

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee today to discuss the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs' Fiscal Year 2015 budget.

My message this year is simple. The Department remains dedicated to providing unparalleled service to the state's 425,000 veterans while maintaining the singular focus of the New Jersey National Guard to safeguard the state and nation.

DMAVA continues to expand its services even in lean budgetary times by leveraging federal dollars and continuing its partnerships with one of the most robust Veteran's communities in the nation. The New Jersey National Guard is poised to weather an unprecedented period of federal defense budget austerity by ensuring that it's recruiting and retention efforts continue to be among the top in the nation.

When I last appeared before this committee, our operations in response to Super storm Sandy had just concluded.

This response cost approximately \$8 million. The Department continues to work closely with (FEMA) for maximum reimbursement.

National Guard Training Center at Sea Girt suffered extensive storm damage.

More than \$24 million dollars for military construction projects has been allocated to New Jersey, including repairs to storm damaged facilities.

More than \$100 million in federal funds will flow to New Jersey, some to help rebuild critical structures damaged by Sandy. All of these federal projects will create jobs for New Jerseyans.

DMAVA is committed to working with other agencies including the state Office of Emergency Management to ensure Sandy related projects are completed to specification.

Military construction projects at National Guard facilities have received federal money for construction. The total economic impact tops \$1 billion dollars. In other words, for every dollar the state General Fund sends DMAVA, the Department returns more than \$20 to the Garden State economy.

\$49 million dollars is allocated to build a state-of-the-art Army Aviation Support Facility.

\$34 million dollars is allocated to build a Regional Training Institute at the National Guard Training Center in Sea Girt.

The Department's proposed \$95.5 million budget for Fiscal Year 2015 is a \$250,000 reduction from the 2014 adjusted appropriation.

Our Department's hallmark is its ability to form partnerships that allow it to maximize resources to accomplish its core missions.

Before I speak about our strong relationships with Veterans Organizations, I would like to publicly acknowledge some of our partners who are present today..._____, _____ and _____.

These volunteers have done everything from organizing bus trips to running bingo games to just being there to lend an ear to a fellow Veteran.

These volunteers have provided more than 68,000 volunteer for a savings of more than \$1.7 million dollars. Additionally, they have donated more than \$400,000 worth of goods and services to our Veterans.

Alternative energy and conservation has allowed DMAVA to avoid nearly three quarters of a million dollars in electrical utility costs over the past five years. The Department has been awarded four Secretary of the Army Energy and Water Management Awards in that time period.

In addition to six current solar projects across the state, DMAVA has received

Department of Defense and National Guard Bureau approval for additional green energy projects.

This Department is entrusted with caring for the state's Veterans from the day they take off the uniform until the day they die.

The key to our efforts is statewide coverage for all New Jersey Veterans through a network of 16 Veterans Service Offices.

The DMAVA Veterans Service Officers who staff these offices have steadily increased the amount of federal Veterans Administration benefits received by New Jersey Veterans in each of the past five years, from \$72 million in Fiscal 2009 to \$133 million in Fiscal Year 2013. That was an 84 percent increase in benefits during a period when the number of Veterans in the state declined nearly 10 percent as the members of the Greatest Generation pass on.

DMAVA continues to leverage federal dollars to enhance its services.

A perfect example can be found in the Department's three long-term care nursing homes for Veterans and their spouses in Paramus, Menlo Park and Vineland. The Homes collect annual Medicare receipts of nearly \$10 million, which are used to offset operating costs.

We are one of 15 states to receive a \$10.8 million grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration in November 2012 to support the planned expansion of the Brigadier General William C. Doyle Cemetery. The project was completed in January 2014 and allows 10,700 double crypts and 4,800 niches for cremains.

The Doyle Cemetery has averaged nearly 3,000 interments each year for the past five years. With the increase in the federal Plot Interment Allowance from \$300 to \$700, the Department is able to maintain the best state cemetery in the nation.

In New Jersey, as many as 5,000 Veterans are estimated to be homeless on any given day. To address this need, DMAVA

has taken aggressive steps over the past three years to nearly triple the services provided to homeless Veterans through its time tested transitional housing programs.

Veterans Haven-North and Veterans Haven-South, provide effective long-term rehabilitation services and employment training for its residents.

The number of beds at the Department's long-running facility, Vets Haven-South, doubled to 99 two years ago through a \$5.9 million expansion partially funded by the VA. Operations began at Vets Haven-North in August 2012 and the facility is helping put its residents on a path to self-sufficiency using the same formula of job training and life-skills building that have helped roughly 1,000 Vets Haven-South residents who completed the program since 1995 return to purposeful and productive lives.

The New Jersey National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Academy, located on Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, remains an innovative and cost-effective partnership between the state and federal governments.

The voluntary educational program provides at risk youth the opportunity to undergo an intense 22-week residential program in a quasi-military environment. The educational goal is to prepare cadets for the GED exam and raise math and reading scores a minimum of two grade levels.

Since 2008, there have been 1,161 graduates and 77 percent earned their high school diploma.

Over the past six years, the federal share of the costs to run Youth ChalleNGe has increased from 60 percent to 75 percent. In FY 2013, federal funding for Youth ChalleNGe was \$2.2 million and the state share was \$736,000.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, we have mobilized more than 16,000 troops. We remain committed to ensure that our member's transition back to civilian life is as smooth and transparent as possible.

Through federal funding, DMAVA operates a statewide network of Family Assistance Centers. These centers

support the families of deployed Soldiers and Airmen during unforeseen emergencies and financial hardships. Our dedicated team of chaplains lend additional support.

The crown jewel of this effort is the Joint Military and Family Assistance Center at the Bordentown Armory, which is in the midst of a \$3.5 million renovation using federal funds.

The Soldiers and Airmen returning now are the focus of one of the most comprehensive efforts ever undertaken to support troops as they make the transition from warrior back to parent, spouse, student, employee and community member.

A major focus over the past year has been to ensure that deployed Soldiers and Airmen are able to rejoin the civilian job market. To that end, DMAVA has partnered with the New Jersey Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve to assist Veterans at job fairs across the state.

To complement our efforts, we have partnered with Fortune 500 executives in New York and currently are in a pilot

program that places Guard members alongside an executive in their chosen field. The executive works with the service members during the course of an internship which could lead to full-time employment.

DMAVA continues to see a substantial increase in the number of Veterans seeking treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Over the past four years, the demand for PTSD counseling has increased by 22 percent, with 20,029 sessions in FY 2013.

New Jersey is committed to providing Veterans a helping hand and remains one of only seven states that provides additional mental health services for its Veterans and is the only state to assist their families as well. We are currently offering services for more than 12,000 service members and 400 of their family members. A cornerstone of this effort is our toll free, 24-hour Veterans Helpline. Calls to the helpline have more than doubled since its inception in 2006, from 1,571, to 3,446 last year.

The Vet2Vet Helpline has proven as a positive and affective means to mitigate potentially life threatening issues to service members returning from deployments.

I would like to finish my comments today by discussing a recent event that demonstrated the relevance of the National Guard and the primary role it plays in protecting the citizens of New Jersey.

National Guard Soldiers and Airmen were on duty when our state hosted Super Bowl 48. They served in security roles, from helping to ensure the safety of fans in and around the Meadowlands to ensuring nearby transportation hubs were safeguarded. In addition, a team of National Guard specialists in nuclear, chemical and biological hazards were on standby.

As always, your hometown team, the New Jersey National Guard was there.

Our job now is to ensure that the New Jersey National Guard continues to be there and be there with the strength and vitality it needs to accomplish its mission.

It will be a challenge.

The Army National Guard faces an 18 percent decline – or a \$16.3 million dollar loss from federal dollars in FY 2013 to FY 2014. That follows a 16 percent loss from FY 2012 to FY 2013. The New Jersey Army National Guard also faces a \$2.2 million loss in funds for the pay for its Soldiers.

The New Jersey Air National Guard faces a nearly 8 percent decline in its Fiscal Year 2014 budget of \$103 million. The immediate impact of these cuts will delay in sending Airmen for training required for successful accomplishment of their missions. And other cuts will be the delay of badly needed upgrades to infrastructure.

The best way for states to preserve force structure will be to maintain a high state of readiness. That is exactly what the New Jersey National Guard plans to do. And we will do it

by making sure both the Army and Air Guard continue recruiting and retention efforts that have placed both at the very top of their respective services.

The New Jersey Army National Guard is currently at 102 percent of its authorized end strength - placing it number two in the nation. And the New Jersey Air Guard is at 108 percent of its authorized end strength, which is the third highest in the nation.

Despite the bleak federal budget numbers, there is another number that gives me reason to be optimistic about the future of the New Jersey National Guard.

Its 8,600--the number of our Soldiers and Airmen.

They exceed my every expectation each time they put on the uniform. They have resolutely faced every danger in their path, from enemy fire in Afghanistan to the hardest gusts of wind Sandy could muster. It's a privilege to serve alongside them.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this presentation before your distinguished committee. My staff and I will be happy to answer any of your questions.