

# Commission to Strengthen and Align the Services Provided to Maine's Veterans

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FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

# Members

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Sen. Ron Collins, Chair  
Sen. Earle McCormick  
Rep. Jared Golden, Chair  
Rep. Jonathan Kinney  
Rep. Louis Luchini  
John Libby  
Matthew Murphy  
Alley Smith  
Adrian Cole  
Randall Liberty  
Adria Horn

Staff: Danielle Fox, Legislative Analyst  
Karen Nadeau-Drillen, Legislative Analyst



# Background

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- Established by Resolve 2015, chapter 48, which was passed into law by the 127<sup>th</sup> Legislature. Bill was unanimously voted OPT-A by VLA.
- The Commission held five meetings between October 2015, and January 2016.
- Commission was directed to submit a report, with findings and recommendations, including suggested legislation, to the VLA Committee in January of 2016.
- The VLA Committee may report out legislation to the Second Regular Session of the 127<sup>th</sup> Legislature based upon the report.
- Agendas of commission meetings and other information relating to the commission and its meetings can be found at:  
<http://legislature.maine.gov/legis/opla/veteransservices.htm>



# Briefings

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The commission received briefings from:

- Adria Horn, Director of the Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services (BVS)
- Julie Rabinowitz, Director of Communications with the Maine Department of Labor
- James Doherty from the Veterans Health Administration
- Philip Black from the Veterans Benefits Administration
- Chaplain (Colonel) Andrew Gibson, Army National Guard and a founding member of the Maine Military and Community Network
- Lorraine Spaulding, Coordinator of Veterans services at the University of Southern Maine

# Briefings, cont.

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- Jerry DeWitt and Tom Morrison of Tri-County Mental Health Services
- Alley Smith, Universal Services Advocate at Veterans, Inc.
- Amedeo “Deo” Lauria, Department Service Officer, American Legion
- James Bachelder, with the Veterans of Foreign Wars
- Craig Zurhorst and Sandy Buchanan with Western Maine Transportation Services
- Matt Jabaut, Human Resources at TD Bank
- Peter Merrill, Deputy Director of Maine State Housing Authority
- Attorneys Joe Hahn, Jack Richards and Norman Lawrence with Veteran Mentors of Maine – provides services to veterans in Veterans’ Court

# Summary of Recommendations

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The majority of the commission's recommendations include:

1. Making enhancements to the Bureau of Veterans' Services
2. Improving Administration of assistance to homeless veterans through coordination and oversight
3. Improving transportation for veterans to facilitate better access to services and benefits
4. Supporting student veterans to ensure successful completion of degrees and training

# Bureau of Veterans Services

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## Enhancements to the Bureau of Veterans Services

### 1. Marketing and outreach:

establish the current two-year contracted outreach coordinator position as a permanent position.

Create a defined, statutory framework outlining the objectives of marketing and outreach functions and the specific duties required to achieve them.

## Objectives of marketing and outreach functions

- **Identify veterans in the state**
- **Increase visibility of BVS**
- **Utilize media and technology to reach veterans**

There are approx. 140,000 veterans in Maine. Approx. 76,000 are NOT enrolled in the VA healthcare system and BVS has no record of many of them.

The bureau must work to establish itself as the single point of entry for veterans and family members seeking assistance, and as an access point to VA services and benefits and to veterans groups and organizations providing services to veterans. The bureau should play a central role in educating veterans about available resources and connecting them with those services. In order to do that the bureau must either identify veterans or be visible and accessible so that veterans come to them.

Finally, BVS should develop a baseline and standards to reach through marketing and outreach, along with benchmarks for measuring progress and gauging the effectiveness of outreach.

# Bureau of Veterans Services

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## Enhancements to the Bureau of Veterans Services

### 2. Purchase a case management system:

Simply stated, the lack of an effective system is crippling to the Bureau. To name just a few benefits, the purchase of a system will allow BVS to track administered services, past and ongoing requests for services and to maintain a record of communication with veterans. It will allow BVS to upload and maintain electronic files, and enable it to be less of a paper-heavy office.

# Bureau of Veterans Services

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## Enhancements to the Bureau of Veterans Services

### 3. Data collection and analysis:

Data and statistics are often inconsistent. Demographic information and other statistics are often the basis on which resources are allocated, grants awarded and service priorities established.

- Require BVS to track data on veterans, National Guard and military retirees. No agency is tracking either in the state.

- Direct BVS to develop ability to gather and maintain data about veterans and use it for program analysis and for establishing priorities for current or future services.

# Bureau of Veterans Services

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## Enhancements to the Bureau of Veterans Services

### 4. Veteran Service Officers (VSOs):

VSOs work with veterans seeking assistance through the VA, state and local/community programs. They are on the front lines of assisting veterans.

The Bureau currently has seven VSO positions covering eight regional offices (plus the main office). In October 2015 there were about 2,200 active cases for each VSO.

MA has a ratio of one VSO per 12,000 veterans. To meet this standard Maine would require 12 VSOs.

VSO position should be structured to allow for work outside the normal hours of 9 to 5, M-F. BVS operating budget should cover necessary travel expenses so VSOs are not constrained by budget shortages.

# Transportation

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Lack of transportation was repeatedly raised as a barrier to veterans accessing available services, from healthcare to jobs and training opportunities.

## Recommendations:

- Implement a pilot project in a location served by a regional transportation network and provide veterans with rides to VA appointments or to other services as deemed appropriate. Use the project to inform the development of a long-term transportation policy to assist veterans in the state.
- Amend MaineCare rules to allow MaineCare-eligible veterans to use the ride program for VA-provided medical treatment and services.
- Work with the DAV and VA to improve the DAV van service.

# Homelessness

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There is currently no one agency or position in state government dedicated to assisting homeless veterans.

According to MSHA publicly funded shelters housed veterans on 438 different occasions throughout the month of January in 2015.

The 2015 PIT identified 95 homeless veterans in one night.

MSHA has currently identified at least 33 chronically homeless veterans.

Federal definitions of homeless and chronically homeless restrict efforts to count total number of homeless and at-risk of homelessness.

Successfully addressing homelessness should be measured by providing homeless with stable housing, not by achieving “functional zero.”

# Homelessness

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## Recommendations:

- There should be more than one sponsored PIT count per year.
- Create an interagency council to facilitate communication and coordination of efforts to eliminate homelessness among veterans.
- Establish a position at BVS dedicated to aiding homeless veterans and to staff the council and promote the implementation of the council's recommendations.

# Education

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-Require the University of Maine System and Community Colleges with significant student veterans to provide transition assistance, orientation and coordination of services based on the model employed at the University of Southern Maine.

USM's Veterans Resource Center's limited fiscal resources allow it to do only so much, however, what it does provide is commendable and helps student veterans to transition from service to student, and to successfully complete a degree program.

# Vet Group - VSOs

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Veterans Organization VSOs provide important assistance to veterans filing claims, and in the field helping to address the needs of struggling veterans. If these post VSO's did not exist the burden would shift to BVS.

State provides \$129,000 annually to support VSO work at Togus.

The commission takes issue with these state-funded VSOs being subject to VA policy of "It's the nation, not the station." However, we also recognize the importance of these offices, which are housed by the VA, and the importance of the work these VSOs provide to Maine veterans.

Not all post-level VSOs are trained and VA certified. The commission supports efforts to incentivize these VSOs to receive proper training and to be subject to supervision.

The commission believes that the state has a responsibility to provide oversight and to require thorough reporting on the use of state funds and the work being performed for veterans.

Loss of membership and loss of charitable gaming revenue jeopardizes these posts and the critical assistance they provide to veterans in our communities.