

**Commander's Group
2024 Legislative Priorities
Updated 8 March, 2024**

The Michigan Commanders Group believes that these are the most important State of Michigan issues facing Michigan Veterans and their dependents. For additional information and to possibly email your support to your State of Michigan legislators, click on one of the following descriptions.

Combat Suicides and high mortality rates of veterans related to overprescribing of psychiatric drugs and veterans not being given informed consent of side effects and withdrawal issues related to antidepressants and other psychiatric drugs

Veteran, Active and Guard/Reserve Suicides and High Mortality Rates Related to Psychiatric Drug Harm:

Call for the State of Michigan, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (USDVA) – and the private sector – to combat suicide among veterans and active military personnel by investigating the role of psychiatric drug harm on veterans, which should include, but not be limited to antidepressant withdrawal and the overprescribing of psychiatric medications to Michigan's veterans by the USDVA and/or other medical service providers.

Request the MVAA and DMVA to run a statewide educational campaign for prescribers and for patients being treated with psychiatric medications, with a focus on antidepressants. Campaign should be specific about medication risk profiles and dangers associated with SSRI, benzodiazepine, and antipsychotic drug withdrawal. Request that the State Licensing and Regulatory Agency (LARA) conduct a review of psychiatric medication prescribing practices, with a focus on Polpharma and informed consent.

Request the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to post mortem and post event reviews after suicides and violent acts to understand full role of medications in suicides and violent acts.

Request the State Legislature to hold hearings with surviving families and survivors of psychiatric drug harm, and with VA leadership to understand scale of harm and what actions the VA is taking to reduce this harm.

Support a statewide pilot program for Hyperbaric Oxygen Treatments (HBOTs), to treat Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Hyperbaric Oxygen Treatments (HBOTs): Appropriate funds to support a statewide pilot program for Hyperbaric Oxygen Treatment for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This pilot should also focus on the reduction of opioid dependency, suicide, incarceration, homelessness, and divorce rates among veterans with Brain Wounds upon discharge from service to our nation. HBOTs have shown to be an effective therapy for mental health and reduces the risk of veteran suicides, without the dramatic side effects that can be found with psychopharmaceuticals and other therapies. There are currently eight states (OK, AZ, TX, IN, KY, FL, MD) who have enacted HBOT treatment legislation with total funding of approximately \$3 million, with another \$4.6 million pending this legislative session across the US. A total of 20+ Institutional Review Board of HBOT clinical medical trials have been completed since 2007, all demonstrating safety and efficacy of HBOT for TBI/PTSD Veteran.

Develop a statewide program for utilizing HBOT as an alternative and effective method to treat brain injuries.

Provide funding for the establishment and execution of a HBOT program in Michigan.

Implement the PACT Act of 2022 at the State level

PACT Act Awareness Statewide: The state should support a campaign to enable the identification, treatment, and compensation of toxic exposures while on active duty, or in guard or reserve units.

The MVAA, MVC, and the County VSO's must coordinate with the USDVA and the Leadership of DMVA to assure that information is getting to those affected by toxic exposures.

Any sources and activities should be managed by an agreed upon office to maximize outreach and the beginning of claim filings and treatment.

Expand the number of Veterans Treatment Courts in Michigan

Veterans Treatment Courts: Sustain and expand the operations of Veteran Treatment Courts to address behaviors & consequences resulting from PTSD and/or other service-connected disabilities. Sufficient funding should be secured to expand the number of Veteran's Treatment Courts in Michigan.

Clarify the funding, establishment, and operation of Veterans Courts in Michigan.

Determine effectiveness of counseling, mentoring and assessing the process to veterans.

Retain the 100% Disabled Property Tax Exemption

Property Tax Exemption: Continue to support and protect the property tax exemption for 100% disabled Michigan veterans and their surviving spouses. Examine all options presented in the legislative process that do not diminish current benefits.

Although recent legislation has attempted to fix this problem, the issue of funding (reimbursing the local property taxing authority) is still unresolved and threatens to undo the progress made.

Work with officials to find a way to reimburse local units of government without placing a burden on the veteran community.

Clarify the Michigan Constitutions definition for this type of tax expenditure.

Related Bills: SB0176 & HB4897

Equitable Funding for the Michigan Veterans Coalition

Michigan Veterans Coalition: Legislation for rollover funding, and to maintain, and adjust as necessary, the grant to enable the Michigan Veterans Coalition (MVC) to perform the tasks of filing claims and appeals on behalf of Michigan's veterans and their families. This includes the cases which to the U.S. Court of Veterans Appeals. Assure that it is a standard appropriation (or supplemental) with rollover balances – to stabilize & avoid payment gaps – as is allowed for county veteran's affairs operations.

Last fiscal year, the work of the Michigan Veteran's Coalition, and its 72 certified Veteran Service Officers, resulted in \$660, 000, 000 of benefits for Michigan veterans and their families.

Continued grant funding is essential and has been providing the base for this work since the 1920's.

Implement Rollover Funding and the ability to maintain and adjust as necessary to support appropriate levels of Veteran Service Officer staffing.

Stabilize and Support the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund

Michigan Veterans Trust Fund:

- Sustain and support the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund (MVTF) and its programs to help Michigan's veterans and their families during time of need.
- Enact laws which will channel sports gambling tax revenue to the Michigan Veteran's Trust Fund – or to another constitutionally protected trust – to the point where it can sustain all of Michigan's Veteran's Programs without using General Fund revenue. The earnings of the trust shall also fund efforts to prevent suicides and pay for future bonuses for past service periods.

Continue and grow the operations and the resources of the Michigan Veteran's Trust Fund (MVTf)

Since the constitutional amendment, the MVTf has grown past the original \$50 million to over \$70 million in recent years.

The MVTf has been able to expand its scope of assistance to Michigan's Veterans.

With the direction of a percentage of gambling tax revenues to the MVTf it can grow to a size comparable to the Natural Resources Trust.

All of Michigan's veteran programs and operations could then be funded without General Fund Revenue, thereby providing a great relief to the State budget.

Extend the Vietnam Veteran Bonus to those at the End of the War

Vietnam Veteran Bonus: Consider the extended eligibility and the cost of a bonus for the honorable service of Michigan veterans for the end of the Vietnam Era (1973-1975). When created in the 1970's the full bonus promise was not honored in that those who serviced of the official U.S. Dept of Defense dates for duty in Vietnam were determined to not be eligible.

There is a lingering concern for those who were not deemed eligible when the Michigan Vietnam Bonus was passed in 1973.

Troops were still sent to Vietnam until 1975.

The maximum amount was \$600 for those who served in Southeast Asia and \$450 for those who served elsewhere.

Should new eligibility be adjusted for inflation?

Are the records from the first phase available to clarify who received the bonus earlier?

Expand the number of Michigan Veterans Homes

Michigan Veterans Homes: Maintain and expand the number of State Veterans Homes in Michigan to accommodate the various veteran population centers in the state. Do so in a manner that meets USDVA, Medicare, and Medicaid standards (Study by State of Michigan recommends seven Veterans Homes)

- Lead the efforts to address the needs of homeless veterans in Michigan.
- Increase the salaries of professional care staff to maintain the highest quality of life.

There are currently three veterans' homes in Michigan – Grand Rapids, Marquette and Chesterfield Twp.

The Marquette home is in need of replacement.

Each new home has a capacity of about 238.

Grand Rapids Home for Veterans (GRHV) had a previous capacity of 750 and the Marquette home about 430.

There is a need to geographically position new homes within a reasonable distance of those likely to need the care.

Although the funding to build new homes is a 65/35 % fed/state proposition, \$10 million is added to the state budget for each new home.

Staffing of the homes are facing the same challenges as the private sector medical sector.

Land available at GRHV is an ideal setting to address homelessness among veterans. A transitional and/or permanent supportive housing operation could revitalize the old buildings for such a purpose.

Add a Veterans Cemetery in the Upper Peninsula

Veterans Cemetery in the Upper Peninsula: Michigan's veterans who live in the Upper Peninsula (UP) do not have reasonable access to a state or federal veteran's cemetery. The two active national USDVA Veterans' Cemeteries are in Augusta and Holly. A new national or state cemetery in the UP should be created. The geographical rationale for such a location is obvious. If a federal cemetery is determined to not be a feasible option, then a State of Michigan Veterans' Cemetery should be established. It should be created with the aid of the USDVA but operated by the State of Michigan.

There are 30,000 veterans living in the U.P.

In 2002, when Great Lakes National Cemetery in Holly was begun, promises were made that the U.P. would be the next site.

The MVAA needs to be involved in the process.

It's clear that another cemetery is also needed in the upper portion of the U.P.

The creation of both cemeteries would provide coverage for all of Michigan's remaining counties.

It is 218 miles between the Mackinac Bridge and Holly.

Special Events License Expansion for VSO Posts

Special Events Licenses for VSO Posts: Increase the number of Special Events Licenses for VSA posts/chapters from 12 to 48.

At present only a select few have facilities that could benefit from this feature: VFW, Am Legion, DAV, VVA