

Spotlight on: The Polk County Veterans Service Office

Did you know one of every nine Polk County adults is a veteran?

Polk County is proud to serve those who served our country. The County Veterans Service Office is located in the Polk County Government Center in Balsam Lake. The mission of this office is to assist veterans and their families with obtaining local, state and federal benefits. It is here Polk County Veterans are able to get the help they need to obtain the benefits they earned while serving the United States of America. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are coming to an end and as more veterans return home the number of veterans living in Polk County will increase. Simultaneously, Vietnam-era veterans are rapidly aging and retiring. Both groups of veterans are entitled to assistance to obtain their earned benefits

The Veterans Service Office is one of the smallest departments in Polk County Government however, it has a large impact on the local economy and the quality of life for the people it serves. In 2013, the amount of “new” benefits to Polk County veterans, new in the sense that they were obtained for the first time during that year, totaled \$7,687,885. The total amount of all federal, state and local benefit to our County’s veterans was \$28,454,563. With a department budget of just over \$152,000, the return on investment to Polk County taxpayers was approximately \$51 for every \$1 of budget for new benefits, and \$187 for every \$1 of budget for all benefits combined.

The Polk County office is staffed by the County Veterans Service Officer (CVSO), Rick Gates, and Benefits Specialist Gail Wassberg. Rick joined the County in December of 1998, on retirement from the US Navy, and Gail came on board in 2004. Together, they work to help approximately 4,000 veterans along with dependents

and surviving spouses. As advocates, CVSOs are the link between federal, state and local veteran benefits and beneficiaries. In Polk County, veterans see the CVSO to find out about benefits to which



Benefits Specialist Wassberg and VSO Gates



Some of the information available in the VSO office

they might be entitled, and they get hands-on assistance in doing actual applications. In Polk County, VSO’s still do “house calls” for those veterans or applicant’s unable to get to the office. Excellence in customer service is the goal of the Polk County Veterans Service Office.

As a nation, a state and a county we have taken steps to ensure our veterans are cared for in their civilian life and, especially, in their later years or if they are or become disabled. By far the largest amount of benefits to Polk

County veterans are from the federal government. Federal benefits include disability compensation for injuries or disabilities incurred in or due to service, pensions for wartime veterans, widow's pensions, VA medical care enrollment, VA nursing homes, burial benefits, education benefits, VA life insurance, vocational rehabilitation, reemployment assistance, cemeteries, military honors and VA home loan guarantees.

State benefits are smaller, some from the Wisconsin Department of Veteran Affairs (WDVA) and others from other state departments. WDVA operates the three state veteran's nursing homes in Wisconsin, state cemeteries, and oversees state educational benefits and assistance to needy veteran programs. They also assist in homeless programs and provide transportation and other grants to CVSO offices throughout the state. Benefits provided by other state agencies include property tax refunds, state education programs, employment assistance, veteran's license plates, disabled placards, veteran identifier on driver's licenses, reduced fees for fishing and hunting licenses, park and trail passes. Polk County also directly helps veterans through travel assistance to and from VA medical appointments, emergency assistance, and compensation to cemeteries for managing veteran graves and grave registration. The County also provides flag holders and flags for cemeteries. All of these services can be applied for with the assistance of the CVSO office.

The Veterans Service Office is a one stop shop for veterans and their families seeking assistance with veteran benefits. No question is too big or too small. Please feel free to stop by at any time with any veteran related questions, or call us, at (715) 485-9243. The coffee is always on!