



# 91<sup>st</sup> MINNESOTA LEGISLATURE

2019 Veterans Legislation – Session Summary

# Greetings from Commissioner Larry Herke



With the leadership of Governor Walz and great support from the Minnesota Legislature, I am pleased to represent Minnesota's 318,000 Veterans to meet the needs of Veterans and their families. As you will see, the 2019 session was a particularly productive one. It went a long way toward meeting the many and varied needs of Minnesota's Veterans. We appreciate the collaboration between MDVA staff and Veterans Service Organizations for working closely with the Legislature in framing our organizational needs and bringing the legislation to fruition. It is indeed a pleasure to receive the bipartisan support of the Legislature to ensure that MDVA can successfully continue to serve those who have served.

## Mission Statement

Serving Minnesota Veterans, their dependents and survivors by connecting them with the federal and state care and benefits they have earned.

## What We Do

The Minnesota Department of Veteran Affairs runs Minnesota's five state Veterans homes and assists Minnesota's 318,000 Veterans and their dependents in securing available benefits and services.

## Leadership Team

Larry Herke was appointed as the 18th Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) in January of 2019. He is responsible for assisting the state's Veterans and their families. He also represents the Department at hearings before the Legislature, communicates with Minnesota's Congressional Delegation, and maintains close working relationships with the Veterans Service Organizations and County Veterans Service Officers throughout Minnesota.

### Other MDVA senior leaders and the Legislative team include:

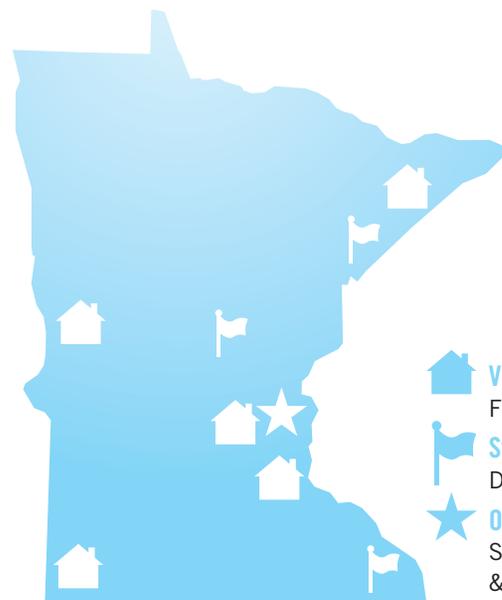
**Brad Lindsay**, Deputy Commissioner of Programs & Services

**Douglas Hughes**, Deputy Commissioner of Veterans Health Care

**Mike McElhiney**, Chief of Staff

**Ben Johnson**, Legislative Director

**Cole Trace**, Legislative Liaison



-  **Veterans Homes**  
Fergus Falls, Hastings, Luverne, Minneapolis & Silver Bay
-  **State Cemeteries**  
Duluth, Little Falls & Preston
-  **Office Locations**  
St. Paul (Veterans Service Building Central Office & Henry Whipple Building Claims Office)

# A Snapshot of Minnesota Veterans

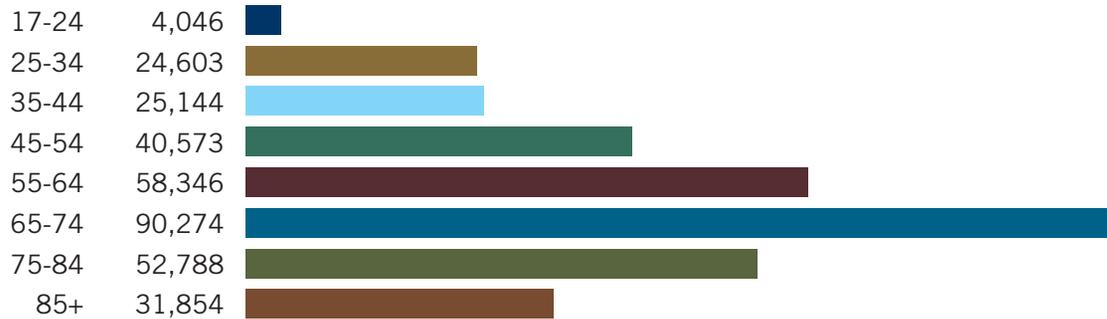
## Gender



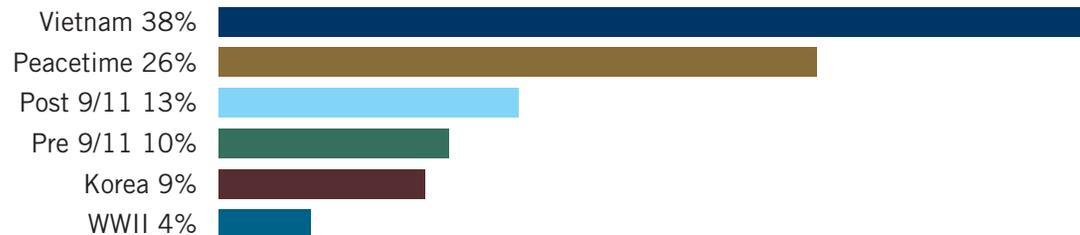
## Race



## Age

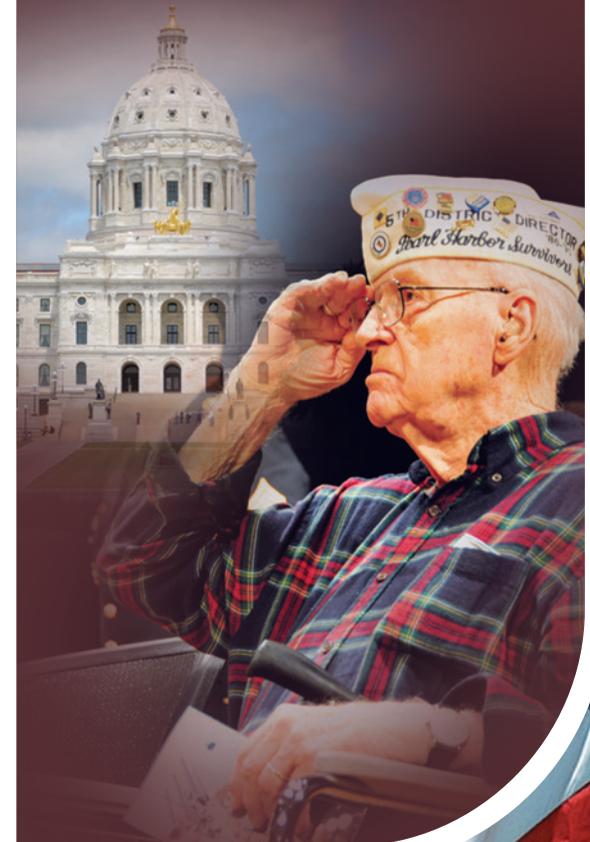


## Service



## Partnerships

MDVA does not do it alone. Through a vital collaboration with state and federal departments, organizations, businesses and community resources, we are able to provide Minnesota Veterans with an outstanding support, care and advocacy network.



# 2019 Legislative Session Summary

**Governor Tim Walz signed the following bills into law, making a significant positive impact on Minnesota Veterans.**

## Omnibus State Government Finance Bill (S.F. 10)

This comprehensive bill continued funding for MDVA for fiscal years 2020-21. It included the operating budget for both the Program & Services and Health Care Divisions that include:

- Five Minnesota Veterans Homes
- Three State Veterans Cemeteries
- State Soldiers Assistance Program
- Education & Employment (Higher Ed Vets Program, GI Bill, Minnesota GI Bill)
- Federal Claims Assistance & Statewide Veterans Outreach
- Gold Star and Women Veterans Programs
- Homelessness Prevention & Assistance Efforts

The bill provided grants to key partners that bolster our efforts, including:

- Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans
- Congressionally chartered Veterans Service Organizations:
  - Disabled American Veterans
  - Military Order of the Purple Heart
  - American Legion
  - Veterans of Foreign Wars
  - Vietnam Veterans of America
  - AMVETS
  - Paralyzed Veterans of America

Three areas of significant need received increased funding as requested:

- An operating adjustment for the MDVA Programs & Services Division
- Additional funding for the State Veterans Cemeteries operations
- Increase to the amount available annually for the Minnesota C.O.R.E. (Counseling and Case Management Outreach, Referral, and Education) Program

## CVSOs

S.F. 10 also authorized Minnesota County Veterans Service Officers (CVSOs) to communicate with County and local assessors to disclose private data for determining eligibility for the disabled Veteran Homestead Market Value Exclusion. It is an important benefit for widows of Veterans, making it easier for them to stay in their homes.





## Special Funding

**The Armed Forces Service Center (AFSC)** has been serving military personnel and their families, along with Purple Heart and Medal of Honor recipients, in Terminal 1 of the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport since November 22, 1970, seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

Legislation included \$100,000 in one-time funding to provide new furniture and improvements in the center to better serve members of the military, Veterans and their families.

It also provided \$150,000 in one-time funding for the **Minnesota Medal of Honor Memorial** on State Capitol grounds. Seventy-two Minnesotans have been awarded the Medal of Honor from the Civil War to the Vietnam conflict.

The Legislature singled out several groups for special recognition, establishing:

**POW/MIA Recognition Day.** Senator Dan Hall, who represents the Burnsville-Savage area, was looking out his office window one day and saw the POW/MIA flag which often flies next to the U.S. and Minnesota flags. He pulled out his binoculars to see the words “You Are Not Forgotten” on the bottom of the flag. He shared this moment with the Senate Veterans and Military Affairs committee and emphasized its importance after S.F. 242 was introduced.

The POW/MIA Recognition Day ensures that the words “You Are Not Forgotten” will endure. “If we forget, we’re going to repeat the mistakes that have been made in the past. We can’t let that happen,” Carla Tappainer, American Legion Third District Commander, told the committee.

The third Friday of September each year will be Minnesota’s recognition of the courage and sacrifices of the state’s POW/MIA and their families.

**Veterans Suicide Awareness Day.** Alissa Harrington lost her 33-year-old brother, Veteran Justin Miller, to suicide in 2018. Her heartfelt testimony before the House Veterans and Military Affairs committee helped lead to the enactment of this special day. “I believe it is time that we speak about the issue of Veterans suicide,” she exhorted. “How we prevent it, how we address the care of Veterans in crisis, and how we care for the community afterwards. Because we can’t lose another soldier.”

Across the United States, an estimated 20 Veterans die by suicide every day. In an effort to increase visibility and focus attention on this crisis, Minnesota will observe “Veterans Suicide Awareness Day” the first Saturday of October each year.

**American Allies Day.** Held June 30th each year, this day honors foreign-born individuals who fought alongside the United States armed forces in military conflicts around the world. The provision encourages schools to offer instruction on the role of American allies during conflicts. There is a special emphasis on those soldiers from allied countries who later immigrated to Minnesota.

**Hmong Special Guerrilla Units Remembrance Day.** Minnesota is home to the second largest population of Hmong-Americans in the country. May 14th of each year will honor Southeast Asians, Americans and their allies who served, suffered, sacrificed or died in the Secret War in Laos during the Vietnam War from 1961 to 1975.





# 2019 Legislative Session Summary Continued

## The Omnibus Tax Bill

In addition to losing their beloved spouses, survivors of Veterans often face financial hardships, including the expiration of homestead property tax benefits available to service-connected disabled Veterans and their qualifying caregivers.

Laurie Pekarik is a prime example, as she testified before the House Veterans and Military Affairs committee. She left her career, and its income, to care for her 100 percent disabled husband's needs. After his death, their household income was reduced more than 65 percent and she was in the eighth and final year of eligibility for the exclusion. "There is no way on God's green earth that I can afford to pay property taxes should this bill not pass," she explained. "What's going to happen to me? I've been in our family home for 46 years. I'm going to lose that house for delinquent property taxes."

Her moving story – and the experience of others – inspired the bill's passage. It includes the elimination of the eight-year expiration of the surviving spousal benefit of the disabled Veteran Homestead Market Value Exclusion. It is effective beginning with assessment year 2019, for taxes payable in 2020. It includes changes for the application

date (from July 1 to December 15) and permits the sharing of applicant information between CVSOs and assessors.

## Judiciary Bill

Veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are two to three times more likely to abuse their partners – more than Veterans not suffering from PTSD – according to an article from the Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law. It also found that 9 in 10 Veterans with PTSD reported being psychologically aggressive with their partners.

The Judiciary and Public Safety finance bill includes a one-time grant to a domestic abuse prevention program for Veterans, current and former service members and their families.

## Legacy Bill

The Legacy funding bill uses money from the Outdoor Heritage, Clean Water, Parks and Trails, and Arts and Cultural Heritage fund.

It provides funding for the Minnesota Military Museum at Camp Ripley to document the service of post-9/11 Veterans in anticipation of the 20th anniversary in 2021.

It also provides funding for the museum to care for, catalog and display the collection

of General John Vessey, Minnesota's most decorated Veteran.

Over the last few years, Legacy financing bills have also provided partial funding for Veterans memorials throughout the state. In 2019, the Legacy bill funds one Veterans memorial project in Martin County on Winnebago Avenue in Fairmont.

Since 2015, the Association of Minnesota Public Education Radio Stations (AMPERS) has partnered with the Minnesota Humanities Center to produce Veterans' Voices radio programming. They first documented the stories of World War II Veterans and followed that with programs about Native American Veterans and then Vietnam. The stories of Korean War Veterans will be told with the use of this funding.

## Jobs Bill

This bill includes a grant to the Construction Careers Foundation for the Helmets to Hard Hats initiative. It helps Veterans to participate in apprentice programs in the building and construction industry. The program's first year saw 68 Veterans achieve employment. This grew to 300 new employees the second year.





## Working toward meeting the needs of Minnesota Veterans

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