

## Proposal to split DMAVA

October 10, 2017 candidate for NJ Governor Phil Murphy proposed a stand-alone Department of Veterans Affairs for New Jersey.

Currently, New Jersey's Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMAVA) is responsible for overseeing both the National Guard and veterans' services, a dual mission that some have suggested pulls focus from the needs of vets.

Governor-elect Murphy has vowed to split apart the department, promising to reshape it into two separate agencies and refocus its mission solely on veterans. Other states have separate veterans agencies.

As part of the restructuring, Murphy said the new department would help bring employment assistance to those transitioning to civilian life, and mental health counseling to those vets suffering from post-traumatic stress.

Murphy also promised to expand an already existing veterans diversionary court program. That may be jumping the shark a little as S307/A4362 which creates the Veterans Diversion Program to divert eligible servicemembers away from criminal justice system and into appropriate case management and mental health services is not up and running statewide yet. It was approved May 1, 2017 as P.L.2017, c.42. This act shall take effect on the first day of the seventh month next following enactment, except that the Attorney General, the Administrative Office of the Courts, and the Adjutant General of the Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs may take any anticipatory administrative action in advance as shall be necessary for the implementation of this act.

The Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs is responsible for the support and coordination of various services to military veterans in New Jersey as well as the more than 9,000 Soldiers and Airmen of the New Jersey Army and Air National Guard.

The Division of Veterans Healthcare Services operates three modern long-term care nursing homes located in Paramus, Menlo Park, and Vineland. These facilities provide nursing home care for eligible veterans, their spouses, and parents of individuals killed in action. Eligibility requirements for veterans include an honorable discharge and two-year State residency preceding the date of application. The three nursing homes have a rated capacity of 948 beds. They all currently have a 100% occupancy rate.

The Veterans Transitional Housing Program, Veterans Haven South and Veterans Haven North, is a New Jersey State operated facility for homeless veterans. After being medically evaluated at a VA Medical Center, eligible veterans must agree to a long-term program focusing on psychological, social and vocational rehabilitation. The transitional housing program is a two-year housing program with the ultimate goal of supporting veterans in securing permanent housing.

The Brigadier General William C. Doyle Memorial Cemetery is managed by the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs. As a state shrine, Doyle Cemetery honors the men and women who have served in the Armed Forces. Approximately 13 burials occur each business day and the cemetery is visited by thousands of visitors each year. The Cemetery continues to be the busiest state operated veteran cemetery in the country and the 11th busiest among all federal and state cemeteries.

The department operates over 16 veteran service offices throughout the State. These offices assist veterans and their dependents in securing State and federal benefits. Evaluation data indicates that the department will serve an estimated 91,000 veterans in FY 2017; provide 24,000 veterans' transportation trips; provide 20,000 post-traumatic stress disorder counseling sessions; house 190 homeless veterans; process 9,000 claims; and perform 3,084 burials.

DMAVA also:

- operates the Vet to Vet Hotline and a benefit hotline
- The Guard and Veterans Affairs support the Stand Downs with troop support, use of armories, logistics and veteran service officers. The Department also allows veterans organizations to utilize Guard facilities for programs
- awards medals to NJ veterans
- conducts Veteran Outreach Events
- administers the Education Tuition Assistance Programs, Homeless Veteran Grant Program, PTSD Program and a statewide Veteran Transportation Program.
- maintains the states 3 major War Memorials in Homdel, Trenton and Atlantic City.
- assists in the Veterans Assistance Project and is gearing up for the Veterans Court Diversion Program

Currently DMAVA, both Guard and Veteran Affairs, share a HQ and conduct some veteran outreach from Guard Armories.

According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, a report produced September 15, 2017 indicated that in FY 2016 New Jersey had 371,518 veterans, ranking as 22nd in veteran population in the U.S.

The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs is an efficient and well managed asset to our veterans, Guard personnel and citizens. Veterans must ensure that any split of DMAVA does not negatively impact the quality of services to our New Jersey veterans nor the quality of life or operational readiness of our Guard personnel.

There will be both immediate and long term costs involved with any split of the Department and the veteran community strongly objects to any of those costs coming from budget cuts of any program that benefits veterans or Guard personnel. The Department currently has joint human resources, which provide quality personnel management, technical expertise, and customer-focused service in support of the Department's mission. The Human Resources Division functions as a support division for all central personnel transactions and provides human resources analysis,

guidance, and information in support of all department state programs and activities. DMAVA also has a joint administration and support services which comprise the planning, management and operation of the physical assets of the Department and its subordinate activities including veterans' memorial homes, armories, facilities and equipment, as well as alteration, expansion, construction, rehabilitation and improvement, and custodial services. There is also a joint Honor Guard support services.

Having two separate Departments will require two bureaucracies, two headquarters, each with its own budget, which will eliminate any savings currently in place under a joint Department. Again, we must ensure that any increased costs do not negatively impact our veterans or Guard personnel.

Before any action is taken to separate the two houses of DMAVA (Guard and veterans) it would seem prudent to evaluate the operation and costs of two separate entities. This would help to ensure that our three Memorial Nursing Homes, Vet Haven South and North and other programs remain exclusively for veterans, their spouses and Gold Star parents, and are properly funded to maintain the high quality of care the residents currently deserve and receive. Veterans want to ensure the General Doyle Cemetery remains exclusively for veterans, spouses and dependents, is maintained in its current pristine condition and staffed by a NG Honor Guard to honor the sacrifices made by our veterans.

For many years now, the major veterans organizations have always supported DMAVA and the Guard; supplying DMAVA with vehicles, a movie theatre, computer labs, furniture, equipment and other quality of life needs for the residents of the nursing homes and Vet Haven (South and North) along with support of the cemetery operations. Veterans groups have adopted local Guard units, supplied financial support to families of deployed troops and have provided often for our residents in the three Memorial Homes, especially during the holidays.

The veteran community has a vested interest in any proposed changes in DMAVA. It would appear to be prudent to discuss the proposed changes in detail with assurances that services will not be diminished for either the Guard or veterans services operations. If you feel that it would be wise to move this proposal from a campaign promise to a detailed study of the options and costs involved in this proposal, especially with the budget already set; reach out to your elected officials and ask them to consider our concerns going forward. If you think we should sit back and do nothing, prepare yourself for what may be coming. A new budget will not be approved until the end of June 2018. There is no reasonable expectation that the split can take place without having an impact on the current budget. What services do you think we should allow to be discontinued?