



Georgia Department of Veterans Service

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

June 2023

HONORING THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE: CELEBRATING 75 YEARS OF WOMEN’S MILITARY SERVICE

On June 12, 1948, President Truman signed the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act into law.

This was a truly groundbreaking piece of legislation for America’s military women, as it granted them a permanent place and opportunities for careers in the nation’s military. This year marks the 75th anniversary of women officially serving our country in the Armed Forces. The Georgia Department of Veterans Service held a gala on June 10, 2023 to recognize and celebrate the bravery, commitment, and willingness of women to serve.

“Women are an essential part of keeping America free,” said GDVS Women Veteran, Diversity, and Inclusion Coordinator Veda Brooks. “I hope the women veterans and their families who attended walked away knowing they are seen, supported and appreciated.”

GDVS Executive Director and Army Veteran Shelly-Ann Simpson, was thrilled to participate as a veteran and an employee, but the highlight of the night for her was the interaction with her fellow female veterans.

“Being able to see and speak with so many women veterans of different ages, ethnicities, and gender identities was an awe inspiring experience. I am proud we were able to celebrate each other’s triumphs together.”



MEET GEORGIA’S 2023 WOMAN OF THE YEAR: CONNIE BAPTISTE



The GDVS awarded the 2023 Woman Veteran of the Year to Connie Baptiste, a retired Air Force Technical Sergeant and long-time veteran advocate. Established in 2022, the Georgia Woman Veteran of the Year Award recognizes women veterans in Georgia who make a difference for people in their communities and across the nation.

A native of South Georgia, Baptiste joined the Georgia National Guard in 1981 and continued her service in the Air Force. She retired in April 2003 with four overseas tours, including one deployment in support of the Iraq-Iran war. Following her Air Force career, Baptiste established herself as an advocate for military veterans, women veterans and their families. Putting her passion and expertise to work, she is currently the Owner/Executive Chef of the Manna from Heaven Group and the Owner/Operator of the Hunter Family Farm.

“I was thrilled we presented this award to Connie, a woman who has been a true leader and advocate in the veteran community, locally, statewide, and nationally,” said Veda Brooks, GDVS Women Veteran, Diversity, and Inclusion Coordinator. “Connie’s commitment to service, even after wearing the uniform, serves as a shining example to civilians and service members alike.”

Despite her numerous accomplishments, Baptiste was genuinely surprised to receive the honor. “To receive this recognition is such a great honor, and to do it in front of a roomful of my sister veterans brought me to tears. I used to say someone needs to help women veterans tell their story—and then one day I realized that someone was me. Service is not just something I did in and out of uniform. It is just simply who I am.”



TRAINED, TESTED, AND READY TO SERVE GEORGIA VETERANS

Georgia’s state Veterans Service Officers have completed their annual training for 2023. Over 100 VSOs throughout the state of Georgia spent several days learning about claims and benefits, the appeals process, and the impacts of new legislation for veterans. Questions regarding PACT ACT claims, presumptive service connections, and burn pits were some of the topics discussed during the week.

The extensive training was conducted by Training Director Ramona Roper; Assistant Director Steven Fay; trainers Sherri Whitfield, Glenn Massey, Charles Isaac; and guest trainer Sandra Bennett. VSOs also received information from the National Veterans Legal Service Program (NVLSP), a non-profit organization established in 1981, which works to ensure the government delivers the benefits veterans have earned.

After completing their training, VSOs were tested by a thorough and rigorous exam. Passing the exam guarantees their VA accreditation to file claims for veterans benefits and certifies their ability to help Georgia veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors with the challenges they may face.



VA CHANGES STUDENT ENROLLMENT CERTIFICATION PROCEDURES

School Certifying Officials should be aware—beginning July 1, 2023, all enrollments for students using GI Bill® benefits must be certified and submitted through [Enrollment Manager](#). Paper and PDF enrollment certifications will no longer be accepted.

Enrollment Manager, part of the VA Education Platform, decreases manual processes, enhances student data protection, and improves the delivery time for benefits changes.

All approved locations must submit monthly hours normally processed on VA Form 22-6553d-1 and VA Form 22-1999 through [VA Enrollment Manager](#).

The [State Approving Agency](#) (SAA) can no longer upload paper/scanned documents for you. Please **do not** send any VA Forms 22-6553d-1 or VA Form 22-1999 to the SAA. These actions must now be completed in [Enrollment Manger](#).

Have questions about Enrollment Manager? VA is hosting a [series of webinars](#) for all institution types.

You can find more information, resources, and a comprehensive user guide at through VA’s Enrollment Manager [FAQ page](#).

SURVEY FINDS VETERANS PREFER VA HOSPITALS FOR MEDICAL CARE

Good news for veterans receiving care through VA — according to [patient surveys](#) conducted by Medicare, “72% of VA hospitals received four or five stars for overall hospital rating compared to 48 % of reporting non-VA hospitals.”

The ratings are based on communication with doctors and nurses, responsiveness of hospital staff, communication about medicines, cleanliness and quietness of the hospital environment, discharge information, care transition assistance, and a willingness to recommend the hospital to others.

GDVS Atlanta VAMC Officer Manager Joe Baker is not surprised about the encouraging news for veterans healthcare. The Atlanta VAMC is one of the busiest VA medical facilities in Georgia.

“It is understandable veterans would rank VA health care over non-VA hospitals. At the VA hospital, veterans often feel more comfortable around other veterans. It’s a space where they feel a sense of camaraderie and can share their experiences from the military receiving many different types of medical services.”

Find the full survey at [VA News](#).

GET TO KNOW YOUR VSO: KELLY JOHNSON

“Making a difference in people’s lives” is what Kelly Johnson likes most about



working for the Georgia Department of Veterans Service.

Describing himself as easygoing, knowledgeable, and humorous, he has been a valued member of the GDVS team since 2007.

“I will always do the best I can for you and your family to ensure you get the benefits you’re entitled to,” said Johnson.

A Duluth, Georgia native, Johnson enjoys doing home projects, reading, traveling, going to sporting events and to the movies, but his family and friends are what brings a smile to his face.

Johnson currently manages the GDVS Dalton office. He formerly served as a Corporal in the United States Marine Corps from 1996-2000.

His advice to new and future VSOs is to learn from the good days and the bad days.

Johnson is most passionate about doing the right thing, and so it is no surprise he believes you should “strive so much not to achieve success, but to achieve significance.”