



VFW Recovers More Than \$10.2 Billion for Veterans

More than half a million vets benefited from the tireless efforts of VFW's VA-accredited service officers in the last fiscal year

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For well over a century, the VFW's National Veterans Service (NVS) office on Capitol Hill has been devoted to serving veterans. With 1,900 VA-accredited service officers, including 27 service officers at Pre-Discharge offices on military installations, NVS recovered more than \$10.2 billion in earned VA benefits on behalf of more than 550,000 veterans in Fiscal Year 20-21.

"I'm proud of VFW's advocacy for veterans," NVS Director Ryan Gallucci said. "These vets put their trust in us to handle their benefits claims."

One such service officer is VFW Department of Utah Service Officer Wendy Griffin, who files 60-80 claims a month and sees 30-40 veterans a week. She said that even smaller claims, like getting a veteran free hearing aids through the VA, is rewarding to her as she can hear the joy in their voices.

"Things like this, it makes my day for about a month," said Griffin, who has been a VFW Service Officer since 2016. "Big awards are nice, but sometimes it's the little ones going day-to-day."

She recalled helping a homeless veteran who had served during the 1960s and experienced a lot of racial tension and discrimination. He was homeless for 20 years before working with Griffin, who got him \$250,000 in retroactive compensation.

"He couldn't believe it and asked if I was sure about the amount," Griffin said. "He was able to buy a home. After everything he had been through in his life, he was getting recognized for his service."

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Griffin, who was named the 2020 John A. Biedrzycki VFW Service Officer of the Year, said she works a lot with Vietnam vets who were told years ago they were not eligible for VA benefits since they could not prove Agent Orange exposure.

She admits that while her job is greatly rewarding, it can be depressing at times, but adds she would not want to do anything else.

“It’s changed my life,” she said. “If I’m not helping veterans, I’m not doing my job.”

‘THE GREATEST JOB I EVER HAD’

Brian Coleman, the pre-discharge claims representative at Ft. Riley, Kansas, about 130 miles west of Kansas City, Missouri, is another VA-accredited VFW service officer. Coleman, a Persian Gulf War vet, said he wishes he would have had the same level of service he provides to vets when he was discharged from the Army.

Often times, when soldiers preparing to discharge from the military come to see Coleman, they do not realize they need their medical records and must request those.

“Everything has to be documented,” Coleman said. “Then I screen those records to see what he or she may be eligible for. We are very thorough. I have some soldiers come in and they are surprised, especially the older ones.”

Coleman, a member of VFW Post 8773 in Junction City, Kansas, said the most common issue he sees is behavioral health issues such as PTSD, anxiety, depression and military sexual trauma. The discharge process starts 180 days before a soldier is set to depart the military.

“This process is all about diagnoses, updated medical records and trying to navigate the day-to-day system with all the other things like moving your family,” said Coleman who has worked for the VFW for five years. “I tell them, ‘Let me help you with this.’”

Coleman, who got his start as a Post service officer, said that while his primary mission is assisting soldiers, he can, and will, help those who have already left the military.

“This is the greatest job I have ever had,” he said. “This is the one that gets me out of bed in the morning because I know there are soldiers who are depending on me.”

VFW’S TRAINING ‘IS THE BEST’

To achieve such a high level of service, VFW takes great pride in its service officer training, Gallucci said.

“Our service reps are regularly trained to provide the best possible service to our veterans,” he added.

The multifaceted training program for VFW Service Officers includes in-person annual training where they learn about changes in law and regulatory changes.

Another facet to training is online or web conferencing, which was heavily relied upon during the peak of COVID-19.

“VFW seamlessly transitioned to remotely assist veterans during the shutdown,” Gallucci said. “The VFW was one of the only VSOs to immediately pivot to virtual technology. We still use it today to provide virtual assistance. Our ability to reach into communities is what distinguishes us from the rest.”

A third approach is NVS quality assurance, in which a team will meet regularly with new service officers to see if they need assistance.

“When a new service officer comes on board, we get out to their office during the first year to see what they need,” Gallucci said. “Beyond that, we try to visit every office at least every three years.”

Griffin said that VFW’s NVS training is the best out there. She has spoken with reps from other service organizations who get trained once a year, if that.

YEAR OF THE REPRESENTED VETERAN

Gallucci said that service officers such as Griffin and Coleman work tirelessly on behalf of veterans because that is the VFW way.

“Our service officers are trained to provide a lifetime of advocacy to the veterans we represent,” he said. “We do this free of charge regardless of VFW membership.”

Gallucci cautioned that not all service reps are VA accredited, and that is the first thing a veteran or dependent needs to ask. An accredited service officer will ask you to fill out VA Form 21-22 or 21-22a. Gallucci says that if a claims rep is not asking you to fill out one of these forms, move on, because those reps in question are not willing to go on record with the VA.

“Some bad actors are trying to charge veterans for help with their claims, arguing there aren’t enough service officers out there to help,” Gallucci said. “That’s simply not true.”

With Fiscal Year 21-22 well under way, Gallucci said VFW is calling this the Year of the Represented Veteran, given the importance of VA Form 21-22.

“We want veterans to know that we are proud to be your representative in the VA claims process,” he said. “We will meet VA standards every time.”

This article is featured in the 2022 February issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.