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# MINNESOTA OFFICE OF THE STATE AUDITOR

**Minnesota State Auditor's  
Report to the Legislature:  
The Responsibilities and Importance  
of Minnesota's County Veterans  
Service Officers**



**MARK B. DAYTON  
STATE AUDITOR**

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Pursuant to 1991 Laws, Chapter 345  
ARTicle 1, Section 27 JUN 30 1992



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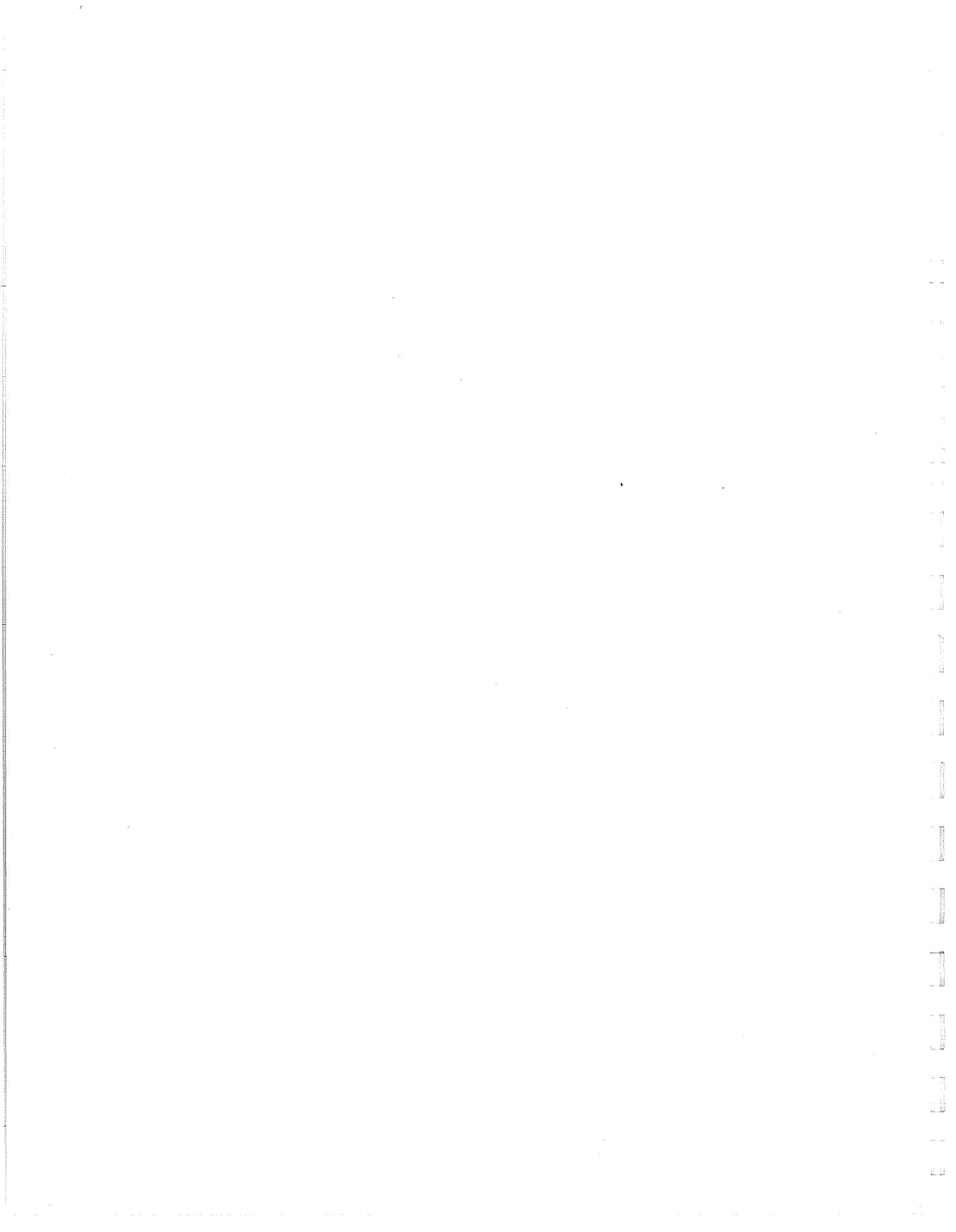
- 1800 townships
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**Minnesota State Auditor's  
Report to the Legislature:  
The Responsibilities and Importance  
of Minnesota's County Veterans  
Service Officers**

**January 1, 1992**



## PREFACE

This study of the responsibilities and importance of Minnesota County Veterans Service Officers has been prepared by the Office of the State Auditor as mandated by Laws of Minnesota (1991), Chapter 345, Article 1, Section 27. The law requires:

"The state auditor shall study the functions of county veterans service officers and report to the legislature by January 1, 1992. The report must include but not be limited to recommendations on the following: (1) elimination or merging of services and personnel; and (2) state funding of personnel costs."

The Report is the culmination of six months of extensive research into the roles and responsibilities of Minnesota's County Veterans Service Officers. The Report was researched and prepared by the Research and Information Division of the Office of the State Auditor. The study and preparation of the Report to the Legislature was directed by Mr. James R. Gelbmann, Assistant State Auditor For Research and Information. Mr. Robert A. Paolino, a graduate research associate from the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, conducted much of the research for this study and assisted in drafting the Report.

While hundreds of individuals throughout the state contributed to this report, several individuals deserve special recognition and appreciation for their assistance. Commissioner Bernie Melter and Deputy Commissioner Jeff Olson, of the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, offered valuable assistance and guidance and provided timely information about the benefits and services provided by the Department.

While many county veterans service officers throughout the state were helpful and took the time to respond to our requests for information, five county veterans service officers deserve special recognition for their invaluable assistance throughout the course of the study. Mr. Bryan Schultz, (Faribault County) President of the Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers, Mr. Hank Sadler, (Nicollet County) Past President of the Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers, Mr. Duane Krueger (Anoka County) Chair of a committee assigned to work with us on the implementation of the study, and the other committee members, Mr. Jon Brown (Carlton County) and Mr. Larry Hunt (Fillmore County), offered their help in many areas. These five county veterans service officers assisted us in refining survey instruments, clarifying information and facilitating communication with county veterans service officers throughout the state. These individuals were always just a phone call away to help answer technical questions that arose during the study.

This Report is hereby respectfully submitted to the Minnesota Legislature in compliance with Laws of Minnesota (1991), Chapter 345, Article 1, Section 27.

Mark B. Dayton  
State Auditor

January 1, 1992

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study of the responsibilities and importance of Minnesota County Veterans Service Officers has been prepared by the Office of the State Auditor as mandated by Laws of Minnesota (1991), Chapter 345, Article 1, Section 27.

The report is the culmination of a six month study of the roles and responsibilities of Minnesota's county veterans service officers. It focuses on the importance of services provided by the county veterans service officers and the hundreds of thousands of Minnesota veterans who depend upon those services.

### **BACKGROUND - THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS**

As World War II drew to a close, the federal government, and state and local governments throughout the nation, began to prepare for the task of assimilating 16 million service men and women back into civilian life. For its part, the Minnesota Legislature enacted a number of laws to support and honor our veterans. One of these laws stated: "the county board of any county may appoint a veterans service officer...." The Act further provided, "it shall be the duty of the veterans service officer to aid all residents ... in securing benefits provided by law on account of the service of any person in the Army, Navy, or Marine Corps...."

The initial role of county veterans service officers was to serve as an advocate for Minnesota veterans returning from World War II, to assist them with their transition into civilian society, and to help them obtain the many federal, state and local benefits to which they were entitled. In 1991, Minnesota's 87 county veterans service officers are available to assist all 490,000 Minnesota veterans and their families, ranging from elderly World War I veterans to the women and men returning from the Persian Gulf War. As Minnesota veterans age and their need for services and benefits increase, the role of the county veterans service officers will become even more critical.

One of the **primary** responsibilities of county veterans service officers is to ensure that Minnesota veterans receive the federal and state benefits to which they are entitled. In 1990, Minnesota veterans received approximately \$285 million in direct federal veteran benefits, an average federal commitment of \$581 per Minnesota veteran. Minnesota ranks 36th nationally in direct federal benefits per veteran. In addition, Minnesota veterans received an estimated \$244.3 million in medical services from Veterans Affairs Medical Facilities, bringing the total estimated value of direct federal benefits and medical services for Minnesota veterans to \$529.3 million.

While the primary responsibility of county veterans service officers is to ensure that veterans receive the benefits to which they are entitled, they also serve as many veterans' primary friend and advocate. Many veterans turn to a county veterans service officer in times of personal crisis, such as after the death of a spouse, or in times of serious financial, emotional or physical crisis.

As evidenced by the wide variety of services provided, the county veterans service officer must be a highly knowledgeable and skilled professional, able to work with an often cumbersome federal bureaucracy on behalf of the veteran. The service officer must also have the ability to listen carefully to the concerns of the veteran, taking the time to explain all details of the issue(s) being addressed. **From a philosophical viewpoint, the veterans service officer understands that veterans were there when their country called upon them, and now the service officer has the opportunity to return the service.**

### **COUNTY EXPENDITURES FOR COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS**

Currently, all counties in Minnesota have at least one part-time county veterans service officer. (There are 35 counties with part time service officers, many of whom are full time employees who have other responsibilities as well.) During Fiscal Year 1991, Minnesota counties appropriated approximately \$5.4 million for the salaries and activities of Minnesota county veterans service officers. To place these expenditures in their proper perspective, current total expenditures by Minnesota counties were \$2.253 billion in 1989. Therefore, Minnesota counties spend approximately 25 cents for county veterans service officers for every \$100 spent by the county.

### **STAKEHOLDER OPINIONS**

Throughout the course of the six month study, we solicited the opinions of various individuals who regularly interact with the county veterans service officers. These opinions were expressed during formal interviews and through responses to written surveys that were sent to various individuals. The overwhelming response of all individuals who interact with county veterans service officers is highly positive. County officials (both elected and appointed), veterans, representatives of statewide veterans organizations, federal and state officials from the respective departments of veterans affairs, and veterans service providers were strongly in favor of maintaining the current system of county veterans service officers. In our survey, over 90 percent of Minnesota county officials stated the services provided by county veterans service officers were either "essential" or "important." Many of the stakeholders contacted described Minnesota's system as among the best in the nation.

"The Dakota County Veterans Service Officer, Mike Labovitch, though not the only contributor, was nonetheless the major contributor towards getting me rehabilitated from being a drain on society to the modest present day tax paying status and other contributions to society....

"He picked me up out of a motel in 1981.... I had been evicted for the third time in succession when the motel evicted me. Instead of ending up on the streets very sick and unwanted by society, Mike got me the care I needed and the home to live in.... Many

laypeople and professionals knew I needed help all along, but it was Mike Labovitch who patiently and professionally spearheaded the drive for service connection for 2 to 3 years.... All during this time, Mike was working on my case ... along with the Disabled American Veterans and the staff at the V.A. Hospital....

"Life before meeting the Dakota County Veterans Service Officer was a disaster, however, the continual vigilance ... has totally turned me around and 1991 has been the best year of my life at 47 years of age."

Mr. Ray Jacobsen  
3M Employee

## **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Overall, we found that the present system of county veterans service officers is working exceptionally well and serving faithfully the needs of its primary clients, Minnesota veterans and their families. We believe it is essential that these services be continued at the county level and, hopefully, expanded even further. The following is a summary of our principal findings and recommendations.

**FINDING: The services provided by the county veterans service officer are essential. They provide a means of guaranteeing that Minnesota veterans receive the maximum level of federal and state benefits to which they are entitled.**

- o The complexity of the federal veterans benefit programs cannot be overstated. The eligibility requirements attached to various benefit programs, and the often cumbersome application procedures which must be followed in order to receive those benefits, may be necessary from the federal government's point of view. However, these requirements and application procedures can be very intimidating to the veteran who is not used to dealing with government programs. Many veterans would likely forego the benefits to which they are entitled, rather than subject themselves to the frustration that often accompanies attempts to obtain assistance from federal agencies.

**RECOMMENDATION: County Veterans Service Offices should NOT be eliminated. To the contrary, the state legislature and 87 Minnesota county boards must ensure that the services of the county veterans service officer continue to remain available for all Minnesota veterans. Furthermore, the services should continue to be administered by Minnesota counties, as a means of ensuring that all veterans have access to these services, regardless of where they reside.**

- o It would be a grave injustice for the state legislature and/or Minnesota's 87 county boards to reduce the amount of services currently available to Minnesota veterans through their county veterans service officers. Eliminating these services, or requiring that counties merge their services with adjacent counties, would be a terrible mistake and would effectively deny many Minnesota veterans the benefits to which they are entitled.

**FINDING: The cost of providing services to Minnesota veterans through a network of county veterans service officers is more than offset by the amount of federal veterans benefits brought into the state.**

- o The cost/benefit analysis of expenditures for county veterans service officers speaks for itself. Minnesota counties spend \$5.4 million per year on their county veterans service officers. At the same time, Minnesota veterans receive \$285.0 million in direct federal veterans benefits and an estimated \$244.3 million in federally funded medical services. Only 2 percent of total direct federal benefits for Minnesota veterans pays the entire current expenditures of all county veterans service offices. Clearly, the services of the county veterans service officers are one of the most cost effective services provided by any level of government.

**RECOMMENDATION: The Legislature and Minnesota's 87 county boards should recognize the significant amount of federal veteran benefits obtained for Minnesota veterans through the services of county veterans service officers. They should consider these benefits when appropriating funds for the county veterans service officers.**

- o Reducing the existing budgets for the county veterans service officers may actually have an adverse impact on state and local budgets. If veterans are unable to obtain federal benefits to which they are entitled as a result of a decreased level of service by county veterans service officers, the veterans may be forced to turn to other state and local programs and services for assistance. Therefore, the budgets of the county veterans service officers should not be reduced.

**FINDING: The Services provided by county veterans service officers will become even more important in the next decade.**

- o As World War II veterans and other veterans continue to age, their need for medical and nursing care will increase significantly. While the application procedures and conditions surrounding federal and state veteran benefit programs can be intimidating for most veterans, they become an insurmountable obstacle for a cognitively impaired or sick veteran, or a bereaved spouse of a recently deceased veteran.

**RECOMMENDATION: The Minnesota Legislature and Minnesota's 87 county boards should recognize that the aging of the veteran population is likely to increase the demands placed on Minnesota's 87 county veterans service officers.**

- o While state and county budgets continue to be strained, legislators and county board members should resist the temptation to reduce the amount of resources dedicated to assisting Minnesota veterans. As the needs of our World War II veterans increase, Minnesota can not afford to reduce the amount of resources dedicated to helping veterans meet their needs.

**FINDING: The services provided by the county veterans service officer are only as good as the ability and commitment of the service officer.**

- o As with all public and private sector jobs, the level of knowledge, skills, and commitment of county veterans service officers varies from individual to individual. While nearly all county veterans service officers are highly motivated and committed individuals who are always there for the veterans in need, a small number apparently lack the level of training necessary to effectively perform all aspects of their jobs.

**RECOMMENDATION: The Minnesota Legislature and Minnesota's 87 county boards should work together to increase the level of ability and commitment of all 87 county veterans service officers.**

- o The Minnesota Legislature should expand the amount of resources provided to the State Department of Veterans Affairs for training opportunities for county veterans service officers. Minnesota county boards should do everything possible to ensure that its county veterans service officers are able to take advantage of all training opportunities that are made available.

**FINDING: The current requirement that counties administer and finance the services of county veterans service officers is appropriate. However, in many counties, the amount of resources made available for the county veterans service officers is inadequate.**

- o The county veterans service officer system is working well as currently administered and financed. Altering the system to a state funded, county administered, system would raise serious accountability questions relative to the expenditure of state dollars. While the current responsibility of counties to finance the services is appropriate, significant improvements could be made if all county veterans service officers had an adequate level of resources.

**RECOMMENDATION: The responsibility for funding the current level of service provided by county veterans service officers should remain with the counties. However, The Minnesota Legislature should appropriate funds to increase the total amount spent by Minnesota counties for the activities of county veterans service officers.**

- o Although the state does mandate that all counties hire a county veterans service officer, the mandate is exceedingly flexible. Given the flexibility offered counties relative to this mandate, and the fact that all counties have committed funds to staff current CVSO operations, we recommend against state funding of the current expenditures for county veterans service officers.
- o However, it is clear that more resources are needed for Minnesota's county veterans service officers. Since the majority of states which rely upon a system of county veterans service officers also contribute state money to the system, we believe that the Legislature should provide a state appropriation to help counties expand and improve the services currently provided.

**FINDING: There is the potential for improved efficiency in transportation services to federal Veterans Affairs medical facilities.**

- o Many Minnesota county veterans service officers organize and/or provide transportation services for Minnesota veterans traveling to veterans' medical facilities. While liability concerns are legitimate, they should be addressed in a way that would not prohibit cooperation among counties for the transportation of veterans.

**RECOMMENDATION: The Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers should continue to explore opportunities to improve coordination among counties relative to the transportation of veterans to federal Veterans Affairs medical facilities.**

- o Transportation of Minnesota veterans to federally-funded veterans' medical facilities is an important service provided by and through county veterans service officers. The service, while not mandated by statute, should continue to be made available to veterans who lack other means of transportation. Transportation must not be a barrier to quality medical services which our veterans have earned.

In conclusion, as noted by Mr. Charles W. Ferguson, Adjutant for the American Legion, Department of Minnesota:

"It is the opinion of the American Legion in Minnesota that our County Veterans Service Officer system is unexcelled in this Country. Minnesota's is a model studied by many of our compatriots for their States. They envy the services provided to Minnesota's Veterans and desire to emulate it in their own States....

"Don't fix a wagon that isn't broken; -- an old cliché, but most apt in this case."

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

This report is the culmination of a six month study of the roles and responsibilities of Minnesota's county veterans service officers. The law requiring this study directed the state auditor to make recommendations regarding the potential for "(1) elimination or merging of services and personnel; and (2) state funding of personnel costs." While this report will address these issues, we determined it was necessary to expand the scope of the study to give the Legislature a better understanding of the actual roles and responsibilities of county veterans service officers. By expanding the scope of the study, we were able to establish a stronger basis for our recommendations, including our recommendations relative to the specific issues identified in the law.

### **METHODOLOGY FOR THE STUDY**

To complete the study, we conducted 60 formal interviews with county veterans service officers, county officials (both elected and appointed), state and federal officials from the respective Departments of Veterans Affairs, veterans service providers (including representatives of various Veterans Affairs medical facilities), and representatives of several Congressionally chartered veterans organizations active in the State of Minnesota. These interviews, which were generally conducted in the individuals' own offices, were designed to obtain a broad-based perspective of the roles and responsibilities of county veterans service officers. Individuals from the Twin Cities metropolitan area and Greater Minnesota were interviewed, including veterans service officers and county officials in counties as far north as Lake of the Woods County and as far south as Lyon County. (A list of all formal interviews conducted appears in Appendix A of this Report.)

In addition to the formal interviews, we met on two occasions with the Commanders Task Force, composed of the Commanders of the Congressionally chartered veterans organizations, and attended the Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers.

Information obtained from the interviews and meetings was supplemented by a series of surveys sent to all major stakeholders. Surveys were sent to: (1) all 87 county veterans service officers; (2) the chair of all 87 county boards; (3) one additional, randomly selected county board member from each of the 87 counties; (4) the county officials directly responsible for supervising the activities of the service officers<sup>1</sup>; (5) officials from the United States and Minnesota Departments of Veterans Affairs, including officials from the Minneapolis, Sioux Falls, and Fargo regional offices of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; (6) veterans' service providers, including officials from Minneapolis, St. Cloud, Sioux Falls and Fargo VA medical centers; (7) the leadership of the Congressionally chartered veterans organizations active in Minnesota; (8) department heads of the Veterans Affairs departments in the 50 states and territories; and (9) 20 Minnesota veterans who have used the services of their county veterans service officers. (Copies of the Survey instruments used appears in Appendix B.)

The information, opinions and concerns compiled from the interviews, meetings and surveys served as the foundation for our findings and recommendations. Initially, the information obtained from the various stakeholder interviews was used to help us obtain a better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of county veterans service officers. Upon understanding the roles and responsibilities, we were able to use the opinions and concerns identified by stakeholders to formulate our findings and recommendations. In formulating our findings and recommendations, we attempted to identify significant themes that were identified and discussed by a number of stakeholders. Our findings and recommendations focused on protecting the interests of both the Minnesota veterans and the taxpayers. To do this, we attempted to identify the actual level of need for the services that are currently provided by county veterans service officers and determine the most efficient and effective way to meet that level of need.

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<sup>1</sup>To identify the direct supervisors, we sent an additional survey to the county board chairs and asked that they forward the copy to the Service Officer's direct supervisor. In many cases, the service officer reports directly to the county board.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

This report is organized into five sections.

The **Background** section of this Report presents a historical perspective on the establishment of county veterans service officer positions. Following the historical perspective, this section focuses on the number and demographic characteristics of Minnesota veterans, and the amount and various types of state and federal benefits available for Minnesota veterans.

The **Roles And Responsibilities Of County Veterans Service Officers** section will identify the wide variety of services performed by Minnesota's county veterans service officers. It will also describe how other states have opted to provide similar services to their veterans.

The **County Expenditures For County Veterans Service Officers** section will identify the current level of county resources (both financial resources and human resources) provided for the activities of the service officers.

The **Stakeholder Opinions** section of this Report presents the popular opinions of the individuals who we interviewed and surveyed during the course of this Study. As noted earlier, we actively solicited the views and opinions of a wide variety of individuals who are familiar with the roles and responsibilities of the county veterans service officers. Specifically, this section of the report summarizes:

- o the common themes that were evident in our interviews with the various stakeholders;
- o the comments of veterans who have been served by the Service Officers; and
- o the responses to selected questions in our surveys of the various stakeholders.

The Major Findings And Recommendations section of the Report present our findings and recommendations relative to our six month study, including a discussion of the factual basis for our findings and a detailed rationale for our recommendations.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

**"My Fellow Americans, Supreme Allied Commander General MacArthur and Allied representatives on the Battleship Missouri in Tokyo Bay:**

**The thoughts and hopes of all America - indeed all of the civilized world - are centered tonight on the battleship Missouri. There on that small piece of American soil anchored in Tokyo harbor the Japanese have just officially laid down their arms. They have signed terms of unconditional surrender."**

**President Harry S. Truman  
September 2, 1945<sup>2</sup>**

With these historic words, the United States ended one of the most trying and stressful four years in its history. All Americans prepared to welcome our victorious veterans home. While the war was over, the effort to properly reward our veterans and help them readjust to a civilian life had just begun. Congress, State Legislatures, and local government boards and councils had already begun passing laws, establishing benefit packages and expressing heartfelt appreciation for the tremendous effort and sacrifices our veterans made on behalf of our country and the world.

While euphoria over the War's end and the Allied victory prevailed, assimilating 16 million servicemen and women back into American society proved to be a formidable task. Servicemen and women needed help completing their education and career training programs, finding employment, purchasing homes, and tending

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted from the "Text of the Address by Truman Proclaiming V=J Day"; printed in The New York Times; Sunday, September 2, 1945; page 4.

to medical conditions brought on by their military service. For the most part, Congress and the American people were there to respond to the need with a wide variety of services and programs. These services and programs were made readily available to veterans as a way of repaying them for the tremendous service they had provided their country. Not only had our returning veterans dedicated several years of their lives to the service of their country, most had demonstrated their willingness to sacrifice their lives for our freedom.

While the United States Congress authorized and funded the majority of the benefits for our returning veterans, state legislatures, local government boards, and private businesses were also ready and willing to respond to the needs of the veterans. Private businesses focused on providing employment opportunities for the returning veterans. State and local governments began to establish programs to assist the veterans with their many and varied needs. While state and local programs often included direct financial rewards, employment preferences, and other miscellaneous benefits, the major focus of state and local efforts was to work with the veterans to ensure their needs were met and they were able to obtain all the benefits to which they were entitled.

In 1945, in anticipation of the war's end, the Minnesota Legislature enacted a number of laws to support and honor our veterans. These laws were a means of demonstrating our state's appreciation for the sacrifices made by Minnesota veterans. One of these laws stated: "the county board of any county may appoint a veterans service officer...."<sup>3</sup> The Act further provided, "it shall be the duty of the veterans service officer to aid all residents ... in securing benefits provided by law on account of the service of any person in the Army, Navy, or Marine Corps...."<sup>4</sup>

This authorizing legislation was all Minnesota counties needed to begin hiring county veterans service officers. Within months of the passage of the legislation, county veterans service officers began opening offices in courthouses across the state.

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<sup>3</sup>The law was subsequently amended in 1978 to require all counties, other than Clay, to appoint a county veterans service officer. The 1978 Legislature retained the provision allowing two or more contiguous counties to "make a written agreement ... whereby the counties may jointly employ a veterans service officer."

<sup>4</sup>Source: Laws of Minnesota, 1945; Chapter 96.

The initial role of county veterans service officers was to serve as an advocate for Minnesota veterans returning from World War II, to assist them with their transition into civilian society, and to help them obtain the many federal, state and local benefits to which they were entitled. However, as the needs of Minnesota veterans changed, the actual roles and responsibilities of county veterans service officers continued to evolve. The aging of all veterans, and the subsequent return of veterans from Korea and Vietnam, expanded the need for, and the demands placed upon, the county veterans service officers.

After World War II veterans were successfully reassimilated into Minnesota communities, the county veterans service officers began focusing their attention on the needs of the World War I veterans, many of whom were approaching retirement age and in need of more medical and custodial care. The end of the Korean and Vietnam wars created new challenges for the county veterans service officers, once again having to focus their energies on reassimilating veterans into civilian life.

### **CURRENT CHALLENGES FACING COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS**

To fully understand the complex nature of the roles and responsibilities of county veterans service officers, it is necessary to first review data on the demographics of Minnesota's veterans and the myriad of federal and state benefits to which they are entitled.

#### **The Demographics Of Minnesota's Veterans**

Minnesota currently has approximately 490,000 veterans living throughout the state. Sixty-nine Minnesota counties have at least 1,000 veterans. Slightly over half (55 percent) of all Minnesota veterans live in the seven county Twin Cities metropolitan area.<sup>5</sup>

We were unable to obtain actual data on the total number of dependents (and/or family members) of Minnesota veterans, all of whom are potentially eligible for various veterans benefits. Using reasonable assumptions, we estimate that there

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<sup>5</sup>Source: United States Department of Veterans Affairs, unpublished data.

are 792,000 family members of Minnesota veterans.<sup>6</sup> Based on this estimate, there are approximately 1,282,000 Minnesotans who are potentially eligible for various veterans benefits. In other words, nearly 30 percent of Minnesota's population are potentially eligible for some forms of veterans benefits.

Minnesota's veterans population includes individuals who served during World Wars I and II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Persian Gulf War, and various periods of relative peace that existed between the aforementioned wars. Table 1 provides greater detail about the actual demographics of Minnesota's veteran population.

The demographics of Minnesota's veterans population are important considering the varying needs of each of these groups.

- o Veterans of World War I are 85 years old and over. The benefits that are most important for these individuals are medical and nursing care, and various survivor benefits in the event of their death.
- o Veterans of World War II are primarily between the ages of 65 and 75 years old. The benefits that are most important for these individuals are pension benefits (including disability pensions), medical and nursing care, and various survivor benefits in the event of their death.
- o Veterans of the Korean War are primarily between the ages of 55 and 65 years old. The benefits most important for these individuals are pension benefits (including disability pensions), insurance coverage and, to a lesser extent, medical and nursing care benefits.
- o Veterans of the Vietnam War are between the ages of 40 and 50 years old. The benefits that are most important for these individuals are readjustment counseling, vocational rehabilitation, education and training, insurance coverage, VA home loans, disability pensions, and medical care.

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<sup>6</sup>To arrive at an estimate of the total number of dependents of Minnesota veterans, we used data from the 1991 Annual Report of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. This Report estimates there are 26.6 million living United States veterans and 42.0 million family members of living veterans. This data indicates there are an average of 1.6 dependents for each living veteran. Assuming this national ratio is accurate for Minnesota's veterans population, we were able to calculate an approximate number of dependents for Minnesota's 490,000 living veterans.

**TABLE 1**

**Minnesota's Veterans Population  
By Era Of Service<sup>7</sup>**

<u>Era Of Service</u>	<u>Total Number Of Veterans</u>	<u>Percent Of Total Veterans Population</u>
<b>Wartime Service</b>		
World War I	2,000	0.4 %
World War II	143,000	29.2 %
Korean War	74,000	15.1 %
Vietnam War	153,000	31.2 %
Persian Gulf War	50,000 <sup>8</sup>	n/a
Total Wartime Service	372,000	75.9 %
<b>Peacetime Service</b>		
After Korean War (before Vietnam)	59,000	12.0 %
Post Vietnam	55,000	11.2 %
Other Peacetime	4,000	0.8 %
Total Peacetime Service	118,000	24.1 %

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<sup>7</sup>Source: United States Department of Veterans Affairs; Veteran Population March 31, 1990; page 3.

<sup>8</sup>This is merely an estimate of the total number of Minnesotans who served in active duty in the Persian Gulf conflict. Since many of these individuals have not yet been discharged from service, they are not yet technically classified as veterans. Therefore, while this number is presented to demonstrate the number of new veterans who will soon be requiring assistance, it is not included in the table totals.

- o Veterans of the Persian Gulf War are expected to have many of the same needs experienced by Korean and Vietnam era veterans upon their return from combat. Because of the relatively short duration of the conflict, the level of effort needed to reassimilate the majority of these veterans into civilian life is likely to be considerably less. However, a number of Persian Gulf War veterans are experiencing serious episodes of post traumatic stress, brought on by their experiences in the Persian Gulf.

Hidden within these demographic characteristics are some alarming realities. Table 2 demonstrates the large increase in the number of Minnesota veterans who will be over 65 years old by the year 2005.

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**TABLE 2**

**Total Number Of Minnesota Veterans  
Over 65 Years And Over 75 Years Old, 1989 - 2005<sup>9</sup>**

<b><u>Year</u></b>	<b><u>Total Number Of Minnesota Veterans Over 65 Years Old</u></b>	<b><u>Total Number Of Minnesota Veterans Over 75 Years Old</u></b>
1989	108,000	23,000
1990	113,000	24,000
1995	134,000	40,000
2000	145,000	59,000
2005	143,000	68,000

**Percent Increase In Number of  
Minnesota Veterans Over 65 Years Old, 1989 - 2005: 32.4 %**

**Percent Increase In Number Of  
Minnesota Veterans Over 75 Years Old, 1989 - 2005: 195.7 %**

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<sup>9</sup>Source: United States Department of Veterans Affairs; Estimates and Projections of the Veteran Population: 1980 to 2040; page 16.

As our World War II veterans age, their need for medical and nursing care will increase significantly. Furthermore, through advances in medical science, World War II veterans will likely live longer, and possibly need more acute and extended medical care, than did our nation's World War I veterans. Given the limited capacities of existing VA medical and nursing facilities, and the enormous federal budget deficit, the needs of our World War II veterans will create considerable strain upon our existing veterans benefit systems, even though the total number of all veterans is likely to decline. While the needs of our veterans can be met, the federal, state and county systems may have to work harder and be more creative to provide our veterans with all the benefits to which they are entitled.

### **The Myriad Of Federal And State Veterans Benefits**

While Congress and the Minnesota Legislature created scores of veteran benefit programs to reward the veterans for their service and assist them with a wide variety of needs, the sheer number and variety of programs, the often complex and unique eligibility requirements attached to each program, and the systems used to prevent fraud and abuse of public funds, can all be overwhelming, and often intimidating, for the individual veteran trying to obtain the benefits to which he/she is entitled.

This section of the Report will briefly summarize the variety of federal and state veterans benefit programs available for Minnesota veterans and their dependents.<sup>10</sup>

In financial terms, Minnesota veterans received approximately \$285 million in 1990 for direct federal veteran benefits, an average federal commitment of \$581 per Minnesota veteran. This includes all compensation and pension payments, readjustment, education and vocational rehabilitation benefits and insurance benefits. In addition, Minnesota veterans received medical benefits from Veterans Affairs Medical Facilities. The estimated value of these medical services for

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<sup>10</sup>Information for this section of the report was obtained from Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents; January 1991; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; and the 1989 Annual Report of the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs

Minnesota veterans is \$244.3 million.<sup>11</sup> The total estimated value of direct federal benefits and medical services for Minnesota veterans is \$529.3 million. Minnesota ranks 36th nationally in direct federal benefits per veteran.

The State of Minnesota also provides financial assistance for its veterans. In fiscal year 1991, the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs provided over \$900,000 in state veterans relief benefits. These are primarily geared toward emergency, short term needs for financial assistance.

The major federal veterans benefit programs and services fall within ten categories. To receive the benefits, the veteran, and/or his or her dependents, must meet specific eligibility requirements which vary by program. Furthermore, the veteran must actively apply for most federal veteran benefits and/or seek out the specific service. In many cases, the veteran must continue to file periodic updates with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to continue receiving the benefit.

The ten major categories of federal veterans benefits are:

- o Disability compensation benefits and services for veterans and dependents with service-connected disabilities;
- o Other pension benefits for non-service-connected disabled veterans who demonstrate financial need;
- o Education, training and vocational rehabilitation programs;

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<sup>11</sup>This estimate was obtained with the assistance of staff from the U.S. Veterans Affairs Medical Centers that serve Minnesota. Staff at each of the five medical centers that serve a significant number of Minnesota veterans (Minneapolis, St. Cloud, Fargo, Sioux Falls and Twin Ports) were asked for their 1990 operating and construction budgets. Using estimates of the percent of patients from Minnesota for each facility, we were able to calculate the proportion of the total operating and construction budgets that could be reasonably attributed to Minnesota veterans. It is important to note that a portion of this total amount is offset by fees paid by private insurance policies of Minnesota veterans using the facilities (not all veterans are entitled to free medical care), and therefore, not all of this amount can be considered a direct benefit.

- o Home loan guarantees and other assistance with the purchase and/or rehabilitation of a home (both for the veteran and surviving spouse);
- o Insurance policies, including individual and group life insurance and mortgage insurance policies;
- o Compensation programs (Dependency and Indemnity Compensation) for dependents of service-connected disabled veterans, upon the death of the veteran;
- o Pension programs for survivor(s) of deceased veterans, if the survivor(s) demonstrate need based on specific income standards;
- o Survivors' and dependents' education programs and benefits;
- o Various death, burial, and commemoration benefits; and
- o Health care benefits, including, but not limited to, hospitalization, nursing home care, domiciliary care, outpatient medical and dental treatment, and alcohol and drug dependency treatment.

State funded veteran benefits encompass three primary programs. These three programs are:

- o Emergency financial and medical assistance for needy, disabled veterans and their families;
- o Claims assistance, Information and Referral services; and
- o War Orphans and Veterans Education programs, which provide a \$350 cash education entitlement for veterans and free tuition at State Universities and Community Colleges for all war orphans.

As noted earlier, there are numerous variations of benefits and services that fall within the categories of services identified above. For each variation, there are unique eligibility guidelines, including, but not limited to, income restrictions, length and type (wartime or peacetime) of service, and time restrictions upon when

the benefit may be claimed. In addition to the unique eligibility guidelines, each of the variations of benefits and programs identified above impose specific application procedures on the veterans seeking the assistance. Understanding the complexity of these programs, and the eligibility requirements, conditions, and application procedures that accompany them, helps explain the great value of having county veterans service officers located in every county of the state.

# **THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF MINNESOTA'S COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS**

## **A SUMMARY OF THE SERVICES PROVIDED**

The Minnesota County Veterans Service Officers, acting as the veteran's primary advocate and resource, offer a wide variety of essential services for Minnesota veterans. These services include:

- o counselling veterans about the variety of federal and state benefits and services to which they are entitled;
- o working with veterans to obtain proper documentation necessary for their applications for veterans benefits, including working with veterans to upgrade a discharge that was less than honorable;
- o assisting veterans with the often complex and intimidating application forms required to receive federal veterans benefits;
- o guiding veterans through the various appeals process if and when they receive an adverse ruling from the federal or state Departments of Veterans Affairs;
- o advising veterans about their opportunities and legal rights relative to various veterans preference laws and regulations;
- o referring veterans to individuals and organizations which are able to assist them with any financial, legal, psychological and/or physical problems they may encounter;
- o arranging for the veterans' transportation to and from Veterans Affairs medical facilities for treatment;

- o helping veterans' spouses and/or dependent(s) to receive the various benefits to which they are entitled;
- o working with various veterans organizations to provide financial assistance (other than federal, state and local benefit programs) for veterans in urgent need of assistance;
- o obtaining assistance for medically-necessary equipment for the disabled veteran, including prosthesis and specially equipped beds;
- o providing a variety of assistance and emotional support for veterans, including acute care and assistance for veterans who suffer from physical and cognitive impairments (vulnerable adults); and
- o comforting and consoling veterans, and the veterans' survivors, in times of crisis, including being available upon the death of the veteran or spouse. In the event of the death of the veteran, the county veterans service officer often helps ensure the survivors receive all the burial, death and survivor benefits to which they are entitled.

In addition to the broad-based services outlined above, county veterans service officers in the Twin Cities metropolitan area are having to respond to a whole new set of problems experienced by a small segment of the veteran population. The service officers from Hennepin, Ramsey and Dakota counties all noted the increased number of veterans who are homeless, chemically dependent, functionally illiterate, HIV-positive or suffering from AIDS, chronically unemployed and/or low income. (Service officers in greater Minnesota may sometimes encounter these problems, but not to the same extent as in the metropolitan area.)

### **THE KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ABILITIES REQUIRED OF SERVICE OFFICERS**

As evidenced by the wide variety of services provided, the county veterans service officer must be a highly knowledgeable and skilled professional, able to work with an often cumbersome federal bureaucracy on behalf of the veteran. The service officer must also have the ability to listen carefully to the concerns of the veteran.

taking the time to explain all details of the issue(s) being addressed. The service officer must keep abreast of all changes in state and federal veterans benefit programs. Finally, the service officer must have a clear understanding of the wide

variety of public and private non-veteran oriented services and programs which may be of some assistance to the veteran in need.

Recognizing the complex nature of the job, and the need for continually upgrading the knowledge and skills of the county veterans service officers, the 1987 Minnesota Legislature directed the Commissioner of Veterans Affairs to establish a voluntary certification program for service officers. This program was initiated at the request of the Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers. Service officers seeking certification must attend training, offered by the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs and the Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers, amounting to 7 Continuing Education Units each year, with initial certification requiring 11 Continuing Education Units. Certified County Veterans Service Officers must also pass an annual written test on various aspects of federal and state veterans benefits and other veterans issues. Most county veterans service officers have been certified.

## **THE MAJOR TYPES OF SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICER TO ALL VETERANS**

### **Outreach Efforts**

Identifying veterans in the county and informing them of the many services available through the county veterans service officer is arguably the single most important role of the county veterans service officer. If veterans are unaware of the service officer's role, they may easily overlook benefits to which they are entitled. Or, veterans who attempt to file for their own benefits without the assistance of a service officer, may become easily frustrated by the often cumbersome and unresponsive federal bureaucracy. A service officer can not be of assistance to the veteran if the veteran does not know who the service officer is and what services he/she is able to offer.

As part of their outreach effort, many service officers encourage veterans to visit the office, even if they do not have specific questions or concerns that need to be addressed. In smaller counties, service officers often make an effort to visit the veterans in their homes, places of employment and nursing homes. By establishing a personal relationship with the veteran, the service officer can build a level of trust between himself/herself and the veteran. This level of trust will be very helpful if and when the veteran needs the professional assistance of the service officer. Furthermore, veterans who get to know their service officers on a more personal level, will realize that the service officer is someone who can be called in times of crisis or personal emergency. Many service officers noted that they often get calls at all hours of the night from distraught veterans who have no place else to turn.

Based on responses we received to our survey (80 of the 87 county veterans service officers responded to our survey), most Minnesota county veterans service officers do an admirable job attempting to reach out to the county veterans and inform them of the services and benefits available to them. Nearly all service officers maintain a close working relationship with the major veterans organizations active in the county. Service officers will routinely attend the meetings of these organizations and update the membership on issues of concern to veterans. Seventy-two of the 80 service officers reported their outreach efforts included speaking to these organizations.<sup>12</sup> While this is an essential component of an overall outreach strategy, a number of county veterans service officers commented that a minority of the veterans in their county are active in these organizations. Therefore, they must use other outreach techniques as well to reach all the veterans.

Other, more innovative outreach efforts identified by the Service Officers include:

- o writing articles on topics of concern to veterans and encouraging local newspapers to print the article (47 service officers reported this activity);

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<sup>12</sup>The number of county veterans service officers who perform specific types of outreach activities was obtained from a survey of all county veterans service officers. Since the question simply asked the service officer to describe their outreach efforts, it is possible that the responses of individual service officers were not all inclusive. Therefore, for example, while only 72 of 80 service officers listed interaction with veterans organizations as a component of their outreach strategy, it is possible that all service officers perform this function but do not view it as part of their outreach effort.

- o local radio and television talk show appearances and public service announcements (27 service officers reported this activity);
- o visits to nursing homes and hospitals, working with the staff to identify residents/patients who are veterans (49 service officers reported this activity);
- o providing routine services and/or maintaining office hours outside of the county seat (16 service officers reported this activity)
- o circulating informative flyers and newsletters around the communities within the county (14 service officers reported this activity);
- o sending letters to newly discharged veterans informing them of the services provided by the county veterans service officers (6 service officers reported this activity)
- o working with other county and municipal agencies, letting officials from those agencies know of the wide variety of services available to veterans and expressing a willingness to assist the official with any clients who are veterans (27 service officers reported this activity);
- o offering veterans a toll free phone number for them to call (5 service officers reported this service);
- o making personal visits to jails and prisons to assist incarcerated veterans (5 service officers reported this activity);
- o reviewing obituaries to identify survivors of veterans who may be eligible for benefits; and
- o regular appearances at meetings of various civic organizations, including the Chambers of Commerce and the Kiwanis Clubs.

## Assisting Veterans Obtain Benefits

While effective outreach efforts are essential, the majority of a county veterans service officer's time is devoted to assisting veterans obtain the benefits to which they are entitled. The service officer is an irreplaceable resource for veterans attempting to obtain information about, and apply for, their federal and state benefits. Their extensive knowledge of the many benefit programs available will help veterans identify all the benefits to which they are entitled.

The effectiveness of service officers in securing benefits for the county veterans is enhanced by the professional working relationships most service officers have established with officials from the federal and state Departments of Veterans Affairs. These federal and state officials ultimately process the veterans' applications for benefits. Through these ongoing professional relationships, the service officer is often able to expedite emergency applications through the system and obtain clearer explanations for why an application was rejected and/or what additional documentation is necessary to get the application approved.

Much of the work performed by county veterans service officers in obtaining federal benefits for veterans is routine. However, these routine services are an indispensable service for the physically or cognitively impaired veteran. For example, veterans' pension benefits require annual verification of eligibility. The annual Eligibility Verification Report itself is a relatively simple form to complete, requiring much the same financial information one would already need to be able to complete an income tax return, plus information on medical and/or nursing home expenses. However, because benefits may be discontinued without the completion of this form, it is a very important document. The service officer who is aware of veterans receiving disability pensions will either remind the veterans (or the veterans' surviving spouse/dependent) about the Verification Report, or will assist in the completion of the report itself. For some elderly recipients, assistance with the Verification Report is absolutely essential.

As noted above, applying for most veterans benefits is fairly routine for the experienced county veterans service officer. For this reason, all veterans are well advised to use the services of the county veterans service officers. By doing so, the veteran will avoid many potential problems which may arise throughout the application process.

Beyond the routine application, the experience and training of service officers is essential when dealing with federal officials on more difficult cases.

Veterans who have received a less than honorable discharge from the armed forces are ineligible for most veterans benefits. In these cases, county veterans service officers can often help veterans upgrade their discharges by obtaining copies of military records, assisting with necessary personal statements, and soliciting character references for the veterans. These documents can then be submitted to the appropriate military authorities who are able to grant upgraded discharges.

County veteran service officers can also assist a veteran to appeal an adverse decision by federal Veterans Affairs officials. A common example of such an action is the appeal of an individual's disability rating. The level of compensation for a service-connected disability varies with the degree of disability. For example, a 10 percent disability rating entitles a veteran to a monthly payment of \$80, whereas a 30 percent disability rating entitles a veteran to a \$231 monthly payment, plus additional allowances for dependents.

Finally, as veterans age, medical problems may arise which can be traced back to an injury received while the veteran was in military service. At the time of the injury, the veteran may not have suffered any noticeable disability. Therefore, it is understandably difficult to document that a newly diagnosed medical condition is indeed the result of an injury received during military service. However, a service officer is trained to know how to obtain the necessary medical records from the military. He/she has experience in identifying and locating military medical doctors who treated the injury, and fellow soldiers who can attest to the circumstances surrounding the injury. Using the military medical records and statements from military doctors and fellow soldiers, the service officer identifies medical experts that can clearly demonstrate a link between the newly diagnosed medical condition and the injury received during military service. All of this documentation will be necessary for the veteran to collect the service-connected disability pension to which he/she is entitled.

It is difficult to determine accurately the total amount of federal veterans benefits which county veterans service officers help bring into the state. While Minnesota veterans receive over \$285 million in federal veteran benefits (not including medical benefits), many veterans undoubtedly would receive their benefits with or without the assistance of the service officers. However, through the course of our

study, we noted many anecdotal instances in which veterans would not have received their benefits were it not for the services of the county veterans service officer. Federal officials from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs acknowledged that a significant number of Minnesota veterans relied entirely on the work of their service officers throughout the application process for various benefit programs.

### **Providing For Transportation Services**

Health Care Services is one of the major categories of federal benefits to which many veterans are entitled. Unfortunately, to take advantage of these benefits, the veteran generally must use a U.S. Veterans Affairs medical facility. (Fee basis medical services from a private provider are possible, although obtaining approval for these services is difficult and the fee may not cover the full cost of the service.) The only Veterans Affairs medical facilities in or near Minnesota are located in Minneapolis, St. Cloud, Sioux Falls (South Dakota), Superior (Wisconsin) (Outpatient clinic), Tomah (Wisconsin) and Fargo (North Dakota). Therefore, transportation to these facilities for many veterans is a significant barrier to obtaining the benefits to which they are entitled. Transportation is especially difficult for the low income veterans and those with physical or cognitive impairments. It is ironic that those veterans who are often in the greatest need of medical benefits are also the ones who are unable to take advantage of the benefits, due to significant transportation barriers.

Many county veterans service officers from counties far removed from Veterans Affairs medical facilities recognized the significant need for transportation services to and from these facilities. To respond to this need, these service officers began coordinating transportation services for their veterans. Without coordinated transportation services, many veterans would lack the means to travel to the medical facilities for examinations and treatment.

The actual transportation arrangements, including frequency of trips, vary significantly from county to county. Seventy counties provide some form of transportation to Veterans Affairs medical facilities. Thirty six counties have their own vans, many of which were donated to the counties by various veterans organizations. Those counties which do not have their own vans rely on private cars/vans and reimburse drivers for mileage. Thirteen counties make daily trips to the medical centers, while the remainder go once or twice weekly, or on an "as

needed" basis. Most vans and private vehicles are driven by volunteers, not the county veterans service officer. In several cases, the county does not pay the cost of this transportation, instead it is financed through fees to riders and/or subsidized by the various veteran organizations active in the county.

Many counties which do provide transportation to medical facilities have begun to coordinate these trips with neighboring counties. For example, the county veterans service officers in Pope, Stevens, Kandiyohi, Meeker, and Swift counties have established an informal cooperative arrangement to minimize the number of vehicles traveling into Minneapolis on any given day. If only one or two veterans from one of the counties need to go to the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs medical center on any particular day, one of the other counties that has room in their vehicle will see to it that those veterans receive a ride. By coordinating their transportation services with neighboring counties, county veterans service officers can maximize the availability of transportation services while minimizing the cost to the counties and/or private organizations financing the trips.

### THE PROVISION OF SERVICES IN OTHER STATES

Minnesota veterans are not alone in their need for assistance. In our study, we attempted to explore how other states are addressing this need. Through a survey of the heads of State Departments of Veterans Affairs, we were able to gain insight into systems other states use for the provision of services directly to their veterans.

Forty states, plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, responded to our survey.<sup>13</sup> In 23 of the states responding, services to veterans are provided by local governments using systems similar to our county veterans service officer system. (We also learned that at least two of the states not responding to our survey also have local government service offices.) The remaining 17 states that responded to our survey, plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, have "state" employees who assist veterans with their needs.

Fourteen of the 23 states that have local governments providing services to veterans also provide their local governments with a partial state subsidy for the

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<sup>13</sup>The states of Alaska, Connecticut, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming have not responded.

services. Only three states (Iowa, Michigan, and North Dakota), use earmarked local tax revenues to fund the local government services to the veterans.

Eight of the 17 states that do not have local governments providing services to veterans rely on extensive networks of state field offices as a means of making the services easily accessible to veterans. Two of the states, Delaware and Rhode Island, are small enough that their state offices are easily accessible statewide.

Most federal U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs officials we talked with acknowledge that Minnesota's system of county veterans service officers is among the best in the nation. Other states that have good systems are:

- o Florida has a strong system of county veterans service officers, in addition to an extensive network of state service offices located at most of the federal Veterans Affairs facilities throughout the state. The Florida Association of County Veterans Service Officers is also recognized for having a good training program for its members.
- o New York has a system of county and city veterans service officers, all of which receive a state subsidy, ranging from \$3,250 to \$48,475. In addition, the State has State Veterans Counselors in approximately 50 field offices throughout the state.
- o North Carolina has an extensive system of county veterans service officers, with 90 of 100 counties employing a service officer. The state also maintains 15 District Offices, in addition to providing a \$2,000 subsidy to each of the participating counties.
- o Wisconsin has a system of county veterans service officers that is very similar to that found in Minnesota. It has county veterans service officers in all 72 counties, with three counties having two offices. Sixty-seven of the 72 counties have full time service officers. In addition to the county system, the State maintains offices in Madison, Superior and Milwaukee. The State also provides minimal State funding for county operations, with annual contributions to local offices ranging from \$500 to \$5,000.

## SUMMARY:

### ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS

Although we have described the major roles of the county veterans service officer, it is impossible to identify all the activities that the job entails. The job literally changes from day to day, as the needs of the county veterans change. The successful county veterans service officer will always try to be there to answer the call of the veterans. **From a philosophical viewpoint, the veterans service officer understands that veterans were there when their country called upon them, and now the service officer has the opportunity to return the service.** Veterans who recognize the sense of commitment most service officers bring to the job understand that they have a true friend and an advocate as close as their telephone. They will call on that friend and advocate both in times of dire need, and when they simply need someone to whom they can talk.

Because of this unique role, veterans service officers often become a focal point for the veterans in times of personal crisis.

- o Distraught widows and widowers often call the service officer first, looking for emotional help and support within hours of the death of their spouse.
- o Veterans service officers routinely help plan the funerals of veterans within their county.
- o Calls from veterans on the verge of suicide are a real concern which service officers must be ready to handle at anytime of the day or night.
- o Around the holidays, service officers routinely get calls from distraught veterans who can not afford to buy their children Christmas presents.
- o Many veterans seek out the veterans service officers on or around Memorial Day each year, wanting someone to share their continued sense of grief over the loss of close friends in the war.

These actual situations help put the value of a good service officer into its proper perspective



## COUNTY EXPENDITURES FOR COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS

### THE NUMBER OF COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS

As was noted earlier, Minnesota Statutes (1990) 197.602 require all counties to appoint a county veterans service officer. However, the law does allow for some flexibility by the county. The law currently allows:

- o two or more contiguous counties may enter into an agreement to appoint a single veterans service officer;
- o counties to set the compensation of the veterans service officer at a level commensurate with other county officials with the same level of responsibility; and
- o county boards to assign other duties to the service officer as well.

Currently, all counties in Minnesota have at least one part-time county veterans service officer.

Thirty five counties have only a part time veterans service officer. Many of these part time service officers are full time county employees who also hold other county responsibilities. (It is quite common for counties with small veteran populations to assign the service officer to be the director of emergency management for the county as well.)

Thirty eight counties have one full time veterans service officer. The remaining 16 counties have one full time veterans service officer and one or more assistant veterans service officers. Hennepin county, with 134,563 veterans, has three assistant county veterans service officers. Ramsey county, with 58,825 veterans has two assistant county veterans service officers. St. Louis County, with 23,763 veterans dispersed throughout one of the largest counties in the state, has six assistant county veterans service officers working out of four office locations.

## THE ANNUAL BUDGETS FOR COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS

During Fiscal Year 1991, Minnesota counties appropriated approximately \$5.4 million for the salaries and activities of Minnesota county veterans service officers.<sup>14</sup> (See Appendix C for total annual budgets of Minnesota's 87 County Veterans Service Officers.) Individual county budgets ranged from \$5,094 in Red Lake County, to \$404,509 in Saint-Louis County. To place these expenditures in their proper perspective, current total expenditures by Minnesota counties were \$2.253 billion in 1989.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, assuming county veterans service officer budgets were as high in 1989 as they were in 1991 (a conservative assumption), Minnesota counties spend approximately 25 cents for county veterans service officers for every \$100 spent by the county. Looking at the county expenditures for county veterans service officers in another light, it is estimated that, on average, Minnesota counties spend slightly over \$11.00 per veteran for the services of Minnesota county veteran service officers.

In addition to the county expenditures for the activities of county veterans service officers, various local chapters of statewide veterans organizations contributed at least \$300,000 to \$400,000 for the activities of the county veterans service officers.<sup>16</sup> These contributions underscore the importance Minnesota veterans place on the services offered by county veterans service officers.

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<sup>14</sup>Source: Survey of Minnesota County Veterans Service Officers conducted by the Office of the Minnesota State Auditor.

<sup>15</sup>Source: Revenues, Expenditures And Debt Of Minnesota Counties; December 31, 1989; Minnesota Office of the State Auditor; page 9.

<sup>16</sup>The bulk of the dollar amount of Veterans organizations' contributions financed purchases of vehicles for transporting veterans to medical centers. Other contributions might help pay for a county veterans service officer's expenses to attend a training conference or to help veterans with expenses in emergency situations. The difficulty in obtaining precise dollar contributions from these veterans organizations arises from lack of comparability of individual county data. Some counties reported contributions only for the current year, even though they use a van donated during a previous year, thereby underreporting the extent of the donations. At the other extreme, overreporting resulted from either totalling contributions spanning several years, or reporting the donation for a van purchased during the current year even though the van will continue to be used in subsequent years when donations will otherwise be smaller. Where enough information was provided to adjust the data for statewide comparability, we did so, but the figure reported should be considered a rough approximation.

## STAKEHOLDER OPINIONS

### OVERVIEW

Throughout the course of the six month study, we solicited the opinions of various individuals who regularly interact with the county veterans service officers. These opinions were expressed during formal interviews and through responses to written surveys that were sent out to various individuals. This section of the Report will present a compilation of comments from many of these individuals. The comments selected are generally reflective of the majority of opinions that have been expressed in the past six months.

The overwhelming response of all individuals who interact with county veterans service officers is highly positive. County officials (both elected and appointed), veterans, representatives of statewide veterans organizations, federal and state officials from the respective departments of veterans affairs, and veterans service providers were strongly in favor of maintaining the current system of county veterans service officers. Many of these individuals described Minnesota's system as among the best in the nation.

### OPINIONS OF MINNESOTA VETERANS

The following comments are taken directly from letters written by Minnesota veterans and members of their families who have been served by Minnesota county veterans service officers. (We have not listed the names of the individuals providing these opinions unless permission to use their name was explicitly given.)

"The Dakota County Veterans Service Officer, Mike Labovitch, though not the only contributor, was nonetheless the major contributor towards getting me rehabilitated from being a drain on society to the modest present day tax paying status and other contributions to society....

"He picked me up out of a motel in 1981.... I had been evicted for the third time in succession when the motel evicted me. Instead of ending up on the streets very sick and unwanted by society, Mike got me the care I needed and the home to live in.... Many laypeople and professionals knew I needed help all along, but it was Mike Labovitch who patiently and professionally spearheaded the drive for service connection for 2 to 3 years.... All during this time, Mike was working on my case ... along with the Disabled American Veterans and the staff at the V.A. Hospital....

"Life before meeting the Dakota County Veterans Service Officer was a disaster, however, the continual vigilance ... has totally turned me around and 1991 has been the best year of my life at 47 years of age."

Mr. Ray Jacobsen  
Minnesota Veteran and 3M Employee  
Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota

"I was working for the Army Corps of Engineers when I was injured on the job in 1985. ... I went to the VA hospital for treatment. When the VA hospital learned of a service-connected injury that occurred in July of 1976, they recommended I contact my county veterans service officer.

"[My service officer] learned I was a service-connected Disabled Veteran. Wondering why I hadn't had any compensation, he checked through my military file and found omissions ... pertaining to my service connected disability.

"After extensive research, paperwork, and communication with other officials, I was finally awarded my fifty percent disability rating I deserved. I had been trying on my own for approximately 15 years to get compensated ... with no results until I contacted my county veterans service officer in December, 1989. Within five months I started receiving my compensation."

Minnesota Veteran  
Southeastern Minnesota

"Since my first visit [with my county veterans service officer] in 1983, [he] has been a friend and is always there to help the veteran. The veteran is first and foremost with him.... Most veterans prefer the one-on-one contact with the county veterans service officer. He is someone they know and trust ... The county veterans service officer's job is just as important, if not more so, as any other county officer. We need more dedicated people like my county veterans service officer."

Michael Stinar  
Minnesota Veteran  
Park Rapids, Minnesota

"My husband ... was a 100 percent battlefield disabled veteran and suffered many periods of illness, surgery, and hospitalization throughout the years following his discharge in 1946...

"My husband passed away on August 13, 1991. If he were here today, he would be very appreciative of [the county veterans service officer's] help to guide me and our family through a very difficult time in our lives....

"His help and guidance have been a great comfort to me and my family at all times, and especially so during the past year...."

Our county veterans service officer was "a big help getting my husband's G.I insurance policy changed from a monthly payment plan to a lump sum [benefit], so I could be able to go ahead and pay burial expenses. He also informed and advised me in regard to some emergency programs that have been helpful with food, fuel, utilities, et cetera during our time of need - programs I wasn't aware of, and couldn't have used without his help.

Surviving Spouse Of A  
Minnesota Veteran  
Western Minnesota

"In March, 1989, my husband was diagnosed terminally ill. Our county veterans service officer made arrangements for the State Veterans Affairs department to pay our utility bills while my husband and I were without work. He got federal Veterans Administration payments coming in record time. Then my husband died.... Again, Mr. Ramey was right there for any and every problem....

"If all county veterans service officers [do] the job as well as Polk county's, there's nothing to be improved. He's helped me go to school, the headstone, everything."

Ms. Tina Trulsen  
Surviving Spouse Of A  
Minnesota Veteran  
McIntosh, Minnesota

"As you know and may not like to hear the vet is not on the top of the government's list of things that need help. I have found out over the years that if you need something from the U.S. government or the State of Minnesota there are three ways to go about it: 1) go through the channels which may or may not work 2) write to a Congressman which sometimes works 3) or ask help from your county veterans service officer which has worked every time for me. To the government the vet is not number one unless you start at the bottom of the pile. To the Congressman the vet might be a vote. To the county veterans service officer the vet is number one - is his only job."

"I can't say enough good about my county veterans service officer, who happens to be Hank Sadler. He has shown me where I was missing out on many benefits that the State of Minnesota, Federal Government and the [Department of] Veterans Affairs just do not tell the vet about."

Eugene Buckley  
Minnesota Veteran  
North Mankato, Minnesota

"...My father was diagnosed with cancer in September and we found out it was terminal on November 29, 1990. During that week, my sister had taken my mother out to the Veterans Service Office to see what benefits were available for my father as he was unable to work. Duane [Krueger - Anoka County Veterans Service Officer] spent a lot of time with my sister and my mother explaining the details of what needed to be done to process a disability claim and exactly what forms he needed from us. We got those forms to him right away as there was absolutely no income coming into my parents' household and we needed the claim processed as soon as possible. When Duane received the proper forms, he then performed a miracle. My father was awarded a disability award effective December 1, 1990 and he also arranged with the State to help out with their utility bills for the month of December. As we came to find out-later, this process normally takes approximately 30-90 days to process; however, Duane went out of his way to get this claim processed in just four days as he understood the urgency of the situation.

"There are no words to describe what a source of support he has been to our family. He is the most knowledgeable person in his area of expertise that I have ever dealt with and yet is still compassionate to the needs of our family and the grief we were and still are experiencing (my father passed away on December 31, 1990).... I have dealt with two mortgage companies, Social Security Disability, Social Security Emergency Income, and Medical Assistance and none of the contacts at these agencies could hold a candle to Duane.

"I can honestly say that I do not know how we would have gotten through the last few months without his support and knowledge. Never, not once, has he made any of us feel like we are imposing on his time or are bothering him.

Laura Lee Johnson  
Daughter of a Minnesota Veteran  
Fridley, Minnesota

"...I returned from the Service after World War II, June 1946. Proud to have been in the US Navy, I had the privilege to serve the greatest Country and form of Government on the face of this earth.

"During the first 20 years of civilian life, my health problems were handled by local Medical Doctors. My condition seemed to worsen. Luckily one day, I had a cup of coffee with the local Veterans Service Officer at the Chippewa County Courthouse. His deep concern prompted me to bring in my Navy Discharge papers. Results are as follows: A visit to the Minneapolis VA Medical Center, where I was again warmly received. After my check-up (physical) I was given medication, and several weeks later I received my mail, a VA Patient Data Card--Service Connected Priority.

"...The first person to inform me of [my] VA rights was our Chippewa County veterans service officer. I frankly did not know I was even eligible to go to the VA Hospital. I always felt that was only for severely wounded service men.

"I heard about our County Service Officer from other Legion members, but for a long time I just neglected to visit his office. The end result of that first visit made me more proud than ever of my Navy service."

Mr. Don Petersen  
Minnesota Veteran  
Milan, Minnesota

"I am a regular outpatient of the VAMC, Minneapolis. I had a back operation there 28 years ago. Recently, I had an operation on my hand and had two cancerous moles on my skin removed. I am very satisfied with the VAMC. I would like to point out that the county veterans service officer provides transportation for me and also, at my request, arranges clinic appointments for me.... I firmly believe any veteran strongly increases his own position with the VA by relying on the advice and assistance of the county veterans service officer.

"...I strongly believe that the county veterans service officer is the best friend and advocate that any Minnesota veteran can have. Any change in the present system would have disastrous consequences....

"I believe the County veterans service officer's position relative to the federal, state and county agencies needs to be enhanced to a higher level so that the County veterans service officer can become more effective in doing his job."

A Minnesota Veteran  
Southeast Minnesota

"I am over 80 years of age, returning following WW II with several service connected disabilities which were a matter of record until the fire of 7-12-73 when my records were destroyed in the St. Louis office. Through the efforts of my local county veterans service officer, he finally succeeded in establishing a few of my service connected disabilities.

"Establishing service connected disabilities was accomplished quite rapidly and efficiently by Art Burns, my local county veterans service officer. I cannot praise too highly the effectiveness of our Hubbard County veterans service officer, his personal and compassionate interest, and being able to visit ... an elder vet in need of assurance and assistance.... The service I received could not be improved upon.... [H]is personal interest and immediate handling of current situations were admirable. It is absolutely necessary to maintain this office in Hubbard county where such a dedicated county veterans service officer can work hand in hand with those of us who served our country to the best of our ability and now ask for assistance to maintain our dignity and well-being."

Mr. Ferd Luebke  
Minnesota Veteran  
Park Rapids, Minnesota

## OPINIONS OF COUNTY OFFICIALS

Minnesota county officials, who must balance the interests of veterans with the overall interests of county taxpayers, are also very supportive of the services provided by Minnesota county veterans service officers.

In our study, we surveyed the chairs of each of the 87 county boards, plus one additional county board member selected at random. We received 95 responses to our survey, with the majority of counties having at least one of the two commissioners respond. Through these 95 responses, we found the following:

- o When asked about the degree of importance county officials place on the services provided by the county veterans service officers:
  - \* 61 respondents (64.2 percent) indicated they provide an essential service for Minnesota veterans;
  - \* 25 respondents (26.3 percent) indicated they provide an important service for Minnesota veterans;
  - \* 6 respondents (6.3 percent) indicated the services could be provided by other state and federal agencies or felt it was an unnecessary expenditure of county resources; and
  - \* 3 respondents (3.2 percent) did not respond to this question.
- o When asked to indicate how the services of the county veterans service officer should be provided:
  - \* 39 respondents (41.1 percent) said they should be provided as currently mandated by state statute;
  - \* 33 respondents (34.7 percent) said they should be administered by the county with a partial state subsidy;

- \* 13 respondents (13.7 percent) said they should be a state-administered and -funded activity with operations located in the counties; and
  - \* 10 respondents (10.5 percent) had suggested "other" arrangements or did not respond.
- o When asked to indicate the level of funding county veterans service officers were likely to receive in the future:
- \* 40 respondents (42.1 percent) indicated the demands placed on the service officer justify an increase in funding, but the resources of the county will restrict any future increases to an amount comparable to increases granted to other county departments;
  - \* 28 respondents (29.5 percent) indicated the county will fund the service officer at its current level;
  - \* 18 respondents (18.9 percent) indicated limited county resources will require future reductions in the level of support for many county services, including the service officer; and
  - \* 9 respondents (9.5 percent) indicated other responses or did not respond.
- o When informed the Legislature may consider providing full or partial funding for the services of the county veterans service officers:
- \* 23 respondents (24.2 percent) indicated the state should provide financial assistance to the county to maintain a level of veterans services appropriate to the current need;
  - \* 22 respondents (23.2 percent) indicated the service officer constituted a small portion of the total county budget and no changes in the current financing arrangements are needed;
  - \* 19 respondents (20.0 percent) indicated the county must maintain control over the services, although the state should help fund the services;

- \* 15 respondents (15.8 percent) indicated that the service officer requirement is one of the least onerous county mandates and it is important to maintain local autonomy over the funding and administration of the services;
- \* 10 respondents (10.5 percent) indicated that because the service officer is mandated by the state, it should be funded by the state; and
- \* 6 respondents (6.3 percent) indicated other responses or did not respond.

It is also noteworthy that 70 of the 87 county boards have adopted formal resolutions supporting the current system of county veterans service officers. Many of those resolutions urged the state to provide partial funding for the services. (See Appendix D for list of county boards that have passed resolutions in support of the current system of county veterans service officers.)

Furthermore, the Association of Minnesota counties, which includes 86 of the 87 counties (Dakota county does not belong to the Association), adopted the following policy statement at its Annual Conference last November:

"The Association of Minnesota Counties supports the mandates of Minnesota Statutes 197 (county veterans service officers) as the most cost-efficient and effective method for the provision of services to the county veterans, dependents and survivors."

Individual county officials, in interviews and through their responses to our survey, also noted the importance of the services provided by county veterans service officers. The following are several quotes county officials shared with us during the course of our study:

"The county veterans service officer, the secretary, and volunteer drivers (for the transportation program) have done a very good job in meeting the increasing needs of the veteran population in Waseca County. The county service organizations have been very generous in donating funds for equipment purchases.

"More complexity in Department of Veterans Affairs benefits and rules will require [county veterans service officers to acquire] more expertise and communication skills."

Commissioner Robert L. Peterson  
Waseca County

"Hennepin County has a very unique and rapidly changing veteran population. This office has and will respond effectively to the needs of Hennepin County's veteran population. A statewide system would not serve the veterans of our county as effectively as the current system.

Kevin P. Kenney  
Associate Administrator  
Hennepin County Bureau of  
Social Service

"The Veterans Service Officer is a very important person in rural counties! We need one locally involved."

Commissioner Jerry Callaghan  
Douglas County

"The county veterans service officer is very knowledgeable regarding all levels of government funding sources and community funding sources. For us this has been a great asset that makes our budget and county dollar go much further to provide quality services for county veterans.

"The county veterans service officer becomes more important each year with the aging of our veteran population. It is important to keep the office at a local level and to maintain services at a local level in order to provide personal quality service. The county veterans service officer is important to our community."

Commissioner Hal Norgard  
Ramsey County

"As veterans become older they will need more help and they should have the best no matter what. Veterans have given their all for their country. They should be given the best care in the world."

Commissioner Robert J. Lewis, Chair  
Houston County

"The county veterans service officer is a vital service provided for veterans. It is a service that we have guaranteed them for their service in the armed forces. We need to stand by that promise of service and do it in a way that allows the veteran to maintain the highest level of dignity. I don't want to ever see the veterans' programs handled through social services or, in any other way, give the recipients the feeling that they are getting "a hand out." I do believe, however, that the operations of the county veterans service officer should be funded by either state or federal grants."

Commissioner Stephanie Klinzing  
Sherburne County

**OPINIONS OF STATE AND FEDERAL VETERANS AFFAIRS**  
**OFFICIALS AND REPRESENTATIVES OF**  
**CONGRESSIONALLY CHARTERED VETERANS ORGANIZATIONS**

The following are representative quotes from representatives of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, and Congressionally chartered veterans organizations relative to the services provided by Minnesota's county veterans service officers. Since these individuals interact regularly with the service officers relative to benefit applications of individual veterans, they are in a unique position to comment on the need for, and effectiveness of, the services provided by county veterans service officers. These individuals also offer a unique perspective on improvements that could be made to the system.

"County veterans service officers are an integral part in the process of veterans advocacy. The simple fact that they report solely to their local County Board of Commissioners allows them to work within, or, if necessary, challenge any part of the state or federal veterans system. If changes were made in this reporting structure, the county veterans service officer may have conflicts of interest. If this happens, the veteran loses."

Mr. Bernie Melter  
Commissioner  
Mr. Jeff Olson  
Deputy Commissioner  
Minnesota Department  
of Veterans Affairs

"The salary of a county veterans service officer is far less than the benefits brought into a community by the presence of a service officer.... County veterans service officers are by far the most cost-effective people involved in veterans affairs in local communities.

"The plethora of federal, state, and local regulations and procedures dealing with these federal funds are far beyond the comprehension of the average veteran. The county veterans service officer is "the" linkage between veterans and the established governmental agencies....

"County veterans service officers have an intricate knowledge of the inner workings of the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs Medical Center and provide many services which help expedite patient care."

Mr. Thomas P. Mullon  
Director  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
Medical Center  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

"Our agency does provide some native American outreach. These efforts pale in comparison to the outreach efforts of a good county veterans service officer. A local county veterans service officer can perform outreach functions in the local nursing homes, attend local veterans organizational meetings, and generally be the local "VA expert." I believe that in all areas the county veterans service officer is more effective in offering assistance to veterans and their dependents."

Mr. J. Frank  
Adjudication Officer,  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Fargo, North Dakota

To improve the quality of service provided by Minnesota county veterans service officers, Minnesota officials should consider:

"A formal, comprehensive training program for new county veterans service officers must be coordinated at the state level to ensure well qualified county veterans service officers.... This training and networking is critical,

especially given the degree to which county veterans service officers must function independently at the local level in many counties.... An ongoing process of program monitoring might maintain high standards and identify and/or address the inadequacies of a small number of county veterans service officers."

Ms. Nancy K. Donovan, MSSW  
Social Worker  
U.S. Veterans Affairs Medical Center  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

"Our Minnesota county veterans service officers are generally a well informed, effective group. In my estimation, their employment status is directly proportional to their effectiveness. Veterans benefits programs are so complex in this day and age, that it takes a great degree of study and work to be fully informed on the many different programs offered. Those who are employed on a limited, part time basis do not have the opportunity to keep abreast of the many changes we see on a daily basis. Those service officers who are full-time are generally the most effective service officers.

Mr. Marlin Thorsgaard  
Chief, Veterans Service Division  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Fargo, North Dakota

"The very fact that Minnesota's county veterans service officers are responsible to their County and its taxpayers, many of whom are veterans, is absolutely essential to the provision of compassionate service to veterans in all service areas. It is impossible to single out one or two services provided as the MOST important, because, no matter what the particular problem may be, ...[that particular service] is the MOST important to that Veteran in need....

"It is the opinion of The American Legion in Minnesota that our County Veterans Service Officer System is unexcelled in this Country. Minnesota's is a model studied by many of our compatriots for their States. They envy the services provided to Minnesota's Veterans and desire to emulate it in their own States....

"Don't fix a wagon that isn't broken; -- an old cliché, but most apt in this case."

Mr. Charles W. Ferguson  
Department Adjutant  
The American Legion  
Department of Minnesota

"The County Veterans Service Officers are held in high regard by this organization. They are "Professionals" in all senses of the word and without their assistance, our claims office would be hard pressed to obtain claims and evidence....

"If any suggestion would be needed to improve [the] services [of the county veterans service officers], then it would be to provide them with the tools ... and time and finances to up-grade themselves in Veterans Affairs Regulations, Forms, etc."

Mr. Frank Volk  
Commander  
Veterans of Foreign Wars  
Department of Minnesota

The county veterans service officer is the person who first sits down with the veteran. Particularly among Vietnam veterans, there's a big distrust and reluctance to deal with government structures. Its very important that the first person they contact is a veteran and portrays himself as being concerned.

County veterans service officers and their counties need to ask themselves, "how best can we get out to the veteran who doesn't know we exist?" They've got to go out and "drum up business...."

Some service officers are better than others. A good service officer "treats veterans with the dignity they deserve and bends over backwards for them."

Mr. Dick Bergling  
State Chair  
Vietnam Veterans of America

"The county veterans service officer system is a very essential and vital service to veteran's and their dependents.... The position of the county veterans service officer is not just a Monday through Friday position.... The county veterans service officer... is the veteran's best ally and friend."

Mr. Mike Cantin  
National Service Officer  
American Veterans of World War II,  
Korea, and Vietnam

With the aging World War II veteran population the services of the county veterans service officers are more important than ever. For the veteran in need of medical care and/or nursing home care, the service officer's knowledge and assistance is indispensable. Veterans don't usually have much reason to know about benefits when they're 30 or 40, but when they approach 70 and need care, its important.

Mr. Tom Shaw  
State Commander  
Jewish War Veterans  
Department of Minnesota

"All services provided by the county veterans service officers are vitally important. If it were not for the county veterans service officers, many veterans and dependents would not make application for benefits....

"In most cases, the county veterans service officer is a well-trained, competent, professional person who is diligently working to assure that the veterans and their dependents ... are receiving the ... benefits to which they are entitled."

Mr. Craig W. Fisher  
National Service Officer  
Disabled American Veterans  
Saint Paul, Minnesota

"We have found the county veterans service officer system to be very effective. Our out-state members consider their county veterans service officer as their local connection with the large and remote [Department of] Veterans Affairs."

Mr. Richard L. Carroll  
Commander  
American EX-Prisoners of War  
Department of Minnesota

"A County veterans service officer denotes a place where a veteran, or family of a veteran, has an advocate for the assistance in the application for benefits. It is a place where outreach programs are accomplished. In outreach, the bureaucracy is the second enemy faced by a veteran, and where the first failed to kill the veteran, the second enemy often finishes the job. **The** county veterans service officer may be the only friendly on this second battlefield."

Mr. Daniel D. Chase, Jr.  
National Service Officer  
Military Order of the Purple Heart  
Saint Paul, Minnesota

## **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Throughout the course of the study, we identified a number of significant public policy issues relative to the roles and responsibilities of the county veterans service officers. **Overall, we found that the present system of county veterans service officers is working exceptionally well and serving faithfully the needs of its primary clients, Minnesota veterans and their families.** We found the county veterans service officers provide a wide diversity of services for Minnesota veterans. The challenges of the job require that the service officer combine an exceptional knowledge of the technical details surrounding federal and state veteran benefits with an ability to work closely with the veteran, and to understand the veteran's needs and problems. Above all else, the county veterans service officer must be able to gain the trust of the veterans he/she serves. The county veterans service officer is not there to assist the veteran obtain a government handout; instead, the service officer is there to ensure the veteran is able to obtain all the benefits and rewards to which they are entitled - as a repayment for the unselfish service they provided our country in its time of need. We believe it is essential that these services be continued at the county level and, hopefully, expanded even further.

This section of the report will focus on several of our major findings and recommendations that were developed throughout the course of our study.

### **FINDING:**

**The services provided by the county veterans service officer are essential. They provide a means of guaranteeing that Minnesota veterans receive the maximum level of federal and state benefits to which they are entitled.**

The complexity of the federal veterans benefit programs cannot be overstated. The eligibility requirements attached to various benefit programs, and the often cumbersome application procedures which must be followed in order to receive those benefits, may be necessary from the federal government's point of view, as

a means of ensuring benefits are only provided to those who are entitled to receive them. However, these requirements and application procedures can be very intimidating to the veteran who is not used to dealing with government programs. Many veterans would likely forego the benefits to which they are entitled, rather than subject themselves to the frustration that often accompanies attempts to obtain assistance from federal agencies.

The need for the services of a county veterans service officer is even greater outside metropolitan areas served by regional Veterans Affairs facilities. While veterans in the Twin Cities area can visit the U.S. Veterans Affairs Regional Office in Minneapolis and obtain assistance from the staff of that office, it is much more difficult for veterans in greater Minnesota to receive that type of assistance. Having someone within their county who is knowledgeable about the federal and state veteran benefits can greatly improve the veteran's ability to receive those benefits.

The federal and state Departments of Veterans Affairs do have staff available to assist the veteran. However, their workload makes it impossible for them to provide the veteran with the level of personal service and attention that is provided by most county veterans service officers.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

**County Veterans Service Offices should NOT be eliminated. To the contrary, the state legislature and 87 Minnesota county boards must ensure that the services of the county veterans service officer continue to remain available for all Minnesota veterans. Furthermore, the services should continue to be administered by Minnesota counties, as a means of ensuring that all veterans have access to these services, regardless of where they reside.**

It would be a grave injustice for the state legislature and/or Minnesota's 87 county boards to reduce the amount of services currently available to Minnesota veterans through their county veterans service officers. Eliminating these services, or requiring that counties merge their services with adjacent counties, would be a terrible mistake and would effectively deny many Minnesota veterans the benefits to which they are entitled.

The services provided by the county veterans service officers could not be provided as effectively through regional operations; nor could the services be provided as effectively by state employees located in field offices throughout the state. Most county veterans service officers have established effective personal and professional relationships with veterans living in their counties. Veterans trust these officers and understand that they are there exclusively to serve the needs of the veteran. Attempting to regionalize the operations would not only make it more difficult for all veterans to have access to the services provided by the service officers, it would also likely undermine the personal and professional relationships that service officers have established with the veterans.

#### **FINDING:**

**The cost of providing services to Minnesota veterans through a network of county veterans service officers is more than offset by the amount of federal veterans benefits brought into the state.**

The cost/benefit analysis of expenditures for county veterans service officers speaks for itself. As noted earlier, Minnesota counties spend \$5.4 million per year on their county veterans service officers. At the same time, Minnesota veterans receive \$285.0 million in direct federal veterans benefits and an estimated \$244.3 million in federally funded medical services. While many Minnesota veterans would continue to receive federal veterans benefits without the assistance of county veterans service officers, only 2 percent of total direct federal benefits for Minnesota veterans pays for the entire **current** expenditures of all county veterans service offices. Clearly, the services of the county veterans service officers are one of the most cost effective services provided by any level of government.

Furthermore, if Minnesota veterans who are in need of financial assistance, social services and/or medical care, are unaware of, or unable to obtain, federal veterans benefits to which they are entitled, they may seek assistance through state and county human services programs. Since the U.S. Veterans Affairs Medical Centers are not allowed to bill medicaid for services delivered to a medicaid-eligible patient, state and county medicaid budgets are spared additional expenditures when medicaid-eligible veterans seek treatment at Veterans Affairs

Medical Centers. Using state and county human services resources to assist a veteran who should have been served by federal veteran benefits is not only an unnecessary drain on state and local budgets, it is demeaning to the veteran. Veterans have earned, and are entitled to, their federal veteran benefits. They should not be forced to turn to state and county human services programs before they have totally exhausted all their federal benefits.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

**The Legislature and Minnesota's 87 county boards should recognize the significant amount of federal veteran benefits obtained for Minnesota veterans through the services of county veterans service officers. They should consider these benefits when appropriating funds for the county veterans service officers.**

Reducing the existing budgets for the county veterans service officers may actually have an adverse impact on state and local budgets. If veterans are unable to obtain federal benefits to which they are entitled as a result of a decreased level of service by county veterans service officers, the veterans may be forced to turn to other state and local programs and services for assistance. Therefore, the budgets of the county veterans service officers should not be reduced. This is especially true if a proposed reduction will result in less assistance for Minnesota veterans who are seeking the federal benefits to which they are entitled.

#### **FINDING:**

**The Services provided by county veterans service officers will become even more important in the next decade.**

As World War II veterans and other veterans continue to age, their need for medical and nursing care will increase significantly. While the application procedures and conditions surrounding federal and state veteran benefit programs can be intimidating for most veterans, they become an insurmountable obstacle for a cognitively impaired or sick veteran, or a bereaved spouse of a recently deceased veteran. Our World War II veterans must have access to the professional services of the county veterans service officers. Their need for those services has never been greater than it is likely to be during the next decade.

### RECOMMENDATION:

The Minnesota Legislature and Minnesota's 87 county boards should recognize that the aging of the veteran population is likely to increase the demands placed on Minnesota's 87 county veterans service officers. This fact should be taken into consideration when considering state or county policies which are likely to affect the roles and responsibilities of the county veterans service officers.

While state and county budgets continue to be strained, legislators and county board members should resist the temptation to reduce the amount of resources dedicated to assisting Minnesota veterans. As the needs of our World War II veterans increase, Minnesota can not afford to reduce the amount of resources dedicated to helping veterans meet their needs. If anything, the budgets of county veterans service officers should be increased and the total funds devoted to helping veterans should be increased.

Furthermore, Minnesota counties that have assigned additional responsibilities to their county veterans service officers should reevaluate those decisions. While service officers may have been able to handle those additional responsibilities in the past, the increasing demands of our aging veteran population may make it more difficult for those service officers to effectively perform all responsibilities currently assigned.

### FINDING:

The services provided by the county veterans service officer are only as good as the ability and commitment of the service officer.

As with all public and private sector jobs, the level of knowledge, skills, and commitment of county veterans service officers varies from individual to individual. While it is not the intent of this study to evaluate the individual performance of all county veterans service officers, the differences among the service officers often became apparent. Several officials from the state and federal departments of veterans affairs commented to us about the varying abilities of

county veterans service officers. While nearly all county veterans service officers are highly motivated and committed individuals who are always there for the veterans in need, a small number apparently lack the level of training necessary to effectively perform all aspects of their jobs. The commitment by the State Department of Veterans Affairs to provide a certification program for county veterans service officers is a step in the right direction. The Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers and the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs are to be commended for the certification initiative. However, for a small number of county veterans service officers, more training opportunities are clearly warranted.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

**The Minnesota Legislature and Minnesota's 87 county boards should work together to increase the level of ability and commitment of all 87 county veterans service officers.**

The Minnesota Legislature should expand the amount of resources provided to the State Department of Veterans Affairs for training opportunities for county veterans service officers. The Department of Veterans Affairs should focus these additional resources on those county veterans service officers who would benefit most from the additional training. The Commissioner of Veterans Affairs should work with the Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers to develop a program that would identify, and provide training opportunities for, the service officers in greatest need of additional training.

Minnesota county boards should do everything possible to ensure that its county veterans service officers are able to take advantage of all training opportunities that are made available.

Finally, county boards should understand that the county veterans service officer system, as currently structured, is the most effective way of providing services to Minnesota veterans. If county veterans are not being adequately served, county officials should not blame the problem on the system which generally works very well. Instead, county officials should focus on three potential areas of concern:

- 1) is its county veterans service office adequately staffed and funded;

- 2) does the county veteran service officer have the training necessary to effectively perform his/her job; and
- 3) is the county veterans service officer adequately motivated and committed to his/her job?

Minnesota veterans and their families will be the ultimate victims if the Legislature and county boards fail to work together to improve the abilities and commitments of all county veterans service officers.

### FINDING:

**The current requirement that counties administer and finance the services of county veterans service officers is appropriate. However, In many counties, the amount of resources made available for the county veterans service officers is inadequate.**

The county veterans service officer system is working well as currently administered and financed. Altering the system to a state funded, county administered, system would raise serious accountability questions relative to the expenditure of state dollars. It might also increase the temptation to regionalize services or to remove county control, which would not be in the best interest of Minnesota veterans.

While the current responsibility of counties to finance the services is appropriate, significant improvements could be made if all county veterans service officers had an adequate level of resources. Our study found that many counties lack the resources to do adequate outreach activities to assure that all veterans are aware of the services provided by the county veterans service officers. Other county veterans service officers lacked travel budgets to allow them to take advantage of training opportunities provided by the federal and state departments of veterans affairs. Other county veterans service officers lacked support staff to make sure calls from veterans are answered when they are out of the office.

Not only is it unfair to the veteran when a county veterans service officer lacks the resources to adequately carry out his/her responsibilities, the lack of resources has

Specifically, we recommend the Legislature enact a state-funded initiative which would include the following three components:

1. A statewide public information effort to promote the services provided by Minnesota county veterans service officers. We believe that many veterans are unaware of the assistance available to them through their county veterans service officers. This is particularly true in the metropolitan area. Many county veterans service officers acknowledged that it is very difficult to inform Minnesota veterans who are not active in veterans organizations about the services available to them. A statewide public information effort would address that issue.
2. A competitive grant program to help fund actual expansions and improvements in the services provided by the county veterans service officers. To leverage additional county resources, and to ensure that state dollars are not used to supplant current county expenditures, the total amount of grant available should be based on the most recent annual increase in county funding for the county veterans service office.
3. Adequate expenses to enable the Department of Veterans Affairs to administer the new programs and provide necessary training opportunities.

**FINDING:**

**There is the potential for improved efficiency in transportation services to federal Veterans Affairs medical facilities.**

Many Minnesota county veterans service officers organize and/or provide transportation services for Minnesota veterans traveling to veterans' medical facilities. While many counties are attempting to coordinate these services with similar service provided in neighboring counties, much more could be done. Several counties prohibit their county veterans service officers from providing rides to veterans from other counties for liability reasons. While liability concerns are legitimate, they should be addressed in a way that would not prohibit cooperation among counties for the transportation of veterans.

## RECOMMENDATION:

The Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers should continue to explore opportunities to improve coordination among counties relative to the transportation of veterans to federal Veterans Affairs medical facilities.

Transportation of Minnesota veterans to federally-funded veterans' medical facilities is an important service provided by and through county veterans service officers. The service, while not mandated by statute, should continue to be made available to veterans who lack other means of transportation. Transportation must not be a barrier to quality medical services which our veterans have earned.

While the service must be made available to all veterans in need of transportation, county veterans service officers should take the initiative to ensure the service is provided as effectively and efficiently as possible. Whenever possible, intercounty coordination of services should be arranged to ascertain that all vehicles traveling to specific medical facilities are not underutilized.

The Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers should work with individual county attorneys, the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Minnesota Attorney Generals Office to determine if the liability issues that concern many county boards can be adequately resolved. Issues of county liability for non-county residents traveling in county vans should not be a barrier to effective and efficient delivery of this important service.



**APPENDIX A**

**A List Of All Formal Interviews  
Conducted Throughout The Course  
Of The Study**



## APPENDIX A

The following is a list of all formal interviews conducted by State Auditor Staff during the course of the Study of County Veterans Service Officers. These interviews were conducted in person and over the phone. In addition to these interviews, scores of individuals, including, county, state and federal officials and representatives of veterans organizations, were consulted in search of specific pieces of information.

<u>NAME</u>	<u>TITLE</u>	<u>ORGANIZATION</u>
Gordon Anderson	CVSO	Big Stone County
Sharon Anderson	Auditor	Cass County
Dick Bergling	President	Vietnam Veterans of America, Minnesota
Bruce Biggins	Commissioner	Koochiching County
Richard Blakesley	CVSO	Saint Louis County
Jon Brown	CVSO	Carlton County
Craig Budenske	Deputy Auditor	Cass County
Tim Burton	CVSO	Olmsted County
Stan Cornelius	Commissioner	Lake of the Woods County
Gary Doty	Commissioner	Saint Louis County
Harlan Evans	CVSO	Blue Earth County
Chuck Ferguson	Adjutant	American Legion, Minnesota
John Finley	Commissioner	Ramsey County
Roy Hansen	Adjutant	Disabled American Veterans, Minnesota
Doris Hanson	Commissioner	Koochiching County
Joe Harris	Commissioner	Dakota County
Mary Hauser	Commissioner	Washington County
Dennis Hegberg	Commissioner	Washington County
Tom Holthaus	Director	U.S. VA Medical Center, St. Cloud, MN
Jim Hubley	CVSO	Lyon County
Ruby Hunt	Commissioner	Ramsey County
Randy Johnson	Commissioner	Hennepin County
John Keefe	Commissioner	Hennepin County
Hank Kohorst	Auditor	Stearns County
Duane Krueger	CVSO	Anoka County
Michael Labovitch	CVSO	Dakota County
Jon Larson	CVSO	Washington County
Milton Larson	Commissioner	Traverse County
Steve Lindstrom	CVSO	Ramsey County
Terry Logan	Agency Relations	Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs
Donald Maher	Commissioner	Dakota County
L.V. Maltais	CVSO	Beltrami County
Duane McCarty	Commissioner	Ramsey County
Gordy McFaul	Deputy Auditor	Saint Louis County
Terry McGee	CVSO	Stearns County
Peter McLaughlin	Commissioner	Hennepin County
Phillip McMullen	Commissioner	Washington County
Bernie Melter	Commissioner	Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs

<u>NAME</u>	<u>TITLE</u>	<u>ORGANIZATION</u>
Carol Monfrooe	CVSO	Clearwater County
Tom Mullon	Director	U.S. VA Medical Center, Minneapolis, MN
Bob Nooner	Director	U.S. VA Regional Office, Minneapolis, MN
Harold Novotny	CVSO	Sherburne County
Darlene Olson	Administrator	Koochiching County
Jeff Olson	Dep. Commissioner	Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs
Genell Reese	CVSO	Wright County
Jimmy Reinarz	CVSO	Koochiching County
John Reuter	CVSO	Cass County
Lillian Rizzo	Commissioner	Koochiching County
David Rooney	Director	Dakota County Community Services
Hank Sadler	CVSO	Nicollet County
Donald Sandbeck	Commissioner	Koochiching County
Edwin Schonnesen	CVSO	Hennepin County
Kathy Schwartz	Personnel Service	Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs
Tom Shaw	Commander	Jewish War Veterans, Minnesota
Elmer Thompson	CVSO	Lake of the Woods County
Chester Toso	CVSO	Otter Tail County
Julie Tweed	Auditor	Beltrami County
Frank Volk	Commander	Veterans of Foreign Wars, Minnsota
Dennis Warling	CVSO	Becker County
Roberta Wasierski	CVSO	Renville County

## APPENDIX B

Copies Of All Surveys Sent  
To Individuals Knowledgeable  
About Minnesota's System Of  
County Veterans Service Officers



## SURVEY SENT TO COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS

September 27, 1991

{Name of Service Officer}  
{Name of County}  
{Address}  
{City, State Zip Code}

Dear {Name of Service Officer}:

As you are aware, the Office of the State Auditor is conducting a research study on the role of the County Veteran Service Officers in Minnesota. We have travelled to several counties to interview a representative sample of the CVSOs about the services they provide to Minnesota's veterans. We also met formally and informally with a number of the CVSOs at your Association's convention.

Logistical considerations preclude personal visits to all 87 counties, but we do want to be certain that the activities in all the counties are represented accurately. Therefore, we request that you send us the following information:

1. The current year's budget for your office.
  2. The proposed budget for next year.
  3. The number of veterans (or their families) served by your office during 1990 and 1991.  
Where possible, also please provide detailed information about the number of personal visits, office visits, telephone contacts, and written correspondence with veterans.  
Please indicate the method you used to determine the numbers.
  4. If possible, please provide the following statistics:
    - (a) The number of individual veterans served by your office. Please list services provided for survivors of deceased veterans as a separate category. Include the number of case files maintained for any veterans now residing in your county, regardless of whether they have received your services during the current year. A veteran who, for example, now receives a disability benefit because of an application you filed when the veteran came to your office three years ago should be included in your count.
    - (b) Indicate the additional number of veterans who have requested information from your office, but would not be included in your count of case files because s/he did not pursue any action through your office.
- If the nature of your file system or daily log does not enable you to answer questions (a) and (b), please describe your system and give your best estimate of the numbers requested and explain the basis for the estimate. Please keep in mind that we are not asking for the total number of veterans in your county.

5. The amount, source, and nature of any non-county revenue (e.g. donations from veterans organizations, other sources) received by your office for services to veterans and/or for other county programs that serve veterans.
6. The most recent annual report to your county board of your office's activity, if available.
7. A description of the different kinds and frequency of "outreach" activities performed by your office to inform different segments of the veteran population of the services you offer. Please indicate any particular segment which may present particular difficulties with respect to outreach activities and how you have attempted to improve service to those veterans.
8. Any County policies which relate to the position of the County Veterans Service Officers, including but not limited to: appointment procedures, numbers of consecutive terms permitted, the CVSO's position in the organizational structure of your county government, and transportation policy.
9. Whether you provide service to veterans who reside in other counties (indicate which counties) and whether some veterans in your county receive service from other County Veterans Service Offices (again, indicate which counties).

For the purpose of ensuring a fair and accurate understanding of your responses, we ask that you respond to each of the nine numbered items separately.

I also encourage you to share any other comments or information you believe would be important for consideration by my office as we proceed with the study. If you have any questions about the study or this request for information, please call Jim Gelbmann (612/296-7001) or Bob Paolino (296-7003).

With best regards.

Sincerely,

Mark B. Dayton  
State Auditor

**SURVEY SENT TO COUNTY BOARD CHAIRS AND  
ONE ADDITIONAL RANDOMLY SELECTED COUNTY COMMISSIONER  
FROM EACH COUNTY**

(Cover Letter Accompanied Survey)

By legislative mandate, the Office of the State Auditor is conducting a study of Minnesota's County Veteran Service Officers (CVSOs). (A copy of the legislative mandate is attached.) We are examining the role of the CVSOs, focusing in part on the activities they perform on behalf of Minnesota's veterans. This study must consider the opinions, ideas, and observations of a variety of county officials about the CVSOs. Please take a few moments to complete this brief survey on behalf of your county board and return it to our office in the enclosed pre-addressed envelope.

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, please describe your level of familiarity with the functions and activities of the {County Name} County Veterans Service Officer

Very Familiar--5 4 3 2 1---Little Knowledge  
(circle appropriate response)

Please identify the major factors that have contributed to your familiarity with the CVSOs (check all responses that apply):

- no experience or familiarity with office
- reputation of office in the county
- reputation of County Veterans Service Officer
- discussion with colleagues
- constituent inquiries or comments
- direct observation of the office and its activities
- other (please specify):

2. Which of the following responses best describes your county board's opinion of the importance of the services provided by County Veterans Service Offices generally?

- The CVSOs provide an essential service for Minnesota veterans.
- The CVSOs provide an important service for Minnesota veterans.
- The CVSOs do not provide an important service, because the services provided by state and federal veterans service agencies and/or private veterans service organizations (e.g. claims representatives or other offices of the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, et cetera) are adequate.
- The expenditure of funds for CVSOs is an unnecessary use of County resources.

3. On a scale of 1 to 5, how satisfied are you with the work performed by your County Veteran Service Office?

Very satisfied --5 4 3 2 1-- Very dissatisfied  
(circle appropriate response)

\_\_\_ mark here if you are not able to judge the quality of the work

4. Have you perceived a change in the kind, volume, and/or level of satisfaction with the service activity performed by the CVSO over time? Please indicate the time span to which you refer.

5. Given the county's veteran population (broadly defined to include spouses, dependents, and survivors), how would you describe the CVSO's performance in bringing state and federal benefits to the county's veterans relative to the resources made available to the office? Please read all responses carefully before choosing the one that most accurately describes your opinion.

\_\_\_ The CVSO successfully provides service to the vast majority of the county's veterans and the size of the CVSO budget is appropriate for the demand for services.

\_\_\_ The CVSO is doing a good job with the resources available to the office, but could reach more of the county's veterans and/or help them obtain more benefits if the office had more funding available.

\_\_\_ The CVSO does a good job serving the veterans who make contact with the office, but the CVSO needs to do more work to let other veterans in the county know about and apply for the benefits available to them.

\_\_\_ The number of the CVSO's potential clients is small enough that the county could reduce the CVSO budget without adversely affecting service.

\_\_\_ The CVSO has adequate funding to provide services, but needs to do a better job assisting the county's veterans in pursuing benefits.

\_\_\_ Other response? Please specify:

6. What, if any, changes in service performed by the CVSO do you believe will be necessary or desirable during the next five years?

7. Does your County Veterans Service Officer have other responsibilities (for other functions of county government) as a county employee? If so, describe those duties and indicate what proportions of the service officer's time are spent on each duty?

8. Please read **ALL** responses before completing this item.

The services provided by the CVSOs should be

- provided as currently mandated by state statute.
- administered by the county with partial state subsidy.
- administered jointly by the county and state with partial state subsidy.
- a state-administered and -funded activity with operations located in the counties.
- Other? PLEASE SPECIFY \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. What is the annual budget for operation of the County Veteran Service Office? Does that represent an increase or decrease in the base funding over previous years' budgets? Have changes in annual funding levels been  less than,  comparable to, or  greater than those for other county departments? Please send the 1991 and 1992 CVSO budgets.

10. Considering the current demand for county resources, which of the following best reflects your opinion of the level of funding the CVSO will receive in the future.

- The demands placed on the CVSO will require an increase in county funding for the office above and beyond the rate of inflation.
- The demands placed on the CVSO justify an increase in funding for the office, but the resources of the county will restrict any future increases to an amount comparable to increases granted to other county departments.
- The county will fund the CVSO at its current level.
- Limited county resources will require future reductions in the level of support for many county services, including the CVSO.
- The county funding for the CVSO will need to be reduced in order to allow the county to reallocate its resources for county services that must be given a higher priority in a fiscal climate that demands that tough choices be made.

11. Minnesota law previously offered counties the option to make an additional levy in excess of any taxing limitations to defray the costs to the county of the veterans service offices. If the option of a special levy was once again available, would you choose to finance the veterans service office in that manner? Please explain your response.

12. One option the Legislature may consider is to provide counties with full or partial financing for your Veterans Service Office. Which of the following best describes your opinion of such a possibility? (choose only one)

**IMPORTANT: Please read ALL choices before selecting a response.**

\_\_\_\_\_ Because the County Veterans Service Office is mandated by the state, it should be financed by the state, whether administered by the state or the county.

\_\_\_\_\_ Although the County Veterans Service Office does not comprise a large proportion of the total county budget, the impact of the state mandate is significant in that it may divert resources from other more important services provided to county residents during a period of fiscal crisis. Therefore, the state should provide financial assistance to maintain a level of veterans services appropriate to the current need.

\_\_\_\_\_ Local conditions distinguishing this county from other counties are important enough that the county should maintain some discretion in financing the County Veterans Service Office, but a shared funding arrangement between the state and the county should be developed to alleviate some of the fiscal impact of the state mandate.

\_\_\_\_\_ The County Veterans Service Office accounts for only a small portion of the total county budget, and local financing of the office has no significant impact on the county's ability to finance other services; no changes in the current financing arrangement are needed.

\_\_\_\_\_ The County Veterans Service Office is among the least onerous of state mandates imposed on local governments; it is important that the county maintain autonomy over both funding and administering veterans services.

\_\_\_\_\_ The following more accurately describes my opinion on the issue:

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13. If you have any other comments, or would like to elaborate on any of your other responses, please feel free to express them here or in a separate letter.

SURVEY SENT TO REPRESENTATIVES OF  
CONGRESSIONALLY CHARTERED VETERANS ORGANIZATIONS

October 8, 1991

{Name}  
{Title}  
{Name of Organization}  
{Address}  
{City, State Zip Code}

Dear {Name}:

As you are aware, the Minnesota Legislature has directed my office to conduct a study of the County Veterans Service Officers (CVSO) system. We have spoken with many of the service officers and a number of county officials. We also met with representatives from some of the veterans' organizations at the Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers convention last month.

Because we are not able to meet personally with representatives of all the veterans' organizations active in Minnesota, we would appreciate your responses to the enclosed questionnaire. The questionnaire is designed to give us your views about the services provided by the CVSOs and your interaction with them. Please be as specific as possible in your responses. By providing us with detailed information and opinions, you will enable us to present an accurate assessment of your views in our final report to the Legislature.

I welcome any additional observations or comments you would like to share with us and encourage you to address those issues in a separate letter or on the questionnaire. If you have questions about the survey, please do not hesitate to call Mr. Bob Paolino in our office at 612/296-7003.

With best regards.

Sincerely,

Mark B. Dayton  
State Auditor

Name, title, and  
organization \_\_\_\_\_

Please attach separate sheets to continue your answers when necessary. (If it is more convenient for you to respond to the entire question on a separate sheet of paper, please number your responses and attach this blank form to your answers.)

1. What kinds of contact does your organization have with the County Veterans Service Officers (CVSOs) throughout Minnesota?
  
2. Among the many services that CVSOs perform for Minnesota's veterans, which ones do you find to be most important? In other words, which particular services are so essential that veterans would be disadvantaged if the assistance the CVSOs now provide were not available at the local level? For the two or three areas you selected, be sure to explain your reasons for citing those as the most important.
  
3. Do you offer services to veterans that are similar to those provided by the CVSOs? To what extent do you coordinate your service activities with the CVSOs?
  
4. What is your assessment of the overall effectiveness of the CVSO system? Do veterans throughout the state have roughly equal access to a consistent quality of service, or are there areas in which veterans could be better served?
  
5. Do you have any suggestions for improving the services provided by County Veteran Service Officers?
  
6. Please give us some background information about the mission of your organization and the segment of the veteran population you represent. Please be sure to tell us about the services you provide to your members (and, if applicable, to veterans who are not members) and to identify the ways in which your organization can be distinguished from other veterans service organizations.

SURVEY SENT TO REPRESENTATIVES OF THE  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS AND THE  
MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

October 8, 1991

{Name}  
{Title}  
{Name of Agency}  
{Address}  
{City, State Zip Code}

Dear {Name}:

As you are aware, the Minnesota Legislature has directed my office to conduct a study of the County Veterans Service Officers (CVSO) system. By conducting the study, we are learning about the services the CVSOs provide to Minnesota's veterans and examining a variety of different financing options for the offices. We have spoken with many of the service officers, county officials, and representatives of veterans organizations. We have also met with some of the administrators from the state and federal departments of Veterans Affairs and VA hospitals.

Unfortunately, however, both limited time and the expense of travel make it difficult for us to meet with many other officials whose views we are interested in hearing. Therefore, we would appreciate your responses to the enclosed questionnaire, which asks for information and your opinions about the services provided by the CVSOs and your interaction with them. Please be as specific as possible in your responses. By providing us with detailed information and opinions, you will enable us to present an accurate assessment of your views in our final report to the Legislature.

If you have questions about this survey, please do not hesitate to call Mr. Bob Paolino in our office at 612/296-7003.

With best regards.

Sincerely,

Mark B. Dayton  
State Auditor

Name, title, and agency \_\_\_\_\_

Please attach separate sheets to continue your answers when necessary. (If it is more convenient for you to use a computer or word processor than to use a typewriter, you may put your numbered responses on separate sheets instead of on this page. Simply attach the blank form to your answers.)

1. What kinds of contact do you have with the County Veterans Service Officers (CVSOs)? How frequent are those contacts?

2. Among the many services that CVSOs perform for Minnesota's veterans, which ones do you find to be most important? In other words, which particular services are so essential that veterans would be disadvantaged if the assistance the CVSOs now provide were not available at the local level? For the two or three areas you selected, be sure to explain your reasons for citing those as the most important.

3. Do you (or your agency) maintain any formal outreach efforts for veterans, similar to outreach activities performed by a number of the CVSOs? Are there other similarities between functions of your office and other services offered by the CVSOs? In what areas do you feel that your organization is more effective than the CVSOs in offering assistance to veterans, and in what areas are the CVSOs more effective?

4. What is your assessment of the overall effectiveness of the CVSO system? Are there areas in which veterans could be better served? If your position is such that you handle cases for veterans from states other than Minnesota, please compare (citing specific examples) the scope and quality of service offered by state and local agencies in those other states with that of the Minnesota CVSOs with whom you have contact.

5. Do you have any suggestions for improving the services provided by County Veteran Service Officers?

6. Please give us some background information about your job and the duties you perform as well as the specific functions and responsibilities of your office.

**SURVEY SENT TO DEPARTMENT HEADS OF STATE**  
**VETERANS AFFAIRS DEPARTMENTS THROUGHOUT THE NATION**  
(Cover Letter Accompanied Actual Survey)

NOTE: Because systems vary from state to state, please modify the form of the question if it does not adequately reflect the situation in your state. Please include in your responses any detail you believe necessary for an accurate understanding. You may attach additional pages if needed to give a complete response. Thank you again for providing this important information.

1. At what level of government are advocacy and benefits assistance provided to veterans? Please check all that apply.

State       Local  
 County  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

*If veterans' advocacy and benefit services are financed and administered by the state government, with NO local government involvement, please skip question 2.*

2a. What are the names of the local agencies or offices that provide advocacy and other services to veterans?

2b. Which level(s) of government is/are responsible for financing the offices?

State       County       Other \_\_\_\_\_  
 Shared financing (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

2c. What is the primary source of revenue for funding the local offices?

State general revenues  
 Local tax revenues  
 Earmarked tax or fee  
 Other (Specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

2d. The local offices are staffed by:

State employees  
 Local government (specify level \_\_\_\_\_) employees  
 Volunteers--please explain \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other--please specify \_\_\_\_\_

3. Does the {Name of Department} maintain local offices and/or have field representatives working throughout the state? If so, how many offices and/or field representatives do you have operating outside the main office? (Please answer even if the offices are administered by local governments.)

4. How many state and local offices, combined, provide veterans' services within your state and where are they located?

NOTES for question 4:

1.) If every county or other unit of government has a separate office, you may simply say so and indicate the level of government and number of offices rather than listing all of them. List any exceptions separately (e.g., if larger counties have more than one office, indicate which counties and the locations of the offices)

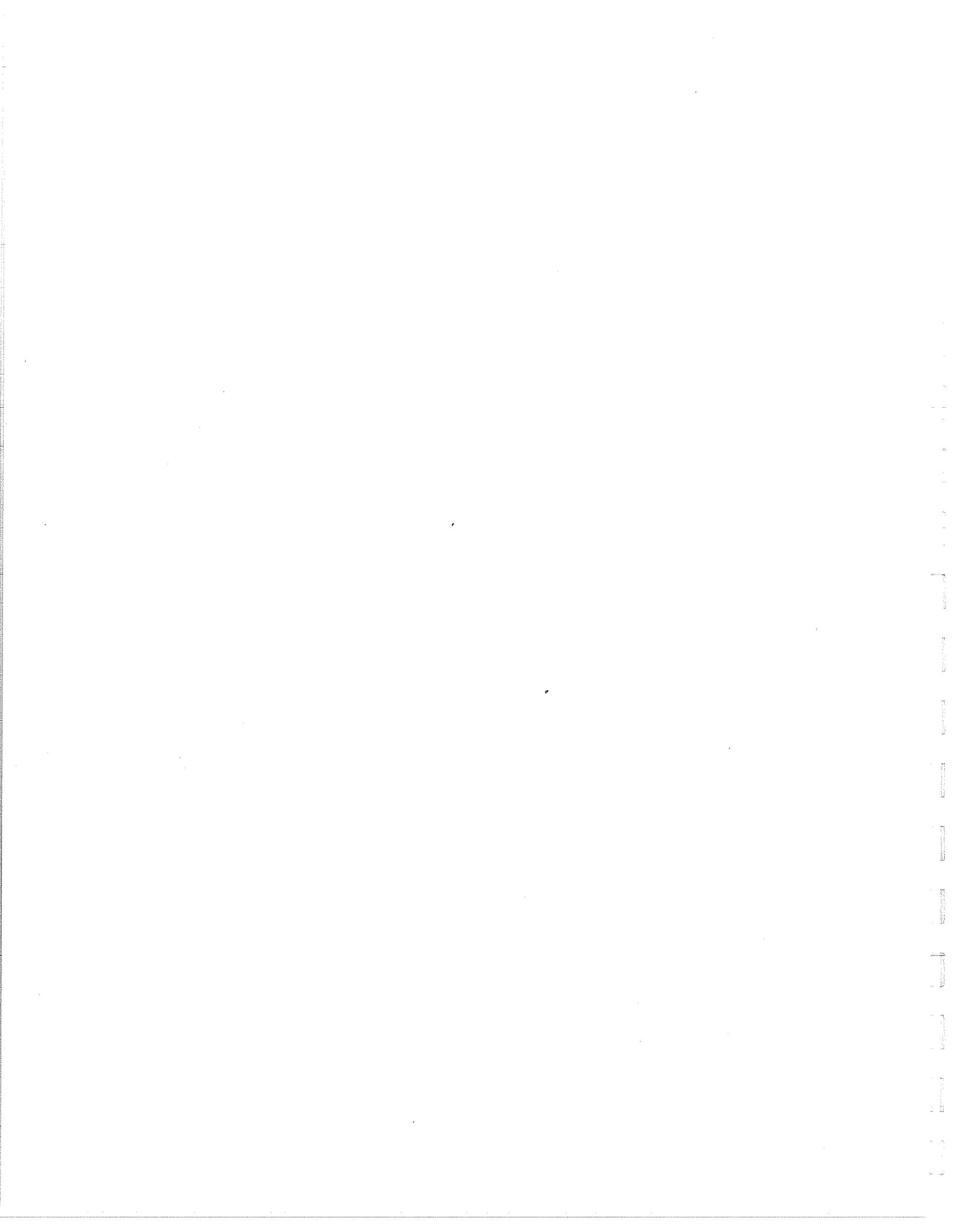
- 2.) If the system is organized on a regional or other basis please list
- 3.) You may attach a pre-printed list or directory of offices, if that

the locations.  
is more convenient for you.

5. Does your department offer any benefit programs apart from benefits provided by the federal government?  
Please describe.

**APPENDIX C**

**Annual Budgets For  
Minnesota's 87 County  
Veterans Service Officers**



COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICER BUDGETS		
COUNTY	BUDGET-91	BUDGET-92
Aitkin	\$45,914	\$47,917
Anoka	\$128,907	\$136,236
Becker	\$57,432	\$55,400
Beltrami	\$70,806	\$72,166
Benton	\$24,526	\$25,332
Big Stone	\$31,669	\$32,285
Blue Earth	\$100,702	\$102,224
Brown	\$68,401	\$70,656
Carlton	\$65,524	\$67,344
Carver	\$47,680	\$68,287
Cass	\$55,153	\$40,862
Chippewa	\$75,396	\$78,103
Chisago	\$20,989	?
Clay	\$39,611	\$21,261
Clearwater	\$26,806	\$21,534
Cook	\$11,956	\$12,082
Cottonwood	\$47,393	\$47,399
Crow Wing	\$107,784	\$108,124
Dakota	\$250,446	\$236,415
Dodge	\$24,116	\$25,688
Douglas	\$59,342	\$59,342
Faribault	\$63,933	\$63,583
Fillmore	\$30,000	\$30,000
Freeborn	\$87,682	\$92,202
Goodhue	\$74,895	\$74,114
Grant	\$8,168	\$8,506
Hennepin	\$246,335	\$226,387
Houston	\$41,806	\$41,806
Hubbard	\$49,812	\$51,018

Isanti	\$32,470	\$20,773
Itasca	\$83,785	\$86,850
Jackson	\$31,351	?
Kanabec	\$48,490	\$48,528
Kandiyohi	\$70,250	\$70,250
Kittson	\$19,141	\$19,306
Koochiching	\$45,152	\$52,221
Lac qui Parle	\$45,088	\$35,730
Lake	\$25,326	\$30,482
Lake of the Woods	\$5,600	\$6,000
Le Sueur	\$61,442	\$58,030
Lincoln	\$7,500	\$7,800
Lyon	\$45,950	\$48,735
Mahnomen	\$27,959	\$28,896
Marshall	\$8,745	\$8,745
Martin	\$54,098	\$59,918
McLeod	\$58,538	\$57,548
Meeker	\$59,784	\$61,474
Mille Lacs	\$50,390	\$55,730
Morrison	\$51,885	\$94,149
Mower	\$77,107	\$81,337
Murray	\$26,330	?
Nicollet	\$51,616	\$51,016
Nobles	\$26,524	\$26,662
Norman	\$46,146	\$47,839
Olmsted	\$86,136	\$88,519
Otter Tail	\$96,591	\$96,591
Pennington	\$29,456	\$32,941
Pine	\$19,405	\$20,512
Pipestone	\$30,923	\$30,598

Polk	\$74,025	\$67,100
Pope	\$45,991	\$48,007
Ramsey	\$228,682	\$228,886
Red Lake	\$5,094	\$5,200
Redwood	\$53,333	\$53,981
Renville	\$83,464	\$94,035
Rice	\$76,849	?
Rock	\$18,580	\$19,278
Roseau	\$15,012	\$14,769
Saint-Louis	\$404,509	\$397,123
Scott	\$114,970	\$120,749
Sherburne	\$85,890	\$93,666
Sibley	\$36,508	\$36,272
Stearns	\$73,666	\$75,294
Steele	\$77,317	?
Stevens	\$20,900	\$22,535
Swift	\$60,000	\$63,500
Todd	\$58,269	\$62,396
Traverse	\$33,829	\$34,000
Wabasha	\$66,250	\$69,000
Wadena	\$25,865	\$21,122
Waseca	\$77,384	\$79,620
Washington	\$108,100	\$100,100
Watonwan	\$59,947	\$63,095
Wilkin	\$35,973	\$41,820
Winona	\$72,183	\$74,762
Wright	\$56,642	\$56,952
Yellow Medicine	\$70,257	\$62,483
Totals	\$5,425,851	\$5,249,198



# APPENDIX D

A List Of 70 Minnesota  
Counties That Have Adopted  
County Board Resolutions  
Supporting The Current System  
Of County Veterans  
Service Officers



COUNTIES ADOPTING RESOLUTION SUPPORTING RETENTION  
OF COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICER

Aitkin  
Anoka  
Becker  
Beltrami  
Big Stone  
Brown  
Carlton  
Carver  
Chippewa  
Clearwater  
Cottonwood  
Crow Wing  
Dodge  
Douglas  
Faribault  
Freeborn  
Goodhue  
Grant  
Hennepin  
Houston  
Isanti  
Itasca  
Jackson  
Kanabec  
Kittson  
Koochiching  
Lac Qui Parle  
Lake  
Lake of the woods  
Le Sueur  
Lincoln  
Lyon  
Mahnommen  
Marshall (East and West)  
McLeod  
Meeker  
Mille Lacs  
Morrison  
Mower  
Murray  
Nicollet

Nobles  
Norman  
Olmsted  
Otter Tail  
Pennington  
Pine  
Pipestone  
Polk  
Pope  
Ramsey  
Red Lake  
Rice  
Rock  
Scott  
Sherburne  
Sibley  
Stearns  
Stevens  
Swift  
Todd  
Traverse  
Wabasha  
Wadena  
Waseca  
Washington  
Watonwan  
Wilkin  
Wright  
Yellow Medicine

