MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

SERVING MINNESOTA VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES

2023 VETERANS LEGISLATION
SESSION SUMMARY

GREETINGS FROM INTERIM COMMISSIONER BRAD LINDSAY

For the second year in a row, a standalone Veterans and Military Affairs Omnibus Bill was passed by the Minnesota Legislature with nearly unanimous support. This achievement was possible due to the advocacy of the Minnesota Commanders' Task Force, support of legislative leaders, and the commitment of Governor Tim Walz.

Minnesota's 300,000 Veterans' voices have been heard. Honoring service and sacrifice, this law provides critical funding to ensure that our state takes care of those who raised their hand to defend our country. Our Veterans and their families have varied needs, from skilled nursing care for the elderly to housing for the homeless, and educational support to those who are starting their careers, to a dignified final resting place for those who pass.

I want to thank all who made the 2023 Legislative Session a success. The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs is grateful for the resources that will allow us to continue serving those who have served our country.

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 Veterans Affairs runs Minnesota's five state Veterans Homes, three State Veterans Cemeteries and assists Minnesota's 300,000 Veterans and their dependents in securing available benefits and services.

VALUES

V	**VETERANS** first in our hearts, minds & actions
E	**EXCELLENCE** is our standard
T	**TRUST** through results
E	**ETHICS** is our cornerstone
R	**RESPECT** for service (past & present)
A	**ADVOCACY** for care & services
N	**NATION-LEADING** services
S	**STEWARDSHIP** of resources

LEADERSHIP TEAM

Larry Herke was appointed as the 18th Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) in January 2019 and reappointed in January 2023 to a second term. As Commissioner, Herke is charged with leading efforts to serve the state's 300,000 Veterans and their families. He also represents the Department at hearings before the Minnesota Legislature, collaborates on Veterans issues with Minnesota's Congressional Delegation and United States Department of Veterans Affairs, and maintains close working relationships with Minnesota's County Veterans Service Officers and Veterans Service Organizations.

The MDVA senior leadership and Legislative Team include:

Brad Lindsay, Interim Commissioner/ Deputy Commissioner - Programs & Services

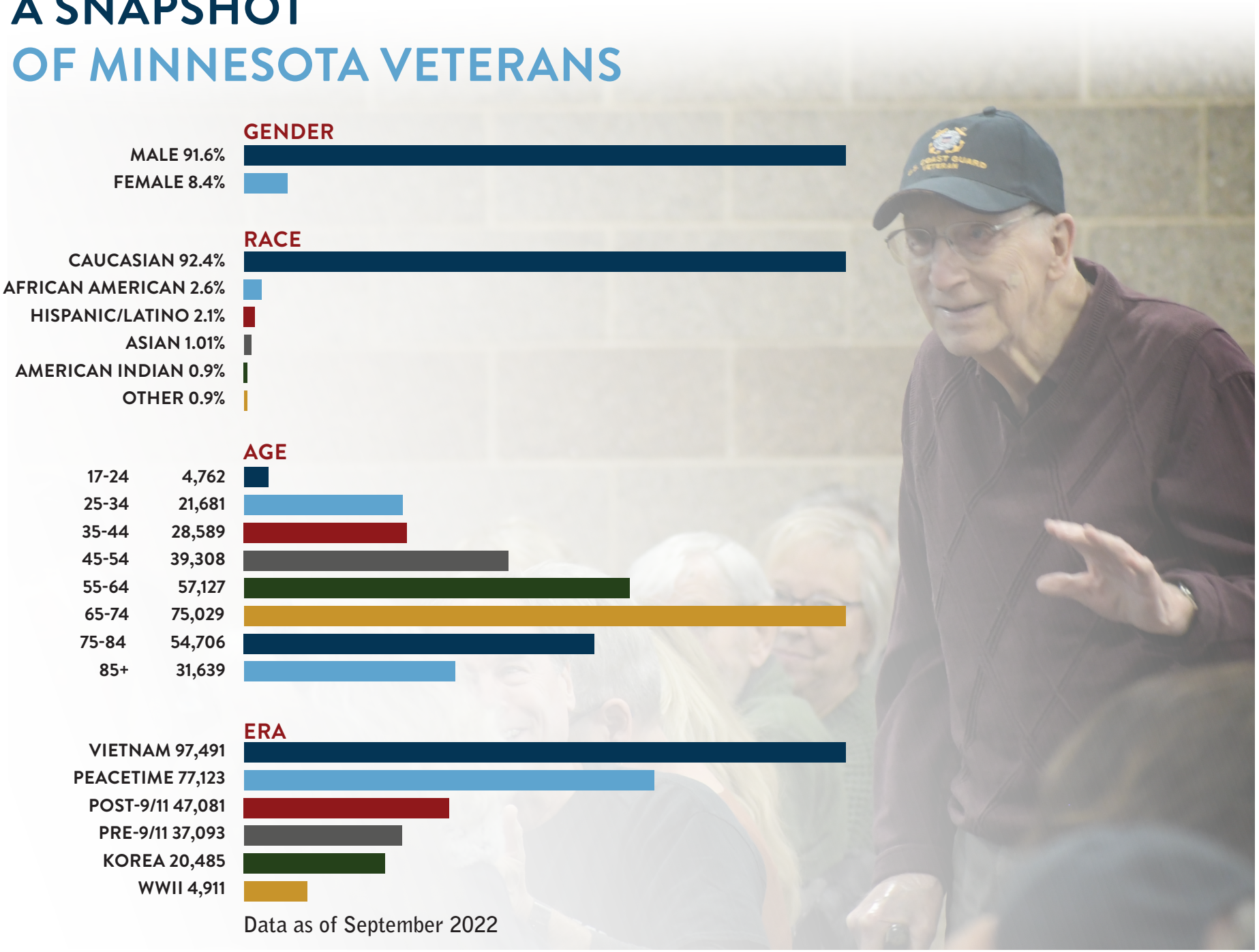
Eric Meittunen, Deputy Commissioner - Veterans Healthcare

Dave Bellefeuille, Senior Admin Officer

Ben Johnson, Legislative Director

Cole Trace, Legislative Liaison

A SNAPSHOT
OF MINNESOTA VETERANS



PRECEDENT SET. PRECEDENT CONFIRMED

By Cole Trace, MDVA Legislative Liaison

Following the passage of the first Veterans Omnibus Bill last year, it was declared that a new precedent was set at the Legislature, a precedent that removed Veterans and their families from years of political gridlock and gamesmanship. While that was a public stance, Legislative stakeholders knew that more work was needed to ensure that this was truly a precedent. It's why the Commanders' Task Force made it the group's top priority for the 2023 session. There was doubt up until the Veterans Omnibus Bill was finally voted onto the House and Senate floors during its last committee stop in each chamber. In the end, the precedent was confirmed.

There were a few obstacles that stood in the way of the second Veterans Omnibus Bill becoming a reality.

The first came with a majority change in the Minnesota Senate. Only one member of the new DFL majority, Sen. Nicole Mitchell of Woodbury, is a Veteran. But because she was a freshman legislator, the likelihood of her chairing the Veterans committee was near zero. That was confirmed when she was named *Vice* Chair of the State and Local Government and Veterans committee.

In the role as Vice Chair and as the author of numerous Veterans-related bills, she wound up leading the Senate negotiations for the Veterans Omnibus Bill. In fact, before this session, there has never been a first-term lawmaker, in their first year, who has authored an Omnibus Finance Bill.

Second, the Senate was operating under rules which stated that finance bills were tied to committees of jurisdiction. This means that the State and Local Government and Veterans committee would only have one Omnibus Bill.

Finally, after the House Veterans and Military Affairs committee and the Senate State and Local Government and Veterans committee passed their respective versions of the Veterans Omnibus Bill, the next committee stop posted agendas that included the bill being added to the State Government Finance Bill.

The other two obstacles were resolved within a week, and the success is due largely to the Veteran community, led by the DAV's MinnFluence program contacting Legislators and urging them to pass the Veterans Omnibus Bill on its own. When the House Ways and Means committee was scheduled to meet on April 12, the agenda included the Veterans Omnibus Bill being added to the State Government Finance bill. That led to outreach from hundreds--if not thousands—of Veterans and their families contacting their Legislators, urging them to pass the Veterans bill on its own. When the committee met, they passed HF 1937 straight to the House floor. The outreach also led the Senate to literally rewrite its rules on April 17 to include a Finance bill for Veterans and Military Affairs, instead of a direct tie to its committee.

The Adjutant General of the Minnesota National Guard Major General Shawn Manke, Sen. Nicole Mitchell of Woodbury, and MDVA Legislative Director Ben Johnson participate in a Legislative hearing during the 2023 session.

POST 9-11
SERVICE BONUS UPDATE

The House took up the Veterans Omnibus Bill on April 18 and passed it unanimously; the Senate took up its version on April 20, passing it 66-1. A conference committee was then named to reconcile the differences and negotiate a compromise between the House and Senate versions. That work took about two weeks when the bill was taken up as amended by the conference committee. The House again passed it unanimously and the Senate passing it with a vote of 61-5.

For two years, the Veteran community in Minnesota has made it clear that Legislative work on behalf of Veterans must be nonpartisan. This led to a new Legislative path set during the 2022 Legislative session. The 2023 session, with a new majority in the Senate, confirmed that new path and cemented the precedent. Now the community can turn its attention to expanding current benefits and seeking new ones that will help our state's Veterans for generations.

Cole Trace is MDVA's Legislative Liaison and has worked with the Legislature in numerous capacities since 2010.

Last year's Veterans and Military Affairs Omnibus Bill provided $25 million to offer service bonuses to Post-9/11 Veterans and Gold Star Families. Unfortunately, there were two notable exceptions that were rectified with this year's Omnibus. The first excluded Veterans who did not begin their service in Minnesota, making it the only MDVA benefit to feature this exclusion. Secondly, recipients of the Inherent Resolve Campaign Medal did not meet the criteria for the full bonus allotment.

The Omnibus Bill also put into statute that Veterans who were previously denied the bonus or are now eligible for a larger bonus can reapply based on the changes that were made this session.

Included with those changes was a $15 million increase in funding for the bonus program to ensure more Veterans can receive the bonus. The Legislature also committed to provide more funds if the current bonus allotment runs out between now and May 2024.

Governor Tim Walz signs the Veterans and Military Affairs Omnibus Bill into law.

While this was the final outcome for this section of the Omnibus Bill, there were three bills introduced in both the House and the Senate that made changes to the bonus program. The final bill language most aligned with HF 1252 (Newton - Coon Rapids) and SF 1039 (Klein - Mendota Heights) which included the noted changes to the law.

GI BILL EXPANSION

Chapter 38 included significant changes to the Minnesota GI Bill benefit. First, it eliminated the distinction between part-time and full-time students so that any eligible Veteran has access to the same level of the benefit. Second, the annual amount was increased from $3,000 per Veteran to $5,000 per Veteran. The lifetime cap was also increased from $10,000 to $15,000.

The Minnesota GI Bill provides assistance to eligible Minnesota Veterans, currently serving military, National Guard and Reserve members and eligible spouses and children. It is separate and differs from the Federal GI Bill and can be used for more than only tuition. It can reimburse out-of-pocket costs for professional exams, licenses and certifications and provides financial assistance while training for a career or trade through an On-the-Job Training or Apprenticeship program.

This change was sought by MDVA and was part of the Governor's budget recommendations introduced to the Legislature that was the original wording for HF 1937 (Newton - Coon Rapids) and SF 2247 (Mitchell - Woodbury).

HOMELESSNESS INITIATIVES

For several years, preventing and ending Veterans homelessness has been a shared goal at MDVA and the Legislature with funds allocated to support making Minnesota the next state to achieve functional zero. This milestone means that a community has measurably solved Veterans homelessness and when it does occur, it is rare and brief. Minnesota is divided by region into 10 continuums of care; eight have declared functional zero and have been certified by the Federal VA and Department of Housing and Urban Development. The two remaining continuums of care are Hennepin and Ramsey Counties.

The focus of this year's funding will be to pursue functional zero in those two counties, but can be used, as needed, around the state.

For the first time, MDVA's Homeless Veterans and SOAR (Social Security Income/Social Security Disability Insurance, Outreach, Access, and Recovery) Program was specifically called out in a budget bill; previously, it was a part of the total appropriation. The program received $1.035 million in each of the next two years.

The Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (MACV) received $7.8 million this year to continue the nonprofit's work for Veterans and their families who are homeless or in danger of becoming homeless. Of the total amount allocated, $6.35 million of the funds will be used to create permanent supportive housing options and must be used by the end of June 2026. The funds can also be used for supportive services to maintain housing; employment; legal issues; housing and housing-related costs; transportation; the acquisition and creation of permanent supportive housing; and property management of permanent supportive housing.

Finally, the Omnibus Bill extended funding from the previous year for the Veteran Homelessness Initiative at levels of $4.3 million the first year and $1.3 million in the second year. This program is a partnership with MACV that provides housing vouchers which are modeled on the HUD-VASH federal vouchers for a rental subsidy to Veterans and their families experiencing homelessness. The program also offers clinical case management to provide wraparound services to ensure that more needs are met for these families, beyond finding permanent housing.

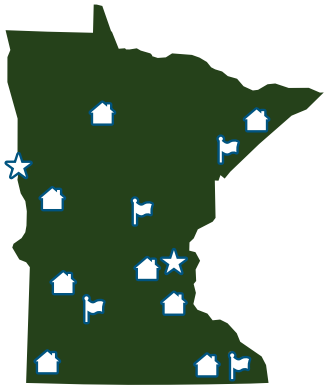
Allison Kier from the MDVA Homelessness Team visits with an attendee at the Veterans Career Fair held in May 2023.

MDVA OPERATIONS

Each budget session, the largest portion of MDVA's request to the Legislature is to maintain current levels of services. This includes operations at the Minnesota Veterans Homes and State Veterans Cemeteries throughout the state, providing benefits like the MN GI Bill, State Soldiers Assistance Program, Honor Guards and so much more.

Chapter 38 provided funding boosts to several MDVA operations that offer direct services, benefits and assistance to Veterans and their families.

- MDVA's Programs & Services Division fulfills the needs of Minnesota Veterans and their families through three areas: Veterans Programs which administers state benefits, Veterans Services which helps with the processing of claims with the Federal VA, and the Education and Occupational Resources division.
- MDVA's Veterans Healthcare Division includes the five current Veterans Homes in Fergus Falls, Hastings, Luverne, Minneapolis and Silver Bay and three new Veterans Homes under construction in Bemidji, Montevideo and Preston which will open in late 2023. The division is also responsible for the Veteran Suicide Prevention initiative striving for zero Veteran deaths by suicide in the state.
- The State Veterans Cemeteries' funding covers staff pay and benefits, as well as equipment and maintenance to ensure Minnesota Veterans have dignified burial options.
- The LinkVet Support Center offers support seven days a week to Veterans and their families.
- The Minnesota Service CORE Program is a partnership with Lutheran Social Services that brings essential, community-based services directly to Veterans and their families across Minnesota at no cost. Services include counseling, debt management, addiction counseling, disability services and in-home counseling. The goal is to help Veterans and their families develop skills and draw on their own strengths to bring about successful and lasting family stability.



VETERANS HOMES
Bemidji, Fergus Falls, Hastings, Luverne, Minneapolis, Montevideo, Silver Bay & Preston

STATE CEMETERIES
Duluth, Little Falls , Redwood Falls & Preston

OFFICE LOCATIONS
St. Paul (Veterans Service Building Central Office) & Henry Whipple Building Claims Office, Fargo/NW Minnesota Claims office

The Omnibus Bill also funded a new MDVA initiative: the Veteran Community Health Navigators program which will establish a statewide community-based outreach program for Veterans and their families. The goal is to connect them with needed services either through the VA or other community-based providers, especially outside the metro area. The goal is to create a healthier statewide population, reduce mortality and morbidity and play a role in reducing Veteran suicide. This initiative was provided $400,000 per year in funding.

MINNESOTA VETERANS HOME
HASTINGS

Since 1978, the Minnesota Veterans Home - Hastings has provided domiciliary care which includes mental, chemical and medical support to Veteran Residents who require care at lower levels than skilled nursing care. The Hastings Veterans Home is housed at a property that is more than 120 years old and previously served as the Asylum for the Hopelessly Insane. Six buildings are reaching the end of their useful life and there is over $20 million worth of deferred maintenance. Many Resident rooms are double occupancy with few private bathrooms. A campus master plan study determined that a complete renovation was needed to continue providing this option to Minnesota Veterans. MDVA requested $77.77 million to cover the state's 35% share of the cost for predesign, design, demolition and construction of replacement administrative and residential infrastructure campus. The other 65% of funding would come from the Federal VA. If fully funded, construction would allow consolidation of the Hastings campus into a new building after demolishing four separate buildings. It would give all Veteran Residents a private room and bathroom, improve sustainability, lower operating costs and improve campus safety. If fully funded, the project is estimated to be completed in 42 months.

This project was funded in HF 669, Chapter 72 which was the Capital Investment bill, which uses bonds to pay for construction and infrastructure projects throughout the state. It was originally introduced to the Legislature this year by the members who represent Hastings, Rep. Shane Hudella and Sen. Judy Seeberger.

The Omnibus Bill also established a Veteran Domiciliary Care Working Group. The group will include the following members:

- Commissioners or designees from MDVA and the Department of Health (MDH)
- Two MDVA staffers with Veterans Homes expertise
- Two MDH staff with expertise in boarding care homes or related standards of care
- Five medical professionals including a medical doctor, nurse, mental health professional and two other health care professionals appointed by the Governor
- Up to three past or current MDVA Domiciliary Program staff appointed by the Governor
- Four public members who have an interest in Veterans Affairs, including two public members appointed by the Speaker of the House and two appointed by the Majority Leader of the Senate

The working group will review and analyze the acuity of domiciliary Residents and the current care model, including admission, care plans and day-to-day care, the current staffing structure and ratios. In addition, the working group will provide recommendations on staffing levels, care delivery model, staff training, management structure and outcomes to determine if staffing levels and care delivery are appropriate at current standards or if adjustments are needed. The group must finish its work and report to the Legislature by January 2024.

OTHER VETERAN INITIATIVES

Additional funding initiatives sought by House and Senate members will provide benefits beyond MDVA and may impact the districts that the bill author represents.

- **Metro Meals on Wheels** was authorized grants totaling just over $1 million for two years to provide home-delivered meals to Veterans in the Twin Cities metro.

  Bill origin: HF 122 (Edelson - Edina) and SF 774 (Mitchell - Woodbury)

- **Every Third Saturday** was authorized $100,000 in grants for two years to provide Veterans with emergency assistance and internships. Every Third Saturday is a nonprofit that helps connect Veterans who may need help with the effects of being unhoused, employment or if a Veteran seeks recreation and camaraderie with other Veterans. Their mission statement is "Fostering Hope and Supporting Post Traumatic Growth." They are located in South Minneapolis at 5402 43rd Avenue South.

  Bill origin: HF 2373 (Greenman - Minneapolis)

- **Camp Bliss** located in Walker, MN is authorized a grant for $150,000 each year to provide retreats to eligible Veterans and their families. The grant may be used for therapy, activities at the camp and for transportation to Camp Bliss.

  Bill origin: HF 1194 (Bliss - Pennington)/SF 1237 (Utke - Park Rapids)

- Similarly, **Veterans on the Lake** in Ely, MN is authorized an annual grant of $50,000 for similar services to Camp Bliss.

  Bill origin: HF 311 (Lislegard - Aurora)/ SF 351 (Hauschild - Hermantown)

- Last year, the **Veterans Campground** on Big Marine Lake received funding for wastewater systems; this year's Omnibus Bill moves the grant funding forward to this year.

  Bill origin: HF 3011 (Patti Anderson - Dellwood)/SF 3105 (Housely - Stillwater)

- The **Veterans Resilience Project (VRP)** offers eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy to help with the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. VRP is authorized a grant for $300,000 for the next two fiscal years. The grant can be used to give EMDR therapy to Veterans and their spouses as well as current military service members and their spouses.

  Bill origin: HF 1353 (Clardy - Inver Grove Heights)/SF 1509 (Mitchell - Woodbury)

- The **Minnesota Military and Veterans Museum** at Camp Ripley received two appropriations. The first is for $14 million for construction of the new museum located outside Camp Ripley, just west of MN Highway 371. The museum was also authorized a $225,000 grant for museum programming to provide direct services to Veterans and their families.

  Bill origin: (construction funding): HF920 (Kresha - Little Falls)/SF 769 (Howe - Rockville)

  Bill origin: (programming grant): HF 2130 (Coulter - Bloomington)/SF 2181 (Howe - Rockville)

VETERAN INITIATIVES
IN OTHER BILLS

The Legacy bill is an annual piece of legislation which funds projects to preserve water, land and cultural heritage in the state. Included this year was funding for the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War. The program will take place in summer 2024. The Legacy bill also funded Veterans memorials in Forest Lake and Wyoming.

Included in the Transportation bill were two benefits for certain Veterans. The first allows total and permanent service-connected, disabled Veterans exemptions from taxes and fees for registration of cars, motorcycles, trucks and RVs. There is a two-vehicle-per-year limit. The other benefit is that special license plate fees have been eliminated for personalized Gold Star plates.

For surviving spouses who have not received the Disabled Veteran Homestead Market Exclusion following the death of their Veteran, the Omnibus Tax Bill eliminated the two-year application deadline. Surviving spouses who had previously received the exclusion that expired prior to tax year 2020 can now reapply for the exclusion. The change also allows them to apply for the benefit if it did not exist prior to creation of the benefit over a decade ago.

The Omnibus Tax bill also authorized a local sales tax in Richfield that will be used, in part, to fund a Veterans Park Complex for housing needs in the city.

In addition to the funding for the campus renovation at the Minnesota Veterans Home - Hastings, the bonding bill provided MDVA with $12.3 million for asset preservation. This will fund numerous deferred maintenance projects at the State Veterans Homes and Cemeteries.

The Minnesota Medal of Honor Memorial, dedicated in September 2022, is located at the Veterans Service Building on the State Capitol grounds.

SERVING MINNESOTA VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES

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