

**Testimony of Coleman Nee, Secretary
Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services
Hearing of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
April 24, 2013
Room 418, Russell Senate Office Building**

Good morning Chairman Sanders and honorable members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

My name is Coleman Nee and I am Secretary of the Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services.

I want to thank the Chairman and the members for this opportunity to address you and speak about the important role state departments of veterans' services can and do play in order to ensure we are providing the highest quality benefits and services to our veterans and their families.

On behalf of Governor Deval Patrick and Lt. Governor Timothy Murray, I am proud to report that Massachusetts leads the nation in veterans' benefits and services. Highlights of Massachusetts benefits include: a veteran service officer in every city and town; providing over \$70 million dollars in direct financial benefits to veterans and their dependents; launching the first-in-the-nation web portal for veterans benefits MassVetsAdvisor.org; collaborating with the Massachusetts Division of Career Services to maximize employment opportunities for every veteran; and offering unique peer support services in the areas of veteran suicide prevention, crisis intervention and support to find homes.

Our greatest asset is the emphasis we have placed on collaboration between federal, state, municipal and private providers to ensure we are creating meaningful partnerships to maximize resources and provide the finest benefits and services the country has to offer.

In Massachusetts, we have found that there is not a lack of resources for our veterans and their families. The major impediment to accessing benefits is the lack of knowledge of those benefits and resources and the navigation of the various bureaucracies associated with those benefits.

To that end, Massachusetts has instituted a number of programs over the past few years to increase access, knowledge, and navigation of resources and benefits that we feel can serve as national models.

These programs include:

Statewide Advocacy for Veterans Empowerment (SAVE) Team

- SAVE is a collaboration with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and their suicide prevention division.

- The SAVE Team is comprised of veterans or family members of veterans who have lived through similar transitions and can use their experiences to build a rapport with veterans and/or veteran family member.
- SAVE Team members offers peer-to-peer crisis intervention coupled with resource navigation to advocate for veterans who are not able to obtain the benefits they have earned due to institutional or personal barriers.
- In FY12, SAVE highlights include:
 - Direct outreach provided to over 1400 veterans;
 - 234 veterans received direct referral and linkage services;
 - 94 veterans received active case management with 10 of those involving "critical incidences";
 - Partnership with the Massachusetts National Guard and provided critical support services during the Army-wide suicide prevention stand down last fall;
- As SAVE achieved its 5th Anniversary on February 11, 2013. DVS has experienced increased requests for support and awareness education to include educators, clinical staff, first responders, and correctional officers.
- Most recently, we have received requests from hiring managers and employers who are eager to know more about military culture as a means to improve their processes to hire veterans and support them when they return from deployment.

Statewide Housing Advocacy for Reintegration and Prevention (SHARP) Team

- Based on the success of the SAVE peer model, SHARP is a collaboration between DVS and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in the effort to end homelessness among veterans.
- This is accomplished through peer support, mental health services, psychiatric evaluation and linkages to emergency shelter at a Veteran-centric facility and permanent supportive housing through enrollment in the HUD-VASH program.
- SHARP was created as a pilot program in December of 2010 with initial federal funding of \$323,000. The initial staff of 4 peer specialists, a substance abuse counselor, psychiatrist and VA case management were able to provide safe and stable housing for 50 veterans in the Greater Boston area.
- Based on the success of the pilot program, the VA increased DVS funding by an additional \$1.4M in October 2012 to allow for the expansion of the SHARP model by adding 9 new peer support specialists and 12 new case managers positions contracted to local veteran centric providers.
- This collaboration with the VA and veteran service providers will allow DVS to substantially increase our outreach and access to veterans while putting Massachusetts on the path to be the first state in the country to end veterans' homelessness.

Women Veterans Network (WVN)

- The Women Veterans Network continues to increase outreach and direct services to the over 27,000 women veterans in the Commonwealth.
- As women are the fastest growing segment of the veterans' population, outreach and access to benefits is even more critical.

- The WVN provides a semiannual newsletter, an annual conference, several networking events, and an annual Women Veterans Appreciation Day.
- More recently, the WVN offers peer support and has provided direct case work and referral services to over 500 women veterans last year alone.

MassVetsAdvisor.org

- Massachusetts received \$1 million in federal funding supported through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to promote broadband adoption and usage for veterans.
- The Massachusetts Broadband Institute, a division of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative partnered with the Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services and the Red Sox Foundation and Massachusetts General Hospital Home Base Program, to develop the website as an easy-to-use resource for Veterans and their family members.
- This one-stop resource streamlines comprehensive data of over 400 benefits and resources from state and federal resources and lists only the benefits and services each veteran is qualified for.
- MassVetsAdvisor has allowed DVS to reach veterans of all generations and seamlessly connect them to their local resources, thereby significantly enhancing their access to and knowledge of benefits.

State departments of veterans' services operate at the community level, in conjunction with numerous other state human service agencies and private providers. This model allows us to be in tune with local resources and programs that can provide critical resources to ensure no veteran or family member is denied access or service.

Traditional care through the VA is based on the individual veteran. Every veteran receives different care based on his or her eligibility and the veteran may not qualify for certain programs and benefits at the VA level. The states are free to operate outside the traditional parameters of VA programs. This flexibility allows the states to maximize non-VA resources and provide the critical connections to unique community resources to ensure veterans and their families have the access and knowledge they so deserve.

In closing, I want to again thank the committee for the opportunity to testify today. Additionally, I encourage this committee to examine unique state programs and best practices, like the Massachusetts SAVE & SHARP initiatives, for potential expansion and pilot programs through the Department of Veterans Affairs so other states can benefit and we can provide the finest resources for our veterans and their family members.

Thank you.