



STATE OF WISCONSIN, DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

30 West Mifflin Street, P.O. Box 7843, Madison, WI 53707-7843

PHONE: (608) 266-1311 1-800-947-8387 (WIS VETS)

WEB SITE: <http://dva.state.wi.us>

E-MAIL: Headquarters@dva.state.wi.us

FAX: (608) 264-7616

Jim Doyle, Governor

John A. Scocos, Secretary

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Contact: Andrew Schuster 608-267-1797
or Kathleen Scholl 608-267-3582

Veterans Benefits Information Fair in Keshena brings successful close to outreach to northern Wisconsin veterans this autumn

(MADISON) – The Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA), as part of its “I Owe You” campaign and new “Mission: Welcome Home” initiative introduced in September, hosted a *Veterans Benefits Information Fair*, expanding the department’s outreach to northern Wisconsin, and especially to the state’s Native American veterans and their families.

As the last of four outreach events this autumn hosted by the department in a statewide effort to ensure that Wisconsin veterans are receiving the millions of dollars of federal benefits for which they are eligible, the one-day information fair was held on Friday, October 29, 2004, at the Menominee Hotel in Keshena, serving over 100 veterans and their families who ventured through inclement weather to attend the fair. The event, presented in conjunction with other agencies such as the VA Hospital, VA Benefits Administration, veterans service organizations, and County Veterans Services Officers, brings to 17,689 the number of Wisconsin veterans and their family members who have been reached by the "I Owe You" campaign, resulting in over \$250 million in new federal VA funding to assist Wisconsin veterans.

"This series of four *Veterans Benefits Information Fairs* this fall in northern Wisconsin has been so very important to reaching out to groups of veterans in more remote areas of the state," said Governor Jim Doyle. "Through these efforts by the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs, coordinated in conjunction with the federal Department of Veterans Affairs, county governments, local offices and Wisconsin's citizens, Wisconsin shows why it is a national leader among states in encouraging veterans to learn about benefits and services they've earned and deserve."

"One of my main goals for the department," said Secretary John A. Scocos, "is to expand the department's outreach, through the 'I Owe You' campaign and also through a new initiative called 'Mission: Welcome Home,' to reach out to service men and women returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. This *Veterans Benefits Information Fair* was the last of four that took place on or near tribal reservations," said Secretary Scocos. "It's part of our new outreach program for all American veterans. Our tribal veterans have done so much for the country."

"The 'one-stop shop' at Keshena presented a forum for federal, state and local agencies to provide assistance to veterans, including information on federal VA health care benefits, state and federal home mortgage and home improvement loans, education and job training grants, and information about other services and benefits," said Scocos.

Department Deputy Secretary Seth Perelman presented a plaque of appreciation on behalf of the WDVA, to Menominee County Board Chair Randy Reiter, who said, "I like to see these events like this. I'm a veteran myself." Plaques of appreciation for event planning assistance were also presented to Menominee County Veterans Service Officer (CVSO) Louis Kakwitsch, and to James Reiter, General Manager and Rachel Peters on staff of the Menominee Hotel.

Rita Bergeon, the most senior elder of the Menominee Tribe at 80 years old, said of the information fair, "I think this is a wonderful thing you're doing. Any time anybody needs anything, our Menominee Tribal veterans are always there for us."

William (Bill) Burns, a 74-year-old Korean War Veteran from Keshena, said, "I came to ask Louis (Kakwitch) about getting a hearing aid. Whenever we go out in the boat fishing, I'm always asking 'huh?'" Burns has a Combat Infantry Badge from when he was with the 2nd Indianhead Infantry Division of the 38th Infantry Regiment during the Korean War. He said he suffered frostbite in his fingertips and hearing loss from bombs dropped nearby to him while serving in Korea. He talked with representative from the federal Veterans Affairs health care booth and applied for a service-connected disability rating. He also came to the fair to find out if he's eligible to take some computer courses.

Sandra Jesko, 36, and her stepfather Donald Maskewitz are both veterans who now live in Shawano but are originally from Neopit. They came to the information fair together, she a peacetime Navy veteran (1986-90) and he an Army paratrooper from the Korean War. Jesko said of her stepfather that he came "just to check it out because there was lots he didn't know about, and to take advantage of his veterans' benefits." Jesko is a student at Menominee Nation College and wanted to find out about loans or an education grant. "I also talked to my Shawano CVSO Nick Benzinger and will register for any disability I might have. I've been having trouble with my hearing and my feet," Jesko said. "There's a lot of information you don't know about being a veteran -- even about being buried. I know I'm young but you never know what can happen." Jesko also said she got her National Defense Service Medal, which she did know about but previously had never applied for.

Two veterans who have been friends since childhood came to the fair together after reading about it in the Wausau newspaper. Jon Schroeder and Otto Grosskreutz are from Edgar, Wisconsin. They had enlisted in the Army together after the Korean War had ended and served from January 1957 to December 1958 during the occupation, that Grosskreutz calls "the Cold War with a draft." Schroeder said, "We just pushed up our draft date, because we know we were going to go anyway." They found out at the *Veterans Benefits Information Fair* that they are both eligible for Good Conduct Medals.

This information fair was the last of four held this fall in northern Wisconsin, at: the Lac Courtes Oreilles Lodge in Hayward on September 30th; the National Guard Armory in Superior on October 15th; the Lake of the Torches Resort in Lac du Flambeau; and at the Menominee Hotel in Keshena on October 29th. A total of 689 attended the four fairs, an average of 172 per event. "This is great news for northern Wisconsin veterans and their families," said WDVA Secretary John A. Scocos. "These outreach efforts are in line with the goals of 'Mission: Welcome Home' to reach out to service men and women returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

On September 20th, Scocos announced a new "Mission: Welcome Home" initiative, to encourage all citizens to help integrate and reintegrate service men and women back in to their communities, by providing information, welcome home materials, and a social support network. "Clearly, the outreach by WDVA to veterans is intertwined with the work we do welcoming new veterans -- my department is here as a resource for all veterans, including those newly returning to Wisconsin."

In 2005, the department will host future benefits outreach events around the state. For more information about veterans' benefits and services, contact a local County Veterans Service Officer (CVSO) or Tribal Veterans Service Officer (TVSO), visit the WDVA website (<http://dva.state.wi.us>), or call WDVA toll-free at 1-800-WIS-VETS (1-800-947-8387).