



**Presentation to the
Senate Human Services and Early Childhood Committee
May 23, 2016**

An Overview of Aging Veterans in Oregon

Chair Gelser, Vice-Chair Olsen and Members of the Committee:

Good morning and thank you for this opportunity to talk to you about Oregon's aging veterans.

My name is Mary Jaeger. I am the Aging Veteran Services Director for the Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs.

While I am new to working with veterans, I'm not new to aging, after 30 years of human services advocacy. You know me from my previous roles as the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman and as the CASA Director for Multnomah and Washington Counties. I've been in this new role for ODVA for about a year now - and I actually feel more like a human services advocate "embedded" in an agency preparing for its next 70 years of service to veterans.

The Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs was formed in 1945 to address the needs of WW II veterans returning home to Oregon. Today - 70 years later - ODVA is still assisting many of those same veterans, spouses and children of WW II veterans in ways never imagined by the Agency founders!

I'd like to share three key observations and opportunities for greater service for Oregon's Aging Veterans for your consideration:

1. There are more veterans, and especially more senior veterans, than you think in Oregon

We are serving four generations of veterans from five major wars. Here are the numbers from 2015:

- There are about 326,000 veterans in Oregon: about 8% of all Oregonians are veterans.
- Over half of all Oregon veterans are 65 years of age or older; almost 165,000 veterans are aged 65+.
- Most veterans are men. About 9% of Oregon's veterans are women, and they are younger than the male veterans. Male veterans average 64 years old, women 48 years old.
 - About 56% of male Oregonians aged 65+ are veterans; there are about 156,000 male veterans aged 65+ in Oregon.
- More than half of these aging vets (52.2%) served in WWII, Korea, or Vietnam, and most of these are 65+. This compares to about 22% of Oregon veterans who served in the Gulf War or Iraq and Afghanistan.

There are more veterans, and especially more senior veterans, than anybody would guess. Their needs today are far, far beyond the initial benefits of education and home loans provided by the GI Bill.

2. Aging veterans don't know about their benefits

Other than the GI Bill for education and home loan programs, most veterans will never use the other benefits that may be available to them. Like veterans everywhere, the veterans in Oregon are mostly quietly proud of their service and not all that interested in talking about it. And, also like veterans everywhere, they don't really know about the what benefits available to them that they have earned.

We know that only about 30% of Oregon veterans are currently accessing any of their Federal benefits for disability compensation and pension. There are about 99,550 Oregon vets currently receiving health care benefits. In 2014, the Federal VA provided \$1.093 billion (One billion, 93 million dollars) in these benefits to Oregon veterans, or about

\$11,000 per veteran.

At ODVA, we regularly encounter older veterans with service-related health care conditions who have not sought any help from the Federal VA. These seniors commonly say things like “I’m okay - - save the money for the young men and women who need it more than me”. They don’t know that their access to benefits will not reduce funds available for the new vets. These veterans have earned these benefits.

We do know that there are many veterans on Medicaid who may be eligible for Federal VA benefits. Our Veteran’s Service Officers are constantly trying to find these veterans to bring them into the Federal VA health care system and off the State Medicaid rolls, and we need more Veteran Service Officer to reach out and help more veterans. For each veteran we can help to qualify for Federal veteran’s benefits, there is a significant savings to the State Medicaid budget.

3. There are veteran’s faces for every human service need

I’ve learned that ODVA is really a human services agency. In fact, “ODVA” could be called the “Oregon Department of Veteran Advocates”. If you ask a regular Oregonian to visualize a “veteran”, they usually think of elderly white men, when in fact there are:

- Women veterans
- Disabled veterans
- Student veterans
- Rural veterans
- LGBT veterans
- Minority veterans
- Tribal veterans
- Incarcerated veterans
- Homeless veterans and
- The largest group of all, Aging Veterans.

ODVA has two State Veteran Skilled Nursing Facilities. One veteran’s home is in The Dalles that opened in the late 1990's and the other home is in Lebanon that opened in late 2014. The Lebanon home is the newest State Veteran Home in the U.S. Together the homes can serve

about 300 veterans, spouses or Gold Star Parents, who are parents who have lost a child to war-time service. It is important to note that many spouses are not aware of their eligibility for the Veteran Homes, much less their eligibility for survivor benefits.

In addition to the two homes, ODVA serves about 300 veterans through our Conservatorship and Representative Payee programs. These veterans, spouses and children of veterans are supported by our dedicated staff and assigned to ODVA by the Courts, the Federal VA and the Social Security Administration. These programs and the services we provide of far beyond simply paying veteran's bills.

The same issues that impact our aging population, veterans and non-veterans alike, combined with increasing dementia and mental health are the primary issues our team at ODVA deals with for our veterans. In fact, we really provide case management in human services terms. If not for the services we provide through Conservatorship and our Representative Payee team, most of these veterans would be admitted into long-term care facilities at great cost to the State. This service truly prevents institutionalization and keeps veterans in their own homes.

Oregon's Veteran's Service Officers work to assist veterans in accessing the Federal benefits they have earned. In 2015, Veteran Service Officers represented about 11,050 first-time veterans seeking Federal benefits. Since 2013, they have represented nearly 28,000 veterans. Many of these men and women are seniors who had no idea they might be qualified for service related benefits.

Despite this remarkable growth, we know there are thousands of veterans who earned benefits that are not receiving them. Aging veterans living without the help that Federal benefits can provide are far beyond our current reach.

If you wonder how many there might be, remember that almost six of every ten male seniors in Oregon are veterans - - and they have spouses.

At ODVA, it is our honor and privilege to serve Oregon's veterans. Our goal is to serve every veteran who has earned their benefits. Veterans are everywhere - - and we should be, too. Thank you very much.