans for a new nursing home in Ogden. The state has provided one-third of the funding required to build the new nursing home, and the federal government has guaranteed the other two-thirds of the funding when the money becomes available. Because this is such an expensive project, completion is at least 5 years away. The land has been secured and it is simply a matter of funding.

Our veterans' outreach program is one of the most important services we provide to veterans in Utah, especially aging vets. The federal Veterans' Affairs regional office is located in Salt Lake City, but many of the veterans in the outlying areas of Utah may not be able to travel to Salt Lake City for assistance with filing a VA claim. It is unrealistic for veterans to try to file claims and appeals by telephone and mail. The process for filing for benefits can be complicated and confusing. It is especially hard for older veterans to make it to Salt Lake from areas like St. George and Logan. With our veterans' outreach program, veterans' representatives, or vet reps, travel throughout the state to assist veterans in filling out the paperwork for their specific need. The vet reps go to the local Department of Workforce Services offices in the town they are in. Veterans are encouraged to come and ask questions about veterans benefits they may be entitled to. Twenty-one towns are visited twice a month by vet reps who are highly experienced in

helping veterans obtain VA benefits. This program ensures that all veterans throughout Utah have the chance to seek advice and assistance.

Our office works very hard to make sure veterans know the benefits they're entitled to. The Utah National Guard and various reserve units are vital channels in which we are able to address individuals who have served, or are serving in our military. Our office visits units on their drill weekends and gives them a one hour briefing on veteran's benefits. Although there are almost no service men and women over the age of 60 actively serving in our military, it is important that we make all veterans aware of their benefits. Many of the service members getting ready to retire from the National Guard or reserves are at an age where they are concerned about how they will be able to support themselves after retirement and what benefits are available to them. During these briefings all service members are given the opportunity to inquire in depth on different benefits. Three people conduct these briefings, each of them are veterans, and two of them have retired from the military. They have extensive knowledge of what the older members can expect when they retire and how to best use their benefits.

One of the best features of these services is that they work to help older and younger veterans. As mentioned in part a of this scan, our budget is very tight. We work to help all veterans equally. We strive to help as many veterans as possible with each of our programs. We have been extremely successful, in this regard, in both our outreach program and our National Guard and reserve briefings. Programs that "kill two birds with one stone" are essential to the success of our mission.

II. Prioritization

1. The high numbers of veterans spread throughout Utah is our first priority. As stated in Brief Part I, many of these veterans are aging and are trying to receive benefits to which they are entitled. With the Regional VA office located in Salt Lake City, veterans, especially aging veterans, find it difficult to travel from places like St. George. It is essential that the paperwork is correct to ensure it goes through the system the first time. Our vet reps help make that happen. Our agency had to assess how many veterans would benefit from programs related to this issue and how those numbers compared to those of other issues. Because our outreach program is designed to assist all veterans, it is vital to our agency's mission.

2. Briefing National Guard and reserve units is second. If we can make current service members aware of their entitlements, it can help them when they reach retirement age. Many National Guard and reserve members are approaching retirement and these briefings are an excellent opportunity for them to learn what they are entitled to. These briefings, like the outreach program, are designed to help all veterans, not only the aging.

3. The next issue is the long waiting list for the veterans' nursing home. As stated in Part I, there are approximately 50 veterans waiting to be admitted to the nursing home. Plans have already been made for a new veterans' nursing home and now it is only a

matter of funding. Being incapable of helping the veterans who need to be in the nursing home greatly diminishes the integrity of our office.

III. Planning

The outreach program has a great deal of potential. By January 2009 we would like to see our outreach program much more stable. Along with its stability, we would like to see it producing information about Utah veterans, which we could use to identify and fix weaknesses in our other programs. If we are to assist all veterans throughout the state, it is essential that we have a database with which we can track Utah's veteran population. This database would be used to make veterans aware of benefits they may be entitled to, as well as to let them know about upcoming veterans programs they may want to take advantage of. The outreach program is vital to this goal.

Our office receives discharge papers for every veteran who comes to Utah after separation from active duty. We put their information into our database. We have discharge records going back as far as 1980. This helps to track younger veterans, but what about aging veterans?

That is where our outreach program comes in. While the outreach is designed to help all veterans, it is geared toward aging veterans who may have trouble making it to Salt Lake City to file claims for benefits. If we can start tracking all veterans taking advantage of the outreach program, we can enter them into the database as well. We will also be able to better assist them the next time they try to take advantage of veterans' benefits

The third prong in our effort to build a state-wide veterans database is to start working with the Drivers License Division to obtain veterans' information. At this time, when completing the form to obtain a state driver's license or identification card, there is a box used to identify veterans and whether or not the veteran wants their information sent to our office. This helps us identify veterans of all ages, many of whom have moved here from other states. If a veteran moves here from another state, we do not receive a copy of their discharge records, so the DLD is the only way we would be able to account for this veteran.

The fourth way we are trying to establish our database is to account for all of the telephone calls coming into our office. By getting some basic information from each person that calls, we can build the database even more and account for some veterans who may have been missed through our other means of tracking veterans.

It is important to note that none of the programs listed above are in full operation. By January 2009, we hope to have a very strong base for all of them.

We will be coordinating with departments from both the public and private sector. The Veterans Service Organizations, which supply many of the vet reps who do the outreach, are privately funded organizations. As stated above, the outreach acquires a lot of information on veterans, especially aging veterans, throughout the state. We will also

be working with the DLD to get information from their applications for driver's licenses and identification cards.

Our goal of creating a database of veterans living in Utah has some strengths and opportunities as well as weaknesses and threats. Our biggest strength is that we know the issue and the different complications that come with it. Because of this, we can prepare and work to avoid those complications. Our goal is weakest in the funding area. Because of our small staff and tight funds, it could be hard to get this project off the ground. While our organization does have opportunities to get new funding, mostly through legislation, we can lose funding the same way. In this way, our opportunities can be through the same channel as our threats.

If we can secure the funding to build and stabilize the veterans outreach, along with the other means of building our database, we will be able to maximize our support for Utah's veterans.