



GOVERNMENT OF  
*THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLAND*  
OFFICE OF VETERANS AFFAIRS



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Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs

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MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Honorable Senator Clifford F. Graham - Chairman of the Committee on Finance, Committee members, and other distinguished Senators of the 31<sup>st</sup> Legislature of the Virgin Islands, a most pleasant good afternoon to you. Additional greetings to all that are physically present, listening via radio or viewing via the Legislature's LEGIT TV. To my comrades in and out of uniform known to you as the Veterans of this beloved territory, I say Thank You once again for your service to country and for your unwavering support. Last but not least, to the staff of the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs to whom I refer to as the "Pillars" of this agency, Mrs. Frederick, Ms. Daniel, Mrs. Gordon and Ms. Jeffers, good afternoon and thank you for your service to our territory's Veterans. Ms. Chalwell, our faithful volunteer, we appreciate and thank you as well for your daily service to our Veterans.

I am Patrick D. Farrell, Director of the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs and I am grateful for the opportunity to serve the Veterans of these Virgin Islands via the capacity in which I serve.

Today, I am here to offer testimony and defend the budget designed for the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs for fiscal year 2017. Before I do that, please allow me to provide a brief overview of the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs, highlight some of our accomplishments during fiscal year 2016 and some of our goals for fiscal year 2017.

Our **Mission** is “To honor the commitment of Virgin Islands Veterans by continuing to advocate on their behalf to enhance their quality of life”.

Our **Vision** will have been realized when it is blatantly evident that Virgin Islands Veterans are equivalent to all Veterans across the nation in federal entitlements, benefits and services.

### **Scope and Overview**

On March 10, 1955, the First Legislature of the Virgin Islands created the Division of Veterans Affairs within the Department of Labor with the enactment of Bill No. 21, Act No. 8. It was renamed the Office of Veterans Affairs and placed under the Office of the Governor by Act No. 5265, the Government Reorganization and Consolidation Act of 1987, and by Executive Order No. 295-1987.

The Office of Veterans Affairs continues to provide current information to Veterans of the Virgin Islands as it relates to their local and federal benefits and entitlements. This includes but is not limited to available health care, educational opportunities, employment opportunities, housing opportunities, burial benefits and the filing and processing of related claims. Additionally, the Office of Veterans Affairs recommends new legislation and amendments to current legislation to the Governor of the United States Virgin Islands in regards to Veterans and their families.

This agency is committed to serving all veterans in a proficient and expeditious manner. We pride ourselves on the satisfaction of every Veteran that walks through our doors. Our mission statement, vision, and strategic goals all reflect the changes in our ever evolving society and different generations of Veterans. We continue to maintain contact with our local Community Based Outpatient Clinics on the islands of St. Thomas and St. Croix which are operated by the Veterans Administration Caribbean Healthcare System. In addition, the administration of the

Veterans Administration Caribbean Healthcare System has made frequent trips to the territory within the last 18 months to address an array of Veterans issues and for outreach purposes. Because of the frequent visits, the relationship between the U.S Department of Veterans Affairs and the V.I. Office of Veterans Affairs has become one of great comradery. We do our best every day to create and maintain effective relationships between local, regional, and federal agencies to ensure the continued improvement of the Quality of Life for our territories Veterans at every opportunity.

For Fiscal Year 2016, the V.I Office of Veterans Affairs would like to highlight four of our more significant accomplishments:

1. An invitation was extended to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Mr. Robert McDonald in which he accepted. Secretary McDonald met with Gov Mapp, Lt Gov Potter, Adjutant General Howell, representatives from both hospitals in the territory and myself on April 25<sup>th</sup> on the island of St. Croix. The purpose of this meeting was to ascertain the feasibility of being able to relocate our local VA clinics into our

local hospitals. This will not only significantly reduce the amount of Veterans that must travel to Puerto Rico for medical appointments and services but it will also create a brand new revenue stream for both hospitals once it becomes a reality. Since then, a follow up meeting and tour of the Juan F. Luis hospital took place with the purpose of looking at possible space and resources to house the clinic. Because of contractual obligations the Juan F. Luis hospital would be the first of the two hospitals being able to house the VA Clinic. At this time I do not have a time-line for the initiation or completion of this project but I will make sure to keep this body informed. Delegate to Congress Plaskett and Senator Harrigan also had an opportunity to meet with Secretary McDonald. Additionally, as a part of Secretary McDonald's visit Mr. Carl Thomas, Mr. Leroy Woodrup, Mr. Jerome Jackson, Mr. Jerome Ferdinand and Mr. Aubrey Nelthropp, all Veterans of the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment were presented with the Congressional of Honor for their service. Also being honored that day by Secretary McDonald and Governor Mapp was Mr. John "Johnny" Tranberg for reaching the milestone of 100 years old. Mr. Tranberg is the eldest living documented Veteran within our shores. That day was named via proclamation the "John "Johnny" Tranberg Day" by Governor Kenneth E. Mapp.

2. We relocated our St. Croix office location from the Watergut area to the Sion Farm Shopping Plaza. Watergut proved to be an area plagued by criminal activity to include several shootings. In one particular incident, the car assigned to our office, while parked at the office, was left with two windows being shot out and the building collecting a few rounds of

ammunition. This was very unsafe for the individuals working in that office. Even though this is a government building and we are not required to pay rent I recommend that we do NOT occupy this building in the future. Safety out-weighs monetary payout at any time. As a suggestion, maybe it can be used as a Police Sub-station.

3. We hosted our inaugural Veterans Health Expo and Registration drive in both districts. Even though we didn't have a large turnout as far as Veterans, we are happy with the response from the health care providers and other agencies that answered the call to serve our Veterans. All agencies that were involved have expressed commitment to support next year's event. The major supporters of this event were the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the VI Department of Health, the VI National Guard, and the VI Office of Veterans Affairs. **AND**
  
4. We were able to secure the nomination to be the host of the 2017 National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs Fall Conference on the island of St. Thomas in August of 2017. This conference usually houses the State Director from every state and territory under the U.S. Flag along with the leadership of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The last time this took place in the Virgin Islands was in the year 1983. For this particular event we are seeking monetary assistance from this body to make it a success.

Our strategic goals for fiscal year 2017 are as follows:

- Ensure that Virgin Islands Veterans continue to receive superior health care, education opportunities, employment opportunities, housing opportunities, burial benefits, and claims assistance.
- Relocate our St. Thomas office into a ADA compliant facility.
- Reduce the amount and eventually eliminate the amount of Veterans having to travel outside of the territory.

For Fiscal Year 2016 our requested general fund appropriations were in the amount of \$758,171. An estimated \$328,171.00 was to cover personnel salaries and fringe benefits; \$300,000.00 covered medical travel and death benefits; \$130,000.00 of non-appropriated funds which is actually from the Virgin Islands Lottery and the Taxi-Cab Commission covered our everyday operating expenses.

For Fiscal Year 2017 our requested general fund appropriations are in the amount of \$884,000. An estimated \$350,000 is to cover personnel salaries and fringe benefits; \$117,000 for operating expenses; \$300,000.00 to cover medical travel and death benefits; \$117,000 of non-appropriated funds which will actually be from the Virgin Islands Lottery and the Taxi-Cab Commission to cover our everyday operating expenses. Our fiscal year 2017 budget recommendation reflects an increase of \$125,829.00 mainly because of a \$117,000.00 collectively in Other Services and Capital Outlays. This increase will greatly enhance our ability to accomplish our goal of relocating our St. Thomas office which will include the cost of building out the office while currently paying rent, utilities, etcetera for two offices versus paying for one in the past. Not to add that we are now receiving our allotment from the

Taxicab commission at the end of the fiscal year versus what used to be within the year.

The Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs currently has a staff of five paid employees – One Veterans Program Coordinator and One Program Administrator on the islands of St Thomas; One Veterans Program Coordinator and One Administrative Officer II on the island of St. Croix; One Territorial Director. We do have as mentioned before, one volunteer on the island of St. Thomas which makes things quite a bit more manageable being that there are only two employees in each office. This staff of five handles the affairs of thousands of Veterans.

As Director of the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs I continue to assess our operation and think of how we can make this agency an even better oiled and working machine. Having an understanding in part of the financial position of our territory, I would not mention everything that can be labeled as financial obstacles but I feel obligated to mention the most critical at this time.

- Personnel –Currently we are authorized a staff of five paid employees, which including myself, in the Office of Veterans Affairs. I am still of the belief that the V.I. Office of Veterans Affairs has a need for a cemetery staff of two maintenance workers and one administrative assistant on each island that has a Veterans section, fortunately in this case there is only one. Plus, it will allow the current employees of the Office of Veterans Affairs more time to focus on claims status and ensuring that our Veterans are getting the benefits they deserve. These individuals would run an operation totally separate and apart from what is now the norm and would be the responsibility of the Office of Veterans Affairs. This way they can be held to the standard of

military burials. I am not pleased with the maintenance of the Veterans section of the Kingshill cemetery which is currently the only cemetery within the Virgin Islands that has a designated Veterans section. Not having oversight of this particular entity makes it hard to get it the way it should be. Our fallen Veterans deserve better. And to make myself clear, this is not a hit on the agency that has current ownership of the Veterans section because they themselves are very short staffed and do not have the adequate resources to maintain the cemetery in question. Not that Non-veterans are any less important than Veterans but a Veterans section should be handled differently.

On another note, outreaches conducted by this agency, has proven to be more successful during the evening hours where more Veterans are likely to be able to attend. Right now, this causes the staff of the Office of Veterans Affairs to be compensated with comp time which causes them to be out of the office during normal working hours. For a staff this small, the absence of one person significantly impacts the agency. In addition to that, we have ceremonies during Memorial Day and Veterans Day which are federal and local holidays. I cannot afford to have the staff out from work every time we have an outreach or an event on a holiday, especially since we try to do them on every island. The allowance of monetary compensation for the staff on these limited overtime events will allow our Veterans to receive services without disruption.

- Veterans Park – On the island of St. John, again, I welcome the opportunity for St. John to have its own Veterans Park just like the other two islands within our territory, they deserve no less. I am continuing to have conversations in reference to Government properties on St. John that may be availa

ble, there must be a parcel somewhere that can be acquired for this purpose. Senators, I welcome your assistance in accomplishing this task for the Veterans of St. John.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to address you and the Committee on Finance. At this time, I am available for questions that you or any other member of this body may have for the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs.