Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee today to discuss the Fiscal Year 2013 budget for the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs.

Let me begin by saying it is an honor to lead the more than 8,300 Soldiers and Airmen of the New Jersey National Guard and DMAVA’s civilian employees, a dedicated team that reflexively puts the needs of the veterans of this great state above all else.

Although these are challenging fiscal times, the Department remains focused on its core missions.

The first: Fielding and equipping highly-trained military forces poised for rapid response to preserve peace and public safety on the orders of the Governor and to respond to national security threats at the direction of the President.

And the second: Ensuring state-of-the-art support to New Jersey veterans through a statewide network of services that run the gamut from mental-health treatment to employment services to ensuring they receive every federal entitlement earned through their service to our state and nation.

Before I go any further, I’d like to call your attention to two things that have taken place since this department last appeared before this committee because they demonstrate the full spectrum of services DMAVA delivers to the residents of New Jersey.

In September, the Department mobilized more than 2,400 Soldiers and Airmen to respond to a Category II

A nurse checks up on a resident at the Veterans Memorial Home at Vinaland. (NJDMAVA Public Affairs photo by Mark C. Olsen)
hurricane that was forecast to make landfall on our Southern shores with devastating force. Instead, as Hurricane Irene changed its path and began to deliver epic rains to the central and northern parts of the state, your New Jersey National Guard was shifting its posture, repositioning more than 300 pieces of equipment in the midst of the deluge to outmaneuver the storm and strategically place Soldiers and Airmen where they were needed most.

It paid off. The New Jersey National Guard carried 543 residents from flood stricken areas to safety and performed hundreds of other missions in direct support to civilian authorizes. As the threat subsided, the National Guard moved quickly to drawdown troops and reposition equipment to minimize the expense to the taxpayer.

Here’s something else that happened in the middle of that storm that illustrates the reach and potency of the National Guard. Even as New Jersey’s “Hometown
Team” was battling the storm, a group of their comrades boarded an aircraft at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst to begin a one-year deployment in support of combat operations in Afghanistan.

Gov. Chris Christie and Brig. Gen. Michael L. Cunniff, the Adjutant General, announced the start-up plans for a Veterans Haven North in Glen Gardner, Hunterdon County on March 17, 2012 during a press conference at Freedom House. The partnership between the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and Freedom House is intended to increase access to transitional housing and provide comprehensive care for New Jersey’s veterans. (NJDMAVA Public Affairs photo by Staff Sgt. Armando Vasquez)

A second significant event occurred several months later and it highlighted DMAVA’s unwavering commitment to the state’s most vulnerable population of veterans. The Department announced plans in March to expand its services to homeless veterans in Northern New Jersey by creating a second transitional housing facility to provide psychological, social and vocational assistance for former service members who have fallen on hard times. The new facility on the grounds of the former Sen. Garrett W. Hagedorn Psychiatric Hospital in Hunterdon County’s Glen Gardner will offer the same services that have been provided since 1995 at DMAVA’s Veterans Haven transitional housing facility on the grounds of Ancora Psychiatric Hospital in Winslow Township, Gloucester County.

The work done by the staff of Veterans Haven has been nothing short of remarkable. Better than three of every four of the 1,000 veterans who have completed the Veterans Haven program have regained their self-sufficiency and returned to productive lives.

Although no one who has served our nation should ever find himself homeless, it is an unfortunate reality. In New Jersey, an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 veterans are homeless on any given day. That’s why the creation of the transitional housing program at Hagedorn -- or Veterans Haven North -- is of such great importance and why a 20,000-square-foot expansion that nearly doubled the number of beds at the existing Veterans Haven is of such vital importance to the state.

The $5.9 million expansion at Veterans Haven was funded through a blend of funds that included $500,000 from the U.S. Veterans Administration. The additional beds are expected to generate an additional $624,091 in VA grant and per diem funds each year.

This leveraging of federal dollars to fund new projects and efforts to maximize income through
federal reimbursement is a theme you will see across nearly every aspect of DMAVA’s operations.

Our commitment to fulfilling our core missions in the most efficient manner possible can be seen in the numbers. The Department’s proposed $94.2 million budget for Fiscal Year 2013 is a $1.3 million reduction from the 2012 adjusted appropriation.

The Department has achieved these reductions by increasing the number of federally-funded positions and through a workforce realignment that seeks to maximize workforce efficiencies without a reduction in services provided.

Between federal entitlements to New Jersey Veterans, direct federal support to the National Guard, military construction projects at National Guard facilities, federal money for VA construction funds at state facilities and other direct federal support of state programs through the Department, the total economic impact tops $1 billion. Put another way, for every dollar the state General Fund sends DMAVA, the Department returns more than $20 to the Garden State economy.

The Department accounts for 1,703 full-time federal jobs through its full-time Military Support Force and a payroll that exceeded $145 million in Federal Fiscal Year 2010. An additional $75 million flows into the state’s economy through the pay earned by the state’s Citizen Soldiers and Citizen Airmen.

An important role played by the Department is ensuring that the Soldiers and Airmen of the New Jersey National Guard receive top-notch training and facilities.

One of the most significant new projects will be a new Army National Guard Aviation facility on Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst. The $49 million project will be funded exclusively with federal money and will provide a 130,000 square foot state-of-the-art aviation maintenance facility for the 150th Aviation Battalion and its fleet of UH-60 Blackhawk and OH-58 Kiowa helicopters.

The New Jersey Youth ChalleNGe Academy, located on the Joint Base, continues to be a shining example of a successful federal and state partnership.

The voluntary educational program provides 16- to 19-year-old high school dropouts the opportunity to undergo an intense 22-week structured residential program in a quasi-military environment. The educational goal is to prepare cadets for the GED exam and raise
academic mathematics and reading scores a minimum of two grade levels. The goal is usually met, with better than 85 percent of the cadets receiving a GED. Chal-leNGe cadets are mentored for one-year post graduation as they pursue employment, college, vocational school or military service. The DMA VA team has been able to secure 75 percent of the operation costs from the federal government. In Fiscal Year 2012, federal support for the program increased by $1.4 million, bringing total federal funding to the program to $3.75 million.

Because of the work of DMA VA staff and our partners in government and the veterans community, Congress passed Public Law 111-275, which increased the plot interment allowance from $300 to $700 beginning in October. The change created an additional $500,000 in revenue in Fiscal Year 2012. Securing the additional federal funding allowed the cemetery to continue to inter eligible veterans for no fee.

The DMA VA team understands the importance of programs that care for our Soldiers and Airmen and their families.

The Brigadier General William C. Doyle Cemetery in North Hanover Township, Burlington County continues to be the nation’s busiest state run veterans cemetery. The DMA VA cemetery staff conducted a record 3,073 burials in the 2011 calendar year. The staff is on pace to exceed that record number this year. By the end of Fiscal Year 2012 the total number of interments at the cemetery are expected to eclipse 53,042.

Since the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the New Jersey National Guard has mobilized 16,178 troops. Many of our Soldiers and Airmen have answered the call of our State and Nation multiple times.
To sustain these busy deployment cycles, we continue to support their families through our robust Family Support Programs. These families have weathered difficult and lonely times during the long deployments. They truly are the Home Front Heroes.

It is incumbent upon the Department of Military and Veterans’ Affairs to ensure that as our National Guard members mobilize, deploy, demobilize and transition back to civilian life, their needs and the needs of their families continue to be addressed.

Through National Guard funding, we operate a statewide network of Family Assistance Centers. These centers support the families of deployed Soldiers and Airmen during unforeseen emergencies and financial hardships. Staff at the centers work in tandem with the dedicated volunteers at the 34 unit-affiliated Family Readiness Groups across the state. Our dedicated team of chaplains lends additional support.

The crown jewel of this effort is the on-site “Seven Seals” family assistance center at the Bordentown Armory to serve military members from all the Reserve Components and their families from across the state. The program helps deployed troops make the transition from Soldier to Citizen. DMA VA secured $3 million in federal money to launch this effort. Those funds will also pay to operate the local family assistance center, which helps Soldiers and their families with deployment-related issues. The federal money paid for an interior renovation of the Bordentown Armory to create a new home for both programs, which launched earlier this year. Earlier this year, the Seven Seals center hosted a jobs fair for returning troops as part of an ongoing Department effort to lower New Jersey’s veterans’ unemployment rate. Another aspect of this effort has been to station state Department of Labor and State Department of Education employment representatives in the Seven Seals center.

The Soldiers and Airmen returning now are the focus of one of the most comprehensive efforts ever undertaken to support troops as they make the transition from warrior back to parent, spouse, student, employee and member of their community.
cus of a reconstitution process designed to reconnect them with their families, smooth the return to their civilian jobs, address any financial concerns that have arisen during their absence, educate them about the benefits to which they are now entitled, and ensure that their physical, mental and spiritual needs are being met.

The National Guard Bureau has recognized DMAVA’s effort to assist Soldiers and Airmen transition to federal mobilization to traditional service as one of the nation’s “best practices.”

The counseling hotline is a significant resource to veterans readjusting to civilian life. (NJDMAVA Public Affairs graphic illustration by Mark C. Olsen)

Soldiers of the 1-150th Assault Helicopter Battalion attended a 60-day reintegration event at the University of Medicine & Dentistry of New Jersey Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in Piscataway. Mental health volunteers met with the Soldiers to identify and help mitigate emotional problems the veterans may have encountered since their return home from their deployment to Iraq. (NJDMAVA Public Affairs photo by Mark C. Olsen)

The department also established a toll-free Veterans Hotline - 1-888-8NJ-VETS - to provide benefit information to veterans and their dependents.

Jersey Guard members who have deployed are now eligible for enhanced education benefits under the newly revamped Post 9-11 G.I. Bill.

DMAVA continues to see a substantial increase in the number of veterans seeking treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Over the past four years, the demand for PTSD counseling has increased by nearly a third and an estimated 22,000 counseling sessions are forecast for Fiscal Year 2013. The Governor’s Fiscal Year 2013 budget proposal for the department appropriates $1.3 million for PTSD counseling.

I am proud to report that New Jersey is one of only seven states that provides additional mental health services for its veterans and is the only state to assist their families as well. A cornerstone of this effort is our toll free, 24-hour Veterans Helpline. The Helpline has offered a lifeline to service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan as well as those suffering ill effects from service in earlier conflicts. Just as deployments for post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries and any other mental health or emotional issues.

Following the initial reconstitution process, Guard members participate in the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program to address their needs at 30-, 60- and 90-day intervals. We recognize that the mental health of our returning heroes is paramount. In the first three months after their return, they are screened no less than three times

The counseling hotline is a significant resource to veterans readjusting to civilian life. (NJDMAVA Public Affairs graphic illustration by Mark C. Olsen)

Staff Sgt. Vanessa L. Torres-Pagan, 177th Fighter Wing, presents Vineland Veterans Memorial Home resident George Welch a candy cane on Dec. 14, 2011. Airmen from the 177th Fighter Wing and the 108th Wing, both assigned to the New Jersey Air National Guard, were joined by fourth graders from the Seaview School in Linwood, N.J. for the Annual Holiday “Songfest” at the Vineland Veterans Memorial Home. This is the 11th year the Wings have visited the Home. Upon arrival, Airmen and fourth graders were issued candy canes and holiday greeting cards, assigned to groups and sent out to spread cheer among the residents. The carolers congregated in cafeterias, day rooms, as well as serenading individuals in their rooms (those residents that are bed-ridden), as well as chatted with the residents. (NJDMAVA Public Affairs photo by Mark C. Olsen)
to combat theaters of operation are forecast to continue, the expectation is that the number of calls to the Helpline will only increase.

The Department never loses sight of its responsibility to the taxpayer and its status as an economic engine for the state, returning more than $20 for each dollar it receives.

With your support, the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs will continue to ensure the safety and security of New Jersey’s citizens and her most deserving veterans. Thank you for the opportunity to make this presentation before your distinguished committee. My staff and I will be happy to answer any of your questions.