



Division of
Veterans' Affairs

ANDREW M. CUOMO

Governor

2018 Annual Report
New York State
Division of
Veterans' Affairs



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About The Division

The New York State Executive Department created the Division of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) in 1945, tasking the Division with assisting returning World War II Servicemembers in their readjustment from military to civilian life. This objective soon expanded to encompass New York State's Veterans, Servicemembers, and their families from all eras. For over 70 years, the Division has connected generations of Veterans, members of the Armed Forces and Uniformed Services, and their families and dependents to various economic, medical, and social benefits and services earned as the result of military service.

Mission

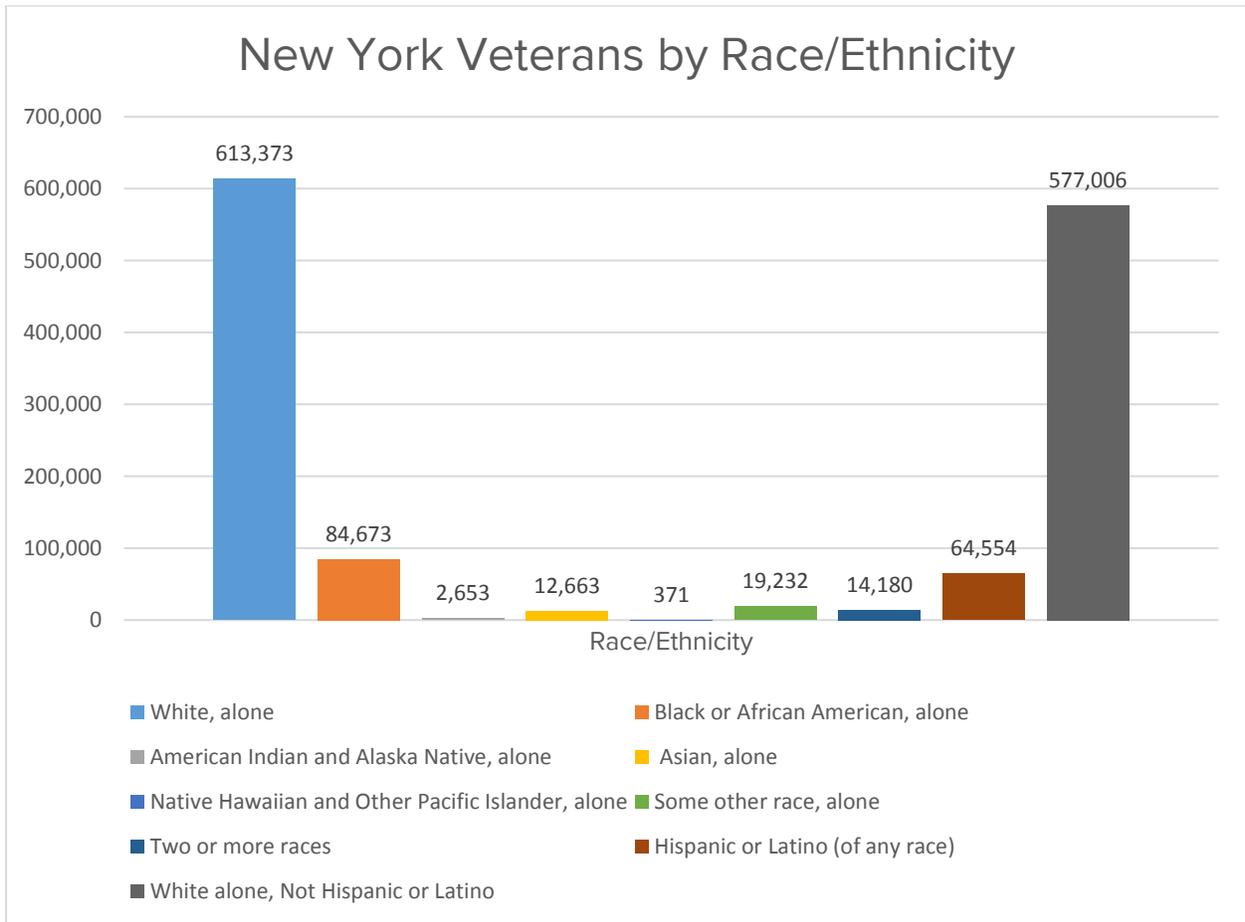
The Division assists New York's Veterans, Servicemembers and their families the rest of the way. At all times, we provide quality support, advice, and advocacy for New York State's Veterans, Servicemembers, and their family members, helping them obtain State and Federal benefits earned by their service to New York State and to the United States of America.



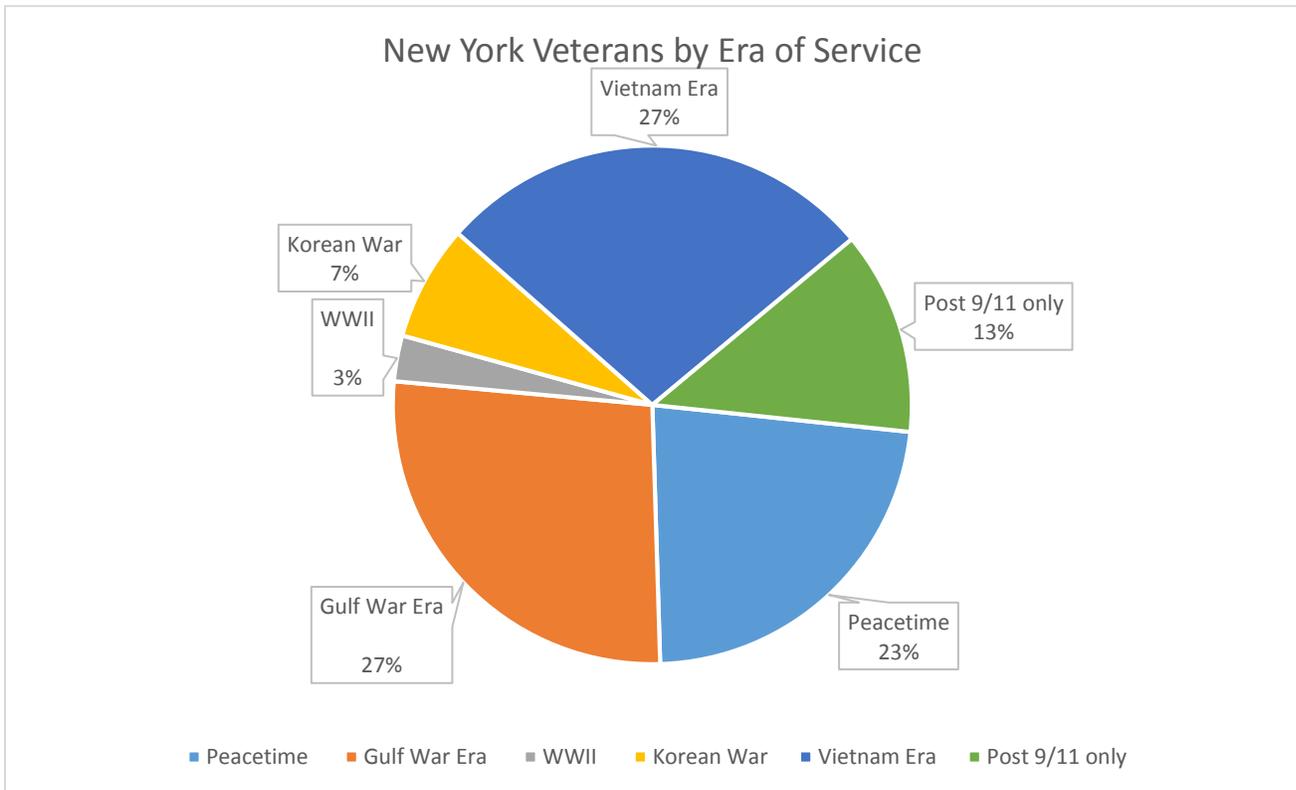
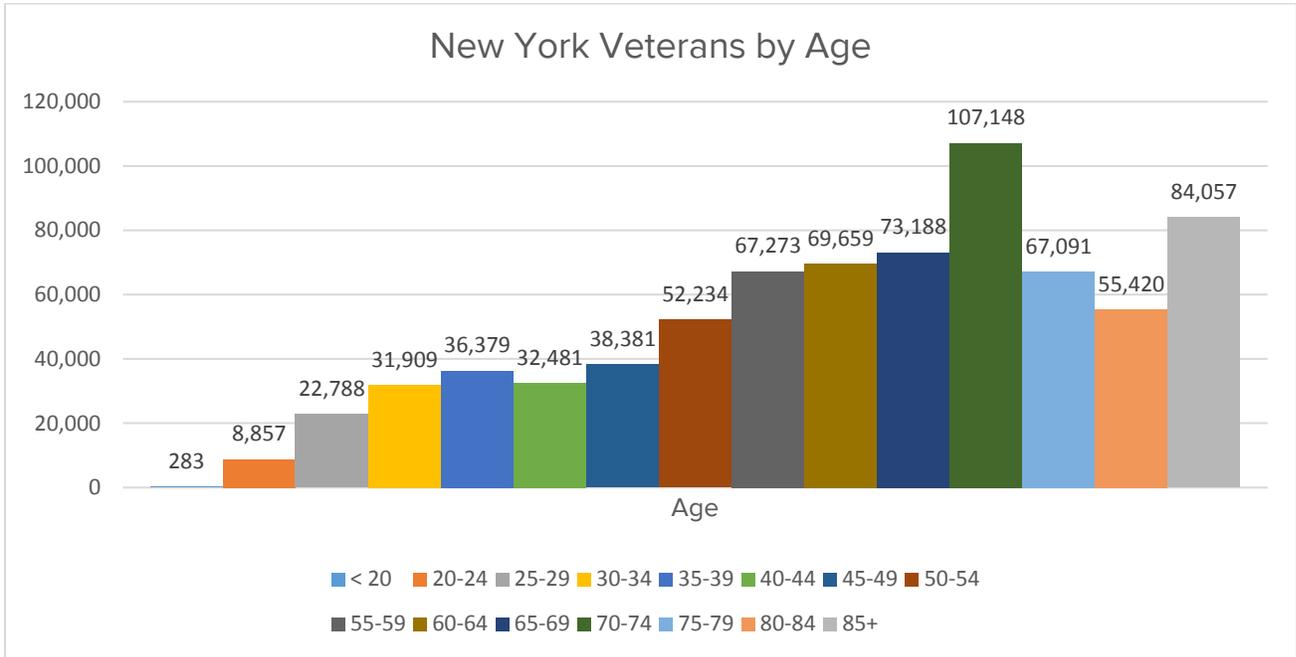
New York Veterans Snapshot¹

New York State's Veteran Population in 2018: 747,146

New York State Veteran Demographics



¹ All data reported as of September 30, 2018





By the Numbers: Serving Veterans and Their Families in 2018

Division of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) Offices: **59**

VA-Accredited DVA Employees: **69**

Money Awarded in Claims Filed by DVA Advisors: **\$43,532,459.45²**

State Blind Annuity Recipients (Veterans): **1,924**

State Blind Annuity Recipients (Surviving Spouses): **1,694**

Total Amount of Blind Annuity Payments: **\$5,048,412**

Total Gold Star Parent Annuity Payments: **\$85,000**

Total Gold Star Parents: **170**

New York Residents Using Post 9/11 G.I. Bill Education Benefits: **31,085**

G.I. Bill Approved Educational Schools in New York: **1,174**

Money that G.I. Bill-Approved Programs Brought Into New York: **\$495,837,698**

Residents of State Veterans Nursing Homes: **991³**

Percentage of Beds Filled in State Veterans Nursing Homes: **93%⁴**

Number of Claims Filed by DVA Nursing Home Initiative: **587**

Total Licenses with Veteran Notation Issued: **149,114**

Businesses Certified as Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Businesses: **571**

Veterans Currently Listed in the State's Veterans Temporary Hiring Portal: **1,026**

Veterans Currently Listed in the State's "55-c Program" Hiring Portal: **341**

Veterans with Disabilities Issued State Parks Lifetime Liberty Passes in 2018: **2,100**

Total Number of Veterans Issued Lifetime Liberty Passes: **10,000**

New York State School Districts Offering Veterans School Tax Exemption: **288**

Recipients of New York State's Veterans Real Property Tax Exemptions: **533,958**

² As of December 31, 2018

³ As of December 31, 2018

⁴ Average amount as of December 31, 2018



Division of Veterans' Affairs Highlights in 2018

I. Direct Agency Services to Veterans and their Family Members

Veterans Benefits Advisors Assisting Veterans and their Families

The largest single program in the Division of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) is the Veterans Benefits Advising Program. The agency's Veterans Benefits Advisors, all of whom are Veterans accredited by the United States Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA), secure and maintain a substantial portion of the federal VA benefits paid annually to Veterans and their dependents in New York State. Veterans Benefits Advisors currently staff 68 field offices located throughout every region of New York.

In 2018, Veterans Benefits Advisors generated over \$43,532,459.45 in new and recurring VA benefits payments for Veterans and their dependents. Data indicates that DVA continues to file more Fully Developed Claims than other Veterans Service Organizations in New York State, significantly reducing the VA's processing time and the waiting period before the claimant starts receiving benefits.

Additionally, DVA's Veterans Benefits Advisors help Veterans access the VA's network of health care, State Veterans' Homes, and nursing homes, as well as many local public assistance programs and private venues offering initiatives to assist Veterans and their families. This provides a significant financial savings for many Veterans and their families across the State. For example, 991 Veterans currently live in New York State's Veterans' Homes. These individuals would pay significantly more if they were receiving skilled nursing care in private facilities.



Veterans Education Program

The Veterans' Education Program staff, stationed at office locations in Albany and New York City, investigates and approves post-secondary educational and vocational institutions as providing a legitimate and quality education. This federally mandated approval process enables Veterans and their dependents to use VA educational benefits at scholastic institutions and facilities throughout New York.

There are approximately 1,174 approved educational programs in New York State, with around 31,085 Veterans presently utilizing these educational opportunities. These programs currently bring approximately \$495,837,698 into New York State.

Gold Star Parent Annuity Program

New York's Gold Star Parents — mothers and fathers of Servicemembers killed in action, as defined by federal law — are eligible to receive a \$500 annuity payment from the State. DVA evaluates eligibility for all Gold Star Parent Annuity applicants. While no amount of money can ever replace the loss of a child in combat, New York provides this annuity in honor of the deceased Servicemember and his or her family, and in recognition of their tremendous sacrifice. All Gold Star Parents residing and domiciled in New York State are eligible for this annuity, regardless of their household income.

In 2018, New York State paid a total of \$85,000 to Gold Star Parent Annuitants. As of December 2018, a total of approximately 172 New York Gold Star Parents receive this annuity from the State in bi-annual installments.



Blind Annuity Program

New York State provides an annuity for legally blind wartime Veterans, and un-remarried surviving spouses of legally blind wartime Veterans, who reside and are domiciled within New York State. Blindness need not be a service-connected disability to qualify. DVA evaluates eligibility for all Blind Annuity applicants.

The monthly amount paid to Veterans or their un-remarried spouse was \$ 116.28 in 2018. New York State paid a total of \$5,048,412 to Blind Annuity Program recipients in 2018. As of December 2018, a total of 3,618 New Yorkers receives this annuity.

Each year, the Blind Annuity dollar amount is eligible to change due to cost of living increases

Supplemental Burial Allowance

New York State's Supplemental Burial Allowance helps defray funeral and interment costs for Servicemembers dying inside a combat zone or from wounds sustained in combat. This program reimburses family members for up to \$6,000 in documented funeral and internment expenses not covered by federal benefits.

In 2018, no requests for reimbursements were made from the Supplemental Burial Allowance.



II. New Statewide Initiatives and Programs for Veterans and their Families

Creating America's First Discharge Upgrade Advisory Board

Veterans that receive other than honorable, bad conduct or dishonorable discharges, face hurdles from employment to health services. There are many Veterans, particularly from the Vietnam-Era, who were less-than-honorably discharged because of the symptoms of undiagnosed or misdiagnosed and untreated PTSD. In September 2014, Secretary of Defense Hagel issued a memo known as the "Hagel Memo" to the Boards for Correction of Military/Naval Records to grant "liberal consideration" for discharge upgrades. In February 2016, the Department of Defense issued a memo, clarifying that Veterans previously denied could reapply under the new rules

To assist the Veterans of New York in obtaining a discharge upgrade to help restore the rightful honor and dignity to their service, New York State established the nation's first Discharge Upgrade Advisory Board in 2018. Comprised of seven attorneys, all of whom are volunteering their time, this board reviews applications from Veterans seeking to upgrade their character of discharge. If the majority of the board members determine that an upgrade is warranted, the board provides a signed advisory opinion that the Veteran can then send in his or her appeal package to the applicable Discharge Review Board or Board for Correction of Military Records.

In 2019, this Discharge Upgrade Advisory Board will also provide statewide training to Veterans Service Organizations to increase proficiency among Veterans Service Officers in preparing and presenting discharge upgrade appeals.



Supporting and Enhancing Veterans Treatment Courts

In 2017, New York State's inaugural grant program for peer-to-peer mentoring initiatives was developed to distribute funding to Veterans Treatment Courts and not-for-profit organizations that train Veteran mentors and provide mentorship for justice-involved Veterans. In 2018, Veterans Treatment Courts across New York State received \$500,000 in grant funding for the Veteran-to-Veteran mentor programs that are crucial to the continued success of these courts.

DVA also hosted a ceremony at the New York State Capitol in July 2018 honoring the ten-year anniversary of Veterans Treatment Courts in New York. Since the birth of Veterans Treatment Courts in Buffalo in 2008, more than 4,500 New York Veterans have benefitted from the Veterans Treatment Courts and participated in regular mentoring sessions with volunteer Veteran Mentors who are critical to the success of the program and rehabilitation process. DVA frequently plays an integral role in helping refer eligible Veterans to Veterans Treatment Courts and assisting Veterans as members of treatment teams with Veterans Treatment Courts.





Increasing Outreach To Historically Underserved Populations

Throughout 2018, DVA amplified outreach and advocacy initiatives for Veterans in several historically underserved population groups. This included unprecedented collaborations with organizations serving Veterans who are Native Americans (e.g., American Indian Community House, New York Indian Council, and tribal governments within the Mohawk, Oneida, Seneca, and Shinnecock Nations), Veterans who are Asian-Americans or Pacific Islanders (e.g., Japanese-American Social Services, Asian-American Bar Association of New York), Veterans with less-than-honorable discharges (e.g., High Ground Veterans Advocacy, Urban Justice Center, legal clinics at multiple law schools), Veterans who are Muslim-Americans (e.g., MuslimMarine.org), and Veterans who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, or Asexual (e.g., SAGE Vets, OutServe, the LGBT Bar Association of Greater New York, the Richard C. Failla LGBTQ Commission of the New York Courts).

These new collaborations permitted DVA to successfully advocate on behalf of many Veterans and their family members who previously were unaware that DVA existed, and many Veterans and their family members who had been disenfranchised due to years of mistreatment and were reluctant about approaching a government agency for services. The successes and positive momentum generated by these outreach initiatives in 2018 will continue as a high-priority item for DVA in 2019 so we can continue to ensure that all Veterans and their family members in New York State receive the benefits and services that they have earned.



Addressing Veterans' Previously Unmet Legal Needs

For the first time in the State's history, the State provided grant funding for law schools that provide free services addressing the unmet legal needs of Veterans, Servicemembers, and their family members. Under the Governor's new Justice for Heroes Initiative, five law schools — Albany, Buffalo, Hofstra, Syracuse, and Touro — received awards of \$150,000 apiece (\$50,000 per year for three years) to implement or improve clinical legal programs that help Veterans, Servicemembers, and their families bridge the justice gap.

These grants allowed the recipient schools to offer new programs to assist Veterans in discharge upgrade appeals, consumer protection cases, family law issues, appeals to the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, and other civil legal areas. In addition, DVA continues to work closely with New York's law schools in developing their Veterans-focused pro bono programs, including helping Fordham Law School launch a pro bono project in 2018 helping Veterans with family law cases, appeals of wrongful denials of VA benefits, and consumer protection matters.



Funding Not-For-Profit Organizations Helping Veterans

In 2018, Governor Cuomo oversaw the State's first-ever set of financial awards for not-for-profit organizations providing peer-to-peer assistance for Veterans and their family members. Ten Veteran-focused not-for-profit organizations — Clear Path for Veterans, the Veterans Defense Program, AIM Independent Living Center, Directions in Independent Living, The Association for Mental Health and Wellness, Rockland Independent Living Center, Compeer of Greater Buffalo, Homeward Bound USA, the Albany Housing Coalition and Black Veterans for Social Justice — received grants, all of which are renewable for a three-year period to ensure the sustainability of these initiatives.

In 2019, the Division will review the work and progress made by each of these recipient organizations to ensure the funding is properly utilized to serve Veterans throughout New York State. The Division will also continue to work with these organizations to increase awareness and access to these peer-to-peer assistance programs.

Remembering Prisoners Of War And Servicemembers Missing In Action

In March 2018, Governor Cuomo dedicated a Chair of Honor in the State Capitol in remembrance of all Prisoners of War and Servicemembers who are Missing In Action. The chair will remain perpetually empty as a permanent sign that New Yorkers will never forget their service and sacrifice and will always remain ready to welcome them home to the Empire State.



Celebrating Military Families

In April 2018, DVA led the first-ever Month Of The Military Child celebration at the New York State Capitol. Military families came from communities ranging from Long Island to Watertown for a fun-filled day of activities organized by DVA throughout the Capitol Complex.

The day included guided “behind the scenes” tours of the State Capitol, visits to the observation deck in the Corning Tower, rides on the historic carousel at the New York State Museum, and a buffet lunch. Each military child received a gift package from DVA, including a personalized certificate thanking them for their service and a proclamation signed by Governor Cuomo. The day ended with a ceremony honoring every military child in attendance at the Blue Room of the Capitol.



III. DVA Partnerships with Other Government Entities

Assisting Veterans Who are Incarcerated

Beginning in 2017 DVA initiated many opportunities to enhance access to services for Veterans who are incarcerated. In 2018 with the assistance of the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, DVA has become an established presence at all the New York State prisons that maintain Veterans-specific housing units. DVA set up monthly visits where accredited staff members meet one-on-one with Veterans inside these prisons and assist these Veterans with benefits applications.

DVA achieved its goal in 2018 of expanding its monthly visits to other correctional facilities including: Albion, Attica, Auburn, Groveland, Gouverneur, Mid-State, and Wyoming. This work helps not only the Veterans, but also their family members outside of prison, who are able to receive money through apportionment claims. Additionally, DVA participated in new DOCCS programs in 2018 focusing on connecting recently paroled Veterans with the federal and state Veterans' benefits and services that they have earned. DVA continues to work closely with DOCCS to expand this prison outreach initiative, which will remain a priority goal of DVA during 2019.





FreshConnect Checks

The “FreshConnect” program began in 2014 as a collaboration between the Division of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA) and the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets. The program gives booklets of “FreshConnect” checks to Veterans, Servicemembers, and members of their families worth \$2 apiece (\$20 total booklet value), redeemable for fresh food products at New York’s farmer’s markets.

2018 marked the fourth year of DVA’s partnership with the New York State Department of Agriculture & Markets to distribute FreshConnect Checks to Veterans, Servicemembers, and their families. Each recipient receives \$20 in FreshConnect Checks, redeemable at farmers’ markets throughout New York State. DVA distributed more than 60,000 FreshConnect Checks during this year’s farmers’ market season. In the past four years, DVA has distributed more than 200,000 FreshConnect Checks to Veterans, Servicemembers, and their families.

Feedback regarding this program from recipients and participants remains overwhelmingly positive. DVA and the Department of Agriculture and Markets plan to resume this statewide partnership during the 2019 farmers’ market season.

Offering Branch-Of-Service License Plates To Veterans

New York's Department of Motor Vehicles now offers license plates customized for the recipient's branch of military service. 2018 marked the first full year when Veterans in New York State were eligible to receive plates bearing the logo of the United States Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, or Coast Guard by completing a simple application and providing proof of the applicant's military service. To date, more than 2,500 Veterans in New York State have received branch-of-service license plates.



Hosting New York State's First Veterans Human Rights Conference

This year, DVA collaborated with the New York State Division of Human Rights to host New York State's first-ever Veterans Human Rights Conference in August 2018. American Civil Liberties Union President Susan Herman served as the program's keynote speaker. Panel discussions featured presentations by leaders from the American Indian Community House, Disability Rights New York, the New York City Veterans Alliance, Volunteers of Legal Service, Queens County Veterans Treatment Court, the New York Health Foundation, the New York City Commission on Human Rights, High Ground Veterans Advocacy, Prisoners' Legal Services of New York, and many other human rights leaders throughout the state.

More than a hundred guests attended this program, which brought to light many challenging but vital issues that are too often overlooked in the Veterans' services community. This conference led to multiple new collaborations among service providers that remain ongoing and will continue into 2019.





New York State Legislation Directly Affecting Veterans

The following new laws directly impact New York State's Veterans and their families:

Removing Two Parent Limit and Providing for an Annual Increase in the Rate of Compensation for Gold Star Parents

The Gold Star Parent Annuity is a special annuity for parents whose child was killed in combat service. It recognizes the emotional hardship created by the Servicemember's death, but also the financial hardships created for the Servicemember's parents, as many deceased Servicemembers contributed substantially to the financial well-being of their parents.

Since its implementation in 2008, the Gold Star Parent Annuity had been unfairly limited to the first two parents to apply for the annuity. The amount of the annuity also had not been increased since its inception.

For the first time since the New York State Gold Star Parent Annuity Program was enacted in 2014, the Governor signed into law a bill allowing all parents of a Veteran – biological, adoptive, and step-parents – to receive the Gold Star Parent Annuity. In addition, the new law provides for an annual increase in the Gold Star Parent Annuity based on the percentage increase of benefits set by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

These changes recognize the sacrifice that all Gold Star Parents make, regardless of their income or parental status, when their child dies in military service to our State and our Nation.



Eliminating Another Barrier to State Employment of Veterans

When Veterans return home, they deserve to have every opportunity afforded to them when they seek employment. To show our gratitude for their service and sacrifice, and to encourage Veterans to utilize their unique training and skill sets in public sector employment in New York State, Governor Cuomo signed legislation waiving the state application fee for taking Civil Service Examinations for Veterans discharged under honorable circumstances.

Enhancing Communication with Veterans So They Receive All the Benefits They Earned from Their Service

The New York State Council on Returning Veterans and their Families recommended to the Governor that agencies at all levels of state and local government develop uniform methods to better identify and track Veterans and their family members within their programs and ensure that they are offered appropriate services. Veterans and their families often deal with numerous subdivisions of the state, from the DMV to Social Services. Often, they are not aware that in addition to the services they receive from these agencies, they are entitled to assistance through the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs. The Governor signed this bill to make sure that Veterans and their families are notified whenever dealing with state agencies that the Division of Veterans' Affairs exists to ensure that Veterans and their families receive all the benefits they earned through their service.



Enhancing Sick Leave for Combat Veterans Employed by the State

Public employees who serve in our Nation's military are provided with paid leave for the greater of 30 calendar days or 22 working days in any calendar year, regardless of the type of military service. While the paid leave afforded to these dedicated civil servants is sufficient for many such individuals, sometimes additional leave for health-related service is needed by our combat Veterans.

To afford these brave men and women with a minimal amount of additional leave that must be utilized for healthcare services related to their combat injury, Governor Cuomo signed legislation authorizing combat Veterans up to five additional days of paid leave.



Supplemental Burial Allowance Report

This report is submitted in accordance with the requirements contained in Section 354-b(4)(i) of New York State's Executive Law.

Since there were no applications submitted during calendar year 2018, there were no applications for the \$6,000 Supplemental Burial Allowance payout for DVA to approve.

There were no new rules or regulations promulgated in calendar year 2018 that relate to the supplemental burial allowance.



Gold Star Parent Annuity Program Report

This report is submitted in accordance with the requirements contained in Section 367(4) of New York State's Executive Law.

Entering its ninth year of existence, New York State's Gold Star Parent Annuity continues to recognize the ultimate sacrifice paid by New Yorkers during military service. While no amount of money can ever replace the loss of a child in combat, New York provides this annuity in honor of the deceased Servicemember and his or her family, and in recognition of their tremendous sacrifice.

In 2018, Governor Cuomo signed legislation amending the executive law to allow for an annual increase at a rate equal to the percentage increase of benefits set by the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs. Additionally, the term 'Gold Star Parent' for this Annuity now includes any biological parent, step-parent, and parent by adoption who was serving in the role of a parent to the Servicemember at the time of the Servicemember's death.

In 2018, New York State paid a total of \$85,000 (\$500 annually) to approximately 170 Gold Star Parent Annuitants.

There were no new rules or regulations promulgated in calendar year 2018 that relate to the supplemental burial allowance.



Report on Women Veterans and Special Program

In 2018, DVA's Veterans Benefits Advisors continued to make outreach to their local Veteran communities a priority with attendance at over 250 events this year alone. DVA brochures and materials were displayed at numerous additional events. With the increased popularity of the FreshConnect program June outreaches increased over the previous year with most of the events being DVA staff attending Farmers Markets to distribute FreshConnect checks to Veterans and their families. December and March were the two months in 2018 with the fewest number of outreach events. Outreach events reached a diverse audience both geographically and in terms of a targeted population such as; Veteran Farmers, Law Offices, Community and 4-year Colleges, Vet Centers, Memorial Day and Veterans Day recognition events and Native American Communities.

Women Veterans continue to be the largest growing subgroup of Veterans and outreach events specifically directed at Women Veterans continued in 2018. The Women Veterans Program Coordinator (WVPC) participated in a variety of events throughout the year across the state. Female VBAs also attended events focused on women Veterans. Two events of note were the dedication of the Women Veterans Memorial at the Calverton National Cemetery and the Women's Veteran's Day Observance hosted by Assemblywoman Pamela Hunter, Chair of the Sub-Committee on Women Veterans in June at the State Capital.

The Women's Veteran's Day Observance hosted by Assemblywoman Pamela Hunter was well attended with over 30 women Veterans in attendance. This annual event has seen an increase in attendance and visibility in the past two years. This year's event included additional information about resources and speakers were present from a variety of organizations. Veterans Benefits Advisor, and U.S. Air Force Veteran, Morgan Woodson was the keynote speaker at the event and provided materials to all attendees.



The dedication of the Calverton Memorial represented a two-year effort by the New York Veterans Service Organizations in collaboration with the U.S. National Cemetery Administration. Our WVPC served in an advisory capacity to the committee working on this effort and addressed the audience at the event. Over 200 people attended the dedication and New York State DVA was honored to share the podium with representatives of Congress, the State Assembly, U.S. VA National Cemetery Administration, the National Commander of the American Legion and local leaders.

When speaking about Women Veterans in New York, it is important to recognize that the needs of Women Veterans are unique based on gender as well as age. While the overall number of Veterans in New York State is declining, the number of Women Veterans is on the rise in New York State as well as nationally. Approximately 8% (58,942) of the 747,146 New York State Veterans are female. However, looking at the age of New York State Veterans broken down by 10-year increments 32% of women Veterans are in their 30s. Using those same 10-year increments, the largest age bracket for males is those in their 70s followed by those in their 60s and then those in their 80s. For women Veterans, the largest population is those in their 50s followed by those in their 30s followed by those in their 40s. The women Veterans population is significantly younger than their male counterparts, this creates differences in terms of the type of medical care, employment and benefits that are important and necessary for women Veterans.

Additional outreach efforts this year included presentations to county governments in the North Country. Although the total number of Veterans in the North Country is less than in other areas of the state, the percentage of Veterans in the North Country is higher than in any other area of the state. The local government presentations were done in coordination with the County Veteran Service Organization and were well received. They provided information to our local elected officials as well as worked to strengthen the relationship between DVA and our county partners. The presentations included information on the



number of Veterans in each county as well as the type of benefits and dollar amounts of Benefits in the county.

The WVPC continued her ongoing interaction with the Women Program Managers at each of the U.S. VA Medical Centers throughout the state and the National U.S. VA Advisory Committee on Women Veterans. By staying connected the WVPC can provide the most up to date information about VA programs for Women Veterans each year at DVA's yearly staff training, as well as to the Veterans and providers she interacts with.



Thank you for reading the
2018 Annual Report of the
New York State Division of
Veterans' Affairs.

We welcome your questions,
comments and feedback
about the materials
contained herein.