

VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES MONTH

ISSUE BRIEF ON POLICY AWARENESS AND ADVOCACY

OFFICE OF THE NASSAU COUNTY COMPTROLLER

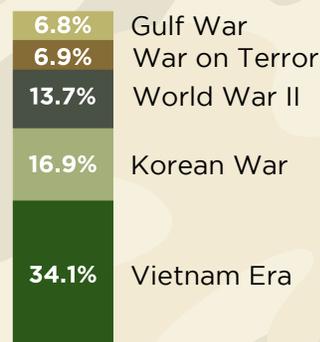
Introduction

November 2018

The Office of the Nassau County Comptroller is engaging advocacy organizations, community members, and policy-makers at all levels of government with specific information about the County's veterans. We hope to raise awareness about existing policies and help foster innovative solutions to the issues veterans face.

Nassau County is the proud home of many veterans, service members, and their families. According to 2016 U.S. Census, more than 50,000 veterans live in the County, making Nassau home to the 3rd most veterans in New York State.ⁱ The County is represented by veterans from every period of service since World War II and those from the Vietnam Era make up the majority.

Figure 1: Nassau County Vets Period of Service



Source: U.S. Census, American Community Survey 2016. "Veterans Status."

Demographics

The demographics of the population highlight two critical challenges facing policymakers striving to administer veteran's services. Nearly 72% of the County's veterans are age 65 or older and 27% have a disability, which illustrates the importance of providing appropriate transportation options.ⁱ

Governments and need-based organizations are adopting communications strategies consistent with the digital age. However, only 42% of seniors in America own smartphones and only 34% access social media.ⁱⁱ While these numbers are on the rise, policymakers must not let convenience outweigh effectiveness. Administrators should consider traditional communication methods, such as direct mailings and newspaper postings, over social media when trying to reach senior veterans. This is even more important when dealing with veterans with hearing and visual impairments.

Policy Advocacy and Awareness

The Office of the Nassau County Comptroller has identified five areas to guide veterans' advocacy.

1. Connecting Veterans to Existing Services and Resources

While there is a large volume of existing resources being provided to support the veteran's community, it can be an overwhelming process to navigate. In Nassau County, veterans in need should be directed to the Nassau County Veterans Service Agency so that they can identify the services that they're entitled to receive.

The Nassau County Veterans Service Agency is a countywide hub for benefits counseling, resources, and information. The agency provides free individual Veteran's Affairs (VA) benefits advice, employment placement, assistance with the VA Home Loan program, free transportation to VA medical appointments, and free food pantry. They can be contacted at 516-572-6565 or www.nassaucountyny.gov/1945/Veterans-Service-Agency.



2. Housing Options

While expanding affordable housing options is a policy challenge decision-makers are already grappling with, this issue is particularly pressing to veterans experiencing homelessness, first-time homebuyers, and seniors.

Homelessness

According to estimates provided by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Long Island has seen a significant decline in veterans homelessness since 2011.^{iv} This is indicative of the national trend, and many officials credit the increased funding for the HUD-VA Supporting Housing Program starting in 2010.^v This program provides veterans permanent housing while also providing them with a case manager and clinical care services. Previously, a veteran would have to be treated for mental health and addiction before getting housing support. This program allows for both to occur at the same time and should be used as a model going forward.

Figure 2: Homeless Veterans on Long Island



Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Homeownership

The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs administers the Home Loan program to provide financial assistance to first-time homeowners. Find more information here:

benefits.va.gov/homeloans/

The Nassau County Department of Assessment Offers property tax exemptions to eligible veterans. Find more information here:

nassaucountyny.gov/1501/Assessment

Senior Housing

As mentioned earlier, 71.5% of Nassau County’s veterans are 65 years or older. This presents a unique set of challenges in regards to housing. Many seniors are looking to downsize to smaller rental units or are seeking senior housing. Policy makers should pursue opportunities to increase affordable, centrally located rental units and senior homes that are connected to transportation options.

3. Jobs and Financial Safety

Veterans do not end their service to the country when they are discharged. In fact, most are seeking opportunities to continue to serve their communities when they return home. The skills veterans acquire during their military service are directly transferable to employment needs in Nassau County, particularly in technology, health care, law enforcement, and government administration. Additionally, it is essential that veterans are not manipulated by predatory lenders. Here are some areas that could use support in policy advocacy and awareness:

- A** The Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) provides tax incentives to businesses that hire unemployed veterans, veterans who receive government aid, and disabled veterans. Policymakers should increase awareness within the business community.



B There were significant changes to the GI Bill enacted in 2017, popularly known as the “Forever GI Bill.” They include the elimination of the 15-year limitation and modification of the monthly housing allowance.^{vii} These changes need to be better communicated to eligible veterans, as this update largely expanded access to affordable higher education options.

C Governments should launch initiatives to attract veterans toward public service, both as government administrators and in law enforcement. This can be accomplished by partnering with veteran’s organizations and communicating upcoming civil service examinations. Find information about civil service examinations here: <http://www.nassaucivilservice.com>

D The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau’s (CFPB) Office of Servicemember Affairs works to ensure banks and lenders are not targeting veterans with illegal practices.^{viii} They have staff dedicated to monitoring veterans complaints and assisting veterans with money management. However, there have been attempts to roll back the enforcement of by division, outlined in the Military Lending Act.^{ix} This requires additional advocacy.

4. Entrepreneurship

There are 2.8 million veteran-owned businesses in the country employing 5.8 million people.^x In fact, veterans are 45% more likely to be self-employed than non-veterans, and veteran-owned businesses generate more than \$1 trillion in sales for our economy.^{xi} To harness the entrepreneurial mindset of veterans, the following resources can help guide veterans interested in starting their own businesses or expanding existing firms.

A The New York State Small Business Development Center’s Veterans Services and Assistance Program works to provide targeted training, counseling, and mentoring to help veterans start and grow a small business. The Long Island office can be reached at 631-370-8889

B In 2016, Nassau County adopted an aspirational goal of including service-disabled, veteran-owned businesses in Nassau County contracting process.^{xiv} The Office of Minority Affairs (OMA) conducts outreach to achieve a minimal participation rate of six percent. OMA should be empowered to continue outreach efforts and conduct any necessary departmental trainings to achieve the goal.

C Boots to Business is an entrepreneurial education and training program offered by the U.S. Small Business Administration as part of the Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program. The program introduces veterans to the skills, knowledge, and resources they need to launch a business, develop a business plan, and access SBA resources. More information can be found at: <https://sbavets.force.com>

5. Mental Health and Substance Abuse

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA), many veterans experience psychological distress from the demanding environments of military life and combat, which can be further exacerbated by substance abuse. Approximately 18.5% of returning service members have post-traumatic stress disorder or depression, 19.5% report experiencing a traumatic brain injury during deployment, and nearly 50% of veterans that require mental health services never seek treatment.^{xii}



A The Veterans Crisis Line connects veterans in crisis and their families and friends with qualified, caring Department of Veterans Affairs responders through a confidential toll-free hotline, online chat, or text. Veterans and their loved ones can call 1-800-273-8255, Ext. 1 or send a text message to 838255 to receive confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Find more information: www.veteranscrisisline.net.

B Many veterans began struggling with opioid addiction when they were prescribed painkillers because of an injury.^{xiii} The VA launched an Opioid Safety Initiative that includes guidance on how healthcare providers can better treat and manage chronic pain. Find more info here: www.va.gov/painmanagement.

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