



DANE COUNTY VETERANS SERVICES

DIVERSITY EQUITY AND INCLUSION PLAN & ACCESSIBILITY 2023

INTRODUCTION:

"To Care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan"

-Abraham Lincoln.

As veteran advocates, we strive to provide Dane County residents the highest quality of service. We work with veterans, their families, and their advocates to navigate the complex Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) system. The Department of Veterans Affairs is comprised of three branches: Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). These branches govern their respective health care benefits, disability compensation, needs-based pension, education, burial benefits, vocational grants, cemetery, and governing laws under the United States Codes. There are also State and County benefits to involve in the process. These variables pose a significant challenge for veterans to realize their entitlement to benefits, such as compensation for injuries they sustained during their military service, educational benefits, health care benefits. County Veterans Service Officers (CVSOs) are accredited by the VA's Office of General Counsel to work in concert with the VA to ensure veterans acquire all benefits they are eligible for. We deeply care about, and strive to provide an environment where people of all backgrounds feel welcomed, and our department is responsible for representing Dane County veterans and their families in a diverse, equitable, and inclusive manner.

EQUITY AND INCLUSION PLAN

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENTS:

Strategic Plan

- We will engage our veterans and family members of those veterans with respect and humility, and we will remain ever vigilant of our mission to leave no veteran or family member behind regardless of race, gender or gender identity, disability, or sexual orientation. The Dane CVSO is by its nature a tool to increase equity and inclusion broadly for Dane County. On any given day, we vigorously assist veterans connect to Federal, State and County benefits, including advocating for veterans of color whom may have unjustly received a military discharge characterized as less than fully honorable based on the period of history in which they served, or racial bias and or gender biases. In short, equity and inclusion are ever inherent in the work we do. Our new challenge is to reach out and provide our services in a manner is that appealing to, and inclusive of all of the veterans we serve.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT:

Mentorship

- Veterans Service Director and Deputy Veterans Service Director continually encourage personal and educational growth geared towards diversity, equity and inclusion. Our current staff encompasses eight full-time employees, including two Caucasian males, four Caucasian females, one African American female, and one Native American female. Over eighty-seven percent of our workforce are woman and twenty-five percent are persons of color. The leadership supports each staff member's personal and career development to achieve CVSO goals. Assistant Veterans Service Officers (ACVSOs), and clerical staff members are encouraged to lead outreach events. Many veterans need to be made aware of their benefits or even the role of County Veterans Service Offices. As such, these outreach events are a significant part of informing the community and, most importantly, reaching members of underrepresented groups. Some CVSO outreach include our partnership with the Dane County Veterans Treatment Court, the Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC), and others. Other events this year involved retirement briefing at the Joint Force Headquarters (JFHQ) to brief recent retirees about their VA benefits. Recently, our CVSO staff members hosted a table at the Dane County Fair, and a military appreciation event at a Mallards baseball game. Future events include American Legion Post brief, Habitat for Humanity build, Lions Club vet talk, and

US Marine Corp League. Briefing requires leadership roles, independent leadership, and group leadership, and a vast knowledge of VA laws and benefits.

- 2023-2024 Goals: Staff members will continue to be encouraged to take the lead on outreach events, and specific topics during staff meetings. VA laws continue to be enacted and legislated, and as such staff members are asked to take initiative, on presenting on various topics. Recently President Biden signed into law, The Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT Act.) This legislation is the most significant improvement in VA benefits in over seventy years. It will involve decades-long implementation of all segments of the laws. Staff members will receive ongoing training by attending national and state conferences, among other educational opportunities. President Biden signed into law, the PACT Act. The PACT Act considers millions veterans who were otherwise ineligible for benefits. Due to the increased demand for services, one goal that has now been set into motion is move our clerical staff member to achieve accreditation through the VA Office of General Counsel. In the past our department has never required this action, due to past department protocols. This policy has since been revamped according to demand for CVS0 services and to maintain accessibility to VA systems.

Internship

- 2023-2024 Goals: Future goals for attracting interns will involve outreach events. As we host or participate in events, there are vast opportunities to recruit diverse veteran community members. Our Director and Deputy will work closely with Employee Relations and OEI in the hiring process to ensure the process is equitable, inclusive, and accessible. We aim to seek out students at the local community colleges and state universities. In the past, we have worked with interns at the VA hospital, and also VA work-study students.

PROGRAM INNOVATION:

Access to persons with disabilities.

- During the pandemic Dane County CVS0 faced significant challenges in finding innovative ways to maintain the highest quality of services we strived for. These challenges involved providing the direct access that veterans were accustomed to. We faced head-on, the realization that advanced technology would play a significant role.

Advanced technology involved implementing a more robust, state-of-the-art case management program. The department purchased eight licenses for access to VetPro, a system designed explicitly for CVSOs. VetPro provided access to electronic signatures and electronically filed claims that allowed direct upload to the VBA. Regular use of platforms such as Facebook has provided opportunities to inform veterans of CVSO's achievements, upcoming community events, and other benefit related news. Recently, Dane County has funded a more innovative workspace, technologies, and accessible location. The majority of our visitors had a difficult time navigating the downtown Madison area to find our office. Our new space away from downtown is much more user-friendly for those we serve. Additionally, our space provides access for persons with disabilities, as well as to attend VA hearings remotely.

- 2023-2024: In order to maximize some of the recently gained resources, our goal is to continue encourage veterans to utilize our new facilities for to attend virtual hearings for appeals. We hope to continue investigate new platforms to broaden access to persons with disabilities. Brainstorming in the future on the ever-changing technological opportunities to utilize programs such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom for virtual meetings.

COLLABORATION:

- In recent years, our department has collaborated with members of organizations of various disciplines, including social workers, medical professionals, legal professional and more. In addition, the Dane CVSO routinely collaborates with ranking members of the VA, including the Regional Director of the VBA, VHA Director, and Vet Center Director and their counselors. For Instance, The CVSO Director and Deputy Director sit on the William S. Middleton VA Medical Center's Veterans Advisory Board, allowing access to members such as the hospital director, chief of medicine, CVSO directors, social workers, and other department heads. The department is privy to cutting-edge information which can be passed down to community partners. Collaboration with Veterans Treatment Court, a program that seeks to treat veterans suffering from disabilities such as substance abuse or mental disorders. This type of collaboration is significant to DEI in that the partners have direct access and can provide leads to marginalized communities can provide leads to marginalized communities.
- 2023-2024 Goals: Continue to engage and strengthen ties with partner organizations such Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA), Tenant Resources Center, Heat for Heroes, Dry Hootch etc., to join forces in improving veterans lives, with a focus of reaching more underrepresented groups. A task that is at times challenging in Dane

County due to demographical makeup of the population. We will continue to invite guests to our meetings each month, to educate our staff on the available resources. In turn, we will continue educate and provide training to these partners. The hope is that the more contact we can make the more word-of-mouth occurs.

RESOURCE MOBILIZATION:

Budget Initiatives

- A trend evident among CVSOs locally and statewide are the difficulties that exist in attracting female veterans. Female veterans who have served in a male-dominated institution are apt to forgo military benefits for various reasons. One such explanation is that female veterans have long thought that resources geared towards female veterans are scarce. For instance, in the past, resources allotted for female fertility issues such as IVF was not as prominent in the VA community as in their civilian counterparts. In addition, female veterans may fear triggering traumatic experiences and, as such, view the claims process as daunting. The CVSO equity and inclusion budget initiatives are intertwined with outreach activities to attract more female veterans.
- 2023-2024 Dane CVSO plans to continue assessing means to maximize our resources to seek out female veterans. Though our department has a relatively small budget; next year, we want to focus on attracting female veterans, and educating them on the claims process. Our department will request increased funding during the next fiscal year to bolster our initiative to invest in female veterans in Dane County.