



GOVERNMENT OF  
THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS  
OFFICE OF VETERANS AFFAIRS



St. Croix:  
Tel: (340) 773-8387  
Fax: (340) 692-9563

St. Thomas:  
Tel: (340) 774-8387  
Fax: (340) 714-0589

Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs Legislative Testimony  
February 28<sup>th</sup> 2023 (Agency Status Hearing)

Honorable Carla J. Joseph, - Chairperson of the Committee on Government Operations and Consumer Protection, other Senators of the 35<sup>th</sup> Legislature of the Virgin Islands of the United States, all that are present, listening via radio, or viewing via the Legislature's LEGIT TV, good afternoon to you. Additional greetings to my comrades in and out of uniform known to you as the Veterans of this beloved territory; Thank You once again for your service to country. Last but never least, to the staff of the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs to whom I refer to as the "Pillars" of this agency, Ms. Daniel, Mrs. Frederick, Mrs. Gordon, and Ms. Hewitt, good afternoon and thank you for your service to our territory's Veterans. Special recognition to our 2023 Employee of the year, Mrs Juliette Frederick. Your dedication and hard work never goes unnoticed.

I am Patrick D. Farrell, your Director of the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs. Today I am here to provide testimony on the agency's status.

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 Number 5265, the Government Reorganization and Consolidation Act of 1987, and by Executive Order Number 295-1987.

Currently we are authorized and have a full complement of five employees – one Veterans Program Coordinator, one Program Administrator, one Administrative Assistant, one Administrative Officer III and one agency director.

The Mission of the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs is "To honor the commitment of Virgin Islanders who rose to the challenge of wearing our nation's military uniform, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, by continuing to advocate on their behalf resulting in the enhancement of their quality of life and by striving to ensure that they receive all entitled services and benefits".

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

This agency remains committed to serving all Veterans in the most proficient and expeditious manner as possible. We pride ourselves on resolving the issues of every Veteran walking through our doors, reaching out to us virtually, or via telephone in the most timely and respectful manner. Our mission statement, vision, and strategic goals all reflect the changes in our ever-evolving society and different generations of Veterans.

As the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs, we are staunch Veterans' advocates, and as such, we serve as the primary intersection on Veterans' issues between the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and our respective government agencies as well as Veteran Service Organizations, community partners, and non-profit entities. We are second to none in providing wide-ranging advocacy to ensure earned services, benefits and support are delivered. We continually place focus on fostering effective representation of persons claiming entitlements on account of the honorable military service of any person defined in 38 U.S.C. 101; to provide a medium for the exchange of ideas and information; to ensure uniformity, equality, efficiency, and effectiveness in providing services to our Veterans and their family members; and maintain an interest in all Veterans' legislation that comes before this or any other branch of government. Our office is tasked and held accountable by the chief executive of this territory and the population we serve to be responsible for addressing the multi-faceted needs of our Veterans irrespective of age, gender, era of service, military branch, or circumstance of service. We remain positioned and ready to deliver efficient, effective, and Veteran-focused services and partner with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs or any organization having an interest in our Veterans. This includes the continued collaboration between the V.I. Office of Veterans Affairs, VISN8, the San Juan VA Medical Center (VAMC), and our local Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOCs), in enrolling Veterans and eligible family members in the VA healthcare system. I cannot express upon those Veterans that are not registered, how important it is for them to be registered. In May of this year, VISN 8, the VA Caribbean Healthcare System, the Virgin Islands National Guard, and the Office of Veterans Affairs are partnering to host a registration fair / claims clinic on the island of St. Thomas and St. Croix for our Veterans. At this event, we will have the capacity to register Veterans on site, screen Veterans for toxic exposures, and initiate benefit claims, just to name a few.

The Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs supports the full and prompt implementation of the recently passed PACT Act, which expands VA health care and benefits for Veterans who were exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic substances. Our Veterans and their families deserve no less. We continue to partner with the VA to provide outreach to all eligible Veterans and their families about the new law and its provisions. As an example, late last month/ early this month, we invited the Veteran Integrated Services Network (VISN8) Director,

Mr. David Isaacks and the executive team from the VA Caribbean Healthcare System to the territory to assist with the education of the PACT Act amongst other things. This is particularly important considering the recent intense level of television advertisements aggressively seeking Veterans to join class action lawsuits to address potential disabilities from toxic exposures at Camp Lejeune. Alternatively, Veterans can file a claim with VA accredited Service Officers, including claims examiners for ABSOLUTELY free. Veterans please do not fall into the trap of these advertisements which will simply take your money for a service that can be provided to you for free. Submitting a claim through an accredited State or Territory Veterans' Claims Examiner will sharply increase the chances of your claim being successfully adjudicated.

Nationally, there has been a marked increase in the number of disability compensation claims submitted by Veterans because of the new law. This is confirmed by published reports on Feb. 6, 2023 by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, which said Veterans have filed nearly 300,000 PACT Act-related claims since the law took effect in August 2022. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers and their community based outpatient clinics across the country, to include our clinics on St. Thomas and St. Croix have begun offering enrolled Veterans a new toxic exposure screening as a result of the PACT Act. This was also verified during the most recent visit; however, if you are not currently enrolled there are provisions for you to be screened as well.

The Office of Veterans Affairs' priorities for the care of our estimated 8 thousand Veterans is consistent with that of the United States Department of VA. As has been made evident during the last 8 years, we fully support efforts to increase Veterans' access to VA Healthcare. Currently, the Code of Federal Regulation authorizes the VA to pay for the travel of service-connected Veterans to the closest VA medical facility for VA medical appointments. To augment that federal guideline, the Office of Veterans Affairs reimburses 100% any non-service connected Veteran's flight arrangements to the closest VA medical facility. This allows for parity, in this case, for our service connected and non-service connected Veterans. They both get to the closest VA medical facility without experiencing a cost to themselves in the end. To further augment the Code of Federal Regulations, the Office of Veterans Affairs inaugurated a policy to subsidize the travel of Veterans who elect to travel to a VA medical facility of their choice versus the one that they are encouraged to utilize via published laws. Veterans electing to take advantage of that policy are encouraged to visit the Office of Veterans Affairs before traveling to ensure they meet the requirements of the policy. To be clear, Veterans can seek care at any VA medical facility in any jurisdiction under the United States flag; how they get there is another situation. For informational purposes, Service-connected means, with respect to disability or death, that such disability was incurred or aggravated, or that the death resulted

from a disability incurred or aggravated, in line of duty in the active military, naval, air, or space service. Nonservice-connected means, with respect to disability or death, that such disability was not incurred or aggravated, or that the death did not result from a disability incurred

or aggravated, in line of duty in the active military, naval, air, or space service. As it relates to medical emergencies requiring transport via air ambulance, through our partnership with our federal partners, this is a **no-cost** event for the VI Government.

The Office of Veterans Affairs applauds the most recent VA initiative involving mental health and Veteran suicide prevention. Veterans in an acute suicidal crisis may now go to any VA or non-VA health care facility for emergency health care at **no cost** – including inpatient or crisis residential care for up to 30 days and outpatient care for up to 90 days barring availability of the necessary facility. There is no requirement for Veterans to be enrolled in the VA to use this benefit. This expansion of care will help prevent Veteran suicide by guaranteeing no-cost care to Veterans in times of crisis. It will also increase access to acute suicide care for all Veterans not currently enrolled in VA care. This was made abundantly clear to the CEOs of the Schneider Regional Medical Center and the Governor Juan F Luis Hospital and Medical Center during our most recent in-person meeting during the month of January.

The Veterans Cemetery Grants Program complements the National Cemetery Association's 155 national cemeteries in 42 states and Puerto Rico and is an integral part of National Cemetery Association's ability to provide burial services for Veterans and their eligible family members. Within the last few days, we've learned that the fiscal year 2023 budget for the grant program has been anticipated to be in the amount of \$50 million. While this seems to be an enormous amount, it cannot satisfy the number of requests across the nation for cemetery projects. Specifically, this will not allow the NCA to establish any new state cemeteries, which unfortunately affects the plan for the Virgin Islands to initiate the construction of our first federally grant funded VA State Cemetery within the next fiscal year. As an agency, with the help of this body, we are ready and prepared to take the next step in reaching our goal of establishing the first federally grant funded VA State Cemetery. In the absence of that project, we are continuing to erect multi-vault crypts and columbariums. The second multi-vault crypt for Veterans is on the way up in the Eastern Cemetery with the new addition of a columbarium. This will be the first provision for the internment of Veterans urns in the territory. In the St. Thomas/St. John district, due to space limitations, it may encourage this way of internment for the future. We look forward to the continued support of this body for the internment of our Veterans when necessary.

A formal partnership, between the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs and the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA) continues to yield positive results for our Veterans across the territory. Through this organization we were able to learn, via best practices, how different states and territories tackle some of the same issues we face, and most importantly, we were able to meet with and create relationships with some very prominent Veterans Advocates. Recently, I was elected Vice-President of the Southeast District of this same organization. This is a win for the Virgin Islands simply because we now have a seat at another national table. Our story will be told.

Other local initiatives include the implementation a specialized service to transport disabled Veterans to and from their VA medical appointments VA referred medical appointments. This service is scheduled to begin within the next week or two between St. Thomas and St. John, and then shortly after on the island of St. Croix. The service won't start simultaneously in the St. Croix district because we haven't identified a contractor through the bid process yet.

Additionally, we just kicked off the driver's license project where the territories' Veterans will now be identified on their driver's license. This will serve as a multi-purpose project; it will assist in getting more accurate data as it relates to the amount of Veterans physically within our shores. Secondly, we intend to initiate a territory-wide campaign to encourage business owners to take part in a Veterans Discount Program. Veterans will then be able to take advantage of that benefit after showing their Virgin Islands Driver's License.

Chairman Joseph, and distinguished members of the Committees on Veterans Affairs, we respect the important work that you have done and continue to do to enhance the quality of life and well-being of territory's Veterans and their families. With your help and continued support, we can ensure our Veterans and their needs are adequately resourced and remain a priority. The challenges we overcome today become the foundation of our promise to serve those who have borne the battle, their families, and their survivors. Our commitment to Veterans of the Virgin Islands and those Veterans who decide to make their home within our shores will remain steadfast. Subject to your questions, this concludes my testimony.

Thank You.