



# MVAA 2021 Annual Report

*Lean on Us*



◀ MVA Director Zaneta Adams reminds veterans and their families that they can *lean on us* by calling 1-800-MICH-VET.

## MICHIGAN VETERANS CAN LEAN ON US

Despite the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic last year, the MVAA — in partnership with Gov. Whitmer’s Office and our many stakeholders — was able to make steady gains in serving veterans and their families.

Lean on Us. It’s our slogan, and there is ample evidence that veterans did just that in 2021.

The technicians in our Michigan Veteran Resource Service Center (MVRSC) handled 26,205 cases for veterans and their dependents in fiscal year 2021 (FY21), an average of 2,183 cases per month. That’s the most cases we’ve ever handled in a single year — by a wide margin — and represents a 58% increase in cases from FY20.

Further, MVRSC technicians made 2,721 referrals for veterans and their dependents to Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) across the state — a 24% increase from the previous year.

This success in veteran outreach came amidst the backdrop of some good news from the VA: Michigan's veteran population increased for the first time in more than a decade. Nearly 568,000 veterans now call Michigan home.

In its latest report, which covers FY20, the VA also said it had spent \$4.8 billion in Michigan — an increase of nearly \$345 million from the previous year. That equates to \$8,592 per veteran, the eighth straight year that figure has increased.

Although COVID restrictions affected the workflow of getting veterans connected to benefits, MVAA's five VSOs were still able to file 713 applications for federal veteran benefits and recover more than \$10 million for our veterans and their families.

In addition, our Michigan Veterans Trust Fund approved 426 applications for \$1.3 million in emergency grant assistance. That's a 26% increase in emergency aid from the year prior and an average of more than \$3,000 per grant recipient.

To counter COVID, we got creative. Among our efforts, we created two food voucher programs for veterans and their families. We hosted veteran care package events in several locations around Michigan. We joined with the Michigan National Guard to provide COVID-19 vaccine clinics for veterans. And we continued our veteran suicide-prevention efforts, including the

launch of the Michigan Veteran Connector. Through this initiative, businesses and organizations volunteer to help in the early identification of veterans with the ultimate goal of getting them connected to benefits and resources so they can thrive.

Finally, we ramped up our partnerships with veteran-friendly organizations to further break down the barriers veterans face in employment, education, health care and quality of life. These efforts include partnering with Davenport University to offer scholarships for employees in our Veteran-Friendly Employer program, collaborating with the Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA) to remove professional-licensing barriers for veterans and working with Habitat for Humanity on veterans' housing needs.

These are just some of our successes in FY21. Working hand-in-hand with the Governor's Office, we're proud of all we accomplished this past year for our former service members and eligible National Guard and Reserve members. We plan to take that momentum strong into fiscal '22 and continue our relentless mission of serving veterans and their families. As always, Michigan veterans can lean on us — through the pandemic and beyond.



Director Zaneta Adams

# SERVING THOSE WHO SERVED

Created by executive order in 2013, the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency (MVAA) is the state's central coordinating point for veterans and their families. As part of the Michigan Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA), the MVAA provides support, care, advocacy and service to veterans of all eras. The MVAA is responsible for administration and operation of the Michigan Veteran Resource Service Center, a 24/7/365 call center (1-800-MICH-VET) in partnership with Michigan 211; the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund, which provides short-term emergency relief to eligible veterans; and the state's grant to chartered veterans service organizations and the Michigan Association of County Veterans Counselors.

Unlike the federal Department of Veterans Affairs, which provides health care, educational, compensation and pension benefits, and more, the MVAA assists veterans and their families by connecting them to their federal and state resources and benefits. The agency does this by working with various state departments and agencies, as well as hundreds of community-based veteran programs to create a no-wrong-door access to benefits and services.

The MVAA embraces the belief that those who serve our state and nation in the armed forces are considered members for life. This means our commitment to these brave men and women start the day they take their oath, providing them with comprehensive support after their service, ensuring

their long-term care needs are met with dignity and their loved ones are supported in their time of need. Our goal is to reach and serve all Michigan veterans, a strategic approach that calls for connecting with underserved veteran populations including women veterans, tribal veterans and incarcerated veterans. Through our comprehensive approach, we work to remove the barriers veterans face in employment, education, health care and quality of life, making Michigan a great place for veterans and their families to call home.

## Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency FY21 Expenditures

At the MVAA, we pride ourselves on being good stewards of taxpayer money and transparent in how we spend it. Our state appropriated budget in FY21 was \$7.4 million, of which about \$2.5 million went for agency partnerships, grant opportunities and our executive and budget and data teams. All of these efforts were focused directly on our mission of serving Michigan's veterans and their families. The bulk of the budget — nearly \$3.9 million — was spent on veteran customer service, marketing and direct outreach and service provision to veterans. This includes:

- **Customer service** — \$856,288. Our 24/7 Michigan Veteran Resource Service Center (1-800-MICH-VET) handled a record 26,205 veteran inquiries in FY21, an average of 2,183 a month.
- **Marketing and communications** — \$958,523. We continued spreading our message of how we connect veterans to the benefits they earned for their service across the state and nation in FY21. This included our Why Michigan for Transitioning

Service Members campaign, designed to highlight Michigan as a great place for veterans and their families to live, work, play and retire.

- **Veterans Service Officers** — \$648,278. Our VSOs submitted 713 applications for veterans' benefits, realizing more than \$10 million in recoveries for veterans and their families.
- **Strategic Outreach** — \$1,419,661. Our targeted outreach to veterans and veteran-friendly organizations focused on breaking down the barriers veterans face in education, employment, health care and quality of life. This included continuing our Community Outreach and Regional Engagement (CORE) Initiative in FY21, which provides tailored outreach to veterans on a regional basis across the state.

### **Michigan Veterans Trust Fund FY21 Expenditures**

The Michigan Veterans Trust Fund's FY21 expenditures totaled \$2,537,986, of which \$1,299,582 was spent on emergency grants for eligible veterans and their families. In addition, the Board of Trustees approved \$476,640 for special program grants to provide assistance in targeted areas such as food insecurity and entrepreneurial programs for veterans. Emergency grants and special program grants accounted for 70% of MVTF expenditures in FY21. Remaining expenditures went toward program and administrative costs on the state and county levels. In FY 2021, the MVTF received \$231,000 in donations — the most in its 75-year history.



▲ Veterans and representatives of veteran organizations participate in a Veterans Roundtable with Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, DMVA Director Maj. Gen. Paul Rogers and MVA Director Zaneta Adams in Lansing on Nov. 10.

# A LOOK BACK AT 2021



▼ Governor Gretchen Whitmer signs bipartisan legislation removing barriers for veterans and their families to using their professional licenses in Michigan.

The continued effects of the COVID-19 pandemic made 2021 a challenging year, but the MVAA, working alongside the Governor's Office and our many partners, met that challenge with the grit and dedication of the veterans we serve. A record number of veterans reached out to us last year, seeking assistance in all facets of their lives, and we responded by connecting them to the benefits and resources they earned for their service. We also forged many new partnerships and launched innovative programs to support Michigan's nearly 568,000 veterans and their families. Here are just some of our FY21 accomplishments:

**24/7/365 Assistance for Veterans & Family Members**  
Michigan Veteran Resource Service Center (MVRSC) is the first statewide program in the nation to offer 24/7/365 assistance specifically to veterans and family members by partnering with a statewide Michigan 2-1-1 network and local veteran service providers. MVRSC technicians connect veterans to federal, state and local resources through a toll-free number, 1-800-MICH-VET. The MVRSC handled 26,205 cases for veterans and their dependents in FY21 — the most cases of any year since the MVAA was stood up in 2013.

### **Check on MIVet**

Created in the midst of the pandemic in 2020, MVAA's Check on MIVet service allows veterans themselves, family members or friends to ask for a "check" to be conducted by MVRSC call-center technicians to the veteran. The service, which continued to take hold in FY21, can be particularly helpful to the fragile and vulnerable population, but can benefit all veterans who are not receiving the full array of benefits and resources they earned for their service.

### **Veterans' Benefits Applications**

In 2021, MVAA's five Veteran Service Officers submitted 713 applications for veterans' benefits and, in collaboration with National Veteran Service Organizations (NVSOS), Michigan submitted 7,916 applications for veterans' benefits. MVAA realized \$10,621,197 in recoveries for Michigan veterans and Michigan NVSOs realized \$157,828,739 in recoveries for veterans and eligible family members. Through a grant program, NVSOs provided 77,021 hours of direct service provision ensuring Michigan veterans and their family members receive the advice and assistance they need to connect to the full array of benefits.

### **Removing Professional Licensing Barriers for Veterans**

In a move championed by the MVAA and the Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA), Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in June signed bipartisan legislation removing barriers for veterans and their families to using their professional licenses in Michigan. Among other benefits, the new law allows veterans and dependents to use certain occupational licenses from another state or country in Michigan.



**Number of  
Cases Handled by  
the MVRSC:**

**FY20: 16,594**

**FY21: 26,205**

▲ Michigan Veteran Resource Service Center technician Amie Barrett helps a veteran who called 1-800-MICH-VET.



**Money Distributed  
through MVAA Food  
Assistance Programs:**

**FY20: \$211,475**

**FY21: \$414,931**

## **ATTACKING FOOD INSECURITY FOR VETERANS**

As the pandemic hurt veterans' livelihoods and caused shortages at food banks, MVAA stepped in to help put food on the table for veterans and their families.

A pair of initiatives that offered food vouchers to

veterans contributed more than \$400,000 statewide in FY21.

Through one initiative, MVAA partnered with Meijer to offer \$50 and \$100 vouchers for food, personal care and cleaning products at the grocery chain's outlets in Michigan. Funded by the County Veteran Service Fund Grant, the vouchers were distributed to participating county veterans' affairs offices, which then dispersed them to eligible veterans.

In FY21, 23 counties participated in the initiative, issuing \$218,306 in vouchers to veterans and their families. This was the second year of the program; in FY20, \$211,475 in vouchers were redeemed. The Meijer food voucher program continues in FY22.

Through the other initiative, Food4Vets, MVAA's Senior Veteran Community Engagement Officers (SVCEOs) distributed food vouchers of up to \$100 to eligible veterans that were redeemable at participating Meijer, SpartanNash and Super One Foods stores.

Funded by a \$300,000 donation from the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund, the initiative saw 1,966 veterans receive food assistance for a total of \$196,625 in FY21. The MVTF, which has since taken over facilitation of the program, continues to distribute the remaining food vouchers to SVCEOs and counties that take MVTF applications.

All told, MVAA's food assistance programs helped veterans to the tune of \$414,931 in FY21. Combined with the FY20 program, more than \$626,406 has gone toward helping veterans and their families battle food insecurity in just the past two years.

### **Partnering with Davenport University on Scholarships**

Davenport University, working with MVAA, announced a program to offer four-year scholarships at Davenport to employees who work at any of our 400-plus Veteran-Friendly Employers (VFE). The scholarship applies to 22 credits per year for four years; tuition amount depends on the status of the VFE (Gold, Silver or Bronze).

### **MVAA Certified Veteran-Friendly Employers**

Although FY21 was a year of flux for many employers, we were able to grow our Veteran-Friendly Employers (VFE) program slightly. The number of certified VFEs increased from 391 in FY20 to 402 in FY21, which includes 14 Gold-level and 33 Silver-level employers.

### **Community Outreach & Regional Engagement (CORE) Initiative**

Working virtually much of the year, our CORE members continued in their vital role of outreach and community-building to help identify veterans and connect them to benefits and resources. Launched in FY20, the CORE initiative is comprised of Senior Veteran Community Engagement Officers, Veteran Community Engagement Officers and the Buddy to Buddy volunteer team working throughout the state. In FY21, the CORE team helped coordinate two dedicated COVID-19 vaccine clinics and two mobile clinics for veterans, distribute food vouchers and conduct many other outreach efforts.

### **County Veteran Service Fund (CVSF) Grant**

The FY21 County Veteran Service Fund (CVSF) Grant was awarded to 57 Michigan counties for a total of \$3.3 million, including \$758,000 in emergency

relief. Grant-funded veteran services included food assistance, transportation, mental health and counseling services, and recreational therapy such as gardening, equine therapy and bike-repair workshops.

### **Why Michigan for Transitioning Service Members**

From April to September of FY21, the MVAA partnered with Victory Media on a digital marketing campaign targeting transitioning service members across the country and highlighting Michigan as a great place for veterans and their families to live, work and retire. Advertising on social media and in publications such as GI Jobs and Military Spouse, the campaign garnered 6.1 million impressions, 20,000 clicks to our Why Michigan webpage and dozens of downloads of our WhyMI app. Top states for engagement were Texas, Florida and North Carolina.

### **MVAA Certified Veteran-Friendly Schools**

Michigan had 63 certified Veteran-Friendly Schools (VFS) for FY21, which includes 37 Gold-level and 23 Silver-level colleges and universities. In FY21, the Veteran-Friendly School program also launched the Veteran Student of the Month initiative to acknowledge veteran students enrolled at VFS institutions who go above and beyond their primary educational goals.

### **Michigan Women Veterans Virtual 5K Fun Run/Walk**

After the pandemic shut down the 5K in 2020, the MVAA decided to hold the fundraiser virtually in 2021 along with cohosts Mission Ambition LLC and the Michigan Women's Commission. Held from June 12 (Women Veterans Recognition Day in Michigan) to June 19, the event had more than 130 participants who together raised \$7,406 for the women's cohort of the Eisenhower Veteran Reintegration Center.



▲ Six women veterans shared their stories through the She is A Veteran campaign. (Top row, left to right) Candy Robertson, Jill Mathews and Meghan Shellington. (Bottom row, left to right) Linda Jones, Andrea Norton and Theresa Robinson.

## SHE IS A VETERAN CAMPAIGN RESONATES WITH WOMEN VETERANS

There are more than 46,000 women veterans in Michigan, but far too many of them feel unappreciated, invisible or don't even identify as veterans. Our awareness and outreach campaign, She is A Veteran, is helping change that.

The campaign tells the stories of a diverse group of six women veterans who faced myriad challenges in military and civilian life, including sexual assault, contempt from male counterparts and a lack of appropriate services.

Since we launched She is A Veteran in June 2020, more than 4.5 million people have watched the video stories of the women veterans featured in the campaign. And more than 1.5 million people have engaged with the videos online, the vast majority providing supportive comments and encouragement.

The campaign has encouraged many women veterans to come forward and tell their own stories and identify as veterans. Others are getting involved in the effort to support their fellow veterans. And still others are getting connected to the benefits and resources they earned for their service.

“She is A Veteran has grown in a way I never imagined,” said program creator Erika Hoover, MVAA’s Women Veterans and Special Populations Coordinator. “This campaign has invoked a lot of feelings in the veteran community, which it was designed to do. And best of all, more women are identifying as veterans and the idea of what a veteran looks like is changing.”

Hoover noted that MVAA has created traveling banners that are linked to the women veterans’ stories and available resources and is working on getting the banners shown at veteran-specific and community events across the state.

“When women walk into these spaces, we want them to know that we see them. And when men and non-veterans come into these spaces, we want them to be aware that women served too,” said Hoover, a Navy veteran. “We are diverse. We are your mothers, daughters, sisters, nieces, wives and colleagues. We are veterans.”

### **Coordinating COVID-19 Vaccine Clinics for Veterans**

MVAA partnered with the Michigan National Guard and the Department of Health and Human Services to offer free COVID-19 vaccine clinics for veterans, family members and caregivers. Dedicated vaccine clinics in Marquette and Sterling Heights resulted in 581 total shots in arms, while mobile clinics in Muskegon and the Grand Rapids area led to more vaccinations. The clinics were in collaboration with the Protect Michigan Commission Veteran Subcommittee, which was chaired and led by MVAA.

### **Operation Veteran Care Package**

After giving out care packages to veterans in Lansing and Detroit in FY20, MVAA continued the campaign in FY21 by holding Operation Veteran Care Package events in Pontiac, Muskegon and Clinton Township. Nearly 300 veterans total received care packages at the three events, which also included free food boxes and mental health and other resource information. Among the many partners were Veteran Navigators from the Department of Health and Human Services, Michigan National Guard, Veteran Service Organizations, WINC, Gleaners and others.

### **Military & Veterans Gala**

More than 450 people attended the inaugural Michigan Military & Veterans Gala at Selfridge Air National Guard Base on Nov. 6. Hosted by the MVAA and the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, the gala included the presentation of statewide awards to veterans and veteran advocates that included Veteran of the Year, VA Employee of the Year and Veteran Friendly County of the Year (Macomb County). Recipients will be featured at the Michigan Heroes Museum in Frankenmuth for the next year.



▲ (Top photo) MVA Director Zaneta Adams speaks at the inaugural Michigan Military & Veterans Gala. (Bottom photo) Gala attendees socialize before the awards ceremony.

# ATTACKING THE PROBLEM OF VETERAN SUICIDE

More than 700 Michigan veterans took their own lives in just four years, according to the most recent data from the VA, and the MVAA is leading the charge to combat this persistent problem.

Partnering with VA and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Michigan is one of 35 states participating in the Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans and their Families. From 2016-2019, 704 veterans died by suicide in Michigan and the veteran suicide rate during this four-year period hovered at 30 per 100,000 people – much higher than the overall state rate of about 18 per 100,000.



But we've made significant progress in addressing some of the major factors involved in veteran suicide, including health care and mental health issues, drug addiction and lack of housing and employment. This progress includes:

- Launching the Michigan Veteran Connector initiative in FY21 through which health care facilities and other organizations ask their customers if they or anyone in their family has ever served in the military and, if so, referring them to the MVAA for a benefits consultation. From January–October 2021, 67 organizations took the Michigan Veteran

Connector pledge to start asking this question. Getting veterans to identify as veterans is the first step to connecting them to the benefits and resources that can help them thrive in all facets of their lives.

- Implemented a free Psych Armor online training portal to provide free suicide and veteran-centric trainings to stakeholders and community members.
- Collaborated with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services to include veteran-specific resources in naloxone leave-behind kits in Michigan. Through this program, EMS providers give overdose survivors extra kits that include naloxone, the medication that reverses opioid overdoses, as well as veteran-centric resources that may assist veterans during their current situation.
- Collaborated with the Michigan Department of Corrections to improve access to services and support within the veterans' unit of the Saginaw Correctional Facility.
- In collaboration with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and National Sports and Shooting Foundation, we developed "lethal means" outreach material designed to encourage veterans to safely secure their firearms. Michigan was invited by SAMHSA to be featured as an "expert" state for our work in this area.

Ultimately, the Governor's Challenge is a collaborative effort that involves some 50 members, from the VA to the Michigan National Guard and from the Michigan State Police to the VFW. We look forward to continuing this vitally important work to reduce veteran suicide into 2022 and beyond with our many partners.



◀ MVT Director Lindell Holm gives a presentation at a Trust Fund training in November.

## FY21 MICHIGAN VETERANS TRUST FUND (MVT) ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Established by the state Legislature to assist World War II veterans in 1946, the MVT celebrated 75 years in 2021 as a key unit of the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency and the Michigan Department of Military and Veterans Affairs. In FY21, MVT's Emergency Grant Program provided nearly \$1.3 million in emergency assistance to veterans and their families.

The MVT processed 760 emergency aid applications, reviews and appeals, ultimately approving 426 applications that provided \$1,299,582 in grant assistance to 1,124 veterans and their family members. All told, 74% of completed grant applications were approved and the average grant was more than \$3,000.



**MVTF Funds Distributed as Emergency Grants for Eligible Veterans and Their Families:**

**FY20: \$1,030,786 | FY21: \$1,299,582**

**Food4Vets**

The Board of Trustees provided \$300,000 to the MVAA to fund the emergency Food4Vets program to address food instability for Michigan veterans and their families negatively impacted by the COVID 19 pandemic.

**Michigan Veteran Entrepreneur Lab**

To promote the vitality of the larger veteran community in Michigan, the Board of Trustees is investing \$250,000 into an accelerator program at Grand Valley State University that provides startup education and support for veteran entrepreneurs. This strategic initiative is an investment that will connect veterans and their spouses with the larger entrepreneurship ecosystem for training, mentoring and tutoring.

**Habitat for Humanity**

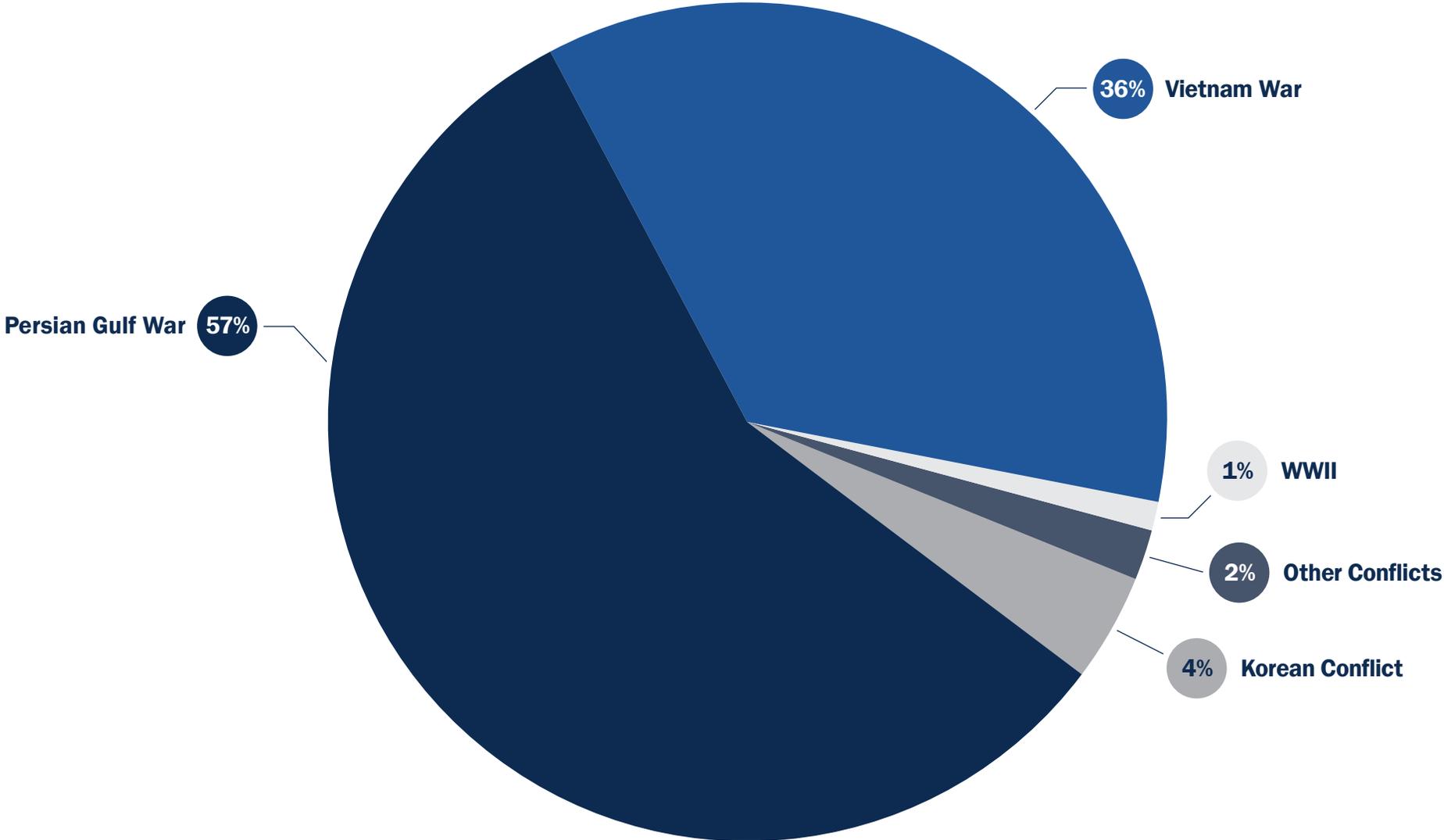
The Board of Trustees provided a \$15,000 grant to Habitat for Humanity to enable a partnership that provides more comprehensive housing assistance to veterans.

**Consumers Energy**

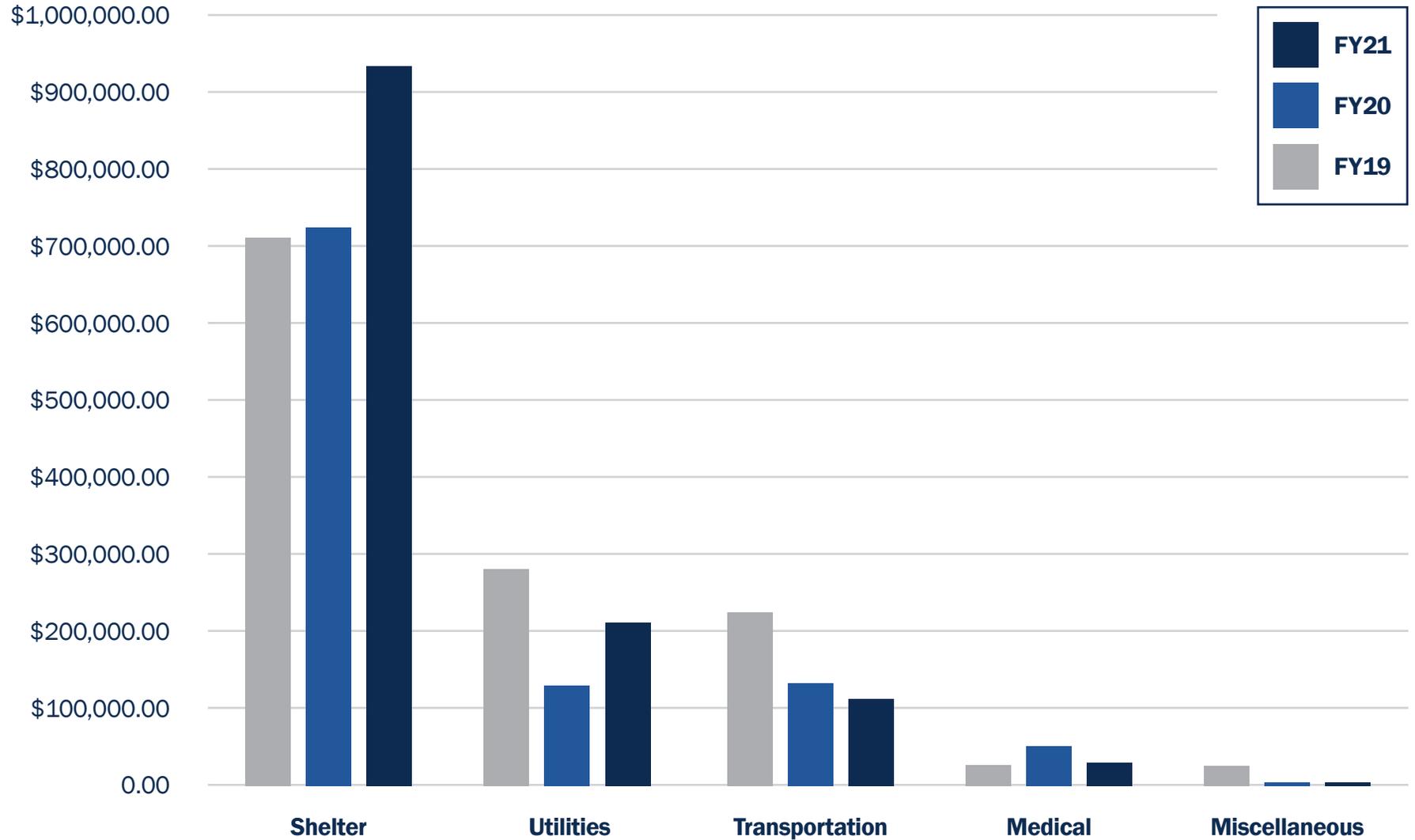
In FY21, Consumers Energy donated \$200,000 to the MVTF to provide emergency assistance to veterans for utility bills, furnace repairs and other critical home repairs. Consumers has become a reliable partner with the MVTF to keep veterans and their families safe and warm throughout the year.

# MVTF FY21 DATA

FY21 Total Apps Submitted by Era



### FY21 Assistance Paid by Category



# THE NEXT 12 MONTHS



Over the next year, MVAA will prioritize service to Michigan veterans by focusing on:

- Connecting with veterans and family members by lining veterans up to the benefits and resources they earned for their service.
- Continue our work to combat veteran suicide through the Governor’s Challenge and the Suicide Prevention Commission.
- Continue meeting the divergent needs of our veterans through the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund, to include the Emergency Grant Program for wartime veterans and the new 65+ Peacetime Program for peacetime-era veterans.
- Supporting underserved veterans including women and tribal veterans. This includes advancing our “She is A Veteran” initiative statewide and hosting our inaugural Women Veterans Leadership Conference in June 2022.
- Strengthening relationships with Veteran Service Organizations, county Veterans Affairs’ offices, key transition points for service members leaving active duty and DMVA leadership to support those in the National Guard.
- Facilitate the \$5.15 million Statewide Veterans Service Provision Grant, which was awarded to the Michigan Veterans Coalition through a competitive grant process and aims to get more veterans connected to benefits and resources.
- Continue our targeted outreach through CORE while striving to increase federal funding coming to Michigan in support of our state’s veterans.
- Maintaining a report of the most veteran-requested services. This information, shared with other agencies, helps identify gaps that we help fill at the local level. Top veteran-requested services for FY21 were VA benefits, food assistance, utilities, VA medical and rent/mortgage help.

▲ (Left to right) MVAA Strategy team members William Damsgaard, Christopher Taylor, Joseph Saur, Julie Cortright and Jennifer Lamb organized and hosted an education conference and an employment conference in October.

# THE LATEST VETERAN DATA

## Michigan's Veteran Population (from GDX 2020\*)

**567,919 veterans** | Ranked **11** of 53 in veteran population amongst states and territories

**83.66%**  
Percent of White Veterans  
(Not Hispanic or Latino)

**10.53%**  
Percent of Black or African  
American Veterans

**3.16%**  
Percent of Hispanic  
or Latino Veterans

**1.75%**  
Percent of Two or More  
Races Veterans

**0.79%**  
Percent of Asian Veterans

**0.68%**  
Percent of American Indian  
and Alaska Native Veterans

**0.38%**  
Percent of Some  
Other Race Veterans

**0.03%**  
Percent of Native Hawaiian and  
Other Pacific Islander Veterans

## Michigan vs National Veteran Population Demographics (as of 9/30/2019\*\*)

**Michigan: 6.6%** | Nationally: **6.8%**  
Percent of Adult Population that are Veterans

**Michigan: 5.3%** | Nationally: **10.9%**  
Percent of Veterans that are Military Retirees

**Michigan: 8.1%** | Nationally: **10.1%**  
Percent of Women Veterans

**Michigan: 50.9%** | Nationally: **46.1%**  
Percent of Veterans Age 65 and Over

Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

\*Information comes from GDX 2020 for total veteran population and uses % of veteran population from VetPop2018 to assume the reasonable percentage of veterans by race/ethnicity for FY21.

\*\*Michigan vs National Veteran Population Demographics come from the MI State Summary received from VA on 12/15/2021.

**VA Average Federal Expenditures Per Veteran in Michigan**





3423 N Martin Luther King Jr Blvd, Bldg 32  
Lansing, MI 48906

**1-800-MICH-VET**  
(1-800-642-4838)

**[Michigan.gov/MVAA](https://Michigan.gov/MVAA)**