

# UNLOCKING DOORS FOR VETERANS

## The Role of County Directors of Veterans Affairs

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**T**he County Director of Veterans Affairs (CDVA) plays a vital role in service delivery to veterans and their dependents and each one is required to be accredited as a Veterans Services Officer (VSO).

Accreditation is essentially a license to represent claimants to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA).

Accreditation is important for many other things as well, but essentially accreditation credentials unlock many doors with the USDVA and Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA). By becoming accredited, VSOs are permitted access to the USDVA system that allows them to submit and track claims in a paperless environment.

The County Code lists duties for the CDVA such as maintaining a grave registry for veterans, making a payment toward the final expenses of a deceased service person, marking the graves of deceased service persons and decorating the graves of deceased service persons. But, the duties of a county VSO do not end there.

Title 51 of Pa Consolidated Statutes places additional requirements on the CDVA such as:

- becoming accredited within one year of being hired by either the DMVA or one of the member organizations of the State Veterans Commission (SVC),
- serving as a local contact between a service member and their dependents and the USDVA,
- advising service members, their dependents and veterans of federal, state and local benefits available to them,
- aiding service members, their dependents and veterans in completing applications for benefits,
- working under the direct supervision of the county commissioners and within the guidelines provided by the DMVA and the USDVA, and
- participating in the programs provided by the DMVA including annual training and refresher courses.

VSOs are the tip of the spear to make sure their veteran constituents are not only receiving the benefits they are entitled to, but that they continue to have their benefits evaluated for potential increases to benefits and to keep them informed of changes to benefits or when new benefits are released.

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## CDVA NAVIGATES BENEFITS

Counties may take on services not required by statute or code such as a veterans ID/discount card or assistance program, and while the CDVA is not normally responsible for recording discharge documents (DD 214) their offices are usually somehow involved in the process even if it is merely directing the veteran to the correct place in county government.

The world of veteran's benefits is a large and often very confusing place to navigate. There are disability benefits, healthcare benefits, education benefits, insurance benefits, vocational benefits, non-service connected benefits, burial benefits, home loan benefits and many more. It takes dedication to learn these



benefits and what the eligibility requirements are for each individual program.

A VSO job description does not end at determining eligibility for an exhaustive list of potential benefits. The VSO must familiarize themselves with medical terminology, so they can read and comprehend a medical doctor's notes and diagnosis, for a well-grounded and complete claim to be prepared. Even then, the VSO is still not done with their critical duties.

The next step in the claims process is like that of a law clerk. This is the part of the process that VSOs must read and comprehend the legal decisions made by the USDVA. This spans from interpreting the initial decision and deciding if they agree with it or if they think there are grounds for an appeal. If there are sufficient grounds for an appeal the next step in the process is drafting, presenting and defending the appeal in a federal arbitration hearing.

## COUNSELOR AND COMRADE

Finally, all along the way the VSO is a counselor and comrade to the veteran or dependent that needs help navigating the system. VSOs are the local 'subject matter experts' not only on USDVA benefits, but even more importantly they are well-versed on local resources. These resources often include interfacing with non-profit organizations and in some cases the veterans office manages its own assistance program. VSOs are also commonly accredited with more than one organization giving them the unique ability to answer questions of clients represented through various organizations. It is not only the responsibility of the VSO to know what organizations can help a veteran or their family.

It is equally important that the VSO be aware of and investigate those organizations that may be preying on veterans. There are many organizations that present

themselves as similarly named organizations to USDVA or traditional veteran service organizations. Some of these organizations have predatory practices and may try to entice a veteran to take a pay day loan or to enter in to an irrevocable trust so they could qualify for a USDVA benefit. VSOs are on the front line of providing services and are the first ones to defend against these practices that may be detrimental to veterans.

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The CDVA position is a very demanding job that requires a multitude of skills that must be mastered and maintained. These skill sets are also constantly evolving with time and experience levels. Although a VSO may

accomplish their initial accreditation in their first year of employment it can take three to five years to begin to master veterans' benefits.

As in all fields the more experienced and successful the VSO becomes the higher demands will be for their time. It is not uncommon for more experienced VSOs to be available by appointment only. This unique skill set is not available in a college degree program. Counties often look for experience in the medical field, legal services, mental health professionals or administrative professionals as a quality transition into the field of a veterans services officer. ▼

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For a complete listing of county directors of veterans affairs in Pennsylvania and their contact information, visit: <http://www.dmva.pa.gov/veteransaffairs/Pages/Outreach-and-Reintegration/County-Directors.aspx>.

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