

MAKING GOOD ON OUR DEBT TO VETERANS WILL PAY UNEXPECTED DIVIDENDS

BY LEROY COLLINS, JR.

***Editor's Note:** Florida will soon overtake California in sheer numbers of veterans. They include not only the dwindling numbers from World War II's "Greatest Generation" and the "forgotten vets" of the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam, but also increasing numbers of troubled young veterans of more recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. How Florida responds will have a large impact on the veterans' quality of life and the state's fiscal future.*

Florida has earned a solid reputation as one of the most veteran-friendly states in the nation. A strong economy with low unemployment, a large military presence, mild winters, and the lack of a state income tax have combined to attract many veterans and their families.

Of Florida's 18 million residents, 10 percent are military veterans, with more than 780,000 over the age of 65.¹ Only California has more veterans, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs projects Florida will overtake that state in total numbers of veterans in the next 20 years.²

Florida also has the largest military retiree population, with more than 187,000 men and women having served a career in the Armed Forc-



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es.³ Census data also tells us that of all veterans moving from one state to another, half are moving to Florida.⁴

When you count the spouses and children of our state's veterans, the impact on Florida's economic, political, and social climate is considerable. For example, taking into account military retirement pay, federal compensation and pensions, medical care and vocational rehabilitation, education benefits and construction funding, more than nine billion federal dollars for veterans are pumped annually into Florida's economy.⁵

Watching over and advocating for Florida's veteran population are the men and women of the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs (FDVA). Not to be confused with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, known by veterans as the VA, the FDVA is a state agency responsible for assisting, without charge, Florida's veterans, their families and survivors in improving their health and economic well-being through quality benefit information, advocacy, education, and long-term health services.

FDVA provides long-term care health services through five 120-bed veterans' nursing homes (Daytona Beach, Land O' Lakes, Pembroke Pines, Springfield, and Port Charlotte) and one 150-bed assisted living facility in Lake City. Construction of a sixth home is planned for St. Johns County in 2008.

Since 1944, Florida has recognized the need for a state government entity to ensure that Florida's military veterans have maximum access

to benefits guaranteed by federal law. In 1988, Florida's voters endorsed a constitutional amendment to create a separate agency, the FDVA, with the charter to provide advocacy and representation for Florida's veterans in their dealings with the VA.

It is useful to reflect on why Florida has an agency to advocate for veterans. The first has to do with public policy of honoring veterans whose contributions over the years have guaranteed the freedoms we all enjoy in our nation today. The other reason is such advocacy increases federal benefits for Florida's veterans, raises the quality of life for veterans with service-connected disabilities, and provides access to federally funded medical care for eligible veterans.

Every time the federal government funds a service required by a Florida resident, the State of Florida is not required to make that same or similar expenditure. Likewise, every additional dollar paid to veterans, their families or survivors, as disability, education or other benefits, is a dollar either spent in Florida's economy or used in lieu of requesting assistance from the state. The value of Federal benefits paid to Florida veterans as a result of FDVA advocacy exceeds the cost of such state advocacy by approximately 90:1—a good investment by the State of Florida.

The 2007 regular legislative session under the new administration was beneficial for Florida's veterans. Working in partnership with Gov. Charlie Crist, the Legislature and Florida's veteran service organizations, FDVA will add 13 new

full-time positions at our veterans' nursing homes to meet stronger nurse-to-patient ratios and nine new positions to expedite veterans' claims for federal and state benefits.

Furthermore, the state upheld its commitment to veterans' long-term health care by appropriating \$4.4 million to fully fund the state's share of construction costs to help build the new St. Johns County veterans' nursing home, plus \$5 million more to keep existing facilities in Lake City and Daytona Beach in prime condition.

On the policy front, legislation was passed this year allowing continuous employment preference for veterans seeking jobs with municipal, county, and state government, automatic renewal of a homestead tax discount passed by Florida voters in November 2006 (aimed at eligible Florida veterans with service-connected disabilities from combat), recognition of more than 100,000 returning Florida servicemembers as 'wartime' veterans in the Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom campaigns, and redistribution of fees generated from the Marine Corps license plate, allowing for an initial increase of \$132,000 annually to the veterans' homes trust fund without raising taxes.⁶

Within the context of access to a proportionate share of federal resources, Florida is particularly well positioned among states to justify veteran resource needs given its

large and aging veteran population. For Florida's veterans, the VA spent more than \$5.2 billion on their care in 2005 through its seven medical centers, 41 comprehensive-service or community based outpatient clinics and 13 veteran counseling centers. Slightly more than half of those

veterans seen at VA facilities in Florida were 65 or older.⁷

The first new VA hospital in the past 20 years will be built in Orange County, plus additional VA outpatient clinics and veteran counseling centers are being planned and constructed from the Panhandle to South Florida.⁸

However, we cannot rest on our laurels. The demographics of Florida's

veteran population are changing due to the passing of our older World War II-era population and the addition of younger veterans of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom who claim Florida as their home state. In addition to traditional health, long term care and burial services, younger veterans and their families will be seeking employment and educational opportunities. We'll continue to partner with other state agencies to support these new initiatives.

We have implemented a special case management program called the Florida Seamless Transition Program for severely injured servicemembers returning to Florida and families of those military servicemembers who

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have been killed in action.

The program ensures our severely injured servicemembers are identified when they move from military hospitals to VA medical facilities in Florida and tracked by state government agencies offering a variety of health care, education, work force, and financial benefits to supplement existing federal programs. Our pilot program, begun in September 2006, was expanded to all states and territories by VA Secretary Jim Nicholson in February 2007.⁹

The challenges facing all federal and state agencies that deal with veterans are substantial but not insurmountable. Providing good health care to the Americans who have volunteered and deployed to risk everything in the service of this Nation is a debt we must pay.

Our goal is to perform these tasks with quality and a level of honor befitting Florida's veterans. We will continue to strive to improve the Department's delivery of advocacy for and services to Florida's veterans.

I urge veterans and the people who care about our veterans to visit the FDVA Web site at www.floridavets.org and participate in one of Florida's veterans' service organizations.

As George Washington once said,

“The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional as to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their Nation.” ❧

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Endnotes

¹ <http://www1.va.gov/vetdata/docs/2l.xls>.

² *Ibid.*

³ <http://www.defenselink.mil/actuary/statbook05.pdf>.

⁴ <http://www1.va.gov/vetdata/docs/1m.xls>.

⁵ Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs Annual Report: July 1, 2005-June 30, 2006, December 31, 2006, page 7.

⁶ “Governor Crist, legislature enhance support for veterans,” Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs News Release, May 30, 2007.

⁷ “Florida and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs,” December 2006. <http://www1.va.gov/opa/fact/statesum/flss.asp>

⁸ “VA Chooses Lake Nona Boulevard Site for New Orlando Hospital,” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs News Release, March 2, 2007.

⁹ “VA Partnering with States to Help Injured Veterans,” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs News Release, February 12, 2007.



“In the first place, it is to be remembered, that the general government is not to be charged with the whole power of making and administering laws; its jurisdiction is limited to certain enumerated objects, which concern all the members of the republic, but which are not to be attained by the separate provisions of any.”

– JAMES MADISON