

# OFFICE OF THE VETERAN ADVOCATE

## ANNUAL REPORT

### Fiscal Year 2025



December 2025

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Bob Notch, Veteran Advocate

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This report meets the requirements of Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 115B, Section 4.

*The veteran advocate shall report annually to the governor, the senate president, the speaker of the house of representatives, the senate and the house committees on ways and means, and the joint committee on veterans and federal affairs on the activities of the office, including, but not limited to, an analysis of the delivery of services to veterans and recommendations for changes in agency procedures which would enable the commonwealth to better provide services to and for veterans and their families and priorities for implementation of those changes to services. This report shall be made public on the website of the veteran advocate.*

## **Executive Summary**

This annual report of the Office of the Veteran Advocate (OVA) for Fiscal Year 2025 (FY2025) is hereby presented to the Governor, Senate President, Speaker of the House of Representatives, State Legislators, and the citizens of Massachusetts. This document outlines the establishment of the OVA, an overview of Massachusetts' veteran population, a summary of OVA actions in FY2025, and an analysis of issues we identified and addressed, in part, in FY2025.



### Establishing the Office of the Veteran Advocate

The OVA was established under Chapter 144 of the Acts of 2022, underscoring its commitment to ensuring that every veteran receives the highest standard of care, access to comprehensive benefits, and the respect and dignity they have earned. We developed our vision and mission through thoughtful and deliberate consideration of the broad responsibilities specified in this enabling statute.

A year-end snapshot of the OVA includes:

- The OVA core staff includes twelve full-time positions to meet statutory responsibilities.
- As of July 1, 2025, the OVA is positioned to minimally meet all of its statutory requirements; however, the agency's capacity to meet the full scope of those requirements is very limited.
- Fiscal Year 2026 funding did not increase from the \$2M budgeted in FY2025. This funding level perpetuates limited capacity and scope for the OVA.



### Massachusetts' Veteran Population

Data from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics estimated a 2024 population of **264,411 veterans in Massachusetts**, mostly over 60 years of age. In the future, the VA estimates this population will continue to decline approximately 3% annually for the next 10 years, while the proportion of women veterans increases from 8.6% to 11.5%.

The OVA continues to work with state partners to identify the number of veterans who are housed by the state. The current estimate, with some agencies not reporting, is 820.



### Actions of the Office

The OVA conducted numerous activities within its mandate to support veterans and their families residing in the Commonwealth. Key activities listed include support to municipal

Veteran Service Officers and state agencies, liaison activities, fatality investigations, and veteran safety cases.



### Analysis of Benefits, Services, and Recognition

While establishing the office and building capacity, the OVA began initial efforts in analyzing strategic issues. The analysis revealed several key areas that warrant attention:

- Continue the Initiative to Update the MA Definitions of Veteran. The HERO Act amended the definition of veteran in MGL c. 115, aligning it with federal language, but it still leaves gaps in eligibility for some veteran programs under other chapters of Massachusetts General Laws. Numerous state veteran benefits and services fall under the primary definition of "veteran" stated in MGL c. 4, which remains unchanged. The OVA recommends legislation, HB3871 and SB2467 to update the foundational definition of a veteran in Chapter 4 to resolve these inconsistencies.
- Support to Uniformed Service Members and Their Families. Massachusetts lacks a single agency responsible for overseeing programs and services for active service members and their families, as well as facilitating their transition from service member to veteran. Various agencies have limited responsibilities, but no centralized oversight of support exists for military families in the state. The OVA recommends expanding its mandate, in bills HB3872 and SB2466 in the 194<sup>th</sup> session of the General Court, to include support for service members and their families.
- Justice Involved Veterans. Veterans incarcerated in Massachusetts may face difficulties accessing physical exams necessary to complete their VA benefits claims. The OVA is taking steps with county jails and the Massachusetts Department of Corrections (DOC) to find initial ways to solve this problem. These efforts are expected to shift a portion of the costs associated with reentry and transitional services from the Commonwealth to the federal government.
- TRICARE Providers. TRICARE, a health care program for military personnel and select veterans, is challenging for many Massachusetts residents to access. The OVA plans to continue its review of the availability and status of TRICARE providers in Massachusetts and gather any potential issues affecting veterans' health care access.
- Data and Analysis. The OVA identified programs, benefits, and services for veterans across all executive agencies and recognized that many collect information and data that could be useful in better understanding the veteran community, their needs, and the effectiveness of programs. With additional funding and agency collaboration, the OVA can serve as an independent third party to gather, protect, and analyze de-identified data to share objective insights regarding veterans and the service and benefit outputs and outcomes.

## **Establishing the Office of the Veteran Advocate (OVA)**



### **Our Vision**

Every veteran in the Commonwealth receives the highest standard of care, enjoys the full spectrum of available benefits, and is treated with unwavering respect and dignity.

### **Our Mission**

The Office of the Veteran Advocate (OVA) safeguards the well-being, dignified treatment, rights and benefits of veterans in the care of, or receiving services from the Commonwealth; ensuring these veterans and their families receive compassionate, timely, safe and effective services.

OVA collaborates to facilitate access to federal and state benefits and conducts thorough investigations to enhance care and services provided to veterans.

### **Origins of the OVA**

The position of Veteran Advocate and the independent Office of the Veteran Advocate in Chapter 115B of Massachusetts General Laws (MGL) were established by Chapter 144 of the Acts of 2022, *AN ACT RELATIVE TO THE GOVERNANCE, STRUCTURE AND CARE OF VETERANS AT THE COMMONWEALTH'S VETERANS' HOMES*. The OVA is charged with multiple responsibilities along with reporting requirements to the governor, legislative leaders and the public. See Appendix B for the list of responsibilities.

### **Understanding the OVA**

Fiscal Year 2025 (FY2025) marks the first full fiscal year for the OVA. On June 30, 2025, the office completed its move into permanent office space, established policies and procedures to meet state agency compliance requirements, and was staffed at a minimum level to fulfill all mandated responsibilities. While the office is considered fully established, it has limited capacity to handle several issues simultaneously and must be selective in its workplan and projects.

The OVA's broad responsibilities extend from the strategic level of the veteran ecosystem down to direct coordination with municipal Veterans Service Officers<sup>1</sup>. With no requirement to directly serve veterans and their families, the OVA serves as an agency-to-agency collaborator

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<sup>1</sup> Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 115 and 115B identify several names for municipal appointees that act to disburse veteran benefits, including veterans' agents, veterans' benefits and services officers, veterans service officers, Directors of Veterans' Services Districts, and the Boston Commissioner for veterans' benefits and services. We use the term veterans service officer to align with common usage.

and advisor, focused on leading changes to improve the lives of veterans and their families in Massachusetts.

The OVA uses peer-reviewed research, relevant data, best practices, recurring observations, and review of laws, regulations, and established policies to evaluate issues and provide trusted recommendations to state leadership and the public on how the Commonwealth may improve its veteran-related programs, benefits, and services.

In the event of a fatality or serious injury to a veteran in the care of the Commonwealth, the OVA conducts investigations and reports to the investigated entity and necessary parties. The focus is to provide recommendations for improvement and assist with implementing corrective actions to prevent further issues for veterans and their families. It is the long-term goal of the Veteran Advocate to build proactive policies, information-sharing procedures and relationships with executive agencies that support prevention of serious injuries or deaths.

### **Office of the Veteran Advocate Staffing**

#### **OVA Staff on June 30, 2025**

Bob Notch – Veteran Advocate	Scott Pitta – Chief of Staff
Danielle Dupont – Financial & Administrative Officer	Cliff Coy – Northeast Region Liaison
Nathan Dufault – Veteran Safety Adv. & Investigator	Truc DeCoste – Southeast Region Liaison
Eve Elliott – General Counsel	Christian DiLuzio – West Region Liaison
Anthony Langone Jr. – Communications Officer	Paul Furbush – Central Region Liaison
Kate Watson – Policy and Research Officer	Elliott Pawlak – Program Analyst
Cody Black - Student Veteran, Part-Time	Thomas Gower - Student Veteran, Part-Time

The general appropriation for the OVA in FY2025 was \$2M, aligned with OVA’s goals to establish an office capable of meeting its statutory requirements by the end of the fiscal year. During the year, the OVA proposed a FY2026 budget of \$3.3M<sup>2</sup> to meet annual cost increases and build capacity to manage the growing demands. While initial proposals from the House and Senate did not align, after a Conference Committee agreement, the General Court approved an appropriation of \$2M for FY2026. This limited budget postpones the OVA’s plan to increase capacity and add a deliberate capability to securely capture and examine veteran related data and information across state agencies.

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<sup>2</sup> “OVA FY2026 Budget Request (3/25/2025)” can be found at <https://www.mass.gov/lists/public-documents>.

## **Massachusetts' Veteran Population**

The OVA believes that maintaining an understanding of the veteran picture in Massachusetts is necessary to assist with near and far-term strategic recommendations to improve programs, benefits and services. We intend to include a review of current and future estimates of the veteran population in each annual report to maintain a common frame of reference. The OVA uses VA's National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (NCVAS)<sup>3</sup> data as its standard. If additionally funded, the OVA could implement a secure data sharing system across state and municipal agencies to generate a more accurate and focused veteran population picture.

# 264,411

Veterans in Massachusetts

## 22,767 (8.6%)

Female Veterans

## 241,644 (91.4%)

Male Veterans

## 166,491 (63.0%)

Veterans over the age of 60



MA<sup>4</sup> & MA Veteran Population<sup>5</sup> 2024

### **Key Observations**

Veterans represent approximately 3.7% of the total population of Massachusetts; one of the smaller minority groups in the state.

Women who served make up less than 10% of the total state veteran population.

Nearly two-thirds of Massachusetts' veterans also qualify for aging services.

This veteran population is based on a more inclusive federal definition of a veteran. The population that meets Massachusetts' definition of veteran in many cases, is smaller.

<sup>3</sup> National Center for Veterans Statistics and Analysis (NCVAS) website, <https://www.va.gov/vetdata/>.

<sup>4</sup> American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables for Massachusetts, Table S101, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2024.S0101?q=massachusetts+2024>.

<sup>5</sup> NCVAS, <https://www.va.gov/vetdata/>.

Massachusetts ranks 5th out of 50 states, with 63.0% of its veteran population age 60 or older.<sup>6</sup> To serve the large aging veteran community in Massachusetts, municipal Veterans Service Officers more often focus on issues like affordable housing and quality healthcare access, rather than the employment needs of younger, wage-earning veterans who are building families – talent that other states such as Wisconsin, Florida, and Indiana are actively recruiting.

The *Transition Overview Packet – Northeast* from the U.S. Army’s Soldier for Life program reports that 70% of those recruited from Massachusetts do not return to the state after leaving the Army.<sup>7</sup> Although similar statistics for other branches are not routinely reported, the Army’s report may indicate similar trends across all Services. This loss of younger veterans is a missed opportunity for the state. Veterans are highly trained, disciplined, and valuable assets to their workplaces and communities. Massachusetts can do more to recruit and share information on state and federal benefits and services with service members before and during their transition. We also note that veterans bring federal dollars to the state. The VA reports \$1.72B in direct expenditures and \$2.36B in indirect expenditures in Massachusetts for veterans.<sup>8</sup>

### Veterans in the Care of the Commonwealth

A critical portion of the veteran population are those who are housed by state agencies. For the OVA, this population of veterans “in the care” of the Commonwealth are a direct oversight and advocacy responsibility. These state facilities include - Veterans Homes at Holyoke and Chelsea (including those in residential living), three state hospitals, 16 correctional institutions, 15 county jails, and several substance abuse treatment programs. While the OVA statute includes some private entities<sup>9</sup> in this oversight responsibility, the OVA has limited access to their veteran counts. This table shows June 2025, reported “in-residence” veterans across agencies.

Public Facility Type <sup>10</sup>	Veterans
State Correctional Facilities	381
County Jails	91 <sup>11</sup>
State Hospitals	NR <sup>12</sup>
Substance Use Disorder Treatment Programs	NR
Chelsea Veterans Home <sup>13</sup>	231
Holyoke Veterans Home	117
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>820</b>

<sup>6</sup> NCVAS 6L\_VetPop2023\_State\_NCVAS using the 9/30/2024 data.

<sup>7</sup> Transition Overview Packet – Northeast FY24 is at <https://soldierforlife.army.mil/Resources/Transition-Research>.

<sup>8</sup> VA Fiscal Year 2024 Expenditure Tables at <https://www.va.gov/vetdata/expenditures.asp>.

<sup>9</sup> The OVA considers state grant, contract, or earmark funding recipients, who receive funding through state executive offices, as the private entities that fall within OVA oversight and advocacy responsibilities.

<sup>10</sup> These facilities have fluctuating veteran populations; the estimate represents a June 2025 point-in-time count.

<sup>11</sup> This count does not include six counties – Berkshire, Essex, Franklin, Middlesex, Plymouth and Suffolk. The OVA is working to obtain additional data from county jails.

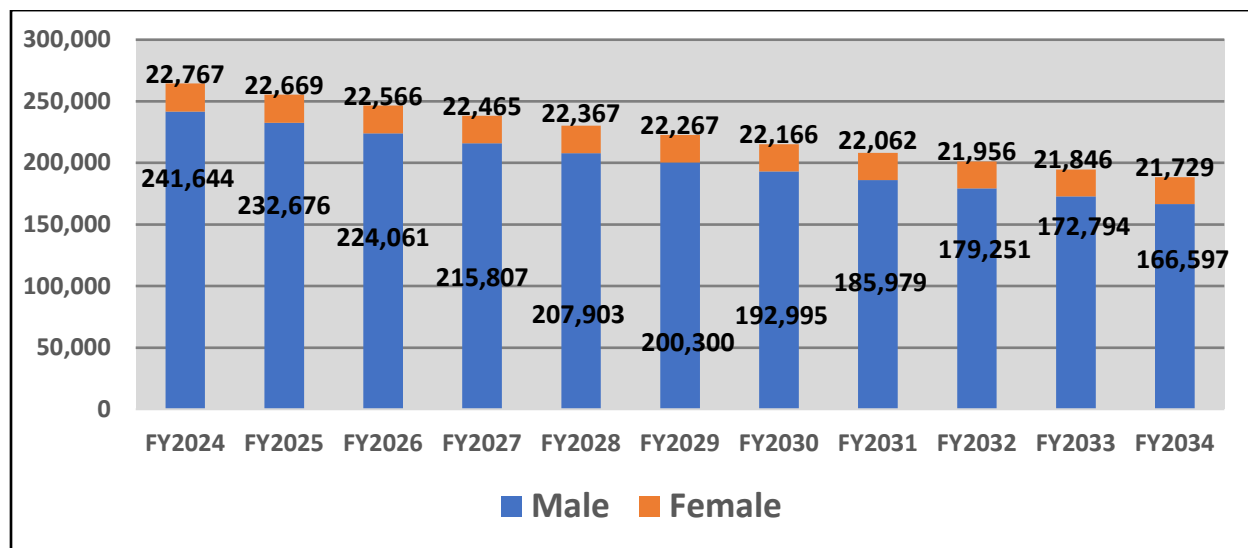
<sup>12</sup> NR denotes no report from these facilities.

<sup>13</sup> This count includes the Chelsea Veterans Home (121) and the domiciliary (110).



## Future Considerations

The following chart shows the predicted continuing decline of the veteran population in Massachusetts over the next 10 years. It is important to consider how this decline may impact Massachusetts' labor force, the amount of federal dollars entering the state linked to veteran benefits and services, and the demand for state funded benefits and services. Policy makers should be aware of this significant reduction as it relates to the number of veterans who call Massachusetts "home".



MA Veteran Population 2024-2034 by Gender<sup>14</sup>

### Key Observations

Massachusetts is projected to continue to drop in veteran population with a total of 76,085 (29%) fewer veterans from 2024 to 2034. By gender, this is a 31.1% decrease for men and 4.6% decrease for women.

While the female veteran population decreases slightly, its proportion of the total number of veterans continues to rise – from 8.6% in 2024 to 11.5% in 2034.

The veteran population is expected to drop below 200,000 in 2033.

While the veteran population estimate declines, the 2035 Massachusetts general population estimate grows to 7,122,364<sup>15</sup>. That year, veterans will likely represent less than 2.5% of the population in Massachusetts.

<sup>14</sup> Population estimates provided by the VA NCVAS.

<sup>15</sup> 2035 MA population projection provided by the UMass Donahue Institute, <https://donahue.umass.edu/business-groups/economic-public-policy-research/massachusetts-population-estimates-program/population-projections>.

## **Actions of the Office**

During FY2025, in addition to establishing the office, the OVA accomplished numerous mission related activities. This section provides a short synopsis of the key actions.

- Hired four regional liaisons whose regions align with the Massachusetts Veterans Service Officers Association (MVSOA) regional breakdown - West, Central, Northeast and Southeast. These liaisons provide direct support to the Veterans Service Agent/Officer and liaise with state and federal agencies to facilitate service and benefit delivery to veterans and their family members.
  - Since January 2025, they had 368 engagements with Veterans Service Officers and 50 engagements with veteran-supporting community partners across Massachusetts.
  - Planned and coordinated two Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) training events for a total of 20 Veterans Service Officers and their staff regarding state public assistance benefits for income-eligible veterans.
- OVA leadership conducted an introduction and listening session with the MVSOA Southeast Region Veterans Service Officers.
- Launched an OVA-funded mental wellness pilot program providing Veterans Service Officers 24/7 access to a telehealth platform. The platform allows users to remain anonymous during group sessions and provides unlimited access to wellness tools. Several Veterans Service Officers mentioned this support has been a long-standing request. The Massachusetts National Guard is implementing this same platform for its service members.
- Partnered with the Massachusetts Municipal Association to provide a “Lunch and Learn” session informing municipal leaders of the value of Veterans Service Officers and the OVA’s responsibility to aid and coordinate at the local level.
- Assisted a town Veterans Service Officer in addressing critical issues regarding inadequate and unsafe living conditions for veterans in a local boarding house. See Appendix C for details.
- Hosted an Author Talk in coordination with the State Library. Matthew J. Louis, author of *Mission Transition* and *Hiring Veterans*, provided insights into the best practices for hiring veterans. The event attracted 70 attendees (50 in-person and 20 online).
  - Prior to the event, the OVA hosted a meeting with the author and the Executive Vice President of the Massachusetts Business Roundtable and held a discussion with senior staff of the Massachusetts Human Resources Division.
  - Following this event, the OVA provided veteran recruiting advice and assistance to Human Resources Division, Civil Service and Department of Corrections.

- Connected with the Department of Public Health (DPH) Veteran Employee Resource Group (VERG) to participate and facilitate sharing of insights and information to state-employed veterans and their family members.
- Completed 19 of 21 reported veteran safety cases and 9 of 10 reported fatality investigations.
  - Of the 19 veteran safety cases: eight were unfounded, six were outside of OVA's authority, and five were referred to external agencies better suited to assist.
  - The OVA completed one fatality report identifying no fault by the organization and minor systemic recommendations.
- Launched an agency website ([www.mass.gov/OVA](http://www.mass.gov/OVA)) and social media accounts on Facebook, LinkedIn, and X to provide benefits and services information and highlight events for veterans.
- Completed initial mapping of state agencies with legislated responsibilities to deliver programs, benefits or services that impact veterans and their families. Ten of eleven state Executive Offices have responsibility for some type of veteran programs, benefits and services.
- Established liaison relationships with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, the VA Experience Office (Veterans Resources Network), the Veterans Benefits Administration Boston Regional Office, VA Vet Centers, VA Boston Healthcare System, VA New England Healthcare System, and VA Western and Central Massachusetts Healthcare System.
- Established liaison relationships with the Department of Labor VETS and MassHire to share information regarding veteran employment in Massachusetts and gather best practices from around the country.
- Established liaison relationships with the Small Business Administration, the New England Veteran Business Owners Outreach Center (VBOC), and the Massachusetts Veterans Chamber of Commerce to share information and develop initiatives for veteran business owners.
- Established a liaison connection with the Office of the Secretary of Defense Personnel and Readiness; Military Personnel Policy, Officer and Enlisted Personnel Management to discuss military transition issues, funeral honors, and share information.
- Established an informal working group including the Department of Defense-State Liaison Office for New England and the Massachusetts National Guard.

- Established an informal policy working group including state leaders from the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Massachusetts Veterans Service Officer Association, Military Officers Association of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Vietnam Veterans of America.
- Established an informal working group with Dept. Of Corrections and County Jails to improve access to VA benefits and services for veterans involved in the justice system.
- Tracking 244 veteran-related House and Senate bills in the current session. Providing research and information to legislators when pertinent and as requested.

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### Special Case – Licensed Practical Nurse<sup>16</sup>

*A Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) and Air Force National Guard member moved to Massachusetts but was denied state licensure despite completing 2.5 years of military training, passing the NCLEX, and holding a Missouri license. Massachusetts Board of Nursing did not recognize her military education or accept her Certificate of Completion. The Office of the Veteran Advocate (OVA) spent nearly four months working with experts to validate her credentials, ultimately securing her license through legislative advocacy.*

*The OVA sees medical professional licensure for service members, veterans and their spouses as an area for collaborative review with the Department of Public Health. Reducing barriers may help fill some of the 58,000 open healthcare jobs in the Commonwealth.*

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- Developed four dashboard tools to gain better visualization of the veteran population, benefits, and services across Massachusetts.
  - *Value of a Veteran* – depicts an estimated financial return on investment for municipality benefits provided to veterans; promotes a fiscal rationale why veteran residents are desirable. Available to trained government employees and select working group members.
  - *Chapter 115 Benefits* – dashboard depiction of state funded annuities and financial assistance benefits by municipality. Available to trained government employees and select working group members.
  - *Veterans Service Officer Office Hours* – time lapse depiction of municipal office hours for veteran assistance. Available by request.
  - *Government Resources Map* – a geographical locator map for federal, state, and local veteran-serving offices. Publicly available at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/government-resources-map>.

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<sup>16</sup> This case was brought to the OVA as a request to assist a state agency after other options were unsuccessful.

## **Analysis of Benefits, Services and Recognition**

### **Continue the Initiative to Update the MA Definitions of Veteran**

**Observation.** The HERO Act amended the definition of veteran in MGL Chapter 115 to be more inclusive and aligned with the federal definition. While necessary, this change provides only limited inclusion and creates inconsistency across MGL for other Commonwealth veteran benefits and services. The foundational definition of veteran, found in MGL Chapter 4, Section 7, Clause Forty-third, remains unchanged and sets the base eligibility requirement for nearly all benefits and services not included in Chapter 115.

**Discussion.** Work on this issue began in the 193<sup>rd</sup> session of Massachusetts General Court and continues into the 194<sup>th</sup> session. The OVA supports bills HB3871 and SB2467 which would provide consistency across state and federal law regarding uniformed service members and expand inclusion of Reserve and National Guard service. Massachusetts' current legal definitions for many benefits and services do not include former Space Force personnel or commissioned officers of the U.S. Public Health Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration who are included at the federal level. The OVA has identified at least six locations in MGL where the term veteran is defined. These are listed in Appendix D. Chapters of MGL without a specified definition of veteran are subject to the Chapter 4 definition as written.

**Ongoing Work.** The OVA is providing research and information to the Joint Committee on Veterans and Federal Affairs as it considers reporting on bills related to the foundational definition of a veteran in Chapter 4 of Massachusetts General Laws.

### **Support to Uniformed Service Members and Their Families**

**Observation.** Through assessments of Massachusetts General Laws, the OVA has identified no agency with directed collaborative oversight of programs, benefits and services to service members and their families.

**Discussion.** Individuals cannot become veterans without first serving as a member of the uniformed services. To best serve service members transitioning to veteran status and civilian life, the Commonwealth should provide support to them before the transition is complete. MGL does not provide authority to any agency to facilitate a successful service member transition or a single agency to holistically support military families residing in Massachusetts. Several agencies have limited authority to support service members and their families in modest ways.

- EOVS - responsibility to share state civilian licensure and certification requirements with military members.
- Massachusetts National Guard - responsibilities to provide benefits and services to its members and their families and provide a military spouse liaison.

- Department of Occupational Licensure - responsibilities to assist in professional licensure for military members and their spouses.
- Bureau of Health Professions Licensure - responsibilities to assist in professional licensure for military members and their spouses.
- Department of Elementary and Secondary Education - responsibility for the Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission, among other matters.

As with veterans, a support and oversight role can assist in providing a strategic view of supporting military families as well as developing early transition support. Bills HB3872 and SB2466 in the 194<sup>th</sup> session of the General Court propose expanding the OVA's responsibilities to support current and transitioning service members and their families.

**Recommendation.** Expand the OVA's mandate for veterans and their families to include corresponding responsibilities to service members and their families. Include funding in future budgets to support the expansion of responsibilities.

### Justice Involved Veterans

**Observation.** Law Student fellows at the Harvard Legal Services Clinic raised concerns that veterans incarcerated in Massachusetts may not have access to physical examinations to complete their claim for benefits through the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

**Discussion.** Work on this issue began in the last half of FY2025. If a veteran is incarcerated, they are still eligible to submit a federal disability claim, yet they may not have access to physical examinations required to complete the process. Completing the veteran's claim early during incarceration may result in some healthcare cost transfer from the state to the VA and is expected to enhance the veteran's reentry to society. VA disability compensation can reduce the amount of Chapter 115 financial assistance needed. At the federal level, the VA and Bureau of Prisons have shown a path forward by signing a memorandum of agreement to allow physical examinations to complete the claims process.

**Ongoing Work.** The OVA is leading collaborative efforts with the Department of Corrections and County Jails to conduct a proof of concept for facilitating VA disability ratings. Work continues in developing a collaborative examination of benefits and services for justice-involved veterans in the Commonwealth.

### TRICARE Providers

**Observation.** A TRICARE-eligible veteran contacted the OVA and reported that their primary care provider no longer accepts TRICARE health insurance. This veteran had been unable to find

a provider within a reasonable distance that accepts TRICARE, leaving them with extremely limited options or without a provider.

**Discussion.** TRICARE, a health care program of the US Department of Defense, provides coverage for military personnel, select veterans, and their families. As reported to the OVA, this benefit seems elusive for many eligible veterans and service members due to limited providers accepting the program in Massachusetts. Due to limited staff, the OVA was unable to complete this review in FY2025 and plans to continue its efforts in FY2026.

**Ongoing Work.** The OVA is reviewing the availability and status of health care providers for eligible veterans and service members living in Massachusetts using TRICARE.

## **Data and Analysis**

**Observation.** As the OVA identified programs, benefits, and services provided to veterans by executive agencies, we discovered that many collect information and data that could be useful in understanding the veteran community, their needs, and the effectiveness of programs.

**Discussion.** The OVA believes that efforts to consolidate de-identified information from multiple agencies are possible and more insightful when merged. With proper funding and agency collaboration, the OVA can serve as an independent third party to gather, protect, analyze, and share objective insights regarding veterans and the service and benefit outputs and outcomes.

**Recommendation.** Legislation directing information sharing and funding to support data warehousing, analytical tools, and professional staff to the OVA would help expedite these efforts.

## **Conclusion**

During FY2025 the OVA completed base establishment of the office and completed an initial catalog of statewide benefits, services, and forms of recognition for veterans and their families in Massachusetts. Concurrently, the OVA leaned into its statutory responsibilities of examining systems, aiding and coordinating with Veterans Service Officers, conducting fatality investigations, and participating in groups focused on improving benefits and services.

The latter part of this report identifies five specific issues that relate to the delivery of services to veterans and includes ongoing actions and recommendations which may enable the Commonwealth to better provide services to and for veterans and their families. The OVA supports data sharing and analysis as a key component to future recommendations for improvements.

As the OVA begins FY2026, we are shifting from a split focus of establishing the agency and statutory responsibilities, to a defined strategic plan aligned with our mission. Based on initial assessments, there are a significant number of opportunities for this office to help improve the lives of veterans and their families residing in the Commonwealth, specifically in the areas of benefits, housing and employment.

*We are their voice when they are not heard. We are their presence when they are not seen.*

*Vox Veteranorum*



## Appendix A – Glossary and Acronyms

**DOC** - Massachusetts Department of Corrections

**DPH** - Massachusetts Department of Public Health

**DTA** – Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance

**EOTSS** - Executive Office of Technology Services and Security

**EOVS** - Executive Office of Veterans Services in Massachusetts

**FYxxxx** - fiscal year for Massachusetts government which begins July 1<sup>st</sup> and ends June 30<sup>th</sup>. The numbers following FY represent the calendar year of the June end date

**MGL** - Massachusetts General Laws

**MMA** - Massachusetts Municipal Association; a nonpartisan trade association for the municipal of Massachusetts

**MVSOA** - Massachusetts Veterans Service Officers Association; a Massachusetts nonprofit member organization comprised of staff (Directors, Veterans Service Officers, Investigators, and Administrative Assistants) of the Veterans Services offices across the Commonwealth

**OVA** - Office of the Veteran Advocate

**VA** - US Department of Veterans Affairs

**VBOC** - Veteran Business Owners Outreach Center

## Appendix B – MGL Chapter 115B, Section 2

### *Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 115B, § 2*

There shall be an office of the veteran advocate, which shall be independent of any supervision or control by any executive agency.

The office shall:

- (i)** ensure that veterans in the care of the commonwealth or receiving services under the supervision of an executive agency in any public or private facility receive humane and dignified treatment at all times, with full respect for the veterans' personal dignity and right to privacy;
- (ii)** ensure that veterans in the care of the commonwealth or receiving services under the supervision of an executive agency in any public or private facility receive timely, safe and effective services;
- (iii)** aid and coordinate with local veterans service officers to ensure veterans receive all available state and federal benefits;
- (iv)** examine, on a system-wide basis, the care and services that executive agencies provide veterans;
- (v)** advise the public and those at the highest levels of state government about how the commonwealth may improve its services to and for veterans and their families;
- (vi)** develop internal procedures appropriate for the effective performance of the office's duties;
- (vii)** act as a liaison to all state agencies providing services to veterans to ensure each veteran receives necessary services and care;
- (viii)** assist in developing procedures for the executive agencies to best serve the veteran community;
- (ix)** act as a liaison to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs and all other relevant federal agencies to advocate on behalf of the veterans of the commonwealth; and
- (x)** investigate incidents where a veteran suffered a fatality, near fatality or serious bodily or emotional injury while receiving services from an executive agency, or circumstances which result in a reasonable belief that an executive agency or a constituent agency failed in its duty to care for a veteran and, as a result, the veteran was at imminent risk of, or suffered serious bodily or emotional injury or death.

## Appendix C – Veterans Service Officer Support Case

In April 2024, the EOVS forwarded a report to the OVA regarding concerns of possible mistreatment of veterans in a facility locally known as the town "veterans home". The OVA made initial contact with the individual reporting their concerns and began gathering additional information. It was soon discovered that the facility was owned and operated by a private company which did not receive any state funding. With no nexus to an executive office of the Commonwealth, the only statutory options for OVA involvement were to aid and coordinate with the town Veterans Service Officer and to liaison and assist state agencies with jurisdiction.

The facility was previously recognized as a VA-assisted Community Residential Care (CRC) facility. The VA CRC Program provides support for veterans who do not need hospital or nursing home care but cannot live alone due to medical or mental health conditions. In October 2023, the owning entity of the facility voluntarily ended its participation in the CRC program. Prior to this, the home was placed on probationary status by the VA due to untreated bed bugs. With the facility's participation in the CRC program ending, the VA offered the residents alternative placement. At the completion of this process, four veterans decided to stay.

Within months following the end of the facility's participation in the CRC Program, the remaining veterans complained to the local Veterans Service Officer and local community service providers of a drastic reduction in services and unsanitary conditions.

Once involved, the OVA liaised with local officials regarding the conditions of buildings on the property. Town health officials and building inspectors subsequently inspected the property resulting in numerous citations to the owner for building safety and sanitary code violations. Those issues were not resolved within required deadlines, and the town filed an enforcement case against the property owner of the facility in housing court.

Over the course of a year, additional veteran residents were accepted at the property, reaching a total of eight. The OVA enlisted the assistance of multiple state agencies and local service providers for these veterans. All could only provide services, referrals and housing assistance, which eventually reduced the number of veteran residents to three. Those three veterans choose to remain in the house.

The OVA referred the matter to the Attorney General's Office and remains concerned for the veterans that continue to reside at the property. The OVA continues to support the local Veterans Service Officer and community service providers with relocation assistance for the remaining veterans as requested.

### Key Observations:

1. This privately owned facility, although promising supportive services, does not fall under any licensing and oversight requirements, unlike other residential care facilities.
2. While many agencies assisted with services or referrals to other providers, we found among them that only the Attorney General's Office and city health and building

inspectors hold enforcement authority requiring the owner/landlord to provide veteran tenants with safe and sanitary housing.

3. Municipalities may struggle with unexpected costs within limited budgets to follow through on legal action to hold owners/landlords accountable.
4. Without other viable alternatives, some of the veterans choose to remain in these unsafe and unhealthy living conditions.
5. This case demonstrates obstacles aging veterans in the community can face, and why other residential care models should be explored.
6. This case demonstrates how community service providers and government agencies successfully worked together to support these veterans.

## Appendix D – Definitions of Veteran in Massachusetts General Laws

### **Chapter 4, Section 7, Clause Forty-third**

Forty-third, "Veteran" shall mean (1) any person, (a) whose last discharge or release from his wartime service as defined herein, was under honorable conditions and who (b) served in the army, navy, marine corps, coast guard, or air force of the United States, or on full time national guard duty under Titles 10 or 32 of the United States Code or under sections 38, 40 and 41 of chapter 33 for not less than 90 days active service, at least 1 day of which was for wartime service; provided, however, than any person who so served in wartime and was awarded a service-connected disability or a Purple Heart, or who died in such service under conditions other than dishonorable, shall be deemed to be a veteran notwithstanding his failure to complete 90 days of active service; (2) a member of the American Merchant Marine who served in armed conflict between December 7, 1941 and December 31, 1946, and who has received honorable discharges from the United States Coast Guard, Army, or Navy; (3) any person (a) whose last discharge from active service was under honorable conditions, and who (b) served in the army, navy, marine corps, coast guard, or air force of the United States for not less than 180 days active service; provided, however, that any person who so served and was awarded a service-connected disability or who died in such service under conditions other than dishonorable, shall be deemed to be a veteran notwithstanding his failure to complete 180 days of active service.

"Wartime service" shall mean service performed by a "Spanish War veteran", a "World War I veteran", a "World War II veteran", a "Korean veteran", a "Vietnam veteran", a "Lebanese peace keeping force veteran", a "Grenada rescue mission veteran", a "Panamanian intervention force veteran", a "Persian Gulf veteran", or a member of the "WAAC" as defined in this clause during any of the periods of time described herein or for which such medals described below are awarded.

"Spanish War veteran" shall mean any veteran who performed such wartime service between February fifteenth, eighteen hundred and ninety-eight and July fourth, nineteen hundred and two.

"World War I veteran" shall mean any veteran who (a) performed such wartime service between April sixth, nineteen hundred and seventeen and November eleventh, nineteen hundred and eighteen, or (b) has been awarded the World War I Victory Medal, or (c) performed such service between March twenty-fifth, nineteen hundred and seventeen and August fifth, nineteen hundred and seventeen, as a Massachusetts National Guardsman.

"World War II veteran" shall mean any veteran who performed such wartime service between September 16, 1940 and July 25, 1947, and was awarded a World War II Victory Medal, except that for the purposes of chapter 31 it shall mean all active service between the dates of September 16, 1940 and June 25, 1950.

"Korean veteran" shall mean any veteran who performed such wartime service between June twenty-fifth, nineteen hundred and fifty and January thirty-first, nineteen hundred and fifty-

five, both dates inclusive, and any person who has received the Korea Defense Service Medal as established in the Bob Stump National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2003.

"Korean emergency" shall mean the period between June twenty-fifth, nineteen hundred and fifty and January thirty-first, nineteen hundred and fifty-five, both dates inclusive.

"Vietnam veteran" shall mean (1) any person who performed such wartime service during the period commencing August fifth, nineteen hundred and sixty-four and ending on May seventh, nineteen hundred and seventy-five, both dates inclusive, or (2) any person who served at least one hundred and eighty days of active service in the armed forces of the United States during the period between February first, nineteen hundred and fifty-five and August fourth, nineteen hundred and sixty-four; provided, however, that for the purposes of the application of the provisions of chapter thirty-one, it shall also include all active service between the dates May seventh, nineteen hundred and seventy-five and June fourth, nineteen hundred and seventy-six; and provided, further, that any such person who served in said armed forces during said period and was awarded a service-connected disability or a Purple Heart, or who died in said service under conditions other than dishonorable, shall be deemed to be a veteran notwithstanding his failure to complete one hundred and eighty days of active service.

"Lebanese peace keeping force veteran" shall mean any person who performed such wartime service and received a campaign medal for such service during the period commencing August twenty-fifth, nineteen hundred and eighty-two and ending when the President of the United States shall have withdrawn armed forces from the country of Lebanon.

"Grenada rescue mission veteran" shall mean any person who performed such wartime service and received a campaign medal for such service during the period commencing October twenty-fifth, nineteen hundred and eighty-three to December fifteenth, nineteen hundred and eighty-three, inclusive.

"Panamanian intervention force veteran" shall mean any person who performed such wartime service and received a campaign medal for such service during the period commencing December twentieth, nineteen hundred and eighty-nine and ending January thirty-first, nineteen hundred and ninety.

"Persian Gulf veteran" shall mean any person who performed such wartime service during the period commencing August second, nineteen hundred and ninety and ending on a date to be determined by presidential proclamation or executive order and concurrent resolution of the Congress of the United States.

"WAAC" shall mean any woman who was discharged and so served in any corps or unit of the United States established for the purpose of enabling women to serve with, or as auxiliary to, the armed forces of the United States and such woman shall be deemed to be a veteran.

None of the following shall be deemed to be a "veteran":

(a) Any person who at the time of entering into the armed forces of the United States had declared his intention to become a subject or citizen of the United States and withdrew his

intention under the provisions of the act of Congress approved July ninth, nineteen hundred and eighteen.

(b) Any person who was discharged from the said armed forces on his own application or solicitation by reason of his being an enemy alien.

(c) Any person who has been proved guilty of willful desertion.

(d) Any person whose only service in the armed forces of the United States consists of his service as a member of the coast guard auxiliary or as a temporary member of the coast guard reserve, or both.

(e) Any person whose last discharge or release from the armed forces is dishonorable.

"Armed forces" shall include army, navy, marine corps, air force and coast guard.

"Active service in the armed forces", as used in this clause shall not include active duty for training in the army national guard or air national guard or active duty for training as a reservist in the armed forces of the United States.

### **Chapter 15E, Section 1**

"Veteran", a person who served in the uniformed services and who was discharged or released from service under conditions other than dishonorable.

### **Chapter 31, Section 1**

"Veteran", any person who:

(1) comes within the definition of a veteran appearing in the forty-third clause of section seven of chapter four; or,

(2) comes within such definition except that instead of having performed "wartime service" as defined therein, he has been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor or one of the following campaign badges: Second Nicaraguan Campaign, Yangtze Service, Navy Occupation Service, Army of Occupation or Medal for Humane Action; or,

(3) is a person eligible to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor or one of the campaign badges enumerated in clause (2) of this paragraph and who presents proof of such eligibility which is satisfactory to the administrator.

A veteran shall not include active duty for training in the army national guard or air national guard or active duty for training as a reservist in the armed forces of the United States.

"Wartime service", the same meaning as specified in the forty-third clause of section seven of chapter four, or active service in the armed forces of the United States in any campaign for

which an award was made of any of the campaign badges enumerated in the definition of "veteran" in this section.

### **Chapter 32, Section 1**

"Veteran", any person who (a) is a veteran as defined in clause Forty-third of section seven of chapter four; or (b) meets all the requirements of said clause Forty-third except that instead of performing wartime service as so defined he has been awarded one of the campaign badges enumerated in the definition of "Veteran" in section one of chapter thirty-one; or (c) meets all the requirements of said clause Forty-third except that instead of performing ninety days' active service, including ten days' wartime service, he has performed active service in the armed forces of the United States at any time between April sixth, nineteen hundred and seventeen and November eleventh, nineteen hundred and eighteen, inclusive.

### **Chapter 115, Section 1 (as amended by the HERO Act on August 8, 2024)**

"Veteran", any person who (a) is a veteran as defined in clause Forty-third of section 7 of chapter 4; or (b) served on active duty in the armed forces for at least 90 days and whose last discharge or release was under conditions other than dishonorable; or (c) served on active duty, to include active duty solely for training purposes, in the armed forces, and was awarded a service-connected disability or who died in such service under conditions other than dishonorable; or (d) served in the national guard or as a reservist in any branch of the armed forces, including active duty solely for training purposes, and was awarded a service-connected disability or who died in such service under conditions other than dishonorable; or (e) is determined to be a veteran according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; provided, that in any case, the service of such person qualified under clause (a) through clause (e) was entered into or served in Massachusetts, or such person has resided in the commonwealth for 1 day, except for the purpose of determining the residential eligibility of a deceased veteran's dependents.

### **Chapter 121B, Section 1**

"Veteran", any person who is a veteran as defined in clause Forty-third of section seven of chapter four. The word "veteran" as used herein shall also include the spouse, surviving spouse, parent or other dependent of such person.