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Veterans Benefits Information Fair in Kenosha reaches out to veterans and their families in southeastern Wisconsin

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

As the first "I Owe You" event of six scheduled for 2005, the information fair was 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 event was held on Saturday, April 23, 2005, at the Kenosha Job Center, serving about 250 veterans and their families. Presented in conjunction with other agencies such as the VA Hospital, VA Benefits Administration, veterans service organizations, and County Veterans Services Officers, the Kenosha information fair brings to **17,939** the number of Wisconsin veterans and their family members who have been reached by the "I Owe You" campaign, resulting in over \$350 million in new federal VA funding to assist Wisconsin veterans since the campaign's inception in 2000.

"These *Veterans Benefits Fairs* have been very important to the department's outreach to veterans at different locations statewide," said Secretary John A. Scocos. "Through the 'I Owe You' campaign and the new 'Mission: Welcome Home' program, we want to make sure that our veterans in Wisconsin, when they come back home from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, receive the quality benefits they deserve for their service. This information fair was the first of six events this year," said Secretary Scocos.

Upcoming two-day *Supermarkets* and one-day information fairs are also planned for LaCrosse (May 13-14), Platteville (May 20), Fort McCoy (September 2), Oneida-Green Bay (September 21), and Milwaukee (the dates to be determined).

"The 'one-stop shop' at Kenosha 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.

Tom Edgerud from Kenosha wanted to find out about his eligibility for benefits. Edgerud said he served in the Marine Corps during the Korean War and is one of the "Chosin Few" who survived the battle at Chosin Reservoir. At the fair, he noticed a booth for Kenosha Benefits Assistance, a program within the Kenosha County Aging and Disability Resource Center. Edgerud said, "I didn't even know about that. These events are good to help with awareness of what benefits are out there," he said and added, "It's nice to see they have this for fellows not willing to leave town."

From the eldest to the newest veterans, the information fair provided information and assistance to attendees.

(more)

Benito Martinez, an 80-year-old World War II Army veteran from Racine, came to the fair with his wife and family. He said he came to the Kenosha event because, "My back is bothering me, and I came to get a hearing aid." He applied for the hearing aid and for medals earned.

Another WWII veteran attending the fair, also 80, was "Chet" Eisenhower, who fought in Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge. He said a shelling during the Battle of Mortin caused a puncture to his right eardrum. He thought the injury was only minor at the time. "That's why I came here today, to apply for my Purple Heart," Eisenhower said. "And they gave me good information on the veterans homes, too." Being from Kenosha, Eisenhower learned more about the Wisconsin Veterans Home at Union Grove, about twelve miles west of Racine.

Jeff Peterson, 51, a Vietnam War veteran from Milwaukee, traveled to Kenosha with friend and fellow Vietnam veteran Dennis LaCoss, because they "wanted to find out about everything at the fair." Peterson is a Navy veteran who was stationed in the South China Sea from 1974-77 on the "West PAC tour." "The fair was very helpful," Peterson said. "There's so much information, and in order to get it you have to attend these fairs and see what's offered, even as compared to usual ways of finding out."

One important new initiative of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs is "Mission: Welcome Home," aimed at assisting newly returning veterans coming home from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

A young family attending the fair was John Walentowski, 24, his wife Shannon and baby Abigail. Walentowski said he is on terminal leave from the U.S. Air Force. "I came here to find out ahead of time about my (veteran's) eligibility," Walentowski said. "I was in Turkey in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, on humanitarian missions. We came back home to Kenosha, just returned this Monday. I'm so happy we came here. I talked with someone about education and employment and got a lot of good information I never knew about to start our lives in Kenosha." Shannon Walentowski said, "I'm glad that there's an organization like this, that people really care."

Another young servicemember currently serving came to the fair with his grandfather, World War II veteran Clarence Metten, 85. Both are Kenosha natives. Senior Airman Christopher Schroeder, 23, who, like Walentowski, is on terminal leave from the U.S. Air Force, was stationed at the Baghdad International Airport in Iraq, taking care of "emergency situations having to do with fire," he said.

Like Walentowski, he was there to find out information about starting civilian life in Kenosha. "I'm looking for a job so I can support my wife and two children."

Metten served in the U.S. Army during World War II in England, Belfast, Normandy, and Iceland. He never thought he needed to apply for VA Health Care. Schroeder took him to apply for it and said, "I was also helped by the Milwaukee VA Medical Center, not knowing how to sign up."

About "Mission: Welcome Home," Schroeder said, "It's a pretty good idea because veterans are getting out now -- we're overwhelmed with directions we can go, there are so many options. It helps to know what information is out there."

For more information about upcoming *Veterans Benefits Fairs*, visit the WDVA website (<http://dva.state.wi.us>), contact a local County Veterans Service Officer (CVSO) or Tribal Veterans Service Officer (TVSO), or call WDVA toll-free at 1-800-WIS-VETS (1-800-947-8387).