

MICHIGAN HOUSE DEMOCRATS

VETERANS' ISSUES

LISTENING TOUR REPORT



5

Listening Tour Sessions

- U.P.: 7
- Detroit: 14
- Metro Detroit: 20
- Southwest/West Michigan: 10
- Mid Michigan: 13

264

 Attendees

64

 Panelists

Statewide Resources:

- Michigan Veteran Hotline: (800) MICH-VET
- VA Federal Hotline: (800) 827-1000
- Veterans Crisis Line: 988
- Find resources in your community: 211
- Michigan.gov/mvaa
- VA.gov
- Michigan Works
- SSDI/SSI, Outreach, Access and Recovery (SOAR) program
- SNAP outreach for veterans
- VA Solid Start program
- Veteran Benefits Administration
- Veteran centers
- Veterans Community Action Teams (VCAT)/Veterans Coalition (VC)
- Veteran Navigator program
- Veteran resource fairs

Report prepared by

State Representative Julie M. Rogers
101st Legislature • November 2022

Overview

In early 2022, state Rep. Julie M. Rogers, with fellow Michigan House Democratic legislators and Dir. Zaneta Adams of the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency, held five statewide Veterans Listening Tour sessions. Brave men and women who have served our country were able to speak directly to policymakers about the issues that matter most to them and their families, and to help create legislation that would improve resources and support.

We learned about the great work and the wide variety of resources available to veterans and their families, as well as the areas that need improvement. Common issues across the state included veterans not knowing what benefits are available to them, the need for additional support for veterans as they re-enter the workforce and difficulty connecting with other veterans. Veterans have made many sacrifices in service of our country. We need to make sure that they have the help they need to thrive once they leave the military. This document recaps the highlights from the listening tour.

Key Concerns and Takeaways

- 1. Informing Veterans About the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency Service:** The Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency (MVAA), within the Michigan Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, provides support, care, advocacy and services to veterans and their families. However, many are unaware of the resources MVAA provides. MVAA can connect veterans and their families to the federal and state resources and benefits they have earned, and coordinate among various agencies and hundreds of community-based veterans' programs.
The MVAA liaises with the federal VA to help remove barriers to accessing benefits. Veterans and their family members can find out more at Michigan.gov/MVAA or (800) MICH-VET (642-4838).
- 2. Locating Resources:** Finding information about available services was a consistent challenge identified in the sessions. The first resource veterans and family members should try is the Michigan Veteran Hotline (800-642-4838), then the VA Federal contact line (800-827-1000). The hotlines help connect veterans with the services and programs available to them in their community. Veterans may not even know what types of services they should ask for. One suggested solution was creating documents geographically tailored to list all veterans' services and resources available in our state and in specific regions.
- 3. Connecting With More Veterans:** Ensuring every veteran is connected to the benefits and the support they earned for their service is a top priority for the MVAA. However, it can be challenging to reach veterans not already connected with the agency. Participants emphasized that online outreach is not enough given large gaps in broadband coverage and the fact that older veterans use the internet at **lower rates**. The best way to ensure every veteran is aware of available services is to meet them where they're at by communicating across every platform, including email, social media, in-person town halls, mail, phone calls and organizations like American Legion posts.
- 4. Encouraging Veterans to Use Their Benefits:** Despite their years of service, some veterans choose to forgo the benefits, resources and support they have earned. MVAA encourages veterans to use the benefits that they are eligible to receive and to register their disability to access additional resources and services. Veterans and their family members should apply for VA services, check their eligibility status, schedule appointments to meet with providers, and help the VA system stay in contact with veterans by updating contact information.
- 5. Increasing Support for Those Most at Risk:** Three veteran demographics were consistently identified as high risk and in need of additional assistance — those dishonorably discharged, homeless or struggling with mental illness. In Michigan, there are over 6,500 homeless veterans. On average, 176 Michigan veterans die by suicide each year, a rate much higher than that of non-veterans. But veterans are less likely to consider or complete suicide if they have a solid support system and are connected to the appropriate benefits and resources. Resources like the VA, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services State Veteran Navigator, and Buddy to Buddy program offer a wide range of mental health services, including virtual mental health care. However, it was clear that there is a need for additional local places to refer those who are most at-risk.

It was also noted that many veterans are resistant to seeking help for their mental health. The best way to reach more veterans is by making an initial connection in an informal setting and connecting them to community events and building a strong, local community with the help of local service centers, nonprofits and the American Legion.

Another recurring concern at multiple stops on the listening tour was the need to help veterans who were dishonorably discharged because they typically do not receive help. There are resources available to all veterans, regardless of their discharge status. The Michigan veteran hotline can help connect those dishonorably discharged with services and available resources.

6. Ensuring Legislation Works on a State and Federal Level: An issue raised at every stop on the listening tour was the need for an analysis of available programs that highlight the overlap and gaps between federal, state and local resources. We also discussed the importance of state legislators connecting with veterans and organizations that provide resources and support to help draft legislation that aligns with the needs of our communities. This can be done through public town halls, in-person listening tours and by using a wide range of communications strategies to reach people in their communities. We also need to continue building coalitions and partnerships through programs like the Veteran Community Action Teams (VCAT) and Veteran Coalitions (VC) to develop a comprehensive network of service providers and community members to ensure veterans and their families are served efficiently.

Additionally, more financial support is always needed. Currently, there is a \$4.25 million grant for county veteran services. Funding like this is helpful because it allows the counties to tailor their services to meet the specific needs of veterans in their communities.

7. Providing Inclusive Support: Every veteran's needs are different and vary based on a number of factors, including their demographics, life circumstances and experiences. The needs and preferred communication methods of veterans nearing retirement are not the same as those of young veterans just starting out. We should ask for feedback and guidance from a wide range of veterans to better understand the veteran community and its diversity. We also need to increase the number of culturally competent services, because it makes a substantial difference when the service providers personally understand the needs and backgrounds of veterans.

As legislators draft new legislation, we need to make sure the language is inclusive to all who serve and update existing language that no longer reflects the modern veteran population. This is especially important as the number of female veterans continues to rise.

8. Ensuring the Regional and Individual Needs of Veterans Are Met: Veterans in every region in Michigan have specific needs. A one-size-fits-all approach to allocating resources doesn't work. We heard

from several people who told us we should look at each location specifically to better support Michigan veterans. One suggested solution was exploring geographical and demographic data on veterans and local resources to improve support systems and identify funding needs for in the state budget. This could help ensure that funds are directed to high-priority areas and services and that funding reflects the population of veterans in the area.

Those who work at county offices expressed on the listening tour that they don't receive enough support to adequately serve all veterans in their region. County offices already serve a large veteran population, but we know there are veterans who aren't accessing their benefits. As we work to connect with more veterans, there is a clear need for additional support for county offices. One idea that was shared was increasing the number of smaller offices throughout each region to better support employees in county offices and allow them to connect with more veterans and meet each veteran's individual needs.

9. Accessing Transportation: Transportation is a top concern for veterans across every region in the state. Without adequate transportation, veterans are unable to receive the health care they need or access valuable benefits and services available to them and their families. Several communities have transportation services available at low and even no cost. Veterans and family members should contact their local veterans' service office for information.

10. Supporting Veterans in the Workforce: Employers struggle with retaining veterans for a number of reasons. Some veterans suggested that employers could better engage with veteran employees by structuring jobs to present new challenges once a task or project is complete. Establishing an employee resource group (ERG) for veterans is another effective retention tool for employers.

The MVAA has also established a Veteran Friendly Employers Database with over 450 employers to educate businesses on ways to support, recruit and retain veterans across the state. The agency also provides referrals to Michigan Works!, where veterans can receive help with preparing for interviews, drafting a resume, learning computer skills and finding employment opportunities.

Other public workforce programs for veterans include the Helmets to Hardhats program, job training and funding for tuition at a college, university or trade school with the G.I. Bill, MI Reconnect and Futures for Frontliners. Michigan is also working to better support service-disabled veteran-owned small business (SDVOSB) owners by establishing a Veteran Facility Board to encourage the use of veteran-owned businesses when constructing veterans' homes. Veteran small business owners were also prioritized when the state released COVID-19 relief funds. There are also nonprofits in several communities that help veterans apply the skills they learned in the military to jobs in the civilian workforce.



Conclusion

Michigan has a wide range of support and services for veterans from the local to the federal level, but many people struggle with locating these resources. While there are concerns we need to address, resources like the MVAA and the state and federal veteran hotlines can make the process easier. Suggestions like increasing funding to county offices, meeting the unique needs of veterans in every region, conducting research to better understand the needs of the diverse veteran population, making sure legislation is inclusive, and continuing to host listening tours and town halls with veterans are all ways the state can better support veterans and their families.