

FY 16 Budget

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Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Department of Military and Veteran Affairs Fiscal Year 2016 budget.

It's an honor to appear before this committee today because it gives me the opportunity to showcase the amazing work done every day – and sometimes around the clock – by both the Department's civilian workforce and the 8,500 Airmen and Soldiers of the New Jersey National Guard.

One of the major focuses of Team DMAVA is the well-being of New Jersey's 428,396 Veterans. The work done by DMAVA's civilian workforce supports Veterans from their transition from military service until the end of their lives. Over this past year, DMAVA's efforts to ensure New Jersey Veterans receive every federal benefit owed them has been particularly potent. I'll talk more about that in a few moments.

For now, I'd like to talk about the positive – and sometimes quiet -- impact the Soldiers and Airmen of the New Jersey National Guard make on our state.

More than 250 of our Soldiers and Airmen were on duty in the Meadowlands before, during and after Super Bowl 48. They helped keep fans safe in the areas around the stadium and kept a watchful eye on the transportation hubs during the game. They stood ready to provide expertise to civil authorities in the event of a nuclear, chemical or biological incident. The jobs weren't flashy, but they were critical.

Two weeks before the Super Bowl, more than 150 Airmen and Soldiers donated blood during a drive organized by the state Department of Health to overcome a seasonal shortage. They weren't ordered to be there. But they came anyway, because they understand that the National Guard is part of the fabric of the communities we serve.

In July, our Soldiers and Airmen provided support to another major sporting event, the Special Olympics. More than 150 Guardsmen provided critical behind-the-scenes logistical support during one of the hottest weeks of the summer to make sure everything went smoothly. They worked tirelessly because they understood that even if the Games weren't likely to get airtime on ESPN, they were the event of a lifetime for the athletes who participated.

This all comes as the New Jersey National Guard continues to protect America's interest abroad by supporting global contingency operations in Southwest Asia.

Our New Jersey National Guard has never been stronger than it is today. The Army Guard is at its highest state of readiness in history. Nine in 10 of its nearly 6,000 Soldiers are trained in their military occupational specialties and are qualified for state and federal mobilizations. The Air Guard is at 108 percent strength, which is in the top three in the nation.

The National Guard's strength is particularly impressive considering that shifting federal funding priorities in Washington over the past two years has reduced funding for the programs that keep our military strong.

Those cuts will only increase in the foreseeable future.

In the longer term, the greatest threat to the vitality of the National Guard is the U.S. Army's plan to cut the end strength of the entire force nationally, from 358,000 to 319,000 by the end of the federal Fiscal Year 2019. If this Army target is realized, it could jeopardize the New Jersey National Guard's force structure. The loss of any unit would result in a substantial loss of traditional drilling Guardsmen and a commensurate loss of full-time positions.

In the shorter term, the Army National Guard is currently managing an \$120 million Fiscal Year 2015 budget that is 9 percent below the year before. This includes a \$7.4 million – or 13 percent-- reduction in Pay and Allowances and a \$4.4 million – or 6 percent – reduction in Operations and Maintenance. It was the second straight year of declines.

The Air National Guard's \$80 million budget for Fiscal Year 2015 is more than \$17 million below funding levels from the previous year, although some, but not all, of those funds will be restored before the end of the fiscal year.

For the Air Guard, the reductions mean putting off maintenance projects until the funds become available. The Air Guard is also managing the loss of the Contingency Response Group at the 108th Wing. The unit, which has 115 members – including 14 full timers – will stand down in July. Some of the lost positions will be regained as the Wing activates a new, and critical unit, the Cyber Vulnerability Squadron. The Squadron will begin with 63 Airmen, 19 of whom will be full time.

For the Army Guard, the cuts will eventually have a negative impact on readiness.

However, both the Air and Army Guard leadership understand that the best way to avoid future cuts is to remain competitive in relation to the other 53 states and territories. The states with the highest levels of readiness will lose the least amount of force structure.

The Department, in concert with the Administration, is moving aggressively to safeguard New Jersey's military assets because they provide an outsized economic impact to the state. The Governor's Military Growth and Development Task Force is working to preserve and enhance the state's military installations, which provide employment for tens of thousands of people, who in turn, contribute billions of dollars to the state's economy. In short, the military is New Jersey's second largest employer and its people and its mission must be protected from possible base closures and realignments in the future.

I believe that the people working to protect New Jersey's military assets and the members of the New Jersey National Guard will rise to all future challenges and remain competitive, vital and able to carry out missions that protect this state and nation.

Much of my optimism comes from the young people within our organization. Today's Soldiers and Airmen are smarter, more tech savvy, and physically tougher than any other group of young people in their peer group. But the greatest strength of our young Airmen and Soldiers is that they have heart and determination.

Let me tell you briefly about two of them.

Sergeant Samantha Kirk was the 2013 New Jersey Army National Guard Soldier of the Year. The honor allowed her to compete this past May in the Best Warrior Competition at Camp Ethan Allen, Vt. It's a brutal competition that tests Soldiers' combat and leadership skills.

The final event was a quarter-mile sprint followed by a six-mile march carrying a rucksack loaded with 50 pounds. It's a daunting challenge even for the fittest Soldier. Kirk, however, had an additional challenge. She had badly sprained an ankle running an obstacle course the day before. She had every right to quit. Instead, Kirk, a combat medic, spent the night before the ruck march treating her sprained ankle with ice and a brace she made herself. She finished the march 20 minutes under the two hour limit.

In her words: "I just dug in and kept going." Kirk is majoring in physical therapy at Montclair State University and is currently deployed, where she's serving as a medic to the Soldiers of our 114th Infantry Battalion. They are in good hands.

Soldiers like Sgt. Kirk help the National Guard thrive because they accept no limits on their potential.

Private First Class Nathaniel Okyere-Bour shares that quality. As a young boy, he spent five years living with his mother's family in Ghana while she pursued nursing degrees at Essex Community College and then Kean University. When Kimberly finished her studies and landed a job as an intensive care unit nurse, she sent for Nathaniel and they were reunited. Private Okyere-Bour enlisted in the National Guard before he even graduated from McNair Academic High School in Jersey City.

To say he got his military career off to a good start would be an understatement. Private Okyere-Bour was the honor graduate of his advanced individual training class and quickly became a top performer in his current unit, the 250th Brigade Support Battalion. He enrolled in Rutgers University this past fall and his grades have been excellent. But Okyere-Bour wanted an education that satisfied his calling to military service.

With the help of his squad leader, battalion sergeant major and battalion commander, Okyere-Bour spent the past year making applications to one of the nation's most selective and physically and intellectually challenging institutions of higher learning.

He was accepted. Private First Class Okyere-Bour will join the United States Military Academy at West Point Class of 2019 in June.

West Point's gain will be our loss. But I believe that as long as the New Jersey National Guard continues to attract young people like Samantha Kirk and Nathaniel Okyere-Bour, there will never be an obstacle tough enough to keep it from performing its mission.

As I said when I began, the impressive work done by Department of Military and Veterans Affairs is not confined to the uniformed members of the National Guard. Every civilian member of the DMAVA team approaches service to Veterans with the same zeal our Soldiers and Airmen put into their state and federal missions.

For evidence of this, look no further than DMAVA's Veterans Service Officers. From 16 offices covering all 21 New Jersey counties, the VSO's primary job is to ensure that every Veteran in our state gets all the federal entitlements he or she has earned through their service.

The DMAVA Veterans Service Officers have steadily increased the amount of federal Veterans Administration benefits received by New Jersey Veterans in each of the past six years, from \$72 million in Fiscal 2009 to \$152 million in Fiscal Year 2014. That's an 112 percent increase. The majority – 83 percent of that money went to New Jersey Veterans for compensation for Service Connected ailments, which run from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, to Traumatic Brain Injury, to Agent Orange Exposure to hearing loss.

DMAVA's VSOs have often gone beyond the regular call of duty to ensure New Jersey's veterans get the compensation due them. Consider the case of a chance meeting between a DMAVA VSO and a World War II Veteran in a Moorestown laundromat in January 2011.

After the VSO, William McDonnell, commented on the man's "Navy Veteran" baseball cap the men talked about the older man's war experience. The man noted that he had been awarded a 30 percent disability for hearing loss after the war, but explained his hearing had deteriorated over the years. Two days later, McDonald met the man to help him fill out paperwork that would enable him to get the full amount of VA compensation owed him. Two years later, the VA awarded the man a full disability for the hearing loss and a number of other service-related ailments McDonnell helped him uncover. In the end, the man ended up with more than \$40,000 in back payments for the benefits he'd never even known our government owed him for his service. He had McDonnell to thank for that.

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. In other words, for every dollar the state General Fund sends DMAVA, the Department returns more than \$20 to the Garden State economy.

Even as DMAVA adds to the state's economy, we remain mindful of our obligation to be careful stewards of tax dollars. The Department's proposed \$96.4 million budget for Fiscal Year 2016 is a \$1.1 million decrease from the FY15 adjusted appropriation from last year.

One of the hallmarks of the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs is its ability to form partnerships that allow it to maximize resources to accomplish its core missions.

For example, the strong relationship DMAVA maintains with Veterans organizations has led to these groups logging tens of thousands of volunteer hours at the Department's three Veterans Memorial Homes in Paramus, Menlo Park and Vineland as well as at Veterans Haven-North and Veterans Haven-South, the Department's transitional housing programs.

These volunteers have done everything from organizing bus trips to running bingo games to just being there to lend an ear to a fellow Veteran.

While the Veteran-to-Veteran connection is priceless, these volunteers have provided nearly 75,000 hours of staff manpower for a savings of nearly \$1.9 million in salaries. On top of that, these volunteers have also donated more than \$205,000 worth of goods and services including a bus, computer equipment and air conditioners.

The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs continues to be a leader among government agencies in the use of alternative energy to reduce costs and create a healthier planet.

Alternative energy and conservation has allowed DMAVA to avoid more than \$950,000 in electrical utility costs over the past six years. The Department has been awarded four Secretary of the Army Energy and Water Management Awards in that time period.

In addition to five current solar projects across the state, DMAVA has received Department of Defense and National Guard Bureau approval for additional photovoltaic projects in Lawrenceville, Sea Girt and Lakehurst as well as a solar ventilation project at Picatinny.

One of the biggest energy initiatives will be the MICRO-GRID system that will allow electrical independence at the National Guard Training Center in Sea Girt. In addition to anticipated cost savings, the system will allow the installation to maintain power even if a natural or manmade disaster interrupts power to surrounding communities.

The National Guard Training Center is the site of one of DMAVA's largest construction projects. Ground was broken this past summer on the \$34 million Regional Training Institute. The 86,000 square foot center will include an administration and classroom building and a student housing building. The additional space will enable the 254th Training Regiment, which is one of the premiere Army National Guard training units in the Northeastern United States, to expand its military training and leadership opportunities for Soldiers from around the region. A New Jersey business is the primary contractor on the project.

An even larger project – funded entirely with federal funds – began operations this month. The \$45 million New Jersey National Guard Army Aviation Support Facility on Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst 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 Blackhawks. The project's primary subcontractors are New Jersey-based businesses.

In addition to bringing federal money directly to New Jersey's Veterans, DMAVA continues to leverage federal dollars to enhance its services.

A perfect example can be found in the Department's three long-term care nursing homes for Veterans and their spouses in Paramus, Menlo Park and Vineland. The Homes collect annual Medicare receipts of nearly \$11 million, which are used to offset operating costs. The quality of care in the Homes receives high marks from both residents and external audits. The Homes are also cost effective. According to a report prepared by Genworth Financial, the average daily care rate for a semiprivate room in a New Jersey long-term care facility is \$300. The daily rate for our homes is \$260.

DMAVA operates the largest, and busiest state Veterans cemetery in the nation. More than 61,000 Veterans and their spouses have been interred at the Brigadier General William C. Doyle Cemetery in North Hanover Township, Burlington County. New Jersey was one of 15 states to receive a \$10.8 million grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration in November 2012 to support an expansion. The project was completed in January 2014 and provides 10,700 double crypts and 4,800 niches for cremains.

The cemetery has averaged nearly 3,000 interments each year for the past five years.

Through the use of federal grants, the master plan envisions extending the viability of the cemetery by increasing its current rated capacity of more than 170,000 to nearly 215,000. With the increase in the federal Plot Interment Allowance from \$300 to \$700, the Department is able to maintain the best state cemetery in the nation.

Construction is currently underway for a Public Information Center on the cemetery grounds. The \$3 million facility is funded by a VA grant. A separate \$3 million grant from the VA is currently covering costs for a realignment of grave markers and the rehabilitation of more than 20,000 graves.

A partnership between DMAVA and the New Jersey Mission of Honor has allowed for the burial of the unclaimed cremains of more than 151 Veterans at Doyle Cemetery. The remains of the men – some of whom served as long ago as World War I had gone unclaimed for an average of 26 years – now have their final rest at Doyle. In addition, the partnership has reunited more than 200 families with previously unclaimed cremains.

An influx of federal dollars over the past several years has also helped DMAVA address the needs of one of our most vulnerable population of Veterans – the homeless. Although no one who has ever served our nation should ever be without shelter, it is an unfortunate reality. In New Jersey, as many as 5,000 Veterans are estimated to be homeless on any given day. To address this need, DMAVA has taken aggressive steps over the past three years to nearly triple the services provided to homeless Veterans through its time tested transitional housing programs.

The Department's two transitional housing facilities, Veterans Haven-North in Glen Gardner, Hunterdon County, and Veterans Haven-South in Winslow Township, Camden County, provides effective long-term rehabilitation services and employment training for its residents.

The number of beds at the Department's long-running facility, Vets Haven-South, doubled to 99 three years ago through a \$5.9 million expansion partially funded by the VA. Operations began at Vets Haven-North in August 2012 and the facility is helping put its residents on a path to self-sufficiency using the same formula of job training and life-skills building that have helped roughly 1,000 Vets Haven-South residents who completed the program since 1995 return to purposeful and productive lives.

Vets Haven-North currently has 72 residents and Vet Haven-South currently has 80.

Operations costs for Vets Haven-South are \$963,000 and are partially defrayed with continuous grant and per diem funding through the U.S. Veterans Administration. Operational costs for Vets Haven-North are \$1 million and are subsidized by a VA grant to supply 30 of its 100 beds for emergency contract housing to acutely homeless Veterans. DMAVA awaits a Notice of Funds Available (NOFA) from the Veterans Administration to be announced for VA Grant Per Diem (GPD) to help fund operations at Vets Haven-North.

The New Jersey National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Academy, located on Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, remains an innovative and cost-effective partnership between the state and federal governments.

The voluntary educational program provides 16 to 18 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 math and reading scores a minimum of two grade levels. The program has a return on investment unmatched among organizations that assist at-risk-youth. Four in five high school dropouts who enroll in Youth ChalleNGe earn a high school diploma and are prepared for the job market, military service or to continue their education.

Since 2008, there have been 1,354 Youth ChalleNGe graduates and 77 percent earned their high school diploma. Upon graduation, cadets went on to continue their education, entered the workforce and joined the military. Those classes of Youth ChalleNGe cadets provided 85,708 hours of community service for government agencies and nonprofit organizations ranging from New Jersey Forestry Services to Monmouth Battlefield State Park to the New Jersey Community Food Bank of South Jersey. The monetary value of the services they provided more than \$2 million.

Over the past six years, the federal share of the costs to run Youth ChalleNGe has increased from 60 percent to 75 percent. In FY 2014, federal funding for Youth ChalleNGe was \$2.7 million and the state share was \$900,000.

The National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program was heralded as an unqualified success in a 2012 report by the Rand Corp., which found that nationally, the program generates an average of \$2.66 for every dollar spent.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, New Jersey National Guard has mobilized more than 16,000 troops. Many of these Citizen-Soldiers and Airmen have answered the call multiple times. 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 met.

Through National Guard funding, DMAVA operates 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 Joint Military and Family Assistance Center at the Bordentown Armory, which was completely renovated earlier this year with \$3.5 million in federal funds. This project, scheduled for completion in July, will allow for a total refurbishment of a facility that is a hub that serves not only the National Guard, but military members from all the Reserve Components as well as their families from across the state.

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 community member.

From the moment they step off the plane from a deployment, Soldiers and Airmen are the focus 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.

A major focus over the past year has been to ensure that deployed Soldiers and Airmen are able to rejoin the civilian job market. To that end, DMAVA has partnered with the New Jersey Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve and the state Department of Labor to assist Veterans at job fairs across the state.

The National Guard Bureau has recognized DMAVA's effort to assist Soldiers and Airmen as they transition from active duty mobilizations to part-time service as one of the nation's "best practices."

DMAVA continues to assist a number of Veterans seeking treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Over the past four years, the demand for PTSD counseling has remained steady, with 19,504 sessions in FY 2014.

I am proud to report that New Jersey is committed to providing them a helping hand and remains 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. Calls to the helpline have more than doubled since its inception in 2006, from 1,571, to 3,525 last year.

Based on the high volume of calls to the 24-hour helpline, the Vet2Vet Helpline has proven as a positive and effective means to mitigate potentially life threatening issues to service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan as well as those suffering ill effects from service in earlier conflicts.

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.