

Community Services Department:

A Program Evaluation of The Veterans Service Office

(Project No. 2003-M-04)

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Executive Summary

For nearly sixty years, Palm Beach County has aided its resident military veterans by providing a local source of information and assistance to them in securing financial and social services benefits to which they are entitled as a result of their service in the armed forces of the United States.

Report Highlights . . .

Our review of the Palm Beach County Veterans Service Office found that:

- ☑ *The Office is generally effective at its mission, but it lacks the types of performance measures which would give a more complete and reliable indication of performance*
 - ☑ *Person-to-person contacts between veterans and the VSO have increased over the past several years*
 - ☑ *Veterans are increasingly conducting their business at VSO satellite centers rather than at the headquarters office*
 - ☑ *The VSO's outreach strategy reflects a highly personalized approach to service delivery, but in some instances, its resources could be better distributed to reach more veterans.*
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In response to a request from county administration, the Management and Program Analysis Section conducted a program evaluation of the Veterans Service Office (VSO), a small program managed by the Human Services Division of the county's Community Services Department. The study team was asked to assess whether that program furnishes necessary, valuable assistance to veterans, in light of the availability of state and federal options for providing the same services. Our evaluation included a review of the size and distribution of the veteran population pool residing in the county, the strategy and steps employed by the VSO to reach that target population, and the performance measures in place to gauge the success of the program in achieving its mission. This report contains the results of that study, in the form of findings and recommendations. William Brown III was the lead analyst assigned to the project, assisted by James Godfrey. Fieldwork for the project was conducted between May 2003 and September 2003, and a final draft of the report was distributed for comment in October 2003.

The study found that despite the presence of both state and federal agencies which are available to assist veterans in applying for benefits, the VSO seems to be quite effective at fulfilling that role on behalf of local veterans. Just how effective cannot be precisely determined for several reasons: 1) there are almost no generally-accepted standards for how "effectiveness" should be defined in this context, and the one measure we found in widespread usage (monetary benefits generated), is flawed as a reliable measure of program performance; 2) the VSO has missed opportunities to measure its own performance in a variety of ways which would have given a better and more reliable picture of its performance over the years; and 3) none of the veterans' service agencies at the three levels of government collects and maintains the filing data that would be needed to conclusively show the extent to which the VSO is involved in securing benefits for veterans.

Nevertheless, the study team has concluded that the VSO is an important link in the federal-state-local partnership designed to aid military veterans in securing financial benefits and social services. Beyond that, the VSO serves a valuable, if unquantified, purpose in reducing state Medicaid and public assistance costs by serving as a local source of information for social services and healthcare agencies on veteran benefit awards affecting income determinations.

Finally, the study shows that there is much that the VSO can do to make its marketing efforts and its collaborations more effective at reaching its target service population.

To address the study team's findings, we have offered three specific recommendations:

VETERANS SERVICES PROGRAMS

- The Veterans Service Office should establish new satellite “offices,” relocate some existing ones, or revise operating hours at satellite offices to better align its resources with the highest concentrations of veterans in the population;
- The Veterans Service Office should establish performance measures which are more effective and reliable indicators of the program’s benefits and efficiency, and of the success of its outreach strategy;
- The Veterans Service Office should upgrade its marketing program and its collaborations to reach more of its target audience.

Community Services Department: Veterans Services Program Evaluation

An evaluation of the services provided by the Community Services Department's Veterans Services program, comparing and contrasting the service offerings, performance and methods of service delivery with those of selected peer counties

The purpose of this report is to provide county administration and department management with an evaluation of the services provided by the Veterans Service Office (VSO). The evaluation includes profiling service delivery methods, caseloads, and performance measures, as well as comparing Palm Beach County's Veterans Service Office with those in selected peer counties.

The study focused on documenting the county's services directed at military veterans living in Palm Beach County. This documentation includes descriptions of major services, client workload (veterans served) and analysis of performance measures used by the Veterans Service Office. Study findings and recommendations relating to operational performance and enhancing the outreach of the Veterans Service Office are presented in separate sections.

The methodology of this program evaluation included documenting what the organization does, how much it does and how its workload has changed over time, and how well it does it. To accomplish this, the study included all of the following:

To understand the VSO's responsibilities and procedures in assisting veterans to file for state and federal benefits, the study team interviewed staff and management of the county and state VSO, conducted a survey of area veterans who have utilized the county service and the study team visited VSO satellite offices.

To understand the similarities and differences between Palm Beach County's VSO and the veterans service programs elsewhere in the state of Florida, a peer county comparison was performed that details the differences in approaches to veterans' benefits advocacy. The peer counties involved in the comparison were the seven Florida counties with the largest veteran populations.

To document the VSO's workload and determine whether workload and the staffing of satellite offices are in proper balance, the study team analyzed available workload data for the past four years, from 2000 through 2003 (projected). Both

veteran trends pertaining to general population and the geographic location of that population were analyzed.

Finally, to assess how well contemporary management practices and technologies have been employed at the VSO, the study team analyzed the accessibility, accuracy and utility of the current client database and filing systems.

Factual Profile

OVERVIEW OF PROGRAMS, BENEFITS AND SERVICES TO MILITARY VETERANS IN THE COUNTY

The county's Veterans Service Office is an outreach and advocacy service for the benefit of military veterans living in Palm Beach County. The VSO focuses on helping veterans and their families obtain benefits to which they are entitled as a result of their military service to the United States. These benefits are in the form of disability compensation, health care, and vocational rehabilitation. According to the federal Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), approximately one-third of the nation may be eligible for VA benefits and services because veterans' dependents and survivors may also qualify for assistance. As used in this report, the term "veterans" refers collectively to honorably discharged veterans, their qualified dependents and survivors, including children, spouses and parents.

The county's VSO was established in 1947 under permissive state legislation that provides that each board of county commissioners may employ a service officer to assist the veteran population in making application for benefits [Chapter 292.11, F.S.]. Organizationally, the VSO is part of the county's Community Services Department, Human Services Division. The veterans program is managed by a Veterans Service Officer, aided by three Assistant Veterans Service Officers and one secretarial position.

The VSO operates as one part of a broader network of agencies designed to identify and aid veterans entitled to receive financial and social services. The VSO plays a key role in the partnership of organizations involving also the VA, the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs (FDVA), and local military veterans service organizations, by working with veterans to initiate and develop claims for benefits and to provide a local source of information for veterans.

The Veterans Service Officer and his staff assist veterans in obtaining benefits through a variety of activities, among them:

- Developing, researching and documenting a veteran's case;
- Assisting veterans in filling out claim forms, compiling the supporting documentation into benefits application packages;
- Acting as a general referral agency to other services, such as senior services, elder services, hospice, homeless, legal aid, and Medicaid.

The VSO assists a variety of state and local social services agencies by responding to requests for information on VA benefits provided to veterans who have applied for the Medicaid program or other public assistance services. By aiding in this manner, the VSO helps identify veterans who are ineligible or only partially eligible for Medicaid or for public assistance payments because of the amount of veterans benefits they receive, thereby saving some public expense associated with the healthcare and social services of individual veterans.

When it deals with individual veterans, the VSO typically functions as their designated representative for purposes of filing benefit claims with the VA. Other organizations, including the FDVA and qualified veterans service organizations, such as the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, can also fulfill that role, at the veteran’s option. A listing of the principal federal and state veterans’ benefits is provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1

**Major Categories of State and Federal Benefits
For Military Veterans**

Federal Veterans Benefits	State Veterans Benefits
Health care/medical benefits	Exemption of homestead taxes
Disability compensation and pension	Various state licenses and fees: occupational, hunting and fishing, driver license.
Education and training	Veteran license plates
Vocational rehabilitation and employment	Scholarships for education of children of deceased or disabled veterans, tuition deferment, reduced tuition for national guard
Home loan guaranties	Domiciliary homes, nursing homes
Life insurance	
Burial benefits	
Benefits for the surviving family members of veterans	

Source: (1) Federal benefits were taken from the Internet website of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, www.va.gov; (2) state benefits were taken from the Internet website of the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs, www.floridavets.org.

State and Federal Veterans Benefits

By far, the largest number and most diverse types of services directed at military veterans are offered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. VA benefits range from health and disability pension benefits to life insurance, death benefits, college education tuition benefits and home loan mortgage assistance programs (see Table 1). The county’s Veterans Service Officer estimates that the most frequently applied for benefits in Palm Beach County are 1) pension claims, 2) original service-connected disability claims, and 3) death benefits. Among the VA’s death benefits,

is the right of every military veteran to be interred in a national veterans' cemetery. A new veteran's cemetery is scheduled to open in Palm Beach County in early 2005.

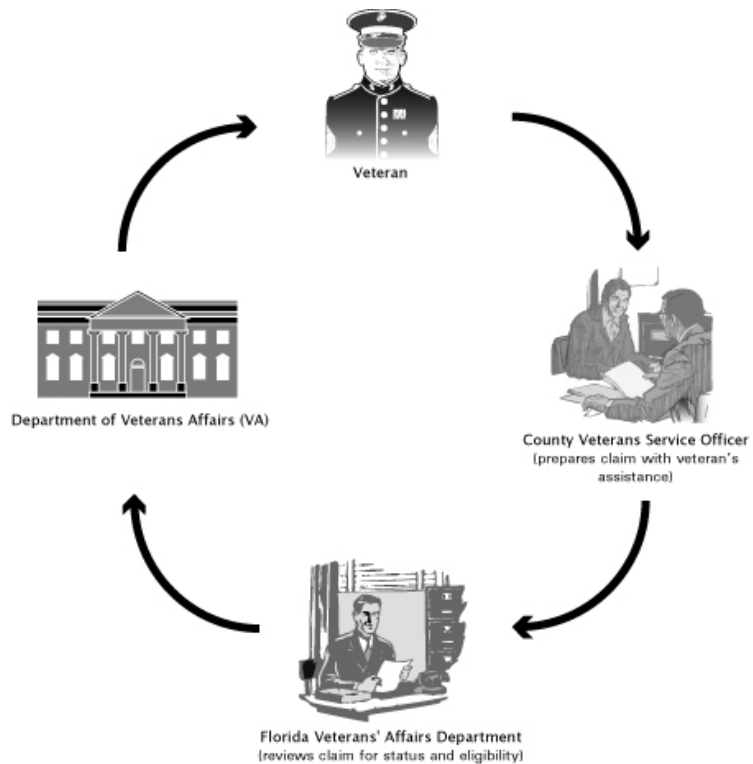
The Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs offers a limited number of benefits that deal primarily with a reduction or waiver of certain state-imposed license fees. However, the state also provides resident care in state operated nursing homes and assisted living facilities, as shown in Table 1. There are no such facilities located in Palm Beach County; the nearest state operated nursing home for veterans is in Broward County.

Palm Beach County offers no separate, local benefits of its own.

The benefit claims process is typically initiated when a veteran contacts the VSO either by telephoning to the main office in West Palm Beach, or in person at the main office or at any of six satellite sites located around the county. Based on its discussion with the veteran, the VSO will initiate a claim for one or more specific entitlements. The claim is then forwarded on to FDVA's St. Petersburg center which, in turn, submits each claim to the VA for consideration. Figure 1 shows the general process involved in making a benefit claim.

FIGURE 1

Veterans Benefit Application Process In Brief



In general terms, the federal VA benefit process occurs in the four steps listed in Table 2. At the individual veteran’s option, the application process can proceed by any of the three alternative means. Each option has a number of required steps in the process. The path chosen to make application for benefits is up to the individual veteran. The veteran’s ability to, 1) access benefit application materials, 2) interpret the requirements for benefit eligibility, and 3) obtain supporting documentation, figures into which option a veteran selects.

TABLE 2

Typical Steps in the Benefits Application Process and Options Available to Veterans

	Step 1	➔	Step 2	➔	Step 3	➔	Step 4
	Complete the application for state or federal veterans benefits		Application is sent to state veteran’s office for processing		State veteran’s office sends application to federal veteran’s office for determination		Federal veteran’s office either approves or denies application for benefits
Veteran selects one of these alternative methods of filing	Option 1		Veteran alone [§]	Yes		Yes	Yes
	Option 2		Veteran & FDVA	Yes		Yes	Yes
	Option 3		Veteran & County VSO	Yes		Yes	Yes

§ If a veteran can obtain the needed benefit application forms (from the federal VA website for example), he could complete the application and submit it directly to the federal VA for approval. According to the PBC Veterans Service Officer this occurs only rarely.

Step 1, the individual veteran, the veteran assisted by the state veteran’s office or the veteran assisted by the county’s VSO completes an application for benefits, together with all supporting documentation;

Step 2, the application for veterans’ benefits is forwarded to the state’s veterans service office;

Step 3, the state veterans office is the entity that “presents” the case to the federal veterans’ office;

Step 4, the federal veterans office determines the merits of the case and either approves or denies the application for benefits;

Step 5 (optional), applications that are denied can be appealed. A veteran may choose either the state or county veterans’ office to assist in developing the appeal. The appeal mainly consists of taking the information contained in the denial of benefits and performing additional research and documentation to develop grounds on which to re-submit the application for benefits.

Based on the number of veterans assisted to this point in the year, the study team estimates that approximately 1,286 veterans will be assisted in making benefit claims applications during fiscal year 2003, resulting in annual veterans' benefits of more than \$3.5 million.¹ An estimated additional 1,081 claims will be filed either directly by Palm Beach County resident veterans or on their behalf by staff of the FDVA and others authorized to do so. Among those veterans who are assisted by the VSO are those who are referred to the VSO because they have applied to receive benefits under the Medicaid program. Medicaid is a joint federal-state healthcare financing program for low income individuals. According to the Veterans Service Officer, fully 40% of the VSO's total contact volume comes from such Medicaid referrals. Other referrals come to the VSO from the county's congressional delegation and from County Commissioner offices.

Once the VSO has assisted a veteran in developing the case for benefits, a benefits application package is submitted to the FDVA center in St. Petersburg. There, gaps in information concerning the veteran's status or eligibility are resolved before the application package is forwarded on to the federal VA regional office, also located in St. Petersburg, for determination. Claims are either approved or denied by VA, and the FDVA is notified. Monthly, FDVA prepares a listing of all Palm Beach County veterans whose benefit claims were approved during the foregoing month. The monthly report is sent to the VSO for notification of affected veterans, whether or not the claims originated with the VSO.

For a variety of reasons, usually associated with program eligibility limitations, most benefit claims are denied. In 2002, the last full year for which such data are available, 76% of new claims originating from Palm Beach County VSO were rejected by the VA; in the year before that, 82% of new claims were denied.² The county's Veterans Service Officer estimates that 10% of the annual workload of his office involves dealing with appeals to denials of claims. The VSO assists with appeals both of cases that it originally developed and others which did not originate with the VSO. The Veterans Service Officer will re-develop evidence for the claim, including researching and documenting precedent-setting court cases.

The stages of the appeal are as follows: 1) the veteran contacts the county or state veterans office and indicates he wants to appeal the denial of benefits, 2) the VSO prepares a Notice of Disagreement and submits it to the St. Petersburg VA office, 3) the VSO prepares a Statement of Case (which includes the redevelopment of evidence in support of the claim/appeal) and submits it to the federal VA office for a ruling. In preparing cases for review of benefit denial, the VSO has various resources available to strengthen the veteran's case. The county's Veterans Service Officer will research The Veteran's Advocate "A Veteran's Law & Advocacy Journal" which describes case precedents that can be used to support an appellant's case. In addition, the Code of Federal Regulations, CFR 38: Pensions, Bonuses, Veteran's Relief is often consulted and cited to strengthen the veteran's claim for benefits.

¹ Source: OFMB calculation based on year-to-date data from the PBC Veterans Service Officer.

² Source: OFMB calculation based on year-to-date data from the PBC Veterans Service Officer. These data are for disability and pension benefit applications only. The VSO also files applications for selected non-monetary benefits, including burial markers and veterans' life insurance, which are not reflected in these data. Of six peer counties surveyed, only Broward County tracks the approval/rejection rates of its benefit claims. In FY 2002, Broward County's rejection rate for benefit claims was 82%.

Applying for state veterans' benefits consists of the same steps as described on page 7, ending with Step 3 where the FDVA determines the merits of the application and subsequently approves or denies state benefits.

Both the VA and the FDVA have a presence in Palm Beach County, although their principal activities are not always the same ones the VSO carries out. Federal VA installations in the county consist primarily of the Veterans Administration Medical Center located in West Palm Beach. The 270 bed hospital provides primary and secondary medical care for veterans living in the seven-county area along Florida's Treasure Coast. Co-located with that facility is a "mini-regional" federal VA office, staffed by up to 6 employees who conduct "case review" on benefit claim applications submitted to them from individual veterans or from the FDVA. These federal employees are not involved in preparing new benefit claims on behalf of individual veterans. In fact, the local telephone directory listing of federal government offices gives a toll free number to the St. Petersburg regional VA office, not to the mini regional office in West Palm Beach.

Five employees of the state Department of Veterans' Affairs are assigned to the federal VA Medical Center in West Palm Beach. They assist veterans in filling out benefit applications and reviewing applications submitted by either individual veterans or by the county's VSO on behalf of individual veterans. These state employees mainly assist veterans who are patients in the hospital; they do not engage in "outreach" activities to veterans in the community at-large.

Veterans can obtain descriptions of veteran's benefits and application forms directly from service officers or they can obtain them in person or by calling the county, state and federal veterans office locations. These materials are also available over the Internet.

The Size, Composition and Characteristics of the Veteran Population Pool in Palm Beach County

Florida has the second largest veteran population among all states in the nation. In the decade between the 1990 and 2000 decennial censuses, the state's veteran population grew by more than 9 percent, to 1,875,597. Like the state's population in general, the veteran population of Florida continues to grow strongly, outpacing the national average rate of growth by 13 percentage points during the decade of the Nineties.³ By some estimates, it may also be the oldest and most disabled veteran population in the country.⁴ Palm Beach County ranks second among Florida counties in population of military veterans, with 132,887.⁵ A listing of veteran population statistics by community within the county is included as Appendix 2 to this report.

³ Source: *Census 1990 vs. 2000 Veteran Population in the U.S. and Puerto Rico* published by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, <http://www.va.gov/vetdata/census2000/cendata/census2000vs1990.xls>.

⁴ Source: Personal interview with Craig Carr, Palm Beach County Veterans Service Officer, September 23, 2003.

⁵ Source: *Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures (FY 2002)*, published by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, <http://www.va.gov/vetdata/geographicinformation/index.htm>. Only Broward County has a larger veteran population (139,156).

Additional data concerning the characteristics of the veteran population pool in Palm Beach County—its average age, median income, education level, for example—will not be available from the Census Bureau for at least another 12 months.

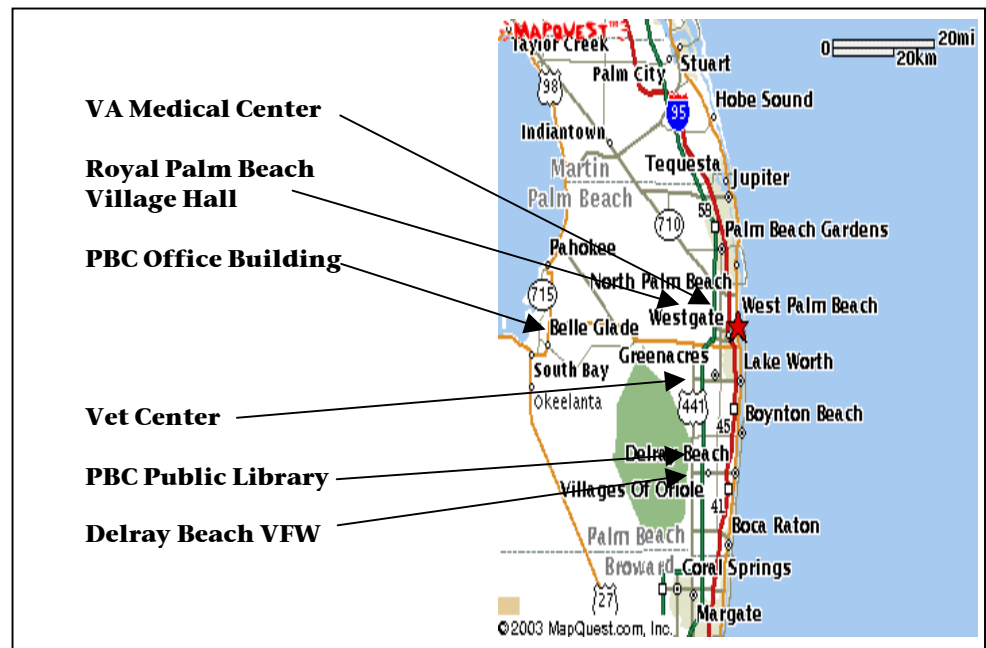
HOW THE PALM BEACH COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICE PURSUES ITS MISSION

Although the VSO does not have its own formal mission statement, as part of the Community Services Department it is charged with the same general mission as the department itself:

“To enhance and improve the health, welfare, and quality of life in Palm Beach County by investing in the potentials of families and individuals in need.”

The program operates with three Assistant Veterans Service Officers and one secretary under the direction of the Veterans Service Officer. All five program staff are assigned to the Community Services Department’s headquarters facility in West Palm Beach, although six satellite offices located around the county are staffed several hours each week on a rotating schedule. The current operating budget of the VSO is \$252,409 for fiscal year 2003, consisting entirely of county general fund appropriations. No state or federal funds are involved in the program.

FIGURE 2
Locations of PBC Veterans Services Satellite Offices



Source: Map Quest.com

The county’s VSO has adopted a strategy of outreach, of “going to the veteran” to provide an accessible advocacy of veterans’ benefits. This is accomplished largely through the use of six satellite sites in communities around the county. These neighborhood locations were selected either for their proximity to population centers with high concentrations of veterans or, in the case of the Belle Glade site, because of its remoteness from other service locations. The scheduling and staffing of these sites are reportedly based on historical demand at the respective locations. Additionally, hospitalized or bedridden applicants can see VSO staff by appointment in their hospital rooms or homes.

TABLE 3

The VSO Holds Office Hours at Regional Satellite Locations Around the County

Site Location	Schedule	Staffing
Vet Center 2311 10 th Avenue North Lake Worth	Mondays 1:00pm – 3:00pm	1 Asst Veterans Service Officer
VFW Hall 5 S.E. 2 nd Avenue Delray Beach	Tuesdays 10:00am – 2:00 pm	2 Asst Veterans Service Officers
VA Medical Center 7305 North Military Trail West Palm Beach	Wednesdays 9:30am – 1:30pm	1 Asst Veterans Service Officer
PBC Public Library 7777 West Atlantic Avenue Delray Beach	Thursdays 9:30am – 1:30pm	2 Asst Veterans Service Officers
PBC Office Building US Highway 1 Belle Glade	Fridays 9:30am – 12:00pm	1 Asst Veterans Service Officer
RPB Village Hall 1050 Royal Palm Beach Blvd Royal Palm Beach	Fridays 2:30pm – 4:30pm	1 Asst Veterans Service Officer

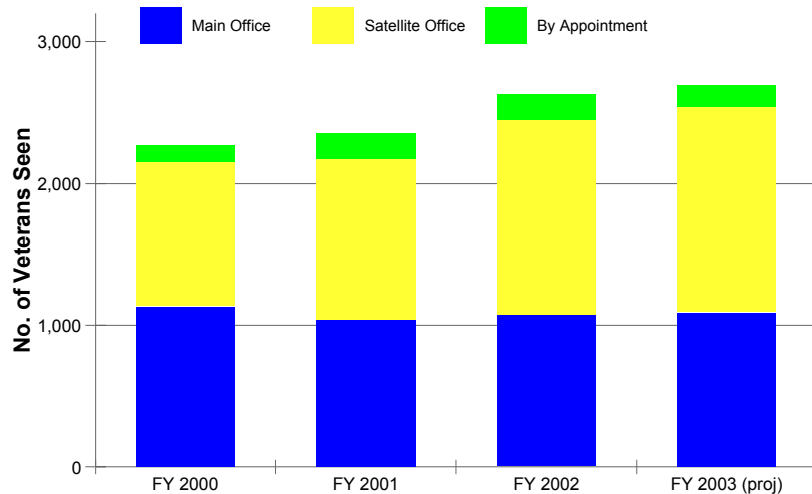
Space at satellite sites is donated to the county’s VSO, and consists of only what is necessary to meet with a small number of applicants at any time and write up applications. Three of the six sites do not have regular telephone access, so applicants cannot call to those locations, and the VSO staff cannot call out. At all of the remote locations, the county Veterans Service Officers meet with individual veterans, answer questions concerning benefits and eligibility, and assist veterans with the preparation and filing of claims for new and increased benefits. When they travel to satellite locations and to appointments with hospitalized and home-bound veterans, the county’s four service officers carry a supply of blank benefit application forms with them. Applications originating at all of these locations are handwritten, and follow the same general filing process to the FDVA that all VSO benefit claims follow.

Contact With Veterans and Workload Considerations

Consistent with the VSO’s practice of emphasizing accessibility to veterans, the incidence of contact with veterans at locations other than the main VSO headquarters has been rising over recent years. As recently as the year 2000, most veterans were still seen at the VSO headquarters facility in West Palm Beach. Since that time, more contacts are increasingly being reported at outside locations. Figure 3 shows both a high level distribution of contact locations and the overall trend in caseload growth during the most recent four years.

FIGURE 3

The Number of Veterans Seen by the VSO Continues at a Steady Rate of Growth, and Increasingly These Contacts Take Place Away From the Main Office



Source: OFMB compilation of data from monthly VSO report to the Director of Human Services.

The predominant type of contact at the six satellite locations is in person, whereas at the main VSO facility, the Veterans Service Officer estimates that an average of 25 telephone calls are processed each day, although this form of contact is not systematically tracked by the VSO for workload or trend information purposes.

The county’s Veterans Service Officer estimates that each benefit claim application requires approximately 40-60 minutes to complete, regardless of whether a Veterans Service Officer or the applicant is filling out the form. According to the Veterans Service Officer, approximately half of the veterans who walk in to inquire about veteran’s benefits do so without knowing the full range of benefits available to them, or of the documentation requirements to completely fill out an application for those benefits. Some portion of the time spent by a Veterans Service Officer with a prospective applicant involves interviewing the veteran in order to

gather the background information required by the application process. In many instances, applications reportedly cannot be completed at the initial meeting because the applicant did not bring along all required supporting documentation.

Benefit claims applications completed at satellite locations are filled out by hand; applications taken at the main office are completed on the computer, using a proprietary software application called LAVATS. This software is not a case management program, and cannot be used to track individual benefit claims as they move through the application process. Similarly, because LAVATS is not a database program, it cannot be used to analyze or report on overall caseloads, or on aging of pending cases, or on filing and award and denial trends over time.

Once a veteran’s application for benefits is completed and forwarded to the FDVA for processing to the federal VA, a physical case file is created by the VSO and filed at a central file room in the county’s main Veterans Service Office. Case files are arranged alphabetically by veterans’ last names, and each file is tagged with the calendar year in which it was created. At the time of our field observations for this report, the central files consisted of thirteen 4-drawer file cabinets containing an estimated 6,600 records of active and closed benefit claims from veterans whose claims originated through the VSO.

Benefit applications received at the FDVA are date stamped, and the veteran’s eligibility date for benefits becomes the first day of the month following that date of receipt. Once the state’s veteran’s office submits an application to the federal VA center in St. Petersburg for consideration, it may take from several weeks to several months for a ruling.⁶ Approved benefits are likely to be effective from the first of the month following the date that was stamped on the application.

TABLE 4

**Veterans Service Office Work Output
(Fiscal Year 2000 – Fiscal Year 2003)**

Output Measure	FY 2000	FY 2001	FY 2002	FY2003 (Proj)	Increase [§]
Veterans, walk-in contacts	2,264	2,353	2,632	2,695	15%
Veterans submitting at least one application	N/A	998	1,206	1,286	28%
Applications approved	N/A	176	294	235	33%
Annualized benefit awards	\$4,404,716	\$2,779,269	\$3,950,384	\$3,500,000	-21%

Sources: (1) Monthly Report of VSO to the Director of Human Services; (2) *County Administrator’s Semi-Annual Report* for the periods ending September 30, 2001 and September 30, 2002.

§ Increases for output measure nos. 1 and 5 are for the period 2000 – 2003; all others are for the period 2001 – 2003.

N/A = Data not collected or reported by VSO.

⁶ In extreme cases, claims can remain pending for many years. One such case filed by the VSO on behalf of a Palm Beach County resident has been open since 1988 and is still awaiting a determination.

Once created, case files are not monitored or managed *per se*. The VSO receives notice of determinations from either individual veterans or from the state veterans office. Once the local VSO is notified of a ruling in a benefits case, the individual's case file is updated and benefit awards are calculated and added to the county's monthly tally of benefits for which the county has provided assistance. This monthly tally is used to track and report the amount of annualized benefits for which the VSO takes credit for assistance.

Marketing the VSO to County Veterans

The primary marketing of the county's veterans services is by word of mouth within the veteran's community and by holding office hours at selected places where veterans gather, such as the VFW Hall in Delray Beach and the Vet Center in Lake Worth. At the time of our fieldwork for this report, the only printed materials specifically published for distribution to veterans locally was a one-page brochure prepared by the VSO to publicize its services. However, this brochure was not in evidence at the two satellite locations visited by the study team.⁷ General information concerning the availability of the county's services to military veterans is also available over the Internet, through the PBC Human Services Division's website. That website contains only static content, and no downloadable materials are available there, and no interactive functionality is provided.

Additionally, the VSO conducts information seminars around the county as a means of reaching veterans in the community concerning veterans' benefits and access to VSO assistance with claim preparation and filing. In 2002, the last full year for which data are available, twenty-two such seminars were conducted, attended by some 850 people. To-date, 10 seminars have been conducted in the current fiscal year, reaching an estimated 450 people.

Measuring the VSO's Performance

In keeping with the county policy of performance reporting, the VSO makes use of two established performance measures which it reports to county administration twice yearly:

- Number of veterans/dependents served; and
- Veteran award benefits generated.

Each of these measures has been in use as a performance indicator for the past four years; no other measures have been monitored during that time. A synopsis of each performance measure is provided below.

Number of veterans/dependents served

This measure seeks to quantify the total number of contacts between the VSO and individuals inquiring about, and taking actions to initiate, benefits to military veterans. As such, it represents the aggregate number of contacts in the course of a year, whether or not those contacts resulted in new or increased benefit filings. It also includes multiple contacts registered with many of the same individuals concerning the same applications. The FY 2003 target of 8,650 contacts is based on

⁷ Our consultants visited the VSO's satellite locations at the Delray Beach VFW Hall and in Royal Palm Beach on August 13, 2003 and August 15, 2003, respectively.

an estimate of 25 incoming calls per workday, combined with estimated walk-in clients at the main office and satellite locations. In FY 2002, the “number of veterans served” was a reported 8,891; in FY 2001 the number was 8,793.⁸ A monthly report to the Director of Human Services is produced by the Veterans Service Officer, which includes the estimated number of incoming phone calls and the number of walk-in contacts for the current month, as well as year-to-date data and a comparison with the preceding year.

Veteran award benefits generated

This measure attempts to place a monetary value on the new and increased benefits awarded to area veterans as a direct result of the VSO’s participation in filing benefit claims. The amount reported each year for this statistic is a composite value based upon an annualized extension of monthly benefits awarded at any time throughout the year, plus the value of one-time benefits awarded during the same year. In other words, the value of each monthly benefit awarded to a veteran is multiplied by 12 to yield annualized benefit values, to which are added the values of one-time, lump sum benefits received during the reporting year. In fiscal year 2002, the last full year for which data are available, the amount reported by the VSO was \$3,950,384; the corresponding amount in FY 2001 was a reported \$2,779,269.⁹

Weekly notices of all awarded claims and denials of claims are sent via postal service from the St. Petersburg Federal Regional Office to the Palm Beach County Veterans Service Office.¹⁰ The VSO typically receives between 45-50 notices of determination per week. Staff at the VSO match the weekly notices to case files maintained at the Datura Street office. The VSO then sends letters to the veterans informing them of the status of their claims, regardless of whether the county originally assisted the veteran with the case filing or not. The county routinely receives all claims determinations to maintain visibility of all veterans’ issues in the county.

Performance Comparisons with Peer Counties’ VSOs

A survey was conducted of peer counties to determine the nature of performance measures utilized in comparable veterans’ programs administered by counties. As peer counties, we selected all Florida counties with veteran populations of at least 80,000. The seven peer counties, listed in alphabetic order, are Broward, Duval, Hillsborough, Miami-Dade, Orange, Palm Beach and Pinellas.¹¹ The results of the survey are tabulated in Table 5, and they illustrate both the similarities and the differences in performance measurement programs. For example, all peer counties surveyed have a customer satisfaction component in their performance measurement programs. Apart from that, no performance indicators are common

⁸ County Administrator’s Semi-Annual Report for the Period Ending September 30, 2002, Palm Beach County, p. B-6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, St. Petersburg Rating Decisions.

¹¹ Miami-Dade County did not respond to numerous telephone contacts, and so is not represented among the survey results. Pinellas County responded, but indicated that its performance measurement program was undergoing revision and therefore could not provide meaningful information.

TABLE 5

Comparisons of Program Operational Characteristics and Performance Measures in Use by Peer Counties

Characteristic	County					
	Palm Beach	Orange	Hillsborough	Duval	Broward	Pinellas [§]
Veteran population	132,887	84,997	104,585	97,523	139,156	126,261
Jurisdiction land area (sq mi) [†]	1,974	908	1,051	774	1,209	280
VSO locations	7	3	5	1	3	3
Full-time VSO staff	5	8	6	17	12	7

Performance Measure						
Veterans/Dependants Served	•		•		•	
Veteran Award Benefits Generated	•	•			•	
Expend 95% of Operations Budget		•				
Percentage of Program Inventory Items Listed		•				
Percentage of Satisfactory Program Reviews		•				
Percentage of Approved Claims 16 Months Following Submission		•				
Percentage Increase in New Claims Submitted		•				
Percentage of Errors in Claims Submitted		•				
Percentage of Satisfied Clients		•	•	•	•	
Percentage of Community Partner Satisfaction		•				
Percentage of Employees Who Are Empowered		•				
Dollars to County per Client Assisted			•			
Number of Service Officer Appointments Resulting in No-Shows /Cancellations				•		
Number of Veterans Employed				•		
Outreach 250 Veterans During "Vets Stand Down"				•		
Claims Filed					•	
Approved Claims					•	
Total Performance Measures	2	10	3	4	5	

Source: OFMB Survey.

Note: Miami-Dade County was contacted to participate in the survey but did not respond to numerous inquiries.

§ Pinellas County performance measures are under development and were not available for inclusion in this report.

† Entire county, not just unincorporated area.

to all of the surveyed agencies, and most VSOs described their approaches to performance measurement in terms that were operationally distinct from approaches used elsewhere.

Differences in organization, practices, performance measures and record keeping around the state make agency-to-agency comparisons only minimally useful.

Because Palm Beach County VSO relies on just two measures as indicators of performance, the study team focused on how closely these particular two measures compared with the performance of the peer counties. Table 6 was created to tabulate that comparison. As evidenced by the differences in the way data is calculated from county to county, direct correlations were not applicable except in the case of Orange County, in certain respects. Even in Orange County, different circumstances exist which make such a comparison difficult. For example, Orange County assigns two full-time service officers to the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Orlando, while Palm Beach County VSO staff spends just 4 man-hours per week at the VA hospital in West Palm Beach. This is potentially significant, inasmuch as hospitalized veterans have a higher likelihood of qualifying for disability benefits than do veterans in the general population. Beyond that, claim support is easier because of the immediate availability of medical staff on hand, and because the claim of a hospitalized patient is more apt to be an adjustment for an existing condition already documented. For all of these reasons, the effect would be a higher claims approval rate and larger dollar amounts of benefits generated with the VSO's assistance, than would be true of the veteran population in general, especially because medical benefits tend to have higher monetary values than do pension benefits.

Also, Orange County has adopted a somewhat different outreach strategy from that employed in Palm Beach County. The Orange County VSO has three additional full-time staff and an outreach philosophy that focuses much more on group contacts via seminars and other mass meetings, and less on one-to-one contacts, particularly of the type of individual, house-call appointments that the Palm Beach County VSO makes to bedridden veterans in homes and skilled nursing facilities.

TABLE 6

**Comparisons of Performance Measures Used in Palm Beach County
With the Performance of Peer Counties
(Fiscal Year 2002)**

Performance Measure	Palm Beach	Broward	Hillsborough	Duval	Pinellas	Orange
Veterans Served: Walk-ins and Appointments	2,632 (1)	6,187 (1)	29,723 (2)	12,000 (1)	7,000 (3)	13,200 (1)
Veteran Award Generated	\$3,950,384	\$1,575,790 (4)	\$16,080,143 (5)	N/A	N/A	\$32,400,000 (6)

Source: OFMB telephone survey and performance measures where available.

(1) Clients seen.

(2) Clients seen plus phone calls plus clients that use the VA Hospital whether they use county services or not.

(3) Clients seen plus whenever a file is pulled.

(4) Retro awards only reported (FY01 data).

(5) Includes Federal VA dollar totals regardless of county involvement.

(6) Orange County uses the same annualizing formula for establishing the value of benefits generated as described earlier for Palm Beach County.

Findings and Recommendations

The preceding sections of this report have documented the major services delivered by the VSO and provided insights into the client population served by the VSO. This part of the report is divided into a Findings section, a Recommendations section and an implementation plan. We begin by summarizing the essential conclusions reached by the study team as a result of our work on behalf of the department.

STUDY FINDINGS

Through an evaluation process that included interviews with VSO staff and management, on-site observations at several VSO sites, a survey of veterans' services practices among peer counties, a random sample survey of VSO clients, and a review of available documentary data, the study team offers its assessment of the VSO's current operating processes, its strategy and methods for reaching its target client base, and its measurement of program performance.

The essential conclusions we have reached are, 1) the VSO appears to be generally effective at its mission, but it lacks the types of performance measures which would give a more complete and reliable indication of performance, 2) person-to-person contacts between veterans and the VSO have increased over the four year period studied for this report, 3) the number of veterans using VSO satellite locations to deal with VSO staff has increased in relationship to those using the main office, and 4) the VSO's outreach strategy reflects a highly personalized approach to service delivery.

The results of our random sample survey indicate that veterans who have used the county's VSO give the office generally high marks for accessibility of services. Where appropriate throughout the findings and recommendations sections of the report, survey results are highlighted to support the conclusions reached independently by the study team. The individual survey questions, respondent answers, and analysis by the project consultants are found at Appendix 1.

The following specific findings describe in detail the study team's conclusions, and are the bases for recommendations that follow in the next section of the report.

The Veterans Service Office is a key part of the network of organizations that aids veterans with financial and social services in Palm Beach County

Military veterans are eligible for a large number of benefits as a result of their honorable service in the United States armed forces. Depending on their length of service, active combat involvement, educational needs, income status, health conditions and disability statuses, and other factors, veterans and their eligible dependents and survivors qualify for a wide array of federal benefits programs, and an additional small number of benefits from the state of Florida.

Before any of these entitlements can begin, however, individual veterans must initiate benefit claims and request eligibility consideration from the VA or FDVA, as appropriate. Even then, a large majority of claims filed are regularly denied, usually for eligibility limitations, but incomplete or poorly grounded applications can also

cause their rejection. Individual veterans are free to prepare these benefit claims application packages on their own, but the complexity of the filing process and the supporting documentation required, lead a large number of area veterans to seek filing assistance from the Palm Beach County Veterans Service Office. We attempted to determine how much of the claims assistance to veterans the VSO carries out as compared to the amount of help supplied by service organizations, FDVA, and the VA in Palm Beach County. None of the veterans' offices at these three levels of government maintains the data to enable us to make such a determination with great confidence. Using the limited filing data that was available from FDVA, the study team estimated that as many as one-half of all claims filed on behalf of area veterans for federal VA benefits are initiated with the assistance of the VSO. A similar share—predominately from among hospitalized patients in the local VA Medical Center—is thought to be initiated with assistance from FDVA. There are no statistics to show that local military service organizations play a significant role in aiding veterans directly in this manner.¹² However, it is known that there are only seven VA-accredited service officers in Palm Beach County, and they are all employees of either the VSO or FDVA; no local service organizations have any accredited personnel.

The VSO is also instrumental in assisting various state and local social services agencies by responding to requests for information on VA benefits provided to veterans who have applied for the Medicaid program or other public assistance services. By aiding in this manner, the VSO helps identify veterans who are ineligible or only partially eligible for Medicaid or for public assistance payments because of the amount of veterans benefits they receive, thereby saving some costs associated with the healthcare of individual veterans. The Veterans' Service Officer has estimated that forty percent of the total volume of VSO service is due to referrals from state Medicaid officials. If that estimate is accurate, more than 500 benefit applications were filed in FY 2003 by the VSO on behalf of Palm Beach County veterans who were also seeking eligibility in the Medicaid program.

Similarly, the VSO is contacted daily by other social service agencies whose benefits are income based. Because of its accreditation standing, the VSO is able to quickly access existing benefits information concerning veterans and pass it along to the inquiring agency. In Palm Beach County, only the VSO and the FDVA accredited representatives at the Medical Center in West Palm Beach have access to this type of information. Currently, there is no reliable estimate of the magnitude of such Medicaid and public assistance cost avoidance; neither the FDVA nor the Florida Department of Children and Families tracks the monetary value of veterans' benefit offsets on Medicaid or public assistance rolls.¹³

¹² When a benefits claim is being prepared for filing with the federal VA, a veteran is free to designate a military service organization—such as the Veterans' of Foreign Wars, American Legion, and others—as his or her representative in determination or appeal hearings before the VA.

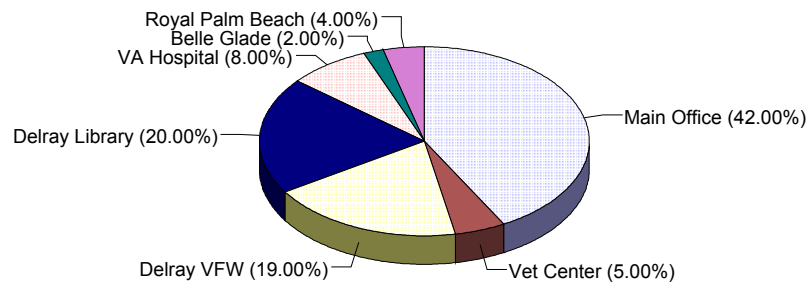
¹³ Source: Telephone interview with Barbara Harker, Director of Veteran Benefits and Assistance, Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs, September 23, 2003.

The numbers of veterans turning to the VSO for assistance in initiating and filing benefit claims is growing, and is largely attributable to increases in volume at satellite offices

In absolute terms, the numbers of veterans seeking filing assistance from the VSO has grown steadily from fiscal year 2000 through the current date, as the chart in Figure 3 on page 12 showed. That chart also shows a pronounced upward trend in the growth of walk-in contacts at the six satellite sites. The incidence of client contacts at satellite sites has grown from 45% of all contacts in FY 2000 to 54% projected in FY 2003. During that same period, walk-in contacts at the main office dropped by ten percentage points, from 50% to 40% (projected) of all contacts. This shift in consumer preference toward satellite sites does not appear to be coming at the expense of the main office, however, but rather is the result of an expanding VSO clientele, all of which is being absorbed by satellite offices. Thus, we have observed that the annual numbers of clients dealing with VSO staff at the main office has remained nearly static over the four-year study period, but has increased among satellite locations. The distribution of walk-in contacts at the seven VSO sites is depicted as segments of the piechart in Figure 4. Further analysis of individual satellite locations indicates that the observed trend towards increased contacts at satellite locations is being driven by the veteran population in the southern part of the county. This is most evident from the data for the two Delray Beach sites. Between them, the two Delray Beach satellite locations account for a projected 39% of *all* walk-in contact/service volume of the VSO for fiscal year 2003, comprising two-thirds of all activity recorded at satellite locations that year.

FIGURE 4

The Majority of Walk-In Client Contacts Occurs at Satellite Offices, But the Incidence of Walk-In Traffic is Highly Uneven Among These Six Locations

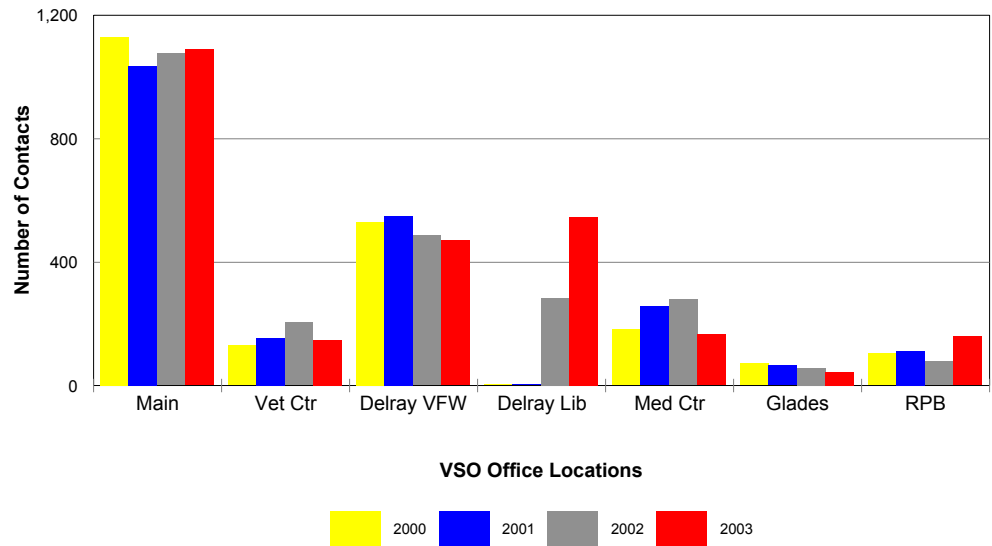


Source: OFMB compilation of data from monthly VSO report to the Director of Human Services.

Beginning in fiscal year 2002, the second Delray Beach location—at the county library branch—was added and had an immediate effect on the numbers of veteran contacts reported. Figure 5 on the following page traces the most recent four-year history of contacts, by site.

FIGURE 5

**Recent History of Distribution of Veterans Contacts by Location
(Fiscal Year 2000 – Fiscal Year 2003)**



Source: OFMB compilation of data from monthly VSO report to the Director of Human Services.

The robust rates of growth in the veteran population living in Palm Beach County and in Florida generally during the recent past are in marked contrast to the overall demographics of this population group. In the decade of the Nineteen-Nineties, Florida’s veteran population growth outpaced that of the nation by 13 percentage points. Indeed, during that decade, the total population of military veterans living in the United States declined by 1,069,501, even as the portion residing in this state rose by more than 156,000.¹⁴ Whether that growth rate will be sustained in the future cannot be known; the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs believes that the county’s veteran population has already peaked and will decline by nearly 15,000 individuals by the year 2010.¹⁵ This may not be totally unexpected, given the aging of World War II- and Korean War-era veterans, and the general downsizing of the U.S. military since 1990.

The VSO’s outreach strategy is heavily dependent on staffing satellite offices to make itself accessible to veterans, but these offices are not always located or staffed in a manner to reach the largest numbers of veterans

Recent history shows client contacts taking place progressively more often at the VSO’s satellite locations, rather than at the headquarters office. Because the VSO’s

¹⁴ Source: *Census 1990 vs. 2000 Veteran Population in the U.S. and Puerto Rico* published by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, <http://www.va.gov/vetdata/census2000/cendata/census2000vs1990.xls>.

¹⁵ Source: Office of the Actuary, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, July 25, 2003.

basic strategy of reaching its target audience is so heavily dependent on its accessibility in the community, the study team wanted to know whether any specific satellite sites were more responsible than others for this observed trend. For that purpose, the project team reviewed the four-year history of walk-in contacts, reported by individual locations of contacts. These data are plotted in the chart on the preceding page. They show generally static levels of activity at most locations over the past four years, but strong growth at the new Delray Beach site located in the county library branch. Although there is some evidence that the new site may be drawing some of its activity away from the cross-town site located in the VFW Hall, the strength of that growth in the past two years suggests a degree of pent-up demand that is now being served more conveniently in that part of the county.

To confirm whether this phenomenon is actually the result of higher demand for services in the southern part of the county or has some other explanation, the study team examined year 2000 census data for veterans living in the county, and grouped those data into six nearly equal geographic sections of the county, divided into thirds from north to south and into halves from west to east. The southwest segment—in and around the Everglades and the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge—is sparsely populated and was omitted, leaving five sections to consider further:

- North East Section – Martin County line as the northern boundary and Mangonia Park as the southern boundary.
- North West Section – Those cities located in the proximity of the eastern shore of Lake Okeechobee.
- Central East Section – West Palm Beach as the northern boundary and Boynton Beach as the southern boundary.
- Central West Section – Those cities in the proximity of the south shore of Lake Okeechobee.
- South East Section – Delray Beach as the northern boundary and the Broward County line as the southern boundary.

Finally, the consultants matched those five population segments with the locations of satellite offices and the amount of staff resources devoted directly to each segment. If the placement of satellites were based solely upon concentrations of veterans in the population, we would have expected to see a close match between the geographic segments and the amounts of activity reported in each one. Instead, we found that there is considerable disparity between the highest volume satellite offices and the lowest volume sites. Table 7 on the following page shows these relationships.

Two regions showing apparent “under-representation” in Table 7 may not be as under-served as the data would initially lead one to conclude. In the North East section, the presence of five FDVA service officers at the Medical Center offsets to some degree the VSO’s relatively light allocation of its own staff resources to that site. And in the South East section, abutting the Broward County line, some of the apparent disparity is offset by Boca Raton residents who deal with the Broward

80% of veterans responding to the OFMB survey of VSO clients rated convenience or accessibility as key factors in deciding to contact the Palm Beach County VSO for assistance.

County Veterans Service Office just outside the city limits in neighboring Deerfield Beach.¹⁶

By contrast, the data in Table 7 indicate that the Central East section would be considered “over-served” by the terms of that analysis. Here, too, a measure of caution is called for in the interpretation of the data. Because of its geographically central location, the Central East section is best positioned to receive overflow demand from surrounding regions, and would thus be the region most likely to require some amount of cushion to accommodate fluctuating demand. Even so, our study found that three of the five geographic regions of the county have material disparities between their veteran population densities and the services devoted to those regions; only two (lightly populated) regions of the county could be considered to be appropriately served for the numbers of veterans residing in those areas.

TABLE 7
The Distribution of Staff Resources by Geographic Area is Not Well Balanced with the Distribution of Veteran Population in the County

Geographic Area	Veteran Population Percent	VSO Staffing Allocation	Office Locations
North East Section	22%	4%	1. VA Medical Center (WPB)
North West Section	1%	0%	None
Central East Section	38%	78%	1. Royal Palm Beach 2. Main Office (WPB) 3. Vet Center (Lake Worth)
Central West Section	1%	2%	1. Belle Glade
South East Section	38%	16%	1. VFW Hall (Delray Beach) 2. Library Branch (Delray Beach)

Sources: 1) *Census 2000 Veteran Population – Florida*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau; 2) OFMB calculations of staff allocation times from data supplied by the PBC VSO. Annual hours available for outreach are estimated at 5,538 (holiday and vacation leave were not included).

The measures VSO uses as indicators of program performance are not adequate to give a complete or fully reliable picture of its performance

Twice yearly, the VSO reports its performance to county administration and other decision makers as required of all operating programs in the county. The study team reviewed the past several years of such performance reports. Reports by the department of activities and benefits attributable to the program do not reflect its performance as effectively as they could, and may lead to misleading or even inaccurate conclusions.

¹⁶ Source: Telephone interview with Broward County Veterans Service Officer Floyd White, September 8, 2003. Mr. White estimates that approximately 180 claims are filed each year by the Broward County VSO on behalf of Palm Beach County resident veterans.

The VSO currently uses two performance measures. They are “veterans/dependents served” and “veteran award benefits generated.” The first of these can be defined as an “input” measure. In other words, this measure is largely outside the control of the organization; veterans choose to come to the VSO or not, for their own reasons. Secondly, included in the figures reported for this measure are estimated telephone contacts received and repeat contacts with veterans in person. All of which do not directly indicate the operational performance of the VSO; they do not directly measure staff activities or the outcomes of the activities performed by staff and management of the program. If fewer veterans needed or chose to come to the VSO for filing assistance, would the program thereby be intrinsically less valuable, as the declining numbers of contacts would suggest?

In similar fashion, the scenario could exist in which the VSO is performing poorly by not giving clear, concise and complete information over the telephone, requiring callers to call back for clarification. Or, during initial meetings with veterans, service officers may not be well prepared or they may give unclear instructions, requiring repeat visits before applications for benefits can be completed. In both instances, the figures reported would be higher than necessary (or desirable), yet they would be interpreted as evidence of high performance, perhaps even demonstrating that performance had “improved” over a previous reporting period. In each case, reported performance would materially misstate actual performance.

These particular scenarios are not among the study team’s specific findings with respect to the Palm Beach County VSO; they only serve to illustrate the inappropriateness of using this first measure as an indicator of program performance of the VSO in achieving its mission.

For the second measure, the department reported that in fiscal year 2002 the VSO assisted in obtaining more than \$3.9 million in new and increased benefits for veterans. During the same period, county funds spent on the program were just over \$234,000. The figures indicate a significant return on local costs, and suggest that the program is highly cost-effective. But this measure, too, is flawed as an indicator of program performance and may even result in reporting inaccuracies. We base this conclusion on three issues in particular:

1. The measure is a composite of monthly pension benefits and one-time, lump-sum payments. Unlike monthly benefits that continue, one-time payments do not. One-time benefits include, for example, life insurance settlements or a single payment of monthly benefits calculated retroactively to an earlier filing date. By combining these distinctly different types of payments into a single value, the VSO may be causing decision makers to draw the mistaken impression that these are annualized amounts that will continue in the local economy from year-to-year. The better practice would be to report these benefits separately, and not as a single, combined value. Even the monthly benefit calculations should be viewed with some caution. For example, a new benefit that began halfway through the year would be reported as a full twelve months of benefits generated, rather than the six months that the veteran received benefit payments.

2. The primary determinant of whether or not a benefits claim is awarded by the VA is the fact basis of the applicant, and not how well the VSO prepares the claim documents. If an applicant is entitled to the benefit for which he or she files, the benefit stands a greater chance of approval than if the veteran is not eligible. In the last analysis, the amount of veteran benefits awarded in any year has more to do with the eligibility statuses of applicants than with the specific performance of the VSO, no matter how effective the VSO's assistance.
3. One cannot know whether the new or increased monetary benefits generated by the assistance of the VSO would not have been received by Palm Beach County veterans anyway, given the filing options available to veterans.

Beyond these two, the VSO does not have any performance measures that deal directly with the effectiveness of its outreach strategy, for example, such as the numbers of people attending VSO-sponsored informational seminars on veterans' benefits. We also found no performance measures to monitor the VSO's track record in representing veterans whose claims were denied and which were subsequently appealed with the assistance of the VSO. Similarly, the VSO could adopt performance measures that monitor its operating efficiency, such as cost-per-claim filed (or awarded). Several such measures are included as recommendations later in this report.

Although the VSO has a basic program of marketing its services, there are additional opportunities to promote itself to the veterans' community

As an advocacy organization designed to serve a specific target population, the VSO is heavily dependent for its success on how effectively it is able to reach that audience. Its collaboration with local service organizations in the placement of satellite sites is part of that process. So are the periodic informational seminars it conducts to get the word out to veterans and their families, and publication of the VSO's one marketing brochure, "Best Bets for Vets." Each of these activities contributes to building an awareness of the VSO and its service capabilities among the veteran population of the county. During its fieldwork for this report, the consulting team visited two of the satellite offices and reviewed the "Best Bets" brochure, but was not able to observe any of the periodic seminars, as none was scheduled during that time.

The "Best Bets" pamphlet is an example of a typical "capabilities" brochure, designed to acquaint potential users with the service offering of the organization and thereby build "brand" awareness and increase its client base. The brochure does an adequate job of informing the reader, even if it is not particularly impressive in its production value. The copy of the brochure reviewed by the study team was provided directly by the VSO staff; no copies of the brochure could be found at either of the two satellite sites on the days we visited, and there were none in the public lobbies of the county Governmental Center in West Palm Beach or regional courthouses and administrative facilities in Royal Palm Beach and Palm Beach Gardens, or in any of the branch locations of the county library we visited.¹⁷

75% of veterans responding to the OFMB survey of VSO clients learned of VSO through "passive" means, including referral from Medicaid or VA, from a service organization, or from the telephone directory.

¹⁷ Project consultants visited the following library locations during the period August 9, 2003 – September 26, 2003: Main branch, Royal Palm Beach, Wellington, and Okeechobee Boulevard branches.

The brochure appears not to have been updated for more than four years. That may not affect the accuracy of its content, but we noted that it does not list the Internet website address or the addresses of the six satellite locations where veterans can meet with VSO staff, and it does not include any references to the sorts of personal information that prospective applicants should be prepared to bring with them if they are thinking of filing for benefits. These sorts of things would improve the informational value of the brochure.

Members of the project consulting team visited the VSO's satellite sites at Royal Palm Beach Village Hall and at the Delray Beach VFW Hall. We observed at the Royal Palm Beach location that the VSO office had been placed in a favorable, high traffic area, adjacent to a post office and municipal utility paying station also located on the premises. However, on the day we visited, the attendant at the information desk could not offer any assistance when we asked about VSO times of operation or contact telephone numbers. At the VFW Hall in Delray Beach, the consultant observed a bulletin board and countertop where various offers and notices were posted; there were no copies of the "Best Bets" brochure or other marketing/informational materials from the VSO. The veterans we encountered there were able to correctly answer questions about the VSO's office hours at that facility.

Around the state, county veterans' service offices are conducting a variety of interesting marketing and outreach programs that are worth considering in Palm Beach County, too. We particularly found two programs that strike us as highly imaginative, effective ways of reaching the target audience:

- Under agreement with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, one county Veterans Service Office is contacted whenever a county resident is separated from the armed services. This enables the office to contact the veteran and communicate the services available to him or her through the VSO.
- In collaboration with the county Property Appraiser's Office, one VSO is contacted whenever a veteran applies for a special homestead exemption available to veterans. Once again, this allows the VSO to make contacts with known veterans.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: It is recommended that the VSO establish new satellite sites, relocate existing ones, and/or revise operating hours at satellite offices to better align its resources with the highest concentrations of veterans in the population

Our analysis of the numbers of veterans seeking out the VSO for assistance with benefit claims applications indicates that the trend over the past few years has been toward increased contacts at the VSO's satellite locations. In the three years between the end of fiscal year 2000 and the end of fiscal year 2003, the satellite sites increased their share of in-person client contacts by one-sixth, from 45% to 54%, while contacts registered at the main office dropped by ten percentage points. Satellite sites now account for the majority of all person-to-person contacts veterans make with the VSO in the course of a year. The growth in contacts in Delray Beach since the opening of the second site there, bringing an additional 16

man-hours of services directly into the south county communities, may reflect the strength of the demand there, or may simply have been advantageous timing. But as the analysis depicted earlier in Table 7 on page 23 documented, the southern communities represent the area of the county with the largest unfavorable gap in service level, measured in terms of population-to-resources committed.

In order to determine the extent to which these remote sites have the capacities to serve additional clients, the study team calculated the ratios of current service levels (or customer demand) to current resources allocated, by individual sites. In this manner, we were able to examine each site by its volume of service produced for the resources expended. We began by calculating the total time in man-hours required of the VSO to staff its six satellite sites, including portal-to-portal travel times. Table 8 contains the data for this first set of calculations. From there, the capacity ratios for all six sites were computed. Just as we had encountered a sizable variation in the distribution of staff resources to the geographic regions described earlier on pages 22-23, so we encountered significant fluctuations in the numbers of veterans seen at each site per man-hour, and in the amounts of service capacity used by each of the satellite sites. Both of these factors are valuable in determining how to maximize outreach efforts to the areas of highest service demand. The resulting conclusions are graphed in Figure 6.

TABLE 8

Satellite Location Data

	Hours of Operation [§]	Clients Seen FY 2003 (proj)	Miles From Main Office	Travel Time [†] (Round Trip)	Total Time Expended [‡]
Delray Library	416	515	24	2 Hours (104 hours/year)	520
Delray VFW Hall	416	473	20	2 Hours (104 hours/year)	520
Vet Center	104	117	8	½ Hour (26 hours/year)	130
Royal Palm Beach	104	100	11	2/3 Hour (34 hours/year)	138
VA Med Ctr	208	192	8	½ Hour (26 hours/year)	234
Belle Glade	130	55	64	3 Hours (156 hours/year)	286

Source: OFMB calculations from data supplied by the Veterans Service Officer.

§ In assigned man-hours per year.

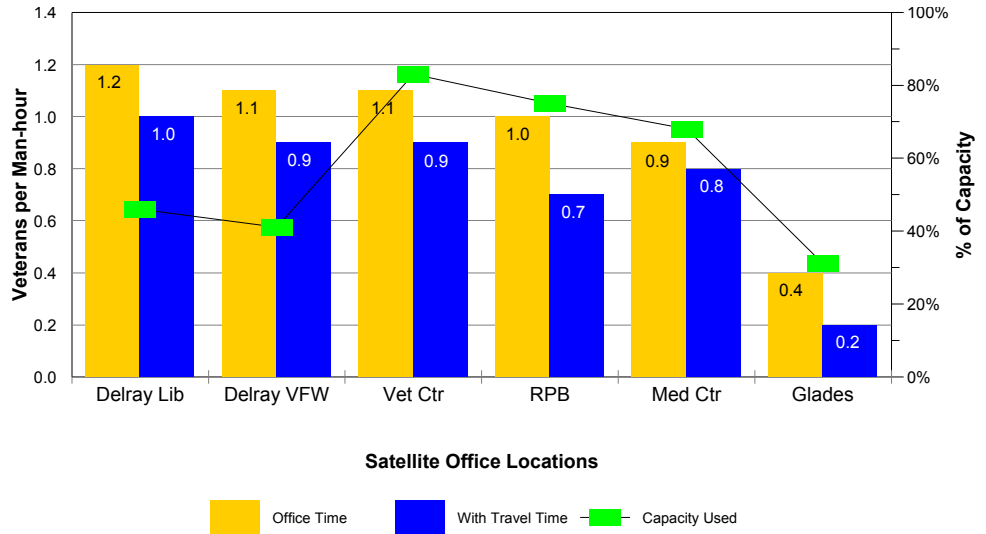
† Travel time doubled for Delray Beach sites to accommodate two service officers' time expended.

‡ Includes roundtrip travel time and office time, in man-hours per year.

After only two years in operation, the newest satellite site at the Delray Beach branch of the county library already sees the highest number of clients of any remote location, at slightly more than 1.2 clients per office hour. This rate is followed closely by the other Delray Beach site and the Vet Center in Lake Worth, both of which see 1.1 clients per hour of office time; the Royal Palm Beach and VA

FIGURE 6

**Rates of Veterans Seen Per Hour
and Operational Capacities of Existing Satellite Offices
(Fiscal Year 2003)**



Medical Center sites are next at 1.0 and 0.9 clients per hour, respectively. The Belle Glade office sees just four-tenths of one client per office hour. At these rates, each of the six satellite sites has unused capacity available to see additional veterans, ranging from the highest usage at the Lake Worth Vet Center (83% of capacity) to Belle Glade, the lowest usage at 31% of capacity. The nearer these rates are to 100%, the more fully the site is utilizing its existing capacity, given the current hours of operation, the numbers of assigned service officers, and the numbers of veterans making contact.¹⁸

OPERATING CAPACITIES OF SATELLITE SITES	
Lake Worth Vet Center	83%
Royal Palm Beach	75%
VA Medical Center	68%
Delray Beach Library	46%
Delray Beach VFW	41%
Belle Glade	31%

Figure 6 also displays a second data point that takes into consideration round trip travel time from the main office to the satellite locations, and is added to the hours of office time to

determine total hours of resources expended per veteran walk-in contact, per site. The figure illustrates that the Veterans Service Officer spends the longest drive time to travel to the place where there is the least amount of activity.

¹⁸ All of the foregoing efficiency calculations are based on an average of 45 minutes staff time required per in-person client. The Veterans Service Officer estimates that these contacts take 40-60 minutes, depending on the type of benefit involved and the individual veteran's circumstances.

Our analysis points to four specific things we recommend for the department's consideration:

- The Belle Glade satellite location offers the least return on invested time of any site. The staff resources allocated to service the Belle Glade area far exceed the historical demand in that area, and should be brought more in line with the observed demand. In view of the community's remoteness from the nearest service location, the veterans in this area of the county should continue to receive the benefit of local assistance, but the service volumes at Belle Glade suggest that a less frequent schedule would be sufficient. Service officers could schedule appointments every other week in Belle Glade, but would make the trip only if appointments had been scheduled for that date. Appointments could be scheduled through a direct toll free line to the VSO main office or through an information kiosk or through the VSO's website. This in turn would allow VSO staff to be reallocated to maximize other areas of VSO outreach. Moreover, implementing an appointment system at remote sites like Belle Glade would have the added benefit of allowing the VSO to prepare veterans for their appointments so that all necessary supporting information and documentation would be available during the first meetings, thus minimizing return visits for all involved.
- The Delray Beach library site has shown remarkably strong growth in service contacts since its establishment less than two years ago. Although our analysis shows that it was being utilized at only 46% of capacity in FY 2003, that was principally the result of assigning two service officers to that location every week. At current levels of client demand, that site is utilizing virtually one full-time service officer—92% of the capacity of one FTE—for the hours the site is operating. If that workload level is representative of the demand for services in the southern part of the county, increasing the hours of operations at that location may be the easiest, surest way of increasing the overall number of contacts that veterans have with the VSO. This could be done either by continuing to double-up the service officers assigned there, or by assigning a single officer for one full day each week, rather than one-half day, as at present.
- The Delray Beach VFW Hall remains among the most heavily visited sites, but it may have lost some of its contact workload to the newer, cross-town site at the library branch. Operating at just 41% of capacity with two service officers assigned there, that site looks like a candidate to reduce assigned staff from two service officers to one. That would have the immediate effect of increasing its capacity utilization to 82%, still quite manageable for a single employee to handle, although the waiting times for veterans to talk with that employee might be somewhat longer as a result.
- Finally, all of the sites have unused capacity available to see additional veterans. This fact leads us to suggest that the rotating office hours at remote sites be increased generally, everywhere except in Belle Glade, to test whether there is sufficient demand that the VSO can serve by spending more hours in the community. At the moment, the VSO cannot know whether its satellite sites have reached their intrinsic capacities because there simply is no greater demand in the community for their services, or whether their services are not offered long enough to capture any higher demand. The

experience of the VSO program during the past four years of strong increases at satellite sites, along with the fact that the VSO currently deals with only approximately 2% of the veteran population of the county, might suggest that the demand exists. Increasing the hours of operations at the five largest satellites for a test period of approximately one year would give the VSO a better understanding of its true “market potential.”

Recommendation 2: It is recommended that the VSO establish performance measures which are more effective and reliable indicators of the program’s benefits and efficiency, and of the success of its outreach strategy

Effective performance measures should relate directly to stated objectives of the organization; performance measures indicate to what degree desired objectives are being accomplished. It is equally important that they measure something that is within the control of the organization—that they measure the performance of the activities performed by the organization to deliver its services. At present, the two performance measures in use in the VSO are not very effective or reliable as indicators of the program’s performance in either of the foregoing respects, for the reasons described earlier in this report.

The VSO should define its outreach objectives in terms of outreach strategy, outreach results, and outreach target audience. Service activities that the VSO can control or directly affect should be used to develop measures of the organization’s performance. Examples of such activities are:

- Number of persons attending VSO seminars—One particularly meaningful outcome measure of seminars might be the number of claims generated directly from individuals attending VSO seminars;
- Percent of staff time spent engaged directly in marketing and outreach to veterans groups—this would involve time spent in informational seminars and other, similar outreach activities designed to build awareness of the VSO program within its target service population, presumably leading to growing service contacts, higher claims filings, more benefit awards and larger market share;
- Share of applications submitted through the VSO—tracking this as a percentage of the total number of benefit claims that are submitted through the FDVA would indicate the “market share” of the VSO;
- Benefit dollars generated, but with ongoing monthly benefits reported separately from one-time, lump-sum amounts received in the reporting period. Several possible variations of this measure that strike us as useful, would be, 1) the monetary amount of benefits obtained per workload activity, and 2) benefits obtained per staff member. In making these calculations, the VSO must ensure that in cases of adjustments to benefits, only the incremental amounts are tallied and reported as new or increased benefits obtained;
- Cost-per-claim filed (or awarded)—this is an efficiency measure based on the annual operating budget of the VSO divided by either the number of claims filed or awarded. Variants of this performance measure might also include, 1) cost per workload activity, 2) operating budget per staff, and 3) workload

activity per staff. Although the results for one year would have limited value, they would take on significance when compared to past periods.

- Institute a customer satisfaction survey system to provide VSO management input concerning such things as general levels of client satisfaction, to accessibility of satellite locations, to success of “marketing” efforts, to trends in veteran computer literacy, to the users’ perceptions of how knowledgeable their assigned service officers were, and so on. Four of the peer counties in our survey include a cumulative customer satisfaction rating among their performance measures.

As just one part of a partnership that involves several other parties, the VSO is not exclusively responsible for veterans’ successes in receiving benefits. Because they result from combined efforts, these benefits cannot measure exclusively how well the VSO carries out its responsibilities and its mission. But by analyzing the claims process from the time a claim is initiated to the date of its award or denial, the VSO can identify the events that delay processing of the claims, including those they can control and those they cannot. In this regard, it would be very useful for the VSO to devise a reliable means to “age” its claims, identifying claims that have not received decisions from the VA after a specified period of time.

The study team recommends the creation of 4-5 performance measures of the types described above that would provide meaningful performance information to the VSO, county decision makers, and the general public.

Recommendation 3: It is recommended that the VSO upgrade its marketing program and its collaborations to help it reach more of its target population

The VSO marketing strategy consists of locating its services in places of high veteran traffic or accessibility, and through “word-of-mouth”. By directly serving just 2% of the total veteran population of the county each year, the VSO should re-examine its marketing activities, and the opportunities that may exist for increased collaborations within the community. A useful place to begin that re-examination would be to identify all possible *first points of contact* with its target service population. For example, the receptionists at the main office and at satellite offices (if any), area governmental office lobbies and other public spaces, such as libraries, hospitals, post offices, and the like, are all prime candidates as first points of contact with prospective applicants.

The OFMB survey of VSO clients reported that 60% of veterans responding were not aware that the VSO operates six satellite locations in addition to the headquarters office.

The VSO’s Internet website, too, is a point of first contact for some portion of the population, and should be regarded as an access point of growing importance for the future.

Once that assessment is accomplished, informed decisions can be made about what information is most likely to be required at each of those points in order to be most helpful. At a minimum, an updated capabilities brochure should be produced for placement and continuous restocking at all county government office building lobbies where the general public has access, perhaps also at municipal office buildings, and at the meeting halls of all local veterans’ service organizations.

Similarly, every point of telephone contact should be equipped with a current listing of all relevant VSO, FDVA and VA addresses, operating hours, driving

directions, and any pertinent restrictions, together with a listing of frequently asked questions with well written, succinct responses, and a basic checklist of personal information and armed forces and government identification documents which will be required of applicants seeking assistance in filing benefit claims through the VSO.

The sort of examination we have in mind should be a fresh look, without being overly constrained by past practice or conventional wisdom. The VSO's current use of contemporary automation technology is too limited, and will likely have to be upgraded to give it the capabilities which a more active outreach and service orientation will require. The study team offers the following ideas as examples of the sorts of issues which the department should consider in its effort to upgrade its program marketing:

- Use of five minute program "infomercials" on the county's government access television station, Channel 20;
- Use of mass mailings to veterans living in the county. If a single mailer to all 132,000 veterans proves too expensive, do it over 3-4 years as budgets allow;
- Increase the number of informational seminars conducted. From the survey of peer counties conducted by OFMB, there is an indication that Orange County conducts many more of these sorts of seminars in the course of the year than does the Palm Beach County VSO, despite a smaller veteran population living in that jurisdiction.
- Upgrade the VSO Internet website to provide more complete information, including in particular, downloadable forms (either directly from the department's web server or by blind link to a state or federal web server) with clear instructions on what to do next to file each form; a listing of frequently asked questions with well written, non-confusing answers; the ability to schedule on-line appointments in Belle Glade or for hospitalized and bedridden applicants; and functionality for allowing veterans to post on-line questions to the Veterans Service Officer; and then make certain that the Internet URL is printed on every piece of paper that leaves the office, including letterhead stationery, envelopes, brochures, mailers, form notices, and business cards.
- Print large, durable banners that can be hung up in every service organization's meeting hall, proclaiming something like, "Your Veterans Service Officer is as Close as Your Phone or Computer."

The survey of peer counties also identified several initiatives being undertaken by VSO's around the state that strike us as extremely positive measures to examine for implementation in Palm Beach County. We are particularly interested in some of the collaborations we found in Orange County. For example, that county has instituted a more aggressive outreach strategy involving informal agreements arranged with governmental agencies and private organizations to pass along veteran information to the VSO for use in making targeted contacts with

prospective clients. The head of the Orange County VSO described four such collaborations to our study consultant:¹⁹

- Federal Department of Veterans Affairs—Under this agreement, the county Veterans Service Office is contacted whenever a county resident is separated from the armed services. This enables the office to contact the veteran and communicate the services available to him or her through the VSO.
- County Property Appraiser—In this collaboration, the VSO is contacted whenever a veteran applies for a special homestead exemption available to veterans.
- Social Services Agencies—Existing relationships with all county and state social services agencies to notify the VSO of veterans or their spouses and dependents who apply for federal food stamps, healthcare or cash grants of public assistance.
- Other—Active and continuous dialog with local veterans’ service organizations, assisted living facilities, health centers and Senior Fair events, at which people familiar with veterans’ conditions can make the VSO aware of veterans in need.

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

This final section of the report contains a suggested plan for the implementation of study recommendations. Appropriate timetables and assigned responsibilities have been suggested. Some recommendations have cost implications, especially in the areas of marketing materials and website enhancement; existing appropriations may need to be reallocated or additional one time appropriations may need to be requested. Still other recommendations represent opportunities to improve operational effectiveness or enhance service levels. Each recommendation is re-stated in Table 9 below, along with a summary of the anticipated service impacts. The recommendations are listed in the same order as they were discussed earlier in the report.

TABLE 9

Suggested Plan for the Implementation of Study Recommendations

Recommendation	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-12 Months	Implementation Responsibility	Comments
1. Establish new or relocate satellite sites, and/or revise operating hours at satellite offices (page 26)	●	●	●	Veterans Service Officer, Division Director	1. Improved resource effectiveness 2. Essential for expanding outreach 3. Added customer convenience, accessibility of services

(Continued on next page)

¹⁹ Source: Telephone interview with Mike Dixon, Program Manager, Orange County Veterans Service Office, July 30, 2003.

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Recommendation	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-12 Months	Implementation Responsibility	Comments
2. Establish effective and reliable performance measures (page 30)	●			Veterans Service Officer	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improved customer service quality 2. Improved internal controls 3. Improved focus on mission of outreach 4. Improved process management
3. Upgrade marketing and collaborations (page 31)	●	●		Veterans Service Officer, Division Director	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Essential for expanding market share 2. Improved community relations 3. Requires development of a “marketing plan” 4. Possible increase in or reallocation of budget appropriations