

The Office of Survivor Assistance: Taking Care of Veterans' Families

“Taking care of survivors is as essential as taking care of our veterans and military personnel,” VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki has said. “By taking care of survivors, we are honoring a commitment made to our veterans and military members.”

The Office of Survivor Assistance is the primary advisor to the Secretary on all matters related to policies, programs, legislative issues and other initiatives affecting veterans' survivors and dependents of survivors.

They monitor VA's delivery of benefits to survivors, make appropriate referrals to VA offices for survivors seeking benefits, and explore innovative ways of reaching survivors who are not receiving VA benefits they are eligible for, including education assistance, home loan guarantees, health care insurance and Dependency and Indemnity Compensation.

OSA serves more than 550,000 spouses, dependents and other survivors of veterans who are receiving VA benefits. Remarkably, that figure includes nearly 5,000 spouses of World War I veterans, 90 spouses and 94 children of Spanish-American War veterans, and two children of Civil War veterans.

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Dan Logan, special assistant to the Secretary, and Debi Bevins, director of Client Relations and special advisor to OSA, provided oversight of OSA until November 2010, when Debra Walker was named the new director. Scott Bell serves as OSA's program

analyst. “Providing support to survivors is an honorable charge,” said Walker, “and I am proud to be a part of the VA office that honors those survivors and their dependents.”

Since its creation, OSA has been working closely with senior VA Central Office leadership to provide up-to-date information and analysis on the issues faced by the survivor community. These issues are as varied and diverse as the constituents OSA serves, and run the gamut in complexity.

OSA gleans much of its information through direct interaction with the survivors themselves. Through outreach and communications, the challenges and successes of the survivor community are brought to the attention of OSA staff. While the thrust of OSA operations is policy-focused, the staff often gets involved in assisting with individual claims.

“I've had the pleasure of working directly with surviving families from around the world,” said Bell. “We have discussed matters ranging from education benefits to VA home loans, DIC, CHAMP-VA health care benefits, you name it—and all of it helps bring home the impact VA has on so many lives.

“I wish everyone in VA

had this opportunity. These surviving families are truly inspirational. When you see the bravery and dedication that so many of them display in the face of losing a loved one, the steps they take to honor their loved one's memory, and how they go about caring for those



Debra Walker, center, directs the Office of Survivor Assistance; she's assisted by Debi Bevins and Scott Bell.

left behind—well, it's hard not to be moved by it.”

As a rule, OSA staff members say they see these service opportunities as mutually beneficial; the survivor obtains the necessary assistance with their particular issue, and OSA benefits by reviewing the trends in requests for assistance, which helps identify possible gaps in programmatic services. Strategy-wise, by working on the micro level, OSA is better able to advise VA leadership at the macro level.

OSA was also a key driver in the addition of “Survivors”

sible for all survivors.

OSA also established multiple partnerships with Department of Defense agencies and veterans service organizations to explore ways to ease the transition of survivors into the VA system, and to make a difference in survivors' lives.

The office maintains a Web site (currently under reconstruction) to help survivors navigate through resources that may be available to them, and will continue to monitor policy and legislative issues as well as pursue outreach to survivors to ensure that survivor issues are fully understood and addressed at the appropriate level.

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Contact the Office of Survivor Assistance at 202-461-1077, or by e-mail at officeofsurvivors@va.gov.