New Jersey Veterans Services Council

2006 Annual Report

The New Jersey Veterans Services Council is pleased to provide for public review its Annual Report covering the period 2005 and 2006.

New Jersey currently has about 600,000 veteran residents, and the War on Terror has resulted in the activation of a significant number of New Jersey National Guard and Reserve units serving in harms way for the first time in 50 years. Additionally, we are seeing a greater number of female veterans than ever before and the needs of these new veterans must be served.

The year was characterized by the continuation of our concern about the changing nature of the needs of our veterans and their dependents….and about the adequacy of the State’s preparation to understand, define, organize and secure funding for the services it will be required to provide ten, twenty and more years from now.

The current pressure to contain Federal and State expenditures in an effort to create more efficient government services bears the risk of restricting available funding.

Furthermore, the soaring costs of medical care, drugs, nursing care and even plain, ordinary housing will exacerbate further the need for urgency in planning, prioritizing and allocating resources as well as the need to pursue even more cost effective methods of delivering health care services.

Moving from an historical perspective to the issues and events of this reporting period, the need for careful, long-term planning becomes evident. Indeed, it becomes more apparent each year that we can provide only those services for which we have planned in advance.

The Council’s oversight role is one of major emphasis and involvement in ensuring that the State is properly informed and positioned to provide our veterans with services that are most essential and cost effective, now and as the current group of veterans age and need veterans services.

One less obvious, but equally essential, requirement for the successful fulfillment of our commitment to veterans is our ability to use existing resources whenever possible, regardless of organizational lines.
Duplication of effort is costly and wasteful, particularly where critical skills are involved. Our studies and strategic plans must contemplate not only the changing mix of required services, but also the changing geographic patterns of need. All of this is required to be planned and programmed in an environment of increasing economic pressures resulting from the rampant increases in the cost of medical care and services combined with budget restraints.

Innovative thought and rigorous pursuit of alternatives to the traditional modes of delivery will be the key to our success.

This Council, as the State appointed authority on veterans’ affairs, continues to actively provide guidance and direction as they pertain to veterans’ affairs, to the proper authorities as mandated by law, and is in constant touch with State and local organizations and officials, Federal agencies and officials, and the many veterans’ organizations. Typically, our members are the Leaders of the veterans ‘organizations in the State and represent particular blocks of veterans while having the welfare of all New Jersey veterans at heart through the Council’s activities.

To help understand the reasons for the conception and continuation of our current veterans programs, a brief review of our history is offered.

**History of Veterans Programs in New Jersey**

The State of New Jersey’s commitment to provide services and support to her wartime veterans and their dependents or survivors has a 175 year history. Some of the highlights of this history are:

- **The American Revolution-** In 1831 the New Jersey Legislature began granting pensions of $60 to veterans and $30 to widows of Revolutionary War veterans. The intent of the pensions was to prevent veterans from becoming impoverished and therefore forced to seek public or private charity.

- **The War of 1812 and the Civil War-** This concern over the impoverishment of veterans also motivated the granting of pensions in the latter part of the nineteenth century to veterans of these two conflicts. In 1865 the Legislature appropriated $50,000 to establish The New Jersey Home for Disabled Soldiers, the first such long term care facility for disabled veterans. The original home was located in Newark, moved to Kearney and in 1932 to its present site in Menlo Park. In 1899 a second home was dedicated in Vineland. This facility provided both residential and Nursing Home Care and was the first of its kind. Veterans who died while at the Home were buried at the expense of the institution, anticipating the Federal, State and County systems of cemeteries and burial benefits which were to be established in later years.
World War I - the State appropriation of funds to these veterans was one of the largest programs of its type offered by any state. Funded by a Soldiers Bonus Bond, over 125,000 claims were paid between 1920 and 1925.

World War II - A Bonus Bill similar to the WWI Bonus was defeated in 1949, but the Veterans Property Tax Deduction was passed. This deduction continued as long as the veteran owned his home. Additionally, a total property tax exemption was authorized for certain service connected totally and permanently disabled veterans, along with compensation for blind and catastrophically disabled veterans. Surviving children of veterans were awarded a $2,000 college educational benefit since 1944. These programs are all administered by the Department of Military & Veterans Affairs and are meant to supplement federal programs.

Post WWII - In the 1980’s the Legislature authorized an additional Home in Paramus. Today these homes are known as Veterans Memorial Homes and are open to all veterans, certain family members and survivors. The Brigadier General Doyle Cemetery in Arneytown was dedicated and in 1986 Veterans Haven in Ancora that provides transitional housing and training to homeless veterans was established.

Current State Programs

Veterans Programs are considered to be gratuitous benefits bestowed on the veteran by a grateful state for their service and preservation of our way of life. Veterans who interrupted their lives in defense of the nation have been considered a select group throughout history, and with that in mind some highlights of today’s programs offered by the State through the Department of Military & Veterans Affairs follow:

- Operation of 17 full time Veterans Service Offices employing 22 Service Officers throughout the state. The function of the Service Officers in these facilities is to advise and assist veterans with a wide variety of veteran’s benefits available to them. These offices compliment and support County and Veterans Service Organization service offices.

- Operation of the BG William C. Doyle Veterans Memorial Cemetery. This cemetery is the jewel of veteran’s cemeteries and is often referred to as New Jersey’s Arlington by veterans. With over 15 burials daily and thousands of visitors annually it is a significant asset to the State and her veterans.

- Maintenance of the New Jersey Korean & Viet Nam Veterans Memorials and development of the WWII Memorial.
Operation of Veterans Haven, a transitional housing rehabilitation facility for the State’s homeless veterans. The Veterans Haven program is divided into three phases, Treatment, Self Reclamation and Community Integration.

Operation of three Veterans Memorial homes located at Menlo Park, Vineland and Paramus. The three facilities are home to over 900 disabled veterans who require skilled nursing care.

Authorization of grants to County and Municipal governments to transport veterans to health care facilities.

Contracting for Readjustment Counseling for returning veterans.

It is the general practice of the Veterans Services Council to have at least one of its members in attendance as a representative to the State Convention of the major veteran’s organizations. It is also the Council’s policy to welcome other veteran’s organization members who have concerns regarding the services and programs offered by the state. It is important to note here that the Veterans Service Organizations provide a substantial number of volunteer hours and financial support to each of the veterans programs and facilities provided by the State. This voluntary support is unique within the veteran’s community and results in significant cost avoidance to the taxpayers.

**Charter and Mission of the Council**

Established on October 25, 1948 by N.J.S.A. 13:1B-20, and amended January 16, 1988, by N.J.S.A. 38A:3-1, The Veterans Services Council is charged with the following:

Council shall, subject to the approval of the Commissioner formulate comprehensive policies for the coordination of all services for the benefit of veterans and their dependents.

Council shall consult with and advise the Director of the Division of Veterans Services with respect to the work of Veterans Affairs.

Council shall study the activities of Veterans Services and hold hearings with respect thereto as it may deem necessary or desirable.

Council shall report to the Governor and the Legislature annually and at such other times as it may deem in the public interest, with respect to its findings and conclusions.

Council shall also be empowered to coordinate services and information for the benefit of veterans and their dependents.
In order to comply with this charter to formulate comprehensive policy for the coordination of veterans services, the Council must be able to identify the needs of veterans in New Jersey and to work closely with the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and ensure that the appropriate public and legislative bodies are informed of those needs in a timely manner.

To accomplish this, the Council regularly monitors the services provided by the State. The Council serves as a clearinghouse to collect and distribute information on veterans programs. The Council coordinates information and activities of the various veterans’ organizations within the State and serves as a mediator between the State and elements of the private sector.

This is all done with the intent of serving as the advocate for all of New Jersey veterans and advising the Deputy Commissioner of Veterans Affairs on any issues of concern to veterans while making recommendations concerning programs and policies.

**Council Organization**

As stated above, the Council members are generally leaders within the veteran’s service organizations in New Jersey and this facilitates keeping “it’s hand on the pulse” of the veteran’s needs and programs within the state. The Council meets on a monthly basis and has implemented a liaison structure that allows it to efficiently monitor veterans programs. Via this system, each of the members is assigned to a specific major program within the state, such as one of the Homes. By regularly attending the Facility Council meetings, the entire Council is consistently advised as to the state of affairs at that facility.

Current Liaison assignments are as follows:

- Department of Military & Veterans Affairs Richard J. Clark, Chair
- Legislation, Menlo Park Raymond L. Zawacki, Vice Chair
- Vineland (Vacant)
- Paramus, Women Veterans Marliese Haemerle
- Stand Downs, VA Regional Office Dorothea Lee (Vacant, resigned 10/06)
- Viet Nam Veterans Memorial Foundation Berley Hanna
- Public Affairs, Communication Dan Weiss (vacant, resigned 10/06)
- Governors Office Ed Kelly
- BG Doyle Cemetery Henry Adams
Goals

Working closely with The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, the Veterans Services Council, established the following general goals for itself and the veterans service organizations community. The intent of the goals is to provide oversight of and direction for the activities which fulfill the State’s obligation to her veterans to participate fully in community life in New Jersey.

? Ensure the continuation of all present veterans’ benefits and programs for future veterans.
? Provide expert information and counsel to assist all eligible veterans in, accessing programs and benefits available, in the transition from military to civilian life, and in achieving permanent integration into that life.
? Provide advice and counsel to the Governor, The Legislature, and the Department of Military & Veterans Affairs on the needs and special concerns of New Jersey veterans.
? Review and oversee the provision of all State services for veterans and their dependents.
? Interact with public and private organizations which provide services to veterans to ensure the coordination of services and extend those services already available.
? Provide or coordinate medical, social and economic services to support New Jersey’s veterans and their families thereby providing them the opportunity to continue to have fruitful lives in their communities
? Assist in addressing social, psychological and economic problems of veterans.
? Assist eligible veterans and their dependents in securing necessary custodial care by maintaining nursing homes and other community support bases.
? Encourage the Legislature to provide funds to assist the homeless veterans.

The Council has also set specific goals that are seen as a need for the state’s veterans. These are as follows

? Women Veterans- The increasing number of women serving in the Armed Forces and the different needs of these veterans make it necessary to reestablish the New Jersey Advisory Committee for Women Veterans to bring together a group of knowledgeable women who will plan for and advise the Department on the needs of these veterans. The Council supports the re-establishment of the New Jersey Advisory Committee for Women Veterans.

? Homeless Veterans- It is estimated that the State has an estimated 7,000 to 8,000 homeless veterans. The Council supports the need to continue and expand programs like Veterans Haven in order to better serve our homeless veterans.
Transportation - Transport to and from clinical appointments for aging veterans is critical to these veterans receiving health care. The Council supports the need to expand transportation services.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Counseling - It is estimated that 25% of those returning from combat service in Iraq & Afghanistan will seek counseling on their return home. The Council supports the need for service officers to be aware of the need for counseling and have the resources necessary to refer these veterans to the US Department of Veterans Affairs, contract or community sources that may be available. The Council strongly recommends that the Legislature direct its attention to proposed Legislation that would amend the definition of a New Jersey veteran.

Communication - Seeking out new veterans as they return to New Jersey to advise them of the programs and assistance available is imperative. The Veterans Journal and The Veterans Guide are useful tools for this communication. The Council supports making these publications available to all newly discharged state veterans.

**Council Reorganization**

Finally, filling the current vacancies in a timely manner is of paramount importance for the Council to remain viable. Over the past several years, Council members have had multiple liaison responsibilities. Combining this with their own work/organizational responsibilities, and the time that the appointment process takes to fill vacancies, we have not always had a quorum at our monthly meetings. In order to improve our own efficiency, the Council has adopted a set of by-laws to act as an operating guide. A copy of these by-laws is attached and it should be noted that we are recommending some changes which can only be authorized by a legislative amendment to NJSA 13:1B-20. These recommended changes are as follows.

1. Increasing the number of Council members from 9 to 11.
2. Setting term limits of two terms.
3. Recommending removal of any member who misses three (3) consecutive meetings without a valid excuse.
4. Changing the language of the third line of the first sentence of the current law from “war veterans” to “veterans”. The conflicts and emergencies our armed forces are engaged in are not conventional wars, making this change necessary.

Richard J. Clark
Chairman