VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS.

'What We Do Changes Lives'

As VFW's National Veterans Service celebrates its 100th anniversary this year, here's a look at what that department is all about and how they are eager to help vets

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This year marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of VFW's National Veterans Service (NVS) Department. That is a century of working on behalf of the nation's veterans to ensure they are granted the benefits they have earned.

It's not an easy mission, as the NVS staff at VFW's Washington Office will attest, but one that grows increasingly more important each year. In 2017-18 alone, VFW's NVS staff recovered a record-breaking $8.36 billion for veterans. Of that, $1.4 billion was for new clients. VFW service officers filed more than 109,000 new claims last year.

"What we do changes lives," NVS Director Ryan Gallucci said. "It's humbling, challenging and rewarding. The scope of responsibility the VFW has to make sure veterans understand their benefits and that those were earned is tremendous."

An Iraq War vet, Gallucci said that he and those who work for him know better than most what it's like to assist discharging veterans get what they are entitled to receive.

"What we went through ourselves after discharging from the military helps us to better explain what we can do for others," Gallucci said. "So many vets are skeptical or don't think they are deserving. It's our job to walk them through the process and show them what they have earned."

Appointed NVS director in 2017, Gallucci oversees 2,051 VA-accredited claims representatives at locations around the world, including two dozen military installations.

A member of Post 3150 in Arlington, Va., Gallucci said it's important for all veterans to know that what NVS offers is free. There is no reason, he said, for vets to pay attorneys to do what his staff can do better and for no charge.

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"NVS is comprised of accredited, highly trained professional advocates," he said. "Our service work is a highly regulated legal process, and our service officers go through up to 80 hours of training a year."

A common misconception among vets, according to Gallucci, is that VFW is somehow affiliated with the VA. This is likely because VFW service officers are often based at VA facilities, and certain email addresses may contain "VA." But, he stressed, VFW service officers advocate for veterans, not the government.

"We are not the VA," Gallucci said. "We have access to VA networks, so we can see what VA sees, but we don't work for VA."

Another misconception is that a veteran can walk into a VFW Post and someone will help file a claim with the VA. Gallucci said this is untrue. At the Post and District levels, service officers play a "critical role," according to Gallucci, but in the end, those folks need to pass on the contact information for VA-accredited VFW service officers.

"We provide a very important service to half a million people, currently," Gallucci said. "Having the right trained professional is key to understanding a very complicated process."

Part of navigating the process involves staying abreast of policy changes at both the VA's Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), which processes claims and distributes compensation, and the Board of Veterans Appeals, which hears arguments from veterans who disagree with their claims decisions.

That's where Mike Figlioli, deputy director of NVS Veterans Benefits Policy, comes in. Figlioli must closely monitor and work to influence policy development within the VBA and the Board of Veterans Appeals.

Figlioli, who served in the Army from 1988-96 and earned his eligibility in Korea in 1994, said there is a constant passing of information and complicated dialogue pertaining to new policies. It's his job to make sure it's all easily communicated to those who need it.

"We have our veterans' backs, and our business is to tell them what they need to hear," said Figlioli, a member and past commander of Post 2017 in Dedham, Mass. "We want them to understand this process. We hear them, and we care."

Before coming to work at VFW's Washington Office, Figlioli was a service officer in Boston in 2008. He also served on VFW's National Legislative Committee and commanded his VFW District.

"Every day someone here touches the life of a vet," he said. "It's important for everyone to know that we are approachable, whether or not you are a member. We want to help all

veterans and their dependents."

Helping Troops Plan Future

An important function of NVS is its ability to help those getting ready to discharge from the military. There are VFW Pre-Discharge Claims Program offices at 24 military installations around the country.

Among other responsibilities, NVS Deputy Director Dawn Jirak is charged with overseeing the pre-discharge offices.

Before taking on this position in 2016, Jirak worked as a claims consultant, appeals consultant and also was a supervisor at the Board of Veterans Appeals.

Retiring from the Air Force in 2008 after serving 20 years, Jirak earned her VFW eligibility in Saudi Arabia during Operation Southern Watch. For six months, she was in charge of the emergency room on Prince Sultan Air Base.

"One of the things I most love about my job is being able to use my medical knowledge that I've gained throughout my life to help other people," said Jirak, a member of VFW Post 8810 in Waldorf, Md. "I think I'm able to better explain things to veterans so that they can more easily understand."

Jirak said when she was based at the Board of Appeals, it was like "being a detective." She recalled the story of a Vietnam vet who was disputing a VA decision made back in the 1970s. In reviewing his files, Jirak noticed that a gunshot wound had never been addressed.

"He received thousands of dollars in retroactive pay because of that one oversight," Jirak said. "That felt pretty good."

Jirak said she has noticed that VFW is the organization of choice for military officers getting ready to discharge from the military.

"It really speaks to the quality of service our claims representatives give," she said. "We have offices from Camp Lejeune in North Carolina to San Diego."

At Joint Base Myer-Hall Henderson next to Arlington National Cemetery, Chris Guthrie, pre-discharge claims representative, has an office to help those getting ready to discharge. He's been with VFW since May 2016.

"I really love this job," Guthrie said. "We get a lot of praise and thanks for what we are doing. I'm just glad I can help the service members with their transition because no one told me what to do when I got out."

To train for this position, Guthrie said he had to learn what to look for in medical records. A lot of times, he said, military personnel don't realize they are eligible for VA benefits.

"More often than not, there is a need for a claim to be filed," said Guthrie, who earned his VFW eligibility serving with the Army in Bosnia.

A member of Post 1114 in Evansville, Ind., Guthrie also had to learn the 38 CFR, which is the VA regulation book for claims.

At nearby Joint Base Andrews in Maryland, another pre-discharge site exists to help those exiting the military.

Until recently, Wayne Hutchison, or "Hutch" for short, was on-site five days a week. He has since been promoted to associate director, field operations and works out of VFW's Washington Office.

Prior to becoming part of VFW's national staff in 2017, Hutchison spent several years as a service officer in Ohio and Colorado and also was a claims rep in Nevada.

A Navy Persian Gulf War vet who served on the USS Midway, Hutchison said VFW is the only veterans service organization at Andrews.

"The relationship and partnership is no doubt why our military folks want to be with VFW," said Hutchison, a member of VFW Post 7596 in Franklin, Ohio. "So many times, people think they have nothing to file. It's very common to see shock on the faces of people who find out they can file a VA claim."

Hutchison said despite his many years in this field, he still learns something new every day.

"I was always so charged and motivated when those folks came in to see me," he said. "We are supposed to take care of one another. And this program does just that."

Hutchison's replacement is Tamara Marsh, an Army Iraq War veteran who is on-site four days each week at Andrews, with one day at nearby Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling.

Training is 'Intense' Experience

Like all service officers, predischarge reps Guthrie and Hutchison partake in annual training. VFW provides four training courses per year. Some are basic, while others are for those with more than five years in the industry.

According to Lauren Barefoot, NVS manager of training and quality assurance, conducting training helps reach a greater pool of people. NVS also will offer online training starting this spring.

"We do everything we can to help others know how to protect veterans benefits," Barefoot said. "Our training is an intense, hands-on experience."

After receiving her law degree from American University, Barefoot worked for the Vietnam Veterans of America and the Military Officers Association before coming to VFW three years ago.

Another Washington-based NVS staffer, Chris Macinkowicz, associate director for quality assurance, spends a good deal of his time producing videos referred to as "Hip Pocket" training courses.

Macinkowicz, who did two tours in Iraq with the Army, said each video is four to seven minutes long. Videos are designed for the "average Joe veteran" who needs to learn more about available benefits.

"In a nutshell, Hip Pocket videos show how VFW helps vets," said Macinkowicz, who has worked at VFW for five years. "Our goal is to try and get these seen by as many people as possible."

Videos can be found on YouTube (search for VFW Hip Pocket Training) and on the organization's Facebook page. A member of VFW Post 1146 in Saint Clair Shores, Mich., Macinkowicz encourages everyone to "like" and share the videos whenever possible.

'We Don't Turn Anyone Away'

NVS offers more than just its service offices. For example, James Moss, NVS assistant director for Veterans Health Policy, has to know the ins and outs of veterans health care, whether it's through VA, private insurance or other government agencies.

"It's important for me to know it all and how each area complements the other," he said.

Retiring from the Navy in 2008 as a master chief, Moss also manages VFW's Tactical Assessment Center (TAC). The TAC receives up to 350 inquiries every month via phone or email.

"When folks call us with questions, we have to know everything or know how to find out for them," Moss said. "In order for us to explain it, we have to know it."

A VFW member with the Department of Maryland, Moss stressed the importance of knowing the difference between "benefits" and "entitlements." Benefits are what is available to you, whereas entitlements are what you have to seek out, he said.

"A lot of veterans need help, but don't know how to get it," Moss said. "That's why we are here. And believe me, VFW knows more than people realize. When I exited the military,

[another organization] started a claim for me. Later, I ran into someone with VFW who had a lot more knowledge."

Tony Lowe, NVS associate director for Economic Opportunity & Transition Policy, agreed. The Iraq War vet said that's what he most appreciates about VFW — its willingness to help anyone.

"You don't have to be a combat vet to get help," said Lowe, a member of Post 341 in Washington, D.C. "Someone who needs help can come to the VFW, and we will help. Even if we don't have the answer, we'll help. We don't turn anyone away."

Prior to coming to work for VFW in 2016, Lowe, who retired from the Air Force in 2015, worked as a service officer for AMVETs. Lowe is the go-to guy for employment issues, as well as GI Bill problems, among other areas of responsibility.

"Everything we do here is about putting veterans first," Lowe said. "This is why VFW invests in training for us so that we can work toward being subject-matter experts."

Director Gallucci said it's important to note that at 100 years old, VFW's NVS department has been around longer than the VA has existed.

"We truly provide a lifetime of advocacy to our half a million claimants," he said. "You may not need us today, but as life circumstances change, if new conditions emerge, even when you pass away, our cadre of service officers stands ready to assist you and your loved ones in understanding your VA benefits."

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