



The **BLUF**

Bottom Line Up Front

Executive Office of Veterans Services
Office of Engagement Quarterly Newsletter

WINTER 2024 – 2025



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A Message from the Assistant Secretary

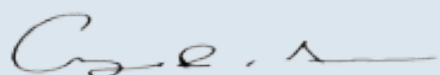
As we approach the close of another remarkable year, we extend our heartfelt gratitude for your unwavering dedication to supporting veterans across Massachusetts. Every day, you ensure those who have served our country receive the benefits, care, and respect they deserve.

Your work doesn't just make a difference—it changes lives. Whether you guide veterans through the complexities of benefits applications, advocate for their unique needs, or simply offer support when they need it, your commitment exemplifies passion and professionalism. Thanks to you, veterans across our state face life's challenges with dignity, hope, and the assurance that they are not alone.

The BLUF Newsletter celebrates and supports your vital work. The EOVS Engagement Team created it to keep you informed of the latest resources and best practices while recognizing the incredible contributions you make every day.

You are the backbone of the veteran community, and we are honored to stand alongside you in service to those who have served us all.

Wishing you a safe and happy holiday season.
Let's go the extra mile!



CORY R. AHONEN
ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR ENGAGEMENT & OUTREACH



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
**EXECUTIVE OFFICE of
VETERANS SERVICES**

EOVS QUARTERLY RECAP

SECTION

02

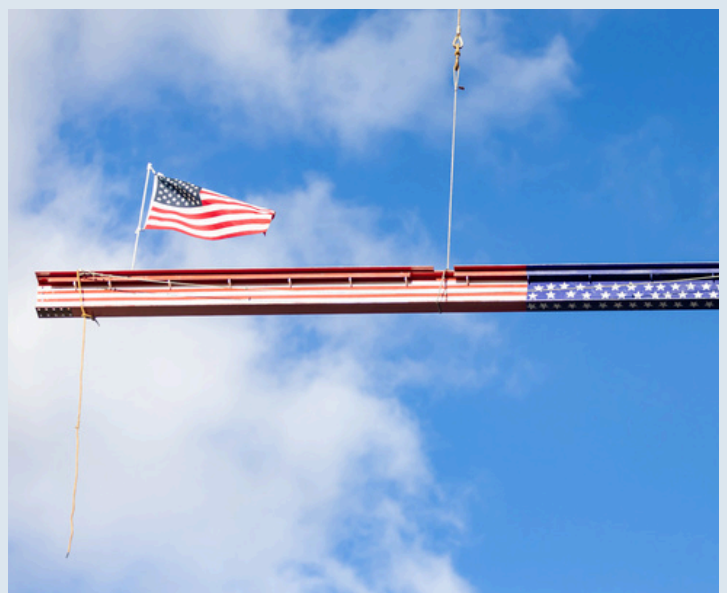
Dive into our quarterly highlights, including Veterans Day celebrations, community events, holiday festivities, and more!

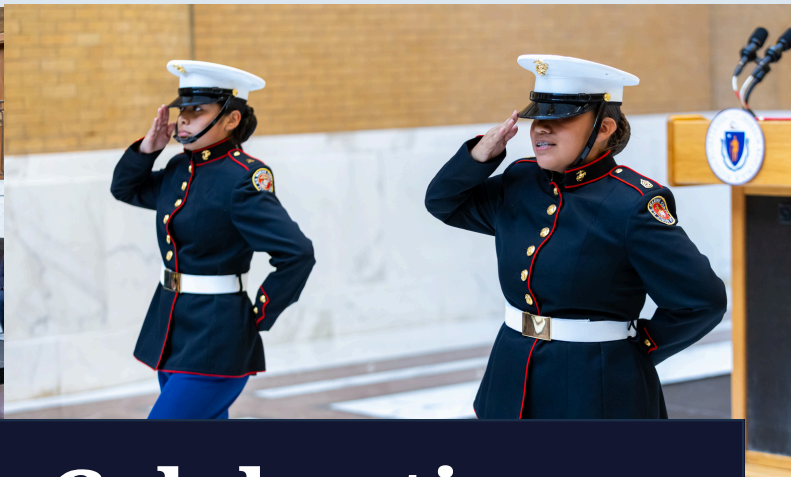




National Veterans and Military Families Month

In honor of National Veterans and Military Families Month, EOVS took part in a range of events and announcements across the state, including the annual Veterans Day celebration with Governor Maura Healey, fostering community connections and honoring the remarkable contributions of Veterans and their families over the past year.





Veterans Day Celebration at the State House

Massachusetts hosted its annual Veterans Day Ceremony at the State House on November 11, featuring keynote speaker Andrew McCawley of the New England Center and Home for Veterans and performances by the Lynn English High School Marine Corps JROTC.



Governor Healey and Deputy Secretary Gayle-Bennett presented the Tom Hudner Award to **Marvin Howard of Agawam** for his extraordinary courage and selflessness. A U.S. Air Force veteran and longtime volunteer at Agawam Cemetery, Marvin has rendered military honors at over 10,000 services and is an active member of American Legion Post 185. The **Veterans Association of Bristol County (VABC)** received the Thomas Kelley Community Engagement Award for its impactful work supporting veterans in Bristol County. Led by Executive Director Ken Levesque, the VABC provides food, clothing, benefits enrollment, and wellness activities to hundreds of veterans each month.

2024 Veterans Week

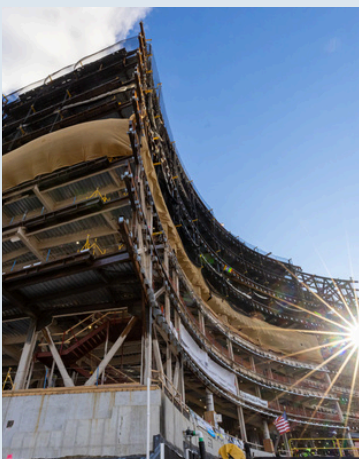
Veterans Day Ceremonies at Assumption University and Wentworth Institute



Secretary Santiago attended Assumption University's Veterans Day Ceremony, emphasizing the state's ongoing investments in veteran services and engagement. Meanwhile, Assistant Secretary Cory Ahonen and Deputy Chief Engagement Officer Marvin Mathelier connected with veterans and service members at Wentworth Institute of Technology, sharing reflections on their service and celebrating the day. EOVS extends its gratitude to both institutions for honoring veterans and fostering meaningful connections within their communities.

Holyoke Topping Off Ceremony

Governor Healey, Congressman Neal, Secretary Santiago, and local leaders joined residents, staff, and tradespeople at the Massachusetts Veterans Home at Holyoke to mark a major milestone in the reconstruction of the new facility with a traditional "topping off" ceremony, placing the highest and final beam on the new facility.



Other Quarterly Events

New and Expanded Workforce Initiatives

Ahead of National Veterans and Military Families Month, EOVS, in partnership with the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, announced new workforce initiatives for veterans, including the enhanced Veteran Hire Tax Credit (VHTC) and the launch of the Veteran's Equity Dashboard. This interactive tool provides insights into veteran demographics, occupations, wages, and more in Massachusetts' labor market. [Learn more](#)



Gold Star Luncheon

Secretary Santiago and the engagement team had the honor of hosting a special luncheon for the Gold Star Mothers and Wives at the iconic Union Oyster House.

The event provided an opportunity for meaningful conversations and discuss future collaborations. Following the luncheon, the group was treated to an exclusive guided tour of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Museum, gaining insight into the rich history of this esteemed organization.



Lung Cancer Awareness Event for Black Veterans

Team EOVS participated in the Lung Cancer Awareness Event for Black Veterans, partnering with the NAACP ASVA Brockton Branch, Tri-Ad Veterans League, and NABVets to raise awareness and connect veterans with essential resources. The event aimed to inform veterans about the importance of screening and how it can help mitigate the risk of lung cancer. EOVS took the opportunity to speak directly with veterans, outlining the ways they can best be supported at the state level. This event is part of an ongoing series, with the next session scheduled for February—stay tuned for more details!





International
Conference on

2024 International Conference on Veterans Affairs

EOVS Secretary Jon Santiago and Assistant Secretary Cory Ahonen represented the United States at the 2024 International Conference on Veterans Affairs in Seoul, South Korea, hosted by the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs. As the only state-level veterans department featured, Secretary Santiago delivered remarks after Minister Jung-ai's keynote and presented on the state's transformative reforms under the Healey-Driscoll administration.



Executive Office of Veterans Services *Celebrates the Holidays*

Throughout November and December, EOVS has commemorated the holiday season by coming together with our partner organizations to honor those who have served.

From decorating the Gold Star Families Tree at the State House to participating in a record-breaking Wreaths Across America ceremony at the Veterans Memorial Cemetery at Agawam, and formally acknowledging the Wreath 11 for the first time in Winchendon, we are profoundly thankful to the veterans, families, and organizations who continue to inspire and remind us of the values of service, sacrifice, and unity during this special time of year.



**EOVS wishes all veterans, service members, and their families
a fantastic holiday season and a healthy New Year!**



WINTER UPDATES

As we embrace the new year, our Winter 2025 updates include a spotlight on the SAVE and SERVE programs, key updates from EOVS initiatives, and a recap of the HERO Act Roadshow.

SECTION

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A Message from the Engagement Office of Peer Support

The holiday season brings joy and togetherness for many, but it can also challenge veterans who struggle with their mental health. The Statewide Advocacy for Veterans Empowerment (SAVE) Program provides compassionate and comprehensive support to those in need. The SAVE team empowers veterans through peer support, advocacy, and evidence-based practices. Through personalized case management, they connect veterans to essential resources, including physical and mental healthcare, housing, education, and employment opportunities.

The Supporting and Empowering Reintegration for Veterans Equality (SERVE) Program is critical in supporting justice-involved veterans, regardless of their discharge status. Veterans on the SERVE team advocate for treatment and rehabilitation as alternatives to criminal prosecution. The SERVE team creates pathways for reintegration and brighter futures by addressing the unique needs of justice-involved veterans.

During the holiday season, remember that every veteran has access to support, no matter their challenges. Together, the SAVE and SERVE programs deliver comprehensive care and advocacy for Massachusetts veterans, ensuring they never walk alone in their journey to renewed purpose.

If you know a veteran who needs support, call the SAVE team at (617) 210-5743.

I wish you, your family, and our veterans a happy, healthy, and peaceful holiday season.



DEPUTY CHIEF ENGAGEMENT OFFICER FOR PEER SUPPORT
LYNETTE.GABRILA@MASS.GOV



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
**EXECUTIVE OFFICE of
VETERANS SERVICES**

Program Spotlight: SAVE & SERVE

The **Statewide Advocacy for Veterans Empowerment (SAVE)** Program and the **Supporting and Empowering Reintegration for Veterans Equality (SERVE)** Program provide critical peer support and case management services to veterans across Massachusetts.



Nicole Darden

SAVE Team - Field Operations Supervisor
nicole.darden@mass.gov

SAVE connects veterans with peers to access benefits and services that support their mental health and help them transition positively back to civilian life. **SERVE** focuses on assisting justice-involved veterans, offering tailored support through a dedicated team of veterans, family members, and others in the veteran community. Together, these programs address unique challenges and empower veterans to build stronger futures.

Visit mass.gov/vets to learn more



Don Purrington

SERVE Team - Field Operations Supervisor
donald.purrington@mass.gov



**Feeling stuck?
Don't know where to turn?**

**Contact the Veterans Crisis Line for
free, confidential support 24/7.**

Women Veterans Network (WVN)



The Executive Office of Veterans Services invites you to join the Massachusetts Women Veterans Network (WVN). This network is dedicated to empowering women veterans, ensuring their voices are heard, their contributions acknowledged, and their well-being enhanced through education, advocacy, and collaboration.

To join, visit
Mass.gov/WVN

OR SCAN THE
CODE!



Veteran Education, Employment, & Training (VEET)

The VEET Office helps veterans in Massachusetts connect with employment, training, and educational opportunities. **Get involved today!**



Hire and Support Veterans in Massachusetts!

Get Veteran Ready Business (VRB) Certified! This program aims to educate businesses across the state about the value of hiring and retaining veterans and spouses.



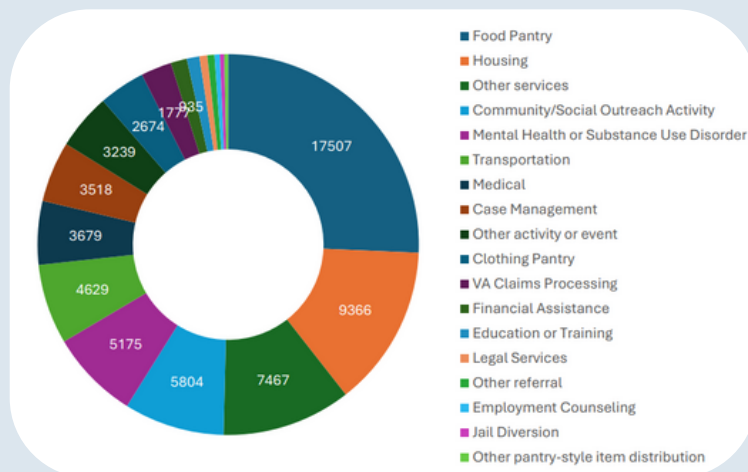
The Student Veterans Council (SVC) met for the first time in November. This group of engaged and proactive leaders seek to improve the educational experience for their fellow veterans.

Visit Mass.gov/VEET
to learn more

Housing, Equity, Resilience & Outreach Services (HEROS)

EOVS Housing providers meet a wide range of needs for veterans and their families. They provide clothing, supplies, and food pantry items while working to address the diverse challenges veterans face holistically.

Since July, EOVS Housing and Outreach providers have delivered nearly 70,000 services to almost 7,000 veterans and their families across Massachusetts (*see graph for reference*).



Number of services delivered

If you know a veteran in need of housing assistance, email EOVSHousing@mass.gov.

Visit Mass.gov/HEROS to learn more

Chapter 115 & Annuity Update

As part of the HERO Act, annuity payments will be increasing from \$2,000 to \$2,500 over the next 2 years.

Annuity recipients will receive a payment of \$1,250 in February of 2025. Starting in August of 2025, recipients will receive one annuity payment per year in the amount of \$2,500.



Visit Mass.gov/MASSVETS to learn more



HERO ACT ROADSHOW



Throughout the fall, EOVS' town halls provided the perfect opportunity for the Secretary, Deputy Secretary and Outreach and Engagement team to talk to veterans and their loved ones, VSOs and our community partners about the many benefits of the HERO Act and answer any questions about this landmark legislation.

The Roadshows launched in September, following **Governor Healey's officially signing of the HERO Act**, and crisscrossed the state, with visits to Pembroke, Billerica, Springfield, Shrewsbury, Osterville, Pepperell, West Roxbury, and Plymouth. The events proved so popular that they were **extended through December**, with a virtual event added to reach anyone who couldn't attend the sessions.



Visit [Mass.gov/Hero](https://www.mass.gov/Hero) to learn more

EOVS Awards & Citations Process

EOVS is proud to support veteran community members and organizations with citations, certificates of achievement, or certificates of appreciation.



EOVS CITATION:

This can be requested for:

- Birthdays over 100
- Couples celebrating their 50th or later wedding anniversary
- Retirements, including military service
- Outstanding services or deeds that surpass a Certificate of Achievement (subject to review)

CERTIFICATE OF ACHIEVEMENT:

Purpose: To recognize outstanding achievements or significant accomplishments by individuals or organizations in advancing the mission of the EOVS and improving the welfare of veterans.

Criteria: Outstanding achievements that have significantly advanced veteran services or welfare. Innovative contributions or initiatives that have made a substantial positive impact on the veteran community that surpasses a Certificate of Appreciation (subject to review).

CERTIFICATE OF APPRECIATION:

Purpose: To formally express gratitude to individuals or organizations for their exceptional service and support to veterans over a sustained period.

Criteria: Exceptional service or support to veterans over a significant period. Demonstrated commitment to improving the lives of veterans

To make a formal request, visit:

mass.gov/forms/executive-office-of-veterans-citation-request-form

Please make your request at least 21 business days prior to the deadline



VETERAN RESOURCES

Discover a range of resources for veterans, including VA benefits, education programs, health and human services, housing support, and transportation assistance.

SECTION

04



VA RESOURCES



Eligibility for VA Health Care

This guide provides step-by-step instructions for applying, including the required documents for veterans and service members.

[Learn more](#)

Massachusetts VA Locations

Headlamp provides ex-military personnel with personalized mentorship, resources, and professional development opportunities through its advanced intelligence tools designed to match veterans' military-acquired skills with high-demand civilian jobs, primarily within the biotech industry.

[Learn more](#)

VA Connected Care

Virtual care is an easy and accessible way to communicate with VA physicians and other health care providers, such as nurses, social workers, and medical assistants.

[Learn more](#)

Urgent Care and Retail Clinics in Massachusetts

This tool provides a filterable database to help the public find urgent care and retail clinic locations in their community that offer specific services, service times, or accept their insurance type. Urgent care centers and retail clinics are for mild illnesses and minor injuries.

[Learn more](#)

VA RESOURCES



Department of Veteran Affairs Veterans Crisis Line

The Veterans Crisis Line connects veterans in crisis, along with their families and friends, to qualified, caring Department of Veterans Affairs responders. This service is available 24/7 via a confidential toll-free hotline, online chat, or text message.

[Contact 800-273-8255](#)



Suicide Prevention Coordinators at MA VA Medical Centers

VA Boston System

- Leslie Wright, Ph.D.: (857) 364-3611
- Julie McCarthy, LICSW: (774) 826-3024
- Brittney Stedman, Psy.D.: (774) 826-3459

Bedford VA

- Rebecca Dreifuss: (781) 687-2176

Leeds (Northampton) VA

- Jillian Hynek: (413) 584-2112

[Learn more](#)



VA Boston Medical Foster Home

VA Boston's new Medical Foster Home program offers veterans needing 24/7 care an alternative to nursing homes or assisted living facilities. The program matches veterans with approved caregivers who welcome them into their homes. Veterans may also receive assistance applying for VBA benefits to help cover costs.

[Contact 617-435-4362](#)



V Safe

As you know, Veterans and their families are popular targets for financial fraud. Scammers may try to defraud you through misleading emails, texts, cold calls, or online ads. Find resources about fraud targeting you. Know the signs of a scam, get advice about what to do, and learn how to report scams and identity theft.

[Learn more](#)

EDUCATION



Free Community College

The MassReconnect and MassEducate programs can cover the full cost of tuition and fees for all eligible students, plus additional allowances for books, supplies, and other college costs based on income level.

[Learn more](#)



Student Veterans of America® (SVA)

Student Veterans of America® (SVA) elevates the academic, professional, and personal development of veterans in higher education through chapter programs and services, outcomes and impacts research, and advocacy at every level.

[Learn more](#)



Post-9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33)

The Post-9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33) is a comprehensive education benefit offered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to veterans and servicemembers who served after September 10, 2001. This program provides financial support to help individuals further their education and career goals by covering various expenses.

[Learn more](#)



Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E)

VR&E valuable resource provided by the VA to assist veterans and servicemembers with service-connected disabilities in preparing for, finding, and maintaining suitable employment. The program offers job training, employment accommodations, resume development, career counseling, and educational assistance.

[Learn more](#)

EDUCATION



Headlamp

Headlamp provides ex-military personnel with personalized mentorship, resources, and professional development opportunities through its advanced intelligence tools designed to match veterans' military-acquired skills with high-demand civilian jobs, primarily within the biotech industry.

[Learn more](#)

HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES



Veteran Walk-In Flu Clinics

Veterans enrolled in VA health care can receive free flu shots during any scheduled appointment. Walk-in clinics are only available during the designated days and times

[Learn more](#)



Smoking Cessation

Want to be tobacco-free? The VA can help!

Quitting smoking is the single most important thing a person can do to improve their health.

[Learn more](#)

HOUSING & MISC.



The Women Veterans Transitional Residence at New England Center and Home for Veterans (NECHV)

Provides women veterans the option for a safe, women-only living space with dedicated case managers and addiction counselors experienced in the complexities of Military Sexual Trauma (MST), PTSD, and other concerns related explicitly to women veterans.

[Learn more](#)



Housing Outreach to Placement Effort (HOPE)

The HOPE Campaign is an outreach and housing counseling program to provide outreach, service coordination, and housing placement to homeless veterans across all of Massachusetts.

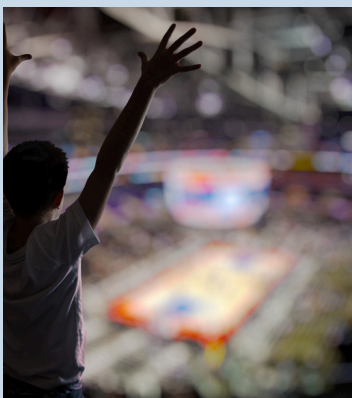
[Learn more](#)



Unmet Needs Grant

The Unmet Needs Grant helps active-duty service members (including activated Guard/Reserve members) and their families dealing with unexpected financial difficulties due to deployment or other military-related activity or injury. The program provides financial assistance of up to \$2,500 to assist with daily necessities. No repayment is required.

[Learn more](#)



Free Tickets for Veterans

The Veteran Tickets Foundation's "Tickets for Troops Program" provides free tickets to active servicemembers for major sports events, leagues, promoters, organizations, and venues.

[Learn more](#)

TRANSPORTATION



RSVP RIDES FOR VETERANS, Norfolk County

Call the Norfolk County RSVP Office to locate a volunteer driver near you. The office is open 8am-4pm weekdays excluding Holidays. A minimum of one week's notice is needed prior to your appointment date. Rides are free, subject to volunteer availability. Passengers are responsible for tolls and required parking charges. All volunteer drivers have passed a CORI criminal history check.

Call: 781-329-5728



DAV Transportation to Veterans

The DAV operates a fleet of vehicles around the country to provide free transportation to VA medical facilities for injured and ill veterans. Use the DAV Hospital Service Coordinator Directory to contact your nearest HSC for information or assistance.

Learn more



DPH Health Care Transportation Resources

Transportation services may be available in Massachusetts to help you get to local or long-distance medical appointments.

Learn more



Veteran Transportation Resources

Access a full list of transportation services in Massachusetts to help veterans get to medical appointments, jobs, and other destinations.

Learn more



**Honorably
Serving
Those Who
Served Us.**

The BLUF
Bottom Line Up Front



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
**EXECUTIVE OFFICE of
VETERANS SERVICES**

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