



## Georgia Department of Veterans Service

Cultivating community connections  
– empowering Georgia’s veterans  
and their families to flourish.

January 2023

### COMMISSIONER’S CORNER



Patricia Ross,  
Commissioner of  
Veterans Service

As we look forward to an exciting 2023, I want to thank the entire GDVS team for all of their outstanding work in 2022.

In our recent brief to the House Human Resources Subcommittee for Appropriations, I was honored to provide an update on our department.

While our total population of veterans has decreased by around 7,000 over the last year, the needs of our veterans have increased.

We answered over 70,000 more calls, had almost 20,000 more office visits, provided memorialization and interment of 500 more veterans or their eligible family members, all while growing to 55 field offices to meet the increasing demand for services in metro counties.

Additionally, we now account for almost \$3.6 billion in compensation and pension to Georgia veterans.

The GDVS has met each challenge and is postured to help even more veterans due to the passage of the PACT Act.

Georgia is a great state for our military and veterans, and I couldn’t be prouder of the GDVS team!

### FREE EMERGENCY HEALTHCARE FOR VETERANS IN SUICIDAL CRISIS

According to data from VA, it is estimated that 17 veterans die by suicide every day. In an effort to address this alarming number, VA enacted a new policy that allows veterans with suicidal thoughts to receive free mental health care at any Department of Veterans Affairs medical facility or outside provider.

VA Secretary Denis McDonough explained that veterans in crisis “can now receive the free, world-class emergency health care they deserve, no matter where they need it, when they need it, or whether they’re enrolled in VA care.”

This new policy is part of the VA’s 10-year strategy to reduce veteran suicide. “It is a great tool to use in the fight to reduce veteran suicides,” said GDVS Suicide Prevention and Outreach Coordinator Calandra Ferguson. “It allows the veterans to get the help they need without worrying about the cost.”

The policy will apply to all veterans, even those who are not using their VA benefits. Representative Mark Takano (D-CA) proposed this idea in a bill in 2020 and is thrilled to see it implemented. “This new benefit removes cost from the equation when veterans are at imminent risk of self-harm and allows them to access lifesaving care when they need it most.”

Along with free emergency mental health care, Veterans will no longer be required to pay out-of-pocket co-pays for some outpatient mental healthcare services thanks to the **REMOVE Copays Act** sponsored by Georgia Senator Jon Ossoff. Along with Senators Kevin Cramer and John Thune, the bipartisan bill eliminates copays for the first three mental health appointments per year. “Every veteran was willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice for the freedoms we enjoy every day. We should ensure they have access to care they need,” said Cramer.

For Georgia veterans, the importance of mental health is crucial. The veteran suicide rate in Georgia is significantly higher than the national general population according to data from VA.

The GDVS and Senator Ossoff’s office are standing by to assist Georgia veterans.

**988**  
SUICIDE  
& CRISIS  
LIFELINE



## GEORGIA WWII VETERAN TURNS 100!



Let the celebration begin for WWII Army veteran Russell Hansen as he celebrates his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2023! Hansen was born in California to traveling missionary parents, and lived in states around the country, before making Michigan his home. He joined the military at 21 and was stationed in Europe during WWII. He served in the Army as a paratrooper and his stories of jumping out of a plane inspired his children and grandchildren to explore the excitement of parachuting.

After leaving the military, he returned to Michigan and raised 9 children, 5 with his first wife and 4 with his second. An accomplished gardener, Hansen was known as the “squash man,” and grew so many vegetables, he would donate them to the local food pantry. In addition to the gardening, he cultivated enough grapes to make his own wine.

Hansen moved to Florida, but eventually settled at the home he built in the Georgia mountains near a babbling creek in Blairsville. He retired as an accountant and now spends his days enjoying his family, gardening, and bird watching. Hansen says he has seen a lot in his life including the invention of television, the changing of the automobile after WWII, a man on the moon, and more. He is amazed at how things are today, most recently fascinated by the technology that allows him to see a person talking on the phone.

When asked what his goal in life is, Hansen said it was to live to 100. Now that he has reached his goal? “Well, my pacemaker runs out at 105 years.”

The GDVS recognized the remarkable service of this centenarian with a special Certificate of Honor.

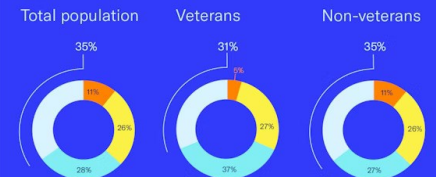


## Veterans are a highly educated talent pool



1 in 3 veterans have a Bachelor’s degree or higher

■ Less than high school     ■ High school (includes equivalency)  
■ Some college or Associate’s degree     ■ Bachelor’s degree or higher



Note: Survey of Employment status of persons 25 years and over by veteran status, period of service, and educational attainment, 2021 annual averages.

Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey

## TOP HIRES: VETERANS AND MILITARY SPOUSES

Veterans and military spouses represent a vast, diverse and talented pool of individuals. Considering the current crisis employers are facing with more jobs than workers, hiring a veteran and/or military spouse will not only address the shortage of workers, but also prove beneficial to businesses.

Current data from the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](https://www.uschamber.com) shows veterans have highly adaptable and desirable skills learned in the military – and are a highly educated talent pool.

Many veterans work in the government industry and more than 40% work in management, professional and business services, which according to The Bureau of Labor Statistics, equates to the highest median wage of all major occupational groups.

However, for military spouses the unemployment numbers are significantly higher than their counterparts.

According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, despite being more highly educated than the average American, in 2019 more than half of the spouses were unemployed. This may be in part to frequent relocation. On average, spouses move once every three years.

Remote work is an option employers should consider. This could not only help fill millions of open jobs, according to the Chamber, but “reduce military spouse unemployment costs, estimated at \$1 billion annually.”

## GET TO KNOW YOUR VSO: CAROL CRAWFORD



Motivated by the goodness of God and the sacrifices made by veterans, Waynesboro office manager Carol Crawford is committed to ensuring Georgia veterans receive the benefits they deserve.

Born and raised in Statesboro, Crawford comes from a family of veterans. During her 20 years with the GDVS, Crawford has developed lasting relationships with Georgia veterans—not only by assisting them with benefits, but by offering continued support throughout the years. “Getting a call from a veteran or spouse just to check on me and let me know they appreciate me means a lot and makes me smile,” said Crawford.

Crawford loves Gospel music and says her greatest strength is her faith, empathy, and willingness to go above and beyond what is required.

She advises future and VSO’s just coming on board to show compassion and patience. “You never know what someone may be going through. Be willing to go that extra step.”

And for Crawford that extra step means making hospital visits, sending cards, sharing her personal phone number, and even attending funeral services.

“I don’t get everything right. I have made mistakes and I don’t touch everyone, but the ones I get right and the ones I have touched give me joy.”