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John A. Scocos, Secretary



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Friday, March 18, 2016

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## **WDVA and Veteran Engagement for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Secretary John A. Scocos, Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs

The Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs has served our veterans with the best programs, benefits and services in the nation for the last more than 70 years. With the March 20 anniversary of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the department is reminded of the service and sacrifice of a new generation of veterans, many who use the same benefits of previous generations delivered in a modern way.

Veterans benefits come primarily from the federal and state governments and the best place to get information about these benefits is direct from the source, which is why the WDVA places a great emphasis on veteran engagement – reaching out to veterans and at the same time being accessible to them.

Much has changed in 70 years. Since World War II, we have transitioned from paper to digits; from copiers to faxes to digital scanners. In fact, the first generation to use their G.I. Bill of rights is nearly gone. Vietnam veterans make up the majority of the veterans population now, to be followed by yet another generation of warriors as time passes. While we look back at those eras with great respect and admiration for accomplishment, with younger generations come new ideas, new benefits and new ways to communicate.

Veterans of the Global War on Terror are different than some previous generations. They think more globally. They are not always returning to the same small town, city or farm from which they left for the military. They are more connected, however. They use technology to find answers. Today's veterans are the most educated, technologically savvy generation, in large part due to the way the military trains and prepares its members.

Recent veterans possess tremendous initiative. They prefer direct action, especially in regard to the programs they have earned through their service. They are more adept than ever before at navigating the system on their own behalf. Benefits are only a mouse click, phone call or email away in most cases. Going directly to a source, whether state or federal, is now more possible than ever before.

We are actively engaging the community and at the same time receiving a high volume of inquiries from veterans and their families. For the fiscal year of 2015, our Veterans Benefit Resource Center handled nearly 25,000 calls and fielded more than 10,000 online chats – answering veterans' inquiries on our entire range of benefits, federal benefits and referring in some cases to local services.

In fiscal year 2015, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs completed 43,670 Wisconsin claims for veterans. Of those, WDVA represented veterans in 22,143 claims. Of the groups that handle claims, WDVA, by far, handled the majority, having a great economic impact on our state. The impact of those benefits to veterans represented by WDVA was \$33.2 million in 2015.

WDVA also runs three veterans cemeteries, one of which, the Southern Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery is the 5<sup>th</sup> busiest veterans cemetery in the nation. As a department, to date in fiscal year 2016, we have already interred 1,024 veterans and their spouses and our Military Funeral Honors Team has coordinated 4,666 funerals.

We strive to ensure we reach every eligible veteran to ensure he or she has the tools they need to accomplish their post-military goals. We are both visible in the veteran community and accessible to those who reach out to us. That is why every veteran who calls us with question about what we can do for them gets through to someone who immediately starts working for them.

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