



THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
OFFICE OF THE VETERAN ADVOCATE
100 HANCOCK STREET, 2ND FLOOR
QUINCY, MA 02171

March 25, 2025

The Honorable Michael J. Rodrigues
24 Beacon St., Room 212
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Aaron M. Michlewitz
24 Beacon St., Room 243
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Chair Rodrigues, Chair Michlewitz, and Joint Committee Members,

The Office of the Veteran Advocate (OVA) submits this proposal for nearly \$3.3M Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26) funding with a focus on generating capacity to meet the growing workload of supporting Massachusetts' veterans and their families. Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) marks the first full fiscal year of operations for the OVA. In this year the office has grown to meet the requirements specified in MGL chapter 115B, section 2 (Enclosure 1). From those requirements, we distilled the following mission statement.

OVA 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, 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.

The total OVA appropriation for FY25 is \$2M. By managing the hiring of full and part-time staff and limiting expenditures on technology tools and larger projects, we will keep expenses within this cap for FY25. Despite the OVA's modest initial budget, the OVA achieved several remarkable accomplishments in its first year. While there are many other examples, a few of these accomplishments include:

- Assisted a municipality in efforts to protect vulnerable veterans from the predatory practices of an absent and uncaring landlord.
- Aided a state grant recipient nonprofit by identifying potentially harmful lapses within its operations and assisting with identifying remedial measures.
- Coordinated with the US Dept. of Veterans Affairs on several enforcement and investigatory measures such as pursuing illegal "claim sharks" and assisting with examinations of professional ethics violations.
- Developed valuable tools to advise and assist decision makers at all levels of government, better assist municipal veteran service agents to identify available housing for veterans, and provide mapping of government-provided veterans resources throughout the Commonwealth.

The successes outlined above, along with other agency initiatives, have increased the OVA's visibility and corresponding demands for assistance from entities at all levels. This increase currently exceeds our ability to meet the demand in a timely manner. The current FY26 H1 Budget (line 0960-1000) proposes no increase over FY25 funding for OVA, resulting in a FY26 proposal of \$2M. This amount does not provide a minimal maintenance increase necessary to meet inflation, nor does it afford the capacity to extend operations to meet growing workload demands. Our analysis determined that an increase in staff to meet the growing workload, a cost increase for a long-term office lease, and technology cost

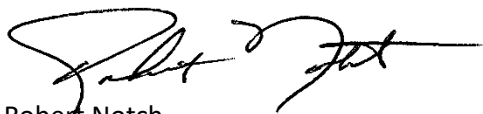
increases require an appropriation of nearly \$3.3M for FY26. Enclosure 2 provides a breakdown of planned expenditures.

The three specific areas mentioned above are a significant portion of the proposed budget increase for FY26. The following subparagraphs provide additional detail in each of these areas.

- Full-time Staffing. While current staffing provides a minimum capability to accomplish statutory responsibilities, most full-time personnel manage two or more areas of responsibility (e.g. finance, human resources and office administration roles are assigned to one person) and there are no additional staff to handle workloads when someone is out for a prolonged period. This FY26 proposal includes the capacity to manage the growing workload and provide continuity in times of personnel absences. Personnel costs account for approximately 75% of the FY26 budget.
- Office Space. The OVA is currently sub-leasing 1,000 square feet of space through the Executive Office of Health and Human Services. With the imminent expiration of that lease, the OVA completed the process to independently lease 3,000 square feet of space. This new space adequately supports the OVA under a hybrid telework plan. The independent lease, while at a lower rate, increases costs nearly three-fold, plus adds copy/print and other recurring administrative costs. Independent office space accounts for 13% of the FY26 budget.
- Technology. The Executive Office of Technology Services and Security provides all technological support for the OVA. In FY26, their chargeback fees are increasing to over double what we currently pay. These increases, and the addition of new staff, account for 8.6% of the FY26 budget.

With adequate funding, the Office of the Veteran Advocate is committed to examining existing systems, supporting local veteran service agents, and advising you and the public about how the commonwealth may improve its services for veterans and their families. We will continue to build relationships with federal and state agencies to best serve the veteran community. We welcome the opportunity to advise and assist members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means in reviewing OVA funding needs and the needs of veterans and their families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robert Notch', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Robert Notch
Veteran Advocate

Enclosures as stated.

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Enclosure 1. OVA responsibilities per MGL chapter 115B, section 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.

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,

- a. 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
- b. priorities for implementation of those changes to services.

The report shall be made public on the website of the veteran advocate.

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Enclosure 2. Office of the Veteran Advocate FY26 Budget Proposal

	FY26 Request	Explanation
Regular Employee Compensation	\$ 2,250,676	Hire 8 additional personnel to meet workload demands
Regular Employee Related Expenses	\$ 51,250	Travel and professional education
Special Employees	\$ 100,000	Paid interns/fellows; research projects
Payroll Tax/Fringe	\$ 36,461	Proportional increase to employees on staff
Administrative Expenses	\$ 190,637	Office expenses and operational software subscriptions
Facility Operational Expenses	\$ 10,000	Supplies for new office space
Energy Costs and Space Rental	\$ 129,303	Larger space long-term lease
Consultant Services to Departments	\$ 100,000	Consultant work
Operational Services	\$ 30,000	Training and auxiliary services
Equipment Purchase, Lease & Rental	\$ 105,000	Office needs; copier/printer, etc.
Information Technology Non-Payroll Expenses	\$ 282,800	IT hardware & software for staff; EOTSS cost increases double
Total	\$ 3,286,127	