



HISTORY

As of October 2023

COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS
ASSOCIATION OF WISCONSIN

HISTORY

The position of County veterans Service Officer (CVSO) has a long and distinguished history. The first CVSO's were self-appointed concerned veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic, who took it upon themselves to aid and assist the veterans, dependents, and survivors of their counties, either through the G.A.R. or through whatever other resources were available.

Their services continued through the Indian Wars, the Spanish-American War, several other conflicts and into World War I, after which time the duties of Service Officer usually evolved into an appointed or elected member of one of the Veterans Service Organizations.

This method of delivering service continued until sometime in the early thirties, when the Fond du Lac County Soldiers' and Sailors' Relief Commission (now known as the Veterans Service Commission) approached the county board about hiring "a full-time contact man to enable the county to care for its disabled veterans." The board appointed Leo J. Promen as the first CVSO in Wisconsin in 1932. In fact, Promen was the first CVSO hired in the United States.

In rapid succession, other counties Soldiers' and Sailors' Relief Commissions picked up on the idea in conjunction with their Veterans Service organizations, most notably the American Legion, and in 1935 there was a state law authorizing counties to voluntarily hire a CVSO.

The statute read as follows; "The County Board may create the position of Service Officer and elect for such office a veteran of a war, who was engaged in the service of the United States, to hold office for a term of two years." – WI Stats Chapter 59.08(23).

By the end of 1935 about 20 of the counties in Wisconsin had hired a County Veterans Service Officer and Leo Promen organized a meeting in Fond du Lac at the Retlaw Hotel on December 30, 1935.



Present day photo Retlaw Hotel, Fond du Lac, WI

Thirty persons (including 18 newly appointed CVSOs) attended the meeting in Fond du Lac. It's said this was "evidence of how the movement is growing in Wisconsin to have a full-time service officer as a paid official in every county."

As the CVSO ranks continued to grow during 1936 many considered calling another meeting. Brown CVSO George K. Nitz said, "Although much good was done at the (Fond du Lac) meeting most of the information was of a general nature." Nitz speculated that the state legislature might discuss CVSOs in its upcoming session and thought it would "be a good move on our part to form an association of CVSOs." August C. Rice, La Crosse County, moved that the CVSOs create an organization known as the County Veterans Service Officers Association of Wisconsin. The motion was seconded by Chester J. Beaudin, Oconto County, and carried. They then elected officers for the new organization: George Nitz, Brown County, President; August Rice, Vice President; and Chester Beaudin, Secretary/Treasurer.



Counties still had the option of naming a CVSO until 1946 when, through the efforts of General John Mullen, the Wisconsin legislature passed legislation requiring each county to appoint a CVSO to "render all possible assistance to veterans, their dependents and survivors."

The year 1959 brought about a "tenure" change, making the CVSOs election four years instead of two. Finally, the "indefinite tenure" came into being on May 9, 1967 when Governor Knowles signed SB 128 into law.

In 1973, the Wisconsin legislature passed legislation authorizing a grant of \$3,000 to counties meeting minimum budget and operating standards to provide for increased levels of service to the veterans of those counties. The grant is entirely voluntary and leaves full operating control to the CVSO office with the county board.

Veterans of all eras since WWI have held the office of CVSO and rendered service to their comrades-in-arms, in time of need. If there is one veteran, dependent, or survivor in need, there will be a CVSO to lend an ear, lend a hand and care.

By Dr. Mark D. Van Ells
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Introduction

For the men and women who return from war, the transition from military to civilian life can sometimes be a confusing and traumatic experience. Many veterans come home with both the physical and emotional scars of war. Those who return after long periods away from home — sometimes years — find that their lives have not only been interrupted but irrevocably altered. Over the course of American history, the country's veterans have won several important victories in obtaining readjustment assistance at both the federal and state levels. However, navigating their way through the sea of bureaucracy sometimes associated with these programs has been a challenge to the nation's former servicemen and women.

In Wisconsin, the County Veterans Service Officer (CVSO) is the frontline fighter in the effort to assist veterans in obtaining their hard-won benefit programs. The CVSO is a county employee who manages and coordinates the delivery of veterans' benefits, both federal and state, to eligible recipients. By statute, a CVSO must be a wartime veteran. Among the duties of a CVSO are to counsel veterans about their benefits, assist veterans in applying for and using those programs, and develop outreach mechanisms to make local veterans aware of their benefits options.

CVSOs have attended to the needs of the Badger State's veterans since the Great Depression. From the moment an ex-service person arrives home to the maintenance of their headstones long after they have passed away, every veteran in Wisconsin is the responsibility of a CVSO. The CVSOs, in essence, are serving those who served. What follows is the story of how the Badger State's county service officers have come to play this vital role in Wisconsin's veterans affairs.

The Birth of the CVSO, 1919-1939

The 4.5 million soldiers and sailors who returned from World War I were the largest generation of veterans the nation had yet seen. The sheer size and scope of the readjustment problem that faced the nation led to important policy innovations regarding veterans at both the federal and state levels of government. In Wisconsin, one product of these changes was the County Veterans Service Officer. The Wisconsin CVSO grew out of the benefits counseling services of private veterans' associations, most notably the American Legion. By the 1930s, the volume of service work proved too much for the veterans' groups to handle. In response, veterans turned to government for help, including those of counties. It was out of this grass-roots activism that Wisconsin's CVSO was born.

Upon discharge, America's World War I veterans received a 3 1/2 cent per mile travel allowance and a \$60 discharge bonus. But the veterans needed more than train fare and pocket change to make a successful readjustment to civilian life. World War I veterans, like those of all wars, faced numerous readjustment problems, many of which lingered years after the cessation of hostilities. For example, veterans often returned to find that their former jobs had been taken or had disappeared entirely. Many veterans argued that their service had handicapped their economic competitiveness. While the private soldier earned less than a dollar a day, American war workers saw their wages increase dramatically, sometimes earning five times as much as the doughboy. Disease also bedeviled many ex-soldiers; thousands contracted illnesses like tuberculosis, the symptoms of which could remain dormant until years after discharge. Chemical warfare left many suffering from the long-term effects of mustard gas on the heart and lungs. The impersonal nature and unprecedented scale of slaughter on the Western Front heightened debilitating psychological conditions; many veterans suffered from a condition known as "shell shock." Physical disabilities, such as amputations and blindness, sometimes required treatment for the remainder of a veteran's life.

For assistance, veterans could turn to several places. The federal government offered many plans. The 1917 War Risk Insurance Act provided participating soldiers with up to \$10,000 in life insurance and provisions for "reasonable" medical care and vocational training in case of disability. In 1919 Congress appropriated more than \$9 million — with a later allotment of \$18.6 million — for veterans' hospitals and rehabilitation. In 1921, President Warren G. Harding combined most veterans' programs into one agency, the Veterans Bureau (known as the Veterans Administration after 1930). But federal programs often proved ineffective. Rapid demobilization left the Veterans Bureau unable to process effectively the thousands of claims it received, and corruption exacerbated its problems. Veterans' groups pressed the federal government for better readjustment aid. In 1924 Congress passed the Adjusted Compensation Act (a.k.a. Bonus Bill) which authorized a delayed lump-sum cash payment to World War I veterans to reimburse them for lost economic opportunities, and the World War Veterans Act, which reorganized the Veterans Bureau, codified existing veterans legislation, and extended eligibility for benefits.

State governments also provided readjustment support. Wisconsin provided its veterans with two bonuses as early as 1919, from which they could choose one. Wisconsin legislators authorized cash bonus payments to Badger State veterans, the amount of which was fixed at \$10 per month of service, but not lower than \$50. If he wished, a veteran could instead opt for an education bonus, which provided up to \$1,080 for educational attainment. In 1919, the Legislature also appropriated \$500,000 to aid sick, wounded, and disabled veterans during convalescence periods, and established the Wisconsin Memorial Hospital near Madison to care for veterans with mental disorders. The convalescence aid and the hospital came from the state's general fund, but the bonus payments came from special taxes authorized by a September 1919 state referendum. At the county level, indigent veterans could turn to their local Soldiers and Sailors Relief Commission. Established in 1887 by pressure from Civil War veterans, the commissions provided temporary relief payments to veterans.

Veterans' organizations not only lobbied government for benefits but also assisted individual veterans in their use. While most major organizations maintained a veterans' service system, none matched the size and scope of operations managed by the American Legion, an organization formed by US World War I veterans in Paris in 1919. At the national level, the Rehabilitation Committee acted as a kind of legislative watchdog agency, conducted research on veterans' readjustment problems, and supervised their counterparts in the state organizations, where activity focused on assisting individuals with claims. The American Legion's Department of Wisconsin created a Service Office in May 1922, headed by James F. Burns — himself a victim of chemical warfare on the Western Front. Burns' mission was to keep veterans informed about their benefit options and counsel them on how to best take advantage of the programs. As early as 1921 — even before the creation of his office — he coordinated "flying squads" of Legionnaires to crisscross the state, especially in isolated rural areas, to reach out to Wisconsin's veterans. Burns also supervised the work of the service officers of local Legion posts, who counseled veterans at the grass roots.

In the 10 years following the creation of the Wisconsin American Legion's service operation, Burns' office handled a large volume of claims. Between August 1, 1924, and August 1, 1925, for example, the Wisconsin Legion recorded 4,187 documented cases, worth an estimated \$169,162.60. The actual number of cases was even higher; "no cases have been counted where a man was interviewed when on visits to post(s)," wrote Burns, "I have personally talked to several hundred claimants not counted as claims in the report." The volume of postwar service work soon outstripped the Legion's ability to accommodate the needs of the state's ex-servicemen. As early as 1925 Burns began to feel the pressure of too many cases. "You probably do not realize," he wrote in 1925, "that the claims work is greater today than it was three years ago. More men are in hospitals now than there were in 1919. The war isn't over by any means."

Burns undertook several efforts to improve the services of his office. In 1926, the Wisconsin Legion sought legislative assistance from the state for its overburdened service apparatus, but the Legislature did not respond. Burns found much more success in his drive to reform the Wisconsin American Legion's service system. His main thrust was to

professionalize the post service officer ranks by drawing up a reference manual and creating a training program for post service officers. "I believe," wrote Burns, "that the solution of service work is the instruction of the post service officer. Surely 370 men well informed can do more than one man that has a good deal of knowledge in his head." Burns secured the assistance of Veterans Bureau officials, who agreed to address his training seminar and inform the service officers about claims procedures. The first school took place in Milwaukee in February 1926 and included "technical" discussions of important service topics such as federal programs, burial benefits, claims ratings, guardianship, insurance, record keeping, and Wisconsin's Soldiers and Sailors Relief Commissions. In later years, service officer schools were held in conjunction with departmental conferences and conventions, as well as many regional meetings.

The Great Depression that struck the nation after the 1929 stock market crash only exacerbated the problem of service to Wisconsin's ex-servicemen. Veterans — like other Americans — found themselves out of work and in need of relief. Burns' case load shot up dramatically after the onset of the depression. In the 1928-1929 fiscal year, the Wisconsin Legion Service Office handled 3,880 cases. In 1929-1930 the number nearly tripled to 10,302, with 5,929 new claims alone. The next year's total rose to 13,447 cases, with 7,239 new cases. The service office could not keep up with the increased demand created by the depression. "It is imperative that additional personnel be added to this office," Burns pleaded in 1930, ". . . (in the coming year) this office will be called upon to do claims work beyond its capacity. During the last half of the fiscal year it has been impossible to keep up."

The Soldiers and Sailors Relief Commissions also felt the stress. Many counties saw disbursements to needy veterans rise dramatically after 1930. In Outagamie County, for example, the commission dispensed \$3,448.00 to indigent veterans in the 1927-1928 fiscal year. In the 1929-1930 year, the figure had jumped to \$5,013.26. More commonly, needy veterans had to wait for relief allotments to catch up with economic conditions. In Rock County, expenditures remained steady through the late 1920s at about \$4,000 annually, but then jumped to \$6,168.50 in the 1930-1931 fiscal year. Kenosha County's disbursement rose from \$2,067.46 to \$3,400.43 in that same period. Manitowoc County did not raise veteran relief funds, and by 1933 the commissioners there noted growing unrest among local veterans; "certain groups last winter banded together and threatened to bring concerted action and compel (us) to grant them relief" they reported.

Much of the pressure on the relief commissions came from local Legionnaires. "This post has taken the lead in this past year," reported the service officer for Post 77 of Chippewa Falls in 1931, "in urging to and securing from the County Board, increased appropriations . . . to the Soldiers and Sailors Relief Commission and instructing supervisors and town chairmen in their work to this form of relief." "Since the work of (our) service department and (that) of the Soldiers and Sailors Relief commission are so closely associated," Janesville's Post 205 believed that "the (Rock) County Board should be informed as to the work of our Service Officer," and submitted a report of their service activities in 1932. The Legionnaires reported that they had expended \$1,304.25 from their own funds to assist the veterans in that city.

But it was Fond du Lac's A.M. Trier Post 75 that led the way in local activism for government assistance in veterans' service work. In February 1931, Post 75 founded a "permanent service Office . . . in the Council Chambers of the City Offices," which was utilized by veterans of all wars from as far away as 25 miles. That fall, the Trier Post pursued action at the county level. On November 13, 1931, Legionnaires approached the county board about the possibility of the county hiring "a full-time contact man to enable the County to care for its disabled veterans." The board liked the idea and appropriated the sum of \$1,800 annually to establish the position of "Service Officer" for local veterans. Area veterans' groups hailed the decision. Post 75 sent the Fond du Lac County board a communication thanking it for "action upon the matter of a full-time contact man." When local Legionnaire Leo J. Prommen assumed the position in January 1932, he became not only Wisconsin's first County Veterans Service Officer, but the first one hired in the United States.

Prommen administered the county service office much like Burns operated the Wisconsin's departmental service office. Prommen viewed his CVSO position as an extension of his American Legion service work, going so far as to report that Post 75's service officer's salary was "paid by Fond du Lac County." But while Prommen's activities mirrored those of Burns, the creation of the office was due primarily to local initiative and innovation rather than the actions of state Legion officials. Burns admitted as much in a speech at the Trier Post's "start of the fiscal year hasenpfeffer feed" of November 1932. Burns heaped praise on Prommen and the county board members who were the guests of the Legionnaires. He characterized the Fond du Lac service office as "the best . . . set-up of any in the state," and said that "much of the credit for this achievement rests on the shoulders of the Legion service officer, but in this county a big share of the credit goes to the county board of supervisors for the creation of the county service office for the care of all veterans."

In scattered fashion, other counties around the state created CVSO positions. In Sheboygan County, Jacob L. Ochs, Legionnaire, and soldier's relief commissioner, assumed the new position after the county board created it in the fall of 1933. "Immediately after this office was established," wrote Ochs in his first annual report in November 1934, "activities were started by attending the regular meetings of Service Men throughout the County and giving talks, stressing the importance of Claims, and urging the men to report any cases in their respective community that needed assistance." The Wisconsin American Legion was often instrumental in creating county service offices. For example, in November 1934 Outagamie County Legionnaires went before the county board there to propose the creation of a county service office, and even recommended a local Legion man for the position, Edward Lutz. Four days later, the Outagamie county board approved the Legion's request and hired Lutz, explaining that the service officer "would be a direct benefit to the taxpayers as well as a valuable service to the veterans of this county."

While local posts confronted their county governments, the Wisconsin American Legion explored statewide legislative options to alleviate the crisis in veterans' service. By early 1935, the Wisconsin Legion's Legislative Committee had drafted a proposal to authorize every county to create the position of CVSO. Action at the Capitol followed. On April 9, 1935, State Senator Morley Kelly of Fond du Lac introduced Senate Bill 305, a proposal requiring counties to hire a service officer. Amended to make the position voluntary rather than mandatory, the legislation passed the Senate. On May 9, SB 305 went to the assembly, and soon thereafter passed by a vote of 64 to 16. On May 24, 1935, Wisconsin Governor Philip F. La Follette signed SB 305 into law. The legislation stipulated that the officer be a veteran, whose duties would be to "to advise with all veterans of wars, residents of the county . . . relative to any complaint made or problem submitted by them to render him such assistance as, in his opinion, he may render." While the position was not mandatory, it nevertheless created basic standards for the position. In counties that opted to hire a CVSO, veterans had another person to whom they could turn if they needed assistance in obtaining benefits.

Interest in the establishment of CVSOs increased dramatically after the passage of the 1935 legislation. At the fall sessions of county boards across the Badger State, the subject of a CVSO was much discussed, and a spate of counties created service officer positions. The pattern of American Legion involvement continued as well. Brown County appointed Legion member George Nitz as its full-time CVSO after "the advantages of the position were pointed out by Legion leaders." In Portage County, the board discussed CVSO qualifications with local Legionnaires and the county's soldier's relief commission before hiring local Legion member Reuben B. Lewis. After lobbying from the Legion's Waukesha County Council, Raleigh Thurwachter was hired for the position in that county. Speaking before representatives of Waukesha County posts, Leo Prommen personally thanked the Waukesha County Legionnaires for their successful work.

By the end of 1935, nearly 20 of Wisconsin's 71 counties had hired a CVSO. Late that year, Prommen organized a meeting of the state's new county service officers, as well as anyone statewide interested in establishing the position in their county. The Wisconsin American Legion strongly encouraged posts in counties without CVSOs, still in the majority,

to send a representative to the meeting. The gathering took place at the Retlaw Hotel in Fond du Lac on December 30, 1935. Thirty persons — including 18 newly-appointed CVSOs — attended. Three Fond du Lac County Legionnaires, including US Senator (and former American Legion State Commander) F. Ryan Duffy gave introductory talks, and State Senator Morley Kelly explained the 1935 law he had drafted. Also speaking were James Burns who explained federal benefits, Albert Freeman of the Wisconsin Adjutant General's Office who discussed state benefit programs, and Prommen, who detailed the operations of his Fond du Lac office. This meeting, claimed the Legion, was "evidence of how the movement is growing in Wisconsin to have a full-time service officer as a paid official in every county."

The Wisconsin American Legion stepped up its agitation for the hiring of CVSOs in 1936. "Such satisfactory results have come from the county service officer plan," reported the Badger Legionnaire that June, that the Department Judge Advocate Henry Oakley "urges that Posts get busy" and lobby for CVSO positions in their counties. Oakley made clear that holding the position of post service officer did not preclude one from being a CVSO and stated that department headquarters would assist Legionnaires in establishing the position in any way it could. "Experience in counties where they already have a county service officer shows," said the Badger Legionnaire, "that they bring into the county much more than the salary paid to such an officer."

Over the course of 1936 several other counties hired CVSOs. Again, the Legion was instrumental in the creation of these positions. In May 1936, Eau Claire's Post 53 discussed the creation of a CVSO in their county and appeared before the county board there with a letter asking the supervisors to create the position. That fall, the Eau Claire County board approved the hiring of a service officer by a vote of 25-1. On November 14, 1936, Legion men in Calumet County appeared before that county board to request that a service officer be hired there to counsel the county's 629 veterans, a request the board honored by a vote of 18-2. Two days later, the relief commission in neighboring Manitowoc County successfully "joined with other serviceman's groups" in the area to urge the board there to hire a CVSO and help "relieve" the pressure on them. By the beginning of 1937, the total number of CVSOs had reached 30.

As employees of their respective counties, the CVSOs were essentially isolated, unconnected islands; they had no coordinating organization and no pathways of communication between them other than the American Legion. Those CVSOs who attended the 1935 Fond du Lac meeting found it useful for disseminating information about veterans' services, and in helping them connect with their counterparts in other areas of the state. As the CVSO ranks grew during 1936, many service officers considered calling another such meeting in late that year. "Although much good was done at (the Fond du Lac) meeting," argued Brown CVSO George K. Nitz, "most of the information was of a general nature." Nitz also speculated that the Legislature might discuss the CVSOs in its upcoming sessions and thought it would "be a good move on our part to form an organization to protect our own interests." Nitz organized another meeting for late 1936. The meeting convened in the Brown County Courthouse in Green Bay on December 29, and the delegates founded the County Veterans Service Officer's Association of Wisconsin.

Soon after organizing the CVSOs began to integrate themselves into the network of services to Wisconsin's veterans independently of the American Legion. For example, the CVSO Association's bi-annual conferences functioned much like the American Legion's service officer schools, except that they became a forum for all Wisconsin veterans' service groups. The agenda for the September 1937 CVSO Association meeting, for example, included joint meetings with soldier's relief commissioners, the directors of two of Wisconsin's federal Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals, representatives from the Adjutant General's Office, and the state service officers of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), as well as James Burns of the American Legion. In early 1938, the Association invited the department service officers from the American Legion, the DAV, and the VFW to attend their meetings "for the purpose of counsel on questions that may arise of the floor." CVSO Association meetings became important clearing houses of service information not only for the CVSOs, but for all of those who attended the meetings.

The CVSO Association also began to network with other county officials. The CVSO Association often held joint meetings with their cousin soldier's relief commissioners. But the CVSO Association's independence from the American Legion was perhaps best demonstrated by its 1938 affiliation with the Wisconsin County Boards Association, a statewide organization of county officials designed to promote and protect county government in the Badger State. Representatives of the County Boards Association spoke before CVSO association meetings, and their news magazine, *Wisconsin Counties*, often included news of CVSO activities.

For assistance in obtaining their readjustment benefits, World War I veterans turned to veterans' organizations, most notably the American Legion. In Wisconsin, American Legion service officers worked hard to serve the state's veterans, but the multitude of readjustment problems, combined with the Great Depression, forced the Legion to look to government for help. Legionnaires found a sympathetic ear at the county level. At Legion urging, a few Wisconsin counties in the early 1930s created the position of County Veterans Service Officer. After state legislation in 1935 provided standards for the position, many more counties hired service officers. To coordinate their activities, the service officers formed the CVSO Association of Wisconsin in 1936. By the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on December 7, 1941, 59 of Wisconsin's 71 counties had hired CVSOs.

The Critical Decade of the 1940s

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, plunged the United States into the Second World War, the largest, most costly, and most deadly conflict in human history. By the end of the war more than 16 million men and women had entered the United States armed forces, and 400,000 Americans were dead. The discharge of this enormous force caused watershed changes in the ways Americans at all levels of government dealt with returning veterans. Wisconsin, long the initiator of innovative veterans' legislation, continued its leadership after World War II. The 1940s was the critical decade in the evolution of Wisconsin's County Veterans Service Officers. When it began the CVSO was a relatively minor player in Wisconsin's veterans' affairs. But when it was over the CVSO had become the point person in Wisconsin's new veterans' service system.

World War II had an immediate impact on the CVSOs. "Boys from this present war are beginning to come back," a representative of Madison's VA hospital told the CVSOs in May 1942, "and (our) hospitals are now getting some of the boys from this war as patients." The county service officer was among the first officials a Wisconsin World War II veteran met once he or she returned home. By November 1943, the Barron County service officer had recorded 138 discharges for World War II veterans. That same month, the Brown County service officer reported that his office handled four or five World War II cases a day. Throughout the war years, a virtual parade of different officials from various governmental agencies and veterans' organizations spoke to CVSO Association meetings, helping CVSOs keep up to date on issues and developments related to World War II veterans. At the 1943 fall conference, for example, no fewer than six guests addressed the CVSOs concerning the new veterans, including several talks by federal, state, and American Legion officials.

Overall, the impact of World War II on the County Veterans Service Officers can be summarized in one word: growth. More than 300,000 Wisconsinites served during World War II, and when all these men and women finally returned home the Badger State's veteran population had more than doubled. The expansion of the county service offices took two basic forms. First, there was a continued expansion in the number of CVSOs. Second, the workload of the county service officers grew precipitously. The increased demand for veterans' services fostered significant changes in the work of the County Veterans Service Officers, but the specific ways in which the CVSO institution evolved owed much to the actions of the service officers themselves.

The growth in the number of CVSOs occurred at two levels. First, much activity occurred in the county governments. During the war counties planned for the postwar period, and in the few counties that had not yet hired a service officer establishing the position was a top priority. At the same time, local veterans' groups continued to press their counties to establish county service officer positions. In November 1943, for example, local Legionnaires successfully pressed the Dunn County board to employ a CVSO. To select a service officer, an advisory commission composed of "representatives from war veterans' organizations of Dunn County" assisted the county board in its search.

In Kenosha County, the position resulted from an even broader community movement. In January 1944, the soldier's relief commissioners recommended hiring a CVSO to their county board. Not only did local veterans' groups support the measure, but the board received communications from organizations such as the Kenosha Manufacturers Association and the Factory Superintendents League favoring the proposal. In a March editorial, the Kenosha News also came out in favor of the position. Noting how Kenosha was one of the few counties not to have a CVSO, the editorial claimed that counties with functioning service officers "have found that it is not only of benefit to the veteran," but to the population, by bringing state and federal dollars into the county and "preventing (veterans') cases from becoming serious community problems." Faced with such widespread backing, the Kenosha County Board created the position in May. By the end of 1944, 65 of Wisconsin's 71 counties employed a service officer.

State government officials planned for the peace as well. In 1943 the Wisconsin Legislature created the Postwar Rehabilitation Trust Fund, administered by the newly created Veterans Recognition Board, to provide aid to World War II veterans. But the board added yet another agency to the list of those serving Wisconsin's veterans. Pushed forward by the Wisconsin American Legion, state officials began formulating plans to consolidate all veterans' services under one agency. Seeking to increase their role in Wisconsin's veterans' service system, the CVSOs entered the debate over reorganization. By the fall of 1943, the CVSO Association had developed its vision of the postwar service officer. The association proposed to make the position mandatory in every county, to have the CVSOs designated the official contact representatives of the proposed state veterans' agency, and for counties to receive state subsidies for service operations.

In November, two service officers explained their position before a special legislative committee discussing the reorganization of veterans' services. The CVSOs cited their experience as veterans and knowledge of veterans' affairs. "We're in a better position to handle (veterans)," claimed George K. Nitz of Brown County, because "we know these people and we know their problems. Let's not chase the veterans around but help them in their own communities." Justifying the need for a state veterans' service subsidy to counties, Nitz argued that "a good officer can save . . . money by bringing in more federal money for eligible veterans." The CVSOs found many allies in county government circles. By the end of 1943 the Wisconsin County Boards Association came out in favor of the CVSO proposal. In January 1944 the Milwaukee County Board passed a resolution asking the Legislature to integrate the CVSOs and the soldier's relief commissions make them the "field representatives" of the new state veterans' agency.

However, the 1943 consolidation plan met considerable resistance. Some, especially in the Adjutant General's Office (which handled many veterans' programs), argued that the existing service system functioned well already, that consolidation would unnecessarily duplicate services, and that the new state veterans' agency would "interfere with existing agencies." Debate over consolidation was contentious and many key portions of the original proposals, such as a state soldiers' bonus and integration of the state veterans' home under the new department, were removed. The CVSOs became another casualty in the debate. When the first consolidation plan reached the floor of the Legislature in late January, it did not include the CVSOs. Reluctance to centralize veterans' affairs too much and a belief that the existing service officer system functioned well enough already led the State Assembly to vote down a proposed amendment to make the CVSOs "appointed representatives of the (new) state department" in January 1944.

The defeat of the amendment outraged those who supported CVSO consolidation. The Green Bay Press-Gazette, for example, claimed that the Legislature had "cut its cloth too short." "Presumably," the Press Gazette complained, "the veterans' recognition board is going to continue sitting in the capitol while wounded veterans in Wisconsin cities seek out their relief directors for meal tickets and room rent." To reassure the CVSOs that they would not be "squeezed out" of the new veterans' service system, several state officials attended the CVSO Association's 1944 winter meeting. State Senate Majority Leader John W. Byrnes, for example, told the service officers that due to their proximity to returning veterans, they were the "logical" persons to administer assistance to veterans. Leo M. Levenick, director of the Veterans' Recognition Board, pledged that his agency would "never sanction a field force" since it would interfere with CVSOs. The remarks mollified the service officers and those who supported them. The Appleton Post-Crescent characterized the remarks as "reassuring to many persons who have been compelled to wonder . . . just how the agency quartered in the capitol could be of any real assistance to the new war veterans."

Ultimately, the 1944 consolidation bill fell victim to a pocket veto by Governor Walter S. Goodland, who described the measure as "premature" in the face of pending federal veterans' legislation and believed the bill might "impair, rather than improve" Wisconsin's veterans' service system. A veterans' service consolidation measure appeared in the next legislative session. The CVSOs resurrected their previous proposal for inclusion into the state system. With World War II rapidly drawing to a close, the 1945 consolidation passed that May. The law created the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA), consolidating almost every state agency handling veterans, including the state veterans' home. Lawmakers also created the Board of Veterans Affairs to oversee the new agency. While the 1945 consolidation did not make the CVSOs part of the WDVA, it did make the position of service officer mandatory in every county and abolished the soldier's relief commissions, replacing them with a County Veterans Service Commission to oversee veterans' affairs at the county level. In addition, the WDVA — true to Levenick's promise of 1944 — did not employ local contact representatives, making the CVSOs the defacto field agents of the new agency. Thus, service officer activism produced a partial victory; only state funds for performing work for the WDVA were not forthcoming.

Federal programs after World War II were much more comprehensive than they were for returning doughboys. The Selective Service Act of 1940, for example, provided those men conscripted into service with certain re-employment rights. Public Law 16, passed on March 24, 1943, provided vocational rehabilitation to disabled veterans. But by far the most important federal program for returning soldiers was Public Law 346, the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the GI Bill of Rights. The GI Bill contained provisions for three key areas of veterans' readjustment. First, the act assisted veterans in finding employment and provided temporary benefits for those who could not. Unemployed veterans could receive monthly checks of \$20 for one year and join what the former servicemen jokingly referred to as the "52-20 Club." To purchase homes, business property, or farms and farm equipment, the GI Bill also provided loans of up to \$2,000 at no greater than 4 percent interest to qualified veterans. But by far the most famous provision of the bill was for education. Veterans who enrolled in a college, university, or other approved institution or program could receive a subsistence allowance and up to \$500 annually for tuition and books for two years of study. Spurring the growth of the nation's economy, its educational establishment, and its sprawling suburbs, the GI Bill greatly aided not only the returning veteran, but the entire country.

Wisconsin also offered benefit programs to its returning GIs, concentrating in the areas of medical, economic, and education assistance. For example, in 1945 the state instituted economic assistance loans of up to \$750 to qualified veterans. In 1947, lawmakers created the Veterans Housing Authority, replaced in 1949 with the Veterans Home Loan Program, to provide assistance to veterans in building or renovating their homes. The state also provided emergency and study grants which nicely supplemented federal GI Bill benefits. The Board of Veterans Affairs appointed liaison officers to other state agencies, among them the Industrial Commission, the University of Wisconsin Extension, and the Board of Vocational and Adult Education, to ensure that those agencies addressed the needs and concerns of the veterans. Wisconsin mobilized its energies and resources to assist the returning soldier in an unprecedented manner.

"The Wisconsin plan for veterans of World War II," bragged the 1946 Wisconsin Blue Book, "is by far the most comprehensive program sponsored by any of the 48 states."

Due to increases in both veterans and benefits, CVSOs experienced massive increases in workload. Precise statistics on the CVSO workload are impossible to obtain. As employees of individual counties, service officers were not subject to any kind of uniform reporting procedures. However, existing numbers reveal one trend is very clearly. Virtually every county service officer reported vast increases in both the number of contacts with veterans and the monetary value of benefits veterans obtained through their offices.

Most counties saw a sharp rise in workload during and immediately after the war, with a decline stabilizing well above prewar workloads. In Manitowoc County, for example, the service officer interviewed on average 2,700 veterans a year between 1940 and 1942. World War II increased those figures dramatically. Between 1943 and 1945 the number of interviews increased from 2,874 to 3,848, and in 1946 skyrocketed to 11,339. Thereafter, the number of interviews declined. In 1947 the number of interviews fell to 9,154, and between 1948 and 1950 averaged 4,500 annually, 67 percent above the first three years of the decade. The estimated monetary value of benefits brought to that county showed a similar pattern. Averaging \$29,000 annually between 1940 and 1942, the numbers rose precipitously, to \$62,910 in 1943, to \$379,596 in 1944. In 1945 the monetary value peaked at \$1,073,974 before falling. Between 1948 and 1950, the Manitowoc CVSO estimated that his office brought on average \$206,000 state and federal dollars into the county each year, a six-fold increase from the 1940-1942 average. Some CVSOs reported continuous increases throughout the decade. The Sauk County service officer reported an increase of 106 percent in the monetary value of benefits between 1942 and 1946, but after that continued to report increases, the 1950 total being more than 200 percent higher than that of 1942. In Barron County, the service officer reported a 60 percent increase in the monetary value of benefits to county veterans between 1948 and 1950 alone.

As the workload increased, so did service office staff sizes and pay rates. In March 1943, the Manitowoc County board approved \$195 for emergency "stenographic help" because of "increased activities caused by the present war." In the fall of 1944, the county board approved the hiring of an additional clerical assistant to the CVSO, and the following fall — two months after V-J Day — approved two more positions. In 1945, the Milwaukee County board authorized an additional stenographer for its service officer. Many county boards awarded raises to their CVSOs and service office workers. In Brown County, George Nitz received two pay raises before the end of 1945, both with the unanimous approval of the county board. In 1942, the county board gave the service officer's chief stenographer a promotion, and in 1944 voted to raise the pay of all office workers except the CVSO.

With veterans returning home, many CVSOs urged their county boards to hire a World War II veteran assistant, often with success. "There is a much urgent need for an assistant," the Brown County Veterans Service Commission told the board in November 1945. In making the request, the commission noted that only 2,369 of Brown County's 10,000 World War II veterans had returned and told the board that "we leave it to your imagination to consider the future work involved in this office..." The Brown County board approved the position. World War II veterans also became full-service officers soon after the war. As early as 1944, three World War II veterans were among the 16 applicants for the newly created position in Kenosha County, which eventually went to a World War I veteran. The first World War II veteran hired as full CVSO was Jack Luban in Milwaukee County, the state's most populous, in 1946. The following year the second most populous county, Dane, hired World War II veteran Wesley Schwoegler as its CVSO.

In response to such dramatic expansion, the CVSO Association established its own annual training program, known as the University Institute, or "short course." CVSO Association meetings had long been clearinghouses of veterans' service information, but the changes in staff size and benefit programs outstripped the abilities of the association meetings to serve veterans effectively. The first short course took place at the University of Wisconsin campus on May 26-29, 1947.

The participants divided into five workshops of practical interest to CVSOs: legal affairs, office management, publicity interviewing and counseling, and insurance. Each workshop drew up recommendations and wrote reports to help their fellow CVSOs deal more effectively with veterans.

Capturing the essence of the University Institute was a speech given by Taylor County CVSO Oscar N. Markus regarding office management. In describing how a service office should be managed, Markus expressed the basic philosophy behind the purpose of the CVSOs: offering the most effective yet sensitive treatment for veterans and their concerns. Markus began by exhorting his fellow CVSOs to "keep the faith" with their comrades lost in war and their fellow veterans in need. No matter what is done," he explained, ". . . to assist veterans in becoming re-established in society, rehabilitation will be a failure unless the County Veterans Service Officer recognizes and meets his responsibility. The veteran cannot eat citations or medals, and the only way to enable him to eat properly, to work properly, to repair his disabilities, and to put him back into a useful place in our social system is by being prepared to secure for him the maximum benefits he is entitled to under existing . . . laws."

The County Veterans Service Office, Markus claimed, was the "only effective existing . . . instrument" available in Wisconsin to help veterans properly. Markus broadly defined the term "office" as more than just "the space (one) might occupy," but also one's "mental attitude," which he believed was "perhaps the most important part." If a CVSO "makes a conscientious effort to understand and analyze the individual veteran's problem," Markus concluded, "not only to assist the veteran temporarily, but for the veteran's permanent rehabilitation . . . (and) will always cooperate with existing agencies, ever remembering that he is the employee of the veteran, we will be keeping the faith."

Because of the success of the first University Institute such meetings became annual events, held each spring on the university campus. Succeeding short courses grew in size and scope and remained an important forum for the CVSOs to exchange and disseminate vital information about veterans' service with other experts and among their own ranks. The 1948 institute, for example, saw the number of workshops expanded to eight, and included new topics such as correspondence, psychology, and public speaking. By the late 1940s, the workshops had become even more specialized. A representative from the Allis Chalmers Company presented a session on interviewing and counseling, and two doctors gave lectures on psychiatry.

The CVSO University Institute won praise from outside the ranks of the CVSOs. Most laudatory of the institute was A.J. Thelen, Secretary of the County Board Association. Addressing the CVSO Association's 1949 fall conference, Thelen lauded the service officers for their "pioneering in the field of institutes for county officer's organizations," and declared the CVSO Association "one of the most important" such groups in Wisconsin. The County Board's Association's magazine Wisconsin Counties also praised the University Institute as a model for training programs for other county government officials, such as the newly organized County Treasurers Institute. "These institute activities all tend to carry out one of the purposes of our association . . .," said Wisconsin Counties, "namely — 'the furtherance of Better County Government.'"

The events of the 1940s transformed the role of the CVSOs in Wisconsin's efforts to assist the readjustment of its war veterans. At the beginning of the decade, counties were not required to hire a CVSO, and no more than half did so. But World War II led to a massive reorganization of Wisconsin's veterans' service agencies, culminating in the creation of the WDVA in 1945. Legislation that year also made the position of CVSO mandatory in every county. In the latter half of the 1940s, more than 300,000 new veterans returned to Wisconsin. The CVSOs not only had to guide these men and women through the various benefit programs, but also continue to assist the generations of past veterans, with their differing and equally complex needs. By the end of the 1940s, the modern Wisconsin CVSO had emerged — a mandatory, highly-effective office in the realm of veterans' service and advocacy.

The Cold War Years

In the decades after 1950, Wisconsin's County Veterans Service Officers continued to effectively serve the diverse community of veterans in the Badger State. In performing their work, the CVSOs showed much consistency with their previous efforts. Service officers continued to counsel veterans about their benefits and act as advocates for ex-servicemen and women. However, changing situations also demonstrated the flexibility of the CVSO system. In serving the needs of still more generations of veterans after World War II and in adjusting to the increased prominence of veterans' affairs in the state's political matters, the CVSO showed a capacity for creative and effective innovation. If the 1940s proved the effectiveness of the CVSO system, the decades after 1950 showed it to be durable as well.

After World War II, the United States became entangled in a "Cold War" with the Soviet Union that lasted more than 40 years. Occasionally, the Cold War flared up, most notably in Korea (1950-1953) and Vietnam (1959-1975). Veterans of these wars also qualified for various federal readjustment benefits. In 1952, Congress passed the Veterans Readjustment Assistance Act, popularly known as the Korean GI Bill, which provided Korean War veterans with unemployment, education, and loan benefits, but at significantly lower rates than their World War II counterparts. Vietnam veterans also experienced a decline in readjustment benefit options. On the federal level, Congress passed two GI Bill-type acts, one in 1966 (amended in 1970), the other in 1972, providing Vietnam-era veterans with education and housing assistance but at levels that failed to keep pace with the economic realities of the 1960s and 1970s.

Wisconsin, traditionally a leader in programs for its veterans, generally maintained but did not expand its level of commitment to Korean and Vietnam veterans. Badger State lawmakers enacted no specific legislation for Korean War vets but included them in existing programs. Wisconsin also extended eligibility to Vietnam-era personnel, and even expanded the scope of some programs, but many of Wisconsin's Vietnam veterans were still unhappy with their benefits and oftentimes did not bother to apply for them. To reach out to disaffected Vietnam veterans, the WDVA created the WisVet program in 1972. By 1974, WisVet counselors in the field worked with 9,000 Vietnam veterans annually. As a grass-roots counseling service, WisVet activities resembled those of the CVSOs, and indeed several WisVet counselors went on to become county service officers.

As the population of ex-military personnel grew during the Cold War Era, veterans' affairs became a key political issue, in Wisconsin and across the nation. The CVSO Association used its political clout and savvy to act as an advocate for the state's veterans in the political arena. One issue of particular concern to veterans in the 1950s and 1960s was housing. An examination of the CVSOs' role in changing the Secondary Mortgage Loan Program is illustrative. In 1950, an 11 member CVSO delegation met with Governor Oscar Rennebohm to discuss ways to liberalize the law so that more veterans could qualify for it. The CVSOs complained that the terms of the loan were so strict that only 300 of the state's more than 300,000 eligible veterans had applied for it, and the \$10,000 property value limit failed to consider local conditions. The Legislature subsequently raised the property value cap to \$15,000. The CVSOs did not achieve the increase by themselves, but rather worked in concert with other veterans' groups. Neither did the service officers triumph in all their political endeavors in veterans' advocacy; attempts to secure a bonus payment for World War II and Korean War veterans, for example, failed. But by the early 1960s, the CVSOs had become important players in the politics of veterans' affairs in the Badger State.

Much political activity also focused on securing a stronger place for CVSOs in the state's veterans' service system. After having established themselves as critical players in Wisconsin's veterans' affairs, the CVSO Association sought legislation securing tenure of office. In July 1956, the association's Legislative Committee recommended that the state law regarding CVSO terms of office be changed to extend the two-year period to an "indefinite term." The CVSOs' plan met opposition from the state County Boards Association which, according to some CVSOs, simply feared losing some of its political power. In February 1957, the Legislative Committee met with State Senator Leo O'Brien of Green Bay, chairman

of the Veterans Affairs Committee. O'Brien drafted the proposed SB 583, providing CVSOs with continuity of tenure. O'Brien held hearings on the bill on May 29, 1957, attended by CVSO representatives from 26 counties. However, also at the hearing was A.J. Thelen of the County Boards Association, who successfully prevented the bill from going to the senate floor.

In October 1957, a three-man liaison committee met with Thelen and the County Board Association's advisory council in Superior to discuss SB 583. Thelen and the advisory council counseled the CVSOs to "proceed somewhat cautiously" with their tenure proposals, warning that lawmakers might attach amendments to the bill that could potentially bring CVSOs under state civil service laws, and thus remove them from the county level. The meeting seemed to ease the tensions between the CVSOs and County Board Associations; "your liaison committee found the Advisory Council and Mr. Thelen most cooperative," reported the committee, "and granted us as much time as we wished in discussing our problems." The liaison committee suggested scaling back the original proposal and sought an increase in tenure from two to four years, a suggestion the CVSOs approved. This strategy was a success; in 1959 the Legislature passed, and the governor signed, a bill extending CVSO tenure from two to four years. The CVSOs viewed the bill as a "first step," however, and continued to seek more secure terms of office.

Another major concern for many CVSOs was the establishment of a standard pay scale and state aid to help fund their offices. Many CVSOs felt inadequately compensated for their work. Some counties — especially the state's smallest and poorest — only employed part-time service officers; many full-time CVSOs also felt underpaid. As early as 1938, CVSOs discussed state aid to their offices. The issue re-emerged after World War II. In 1954, Herman Owen of Barron County suggested state legislation requiring counties to hire full-time CVSOs, and that the state set minimum pay requirements. By the early 1960s, the movement had picked up steam. An August 1963 resolution called for legislation establishing a minimum salary of \$5,000, and "due to the work the service officer is doing with State and Federal agencies," financial aid from the state. "The Veteran Service Officers are subject to call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week," the resolution pointed out, yet "many counties (are) paying less than a living wage" even to full-time service officers. Proponents of the idea faced some resistance from fellow CVSOs. The subject evoked a "spirited discussion" at a 1964 meeting. Herman Owen complained that "we have got CVSOs that are darn well paid and don't want to monkey around with this thing at all." Nevertheless, the committee went ahead with the formulation of a plan.

By the fall of 1964 the Legislative Committee, after polling fellow CVSOs statewide about their salaries and exploring various options with WDVA Director John Moses, developed a concrete CVSO reimbursement proposal. Under the plan, Wisconsin's counties were divided into four categories based on the "equalized assessed value" of that county's proportion of property to the state's total. Each category was then assigned a minimum salary by the Board of Veterans Affairs. Those counties containing less than one-fourth of one percent of the state's equalized assessed value would be eligible to have half of the CVSOs' salary paid by the state. By June 1965, the CVSO Association approved the plan in a mail vote, and the proposal was then sent to the state senate, where it became SB 521. The painstaking formulation of SB 521 marked an important stage in the political development of the CVSO Association. "To the best of my knowledge," reported Kenosha CVSO Calvin Hewitt, "this was the first time we originated, resolved, and supported a 'money bill.'" Unfortunately for the CVSOs, the attempt was unsuccessful. By mid-1966, the senate had recessed with the SB 521 languishing in the Joint Finance Committee without any plans for a public hearing. But like the fight over CVSO tenure, the subject of state aid to CVSOs only lay dormant.

During the late 1960s, the CVSOs participated in one of the stormiest political controversies of the decade. In 1965, the legislature created the Temporary Commission on the Reorganization of the Administrative Branch, headed by businessman William R. Kellett and known as the Kellett Commission, to explore ways to reorganize the nearly 100 agencies in the state's executive branch of government. Among the targets for agency consolidation was the WDVA, which the Kellett Commission proposed at various times to be merged with social service agencies. The proposal

shocked and angered many in the Badger State's organized veterans' community, including the CVSOs and their association.

The CVSO Association created a "watch dog" special committee soon after the establishment of the Kellett Commission, and in June 1966 issued its first report. The committee reported that it "had information" that the Kellett Commission would propose a merger of the WDVA with the Department of Public Welfare or a new Department of Health and Welfare. The CVSO Association claimed that the "state's obligation to its war veterans would be compromised" by the measure. Noting how "responsible legislators created (the CVSOs and the WDVA with) unique functions because of the unique condition of war," the CVSOs adopted a resolution stating that the "long established precedence and moral commitment which inspired the creation of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs demand that it NOT be assimilated, associated, or subordinated with any other agency of government." The association then pledged itself give "suitable opposition" to any change in the "independent character and function" of the WDVA.

With this statement, the CVSO Association joined other state veterans' organizations, most notably the American Legion, in opposing WDVA consolidation. Probably because of pressure from veterans' groups, the next draft of the Kellett Commission recommendations maintained the independence of the WDVA. However, the consolidation proposal mysteriously reappeared in the sixth draft of the commission's recommendations issued in early 1967. The CVSO Association again went into action. In February, the association held a special meeting to discuss the issue. The CVSOs decided to read a statement to the Joint Finance Committee on February 10 protesting the measure. Again, the WDVA consolidation proposal was withdrawn, and this time did not reappear. When the Reorganization Act implementing the Kellett Commission's recommendations became law in July 1967, the WDVA retained its independence, due in part to the work of the CVSOs.

Securing tenure for CVSOs remained a top legislative priority. In 1966 the service officers passed a resolution seeking legislative action to gain indefinite tenure for CVSOs. This time, the CVSOs' hard work and persistence paid off. Flanked by seven CVSOs and the bill's co-sponsors, Governor Warren P. Knowles signed SB 128, the CVSO Tenure Bill, into law on May 9, 1967. The tenure act was the biggest feather yet in the legislative committee's cap, and combined with the successful consolidation fight, signaled the emergence of the CVSO Association as a group with which politicians had to reckon. At the 1967 fall conference in Hayward, the association moved to give its Legislative Committee a "rising vote of thanks . . . for the work they had done during the past year"

With its recent political successes, the legislative committee in the spring of 1967 renewed its quest for CVSO grants-to-counties legislation, which had been blocked in 1965. However, the subsidy proposal continued to generate controversy inside and outside the CVSO ranks. In 1967, the Legislative Committee undertook a major effort to determine why the 1965 proposal had failed, and to address those problems. In June 1968, the committee held a special meeting of the "Legislative Committee as a Whole" at Platteville, consisting of some 40 CVSOs, to discuss the subsidy proposal and address concerns about it. First, the committee reported that the death of the bill in the Joint Finance Committee was due largely to opposition from the state's personnel bureau, which objected to the measure's lack of standards for counties to meet to qualify for the subsidy. The committee addressed this concern by suggesting that the creation of standards would be the responsibility of the WDVA — the distributor of the funds — and need not be written into any legislation.

The Legislative Committee also identified four primary reasons for CVSO opposition to the proposal and offered rebuttals of each. First, some CVSOs apparently believed that increasing the salary of CVSOs might make the position "more desirable," and some long-serving service officers might be forced from office by "someone with more political influence with the County Board." The committee argued that the 1967 CVSO Tenure Bill would eliminate that potential. Second, some complained that larger counties would derive no benefit from the measure. The committee pointed out

that all counties would be eligible for grants, and if local budgetary constraints kept a CVSO in a large county from meeting established standards they too would be eligible for funds. Third, some CVSOs objected to taking money earmarked for veterans' programs and putting it "in our own pockets," an assertion the committee countered by arguing that the improvement in CVSO services would itself be of "direct benefit to the veterans" of Wisconsin. Finally, some CVSOs feared a loss of control to the WDVA in Madison, a scenario "which was entirely unacceptable to many members." The committee pointed out that the subsidy program would be voluntary, and a CVSO need not give up any independence, though it was unreasonable to believe that the WDVA would simply give money to the CVSOs without some assurance that certain standards would be met.

During 1968 and 1969, the Legislative Committee created various formulas for CVSO grants, based largely on the 1965 equalized valuation formula. The committee also drafted proposed legislation, and CVSO representatives appeared before legislative committees three times in 1968 concerning a CVSO grant. Nevertheless, CVSO subsidy legislation continued to elude the service officers. Failing to gain passage in 1969, the CVSOs launched subsequent attempts in 1970 and 1972, but these also failed. Finally, in Chapter 90, Laws of 1973, a CVSO grants-to-counties bill became law, providing up to \$3,000 for counties with full-time CVSOs.

In the mid-1970s, another political storm raged over the reorganization of state government. This controversy again involved the WDVA, and thus the CVSOs joined the fray. Governor Patrick J. Lucey's 1974 proposal to give the WDVA cabinet-level status renewed fears among the state's organized veterans — among them the CVSOs — that the agency would become a political pawn and lose some of its valued independence. In a 1976 position statement on the matter, for example, the CVSOs argued that cabinet status for the WDVA would make "Wisconsin Veterans Programs . . . vulnerable to partisan political control . . . (and) could signal the end of our state Veterans Programs which are ranked among the finest in all the states in our Republic." The CVSOs sent the statement to all sitting state legislators and candidates for those seats, "so that the feelings of the County Veterans Service Officers will be known."

Despite the opposition of the CVSOs and organized veterans' groups, the state legislature passed a bill in early 1977 that gave the WDVA cabinet status. That May, the Board of Veterans Affairs, under pressure from Governor Lucey, fired WDVA Secretary John Moses, and replaced him with a selection more amenable to the governor. Judging from CVSO Association meeting minutes, service officers maintained official silence on the matter. However, one CVSO later recalled that "the state's veterans' organizations and CVSOs provided substantial financial and moral support to (Moses) in his legal battle with the Board" to recover his job. In 1978, a Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling reinstated Moses as WDVA Secretary. Four members of the Board resigned in protest of the ruling. The CVSOs planned a mock "memorial service" for the former Board members at a May 1978 meeting.

But the political battle over proposed cuts in veterans' programs in the 1985-1987 state budget marked the coming of age of the CVSO Association in state politics. WDVA Secretary John B. Ellery expressed confidence that his agency would "win more than it would lose" in budget negotiations over the cuts. In February 1985, Ellery told the CVSOs that his agency was "honchoing the legislative aspect," and expected the "vigorous debate" over proposed reductions to continue. But the service officers, who met with veterans daily, were dismayed with the cuts the WDVA eventually accepted, believing they would have a devastating effect on veterans' welfare.

CVSO anger over the budget proposals erupted at a February 22, 1985 Board of Veterans Affairs meeting. Joseph F. Klein of Brown County claimed that all of Wisconsin's 72 CVSOs would go out and "fight to the last man to try and preserve what we've got." Buel F. Ford of Waukesha County told the board that "I don't think that there is a service officer in the state that agrees with the reductions you've accepted." The CVSOs also held a special meeting on February 28 in Wausau. Examining the proposed program changes item by item, the CVSOs declared the entire budget proposal

unacceptable, called for the Board of Veterans Affairs to "repudiate all negotiations held thus far," and issued a press release sharply critical of the cuts.

The outspoken opposition of the CVSOs prompted incoming WDVA Secretary John J. Maurer to address the CVSOs in March 1985 — a few weeks before he assumed his new position. Maurer acknowledged the importance of the CVSO in the state's veterans' service system, characterizing them as "the guys who sit with your elbows on the table across from the veterans every day," and stated that he would need CVSO input when he appeared before the legislature. But Maurer — a former legislator himself — also warned the CVSOs that harsh criticism of the Legislature might be counterproductive. He vowed to use his legislative acumen to maintain veterans' programs at the highest possible level. Maurer's praise, constructive criticism, and determination impressed the CVSOs and restored their confidence in the effectiveness of the WDVA.

A "super-amendment" to the proposed 1985-1987 budget revived most of the programs. The tenacity of the CVSOs in their fight for the welfare of the veterans contributed significantly to the restoration of the programs. After nearly 50 years of political activism on the part of Wisconsin's veterans, the 1985 victory was perhaps the most significant political victory for the CVSOs and Wisconsin's veterans generally.

In the two and a half decades following 1950, Wisconsin's CVSOs demonstrated capacities both for consistency and innovation. In the Cold War Era, the CVSOs operated much as they had before, but changing circumstances demanded new roles, particularly in the realm of politics. The CVSOs used their new-found political clout in two ways. First, they advocated the needs and concerns of the state's veterans in the political arena. Second, the service officers secured a more stable and effective position in government for themselves, from which they could serve the state's veterans even more effectively. By the mid-1980s, nobody involved in Wisconsin veterans' affairs could overlook the influence and insight of the state's County Veterans Service Officers.

The 1985 fall conference at Eau Claire marked 50 years of meetings for the County Veterans' Service Officers' Association of Wisconsin. On the evening of September 25, 1985, the CVSOs held a banquet to celebrate the association's golden anniversary. Among those in attendance were representatives from Wisconsin's most prominent veterans' organizations and their auxiliaries, emissaries from the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (including its Secretary, John Maurer), officials from Veterans Administration hospitals in Wisconsin and Minnesota, and Wisconsin Governor Anthony Earl. After 50 years of dedicated service of Wisconsin's veterans and their families, the CVSO indeed had something to celebrate. But the County Veterans Service Officers also understood that many challenges lay ahead as they entered their second half century of service to Wisconsin's veterans.

In 1991, a survey of Wisconsin's active and retired CVSOs was undertaken for the purposes of this study, the first such investigation ever made of the state's service officers. In fall, a "History Questionnaire" was mailed to all presently active CVSOs and several former ones. The questionnaire asked the CVSOs to respond to 30 different questions, ranging from basic demographic information to questions about their military service, to the type of daily routines they perform and how they felt about their duties. In all, 47 active and 18 former CVSOs responded. Their responses provide a social portrait of the Wisconsin CVSO in the 1990s.

Part I of the questionnaire concerned basic demographic and military service questions. Of those responding to the survey, the CVSO serving in 1991 had been on his or her job on average 7.9 years. Four CVSOs had been appointed as recently as 1990. The longest serving CVSO was Francis Heesakker⁶ of Outagamie County, who had first been appointed as a full-fledged service officer in 1956. The average age of the CVSO was 50 years old, the oldest having been born in

1924, the youngest in 1955. Like most residents of Wisconsin, the majority of CVSOs were white; indeed, only one respondent was African• American, and no members other non-white groups responded to the survey. And like the composition of the armed forces, most CVSOs were men; two of the 47 respondents were women. As Wisconsin's non-white population continues to grow and as more opportunities open in the military for women, the latter two demographic categories will likely become increasingly prominent in the CVSO ranks.

The vast majority of active CVSOs responding were veterans of the Vietnam War. Of the 47 respondents, 35 had served during the Vietnam Era. Thirteen of the respondents indicated that they were Korean War veterans, and one respondent reported being a veteran of the recently concluded Persian Gulf War. Only three active CVSOs responding were World War II veterans. By contrast, those retirees who responded. were overwhelmingly World War II veterans; 14 of the 18 indicated service during the Second World War, one responding retiree had served in World War I. Six of the 47 respondents reported being vets of more than one conflict; three serving in both the Korean and Vietnam eras, one World War II and Korea, one Vietnam and the Cuban Missile Crisis of the early 1960s, and one in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf War.

The United States Army led the way with service affiliation among both current and former CVSOs responding. Among active CVSOs in 1991, 26 indicated service in the Army, eight in the U.S. Navy, six each for the Marine Corps and the U.S. Air Force (two did not indicate branch of service). One respondent reported both Army and Navy service. Among retirees, 10 served in the U.S. Army, three in the Marines, two each for the Navy and the Air Force (one did not indicate branch of service). The vast majority had served overseas; 41 of 46 active CVSOs claimed service abroad, as did 17 of 18 retirees. Most CVSO had also seen combat while in military service; 27 active and 16 retirees indicated combat experience.

Wisconsin's CVSOs in 1991 were rather well educated. Among the 42 active service officers responding to the question, virtually all indicated educational experience beyond high school, and a majority had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Many without a college degree, nevertheless, had professional training which greatly aided them in their work as CVSOs. One CVSO, for example, cited a 21-year Navy career as an administrator, counsellor, and recruiter; "I am sure my background is why I was selected over the 80 plus candidates for the job," he wrote. Six active CVSOs indicated that they had earned at least a master's degree, five of whom having studied in the fields of counseling or vocational rehabilitation. No statistics are known to exist about the educational attainment of CVSOs prior to 1991. However, of the 17 retirees responding to the question, only six indicated an associate's or bachelor's degree; none claimed a master's or higher. It is not unreasonable to infer, therefore, that the CVSO of the 1990s may well be the best-educated and best-trained group of service officers ever to have served Wisconsin's veterans.

The CVSOs came to their position from a wide variety of vocations. Many came from occupations not directly related to their work as CVSOs. Ron Johnson of Adams County, for example, was a retail grocer, Thomas Lois of Kenosha County an air traffic controller, and David Thomas of Taylor County a florist. Many CVSOs noted more than one line of work. Monroe CVSO Daniel Erickson, for example, listed work in sales, nursing, and as a "Radio Air Personality." Three CVSOs indicated some background in construction, four in farming, and six in teaching (including a former school principal, Merl E. Thomasson of Lafayette County). Four responding CVSOs indicated over 20 years of military service, others noted that they still served in the National Guard or Reserves. Many CVSOs indicated a background in counselling, including at least three who had previously worked specifically in veterans' affairs. Some CVSOs had been county employees; Cynthia Pitts was Oneida County Deputy Register of Deeds, for example, and Christine Jordan had worked in personnel for Walworth County. Several indicated that they worked as assistant CVSOs, among them Francis Heesakker, who served in that capacity from 1946 to 1956. A few CVSOs worked as service officers in more than one county. Within just a few years of the 1991 survey, Gary McGoey had moved from Racine to Outagamie County and Irvin Yelle moved from Buffalo to Pierce County. If membership in veterans' organizations is any indication, Wisconsin's CVSOs in 1991 were integral parts

of local veterans' communities across the state --even beyond their work as service officers. Every present and former CVSO responding to the questionnaire indicated membership in at least one local veterans' organization. Excluding CVSO Associations, the active service officer in 1991 belonged on average to 3.38 veterans' groups; one indicated membership in at least 12. The American Legion --the organization so instrumental to the creation of the CVSOs in the 1930s --was by far the single most popular group; 45 CVSOs in 1991 were Legion members; many others also listed membership in the Legions' 40/8 auxiliary. The VFW was the second most popular organization among CVSOs with 31, the DAV third with 15. Twenty-one CVSOs belonged to various Vietnam veterans' organizations like the Vietnam Veterans of America, Vietnow, and the Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans. Other Wisconsin veterans' groups in which CVSOs were members included the AMVETS, the Fleet Reserve Association, the Korean War Veterans Association, Marine Corps League, the Military Order of the Purple Heart, the National Association for Black Veterans, the Polish Legion of American Veterans, and the Special Forces Association --just to name a few. Part II of the History Questionnaire asked the CVSOs about their daily work routines and their service to Badger State veterans. According to the survey, the constituency a given CVSO served varied widely throughout the Badger State. The number of veterans a Wisconsin CVSO served could vary considerably, ranging from Florence County's roughly 40 veterans to Milwaukee County's approximately 112,000. Many CVSOs ministered to fewer than 2,000 veterans in predominantly rural areas. Carl Krantz in Washburn County, for example, described his 1,400 veterans as "a farming community and a retreat for many retired people." By contrast, CVSOs in more urbanized counties such as Milwaukee and Dane served much larger and often more diverse populations. Don Reichard in Rock County, for example, described his constituency as ranging from the homeless to "multiple advanced degree professionals." Regional differences sometimes created specialized needs. Francis Everson of maritime Door County, for example, cited service to Coast Guard veterans and former Merchant Mariners. Daniel Erickson of Monroe County, home of Fort McCoy (a functioning U.S. Army post), mentioned contact with active-duty service members as well as discharged veterans. The local economy also affected a CVSO's constituency. Irvin Yelle in Buffalo County noted service to a "higher than average number of peacetime vets" because of a local firm's practice of employing former naval boiler and nuclear technicians.

The work any given CVSO might conduct on the average day varied considerably. Many CVSOs stated flatly that "there is no typical day." Many service officers, especially in smaller and more rural counties, spent time transporting veterans to health care facilities. Marquette County's Hance Russell, for example, estimated that he devoted as much as 50 to 60 percent of his time transporting veterans; Cynthia Pitts described it as an "all day job." Some CVSOs reported that they had previously transported veterans in the past but could no longer do so. CVSOs with larger constituencies reported somewhat different routines. Ted Fetting reported having a staff of only four people to service Milwaukee County's 112,000 veterans, and thus spent much of his time on administrative affairs. But CVSOs throughout the state also had much in common. Virtually all of those responding to the question cited paperwork, attending meetings, and face-to-face counseling sessions with veterans.

Responding CVSOs noted that local veterans came to their facility for a wide variety of reasons. In general, the survey revealed that more veterans came to utilize state programs more than federal ones. Most of the respondents agreed that in determining the reason why a veteran came to the service officer, age was a bigger factor than conflict; World War II and Korean War veterans most often sought medical and pension benefits, whereas Vietnam veterans more often sought education benefits and home loans. "Problems and concerns are the same [among veterans]," wrote Lorin Sather of Pierce County, they just change as time goes on. WWII vets (in looking at the past files) were concerned about education and housing shortly after discharge. Now it's pension and health care. In the sixties and fifties WWI vets were looking at pension and hospital care. A few CVSOs, however, noted subtle distinctions between veterans of different wars. One service officer in western Wisconsin, for example, that Vietnam vets tended to be more "anti-establishment." Another in the southeastern part of the state surmised that Vietnam War combat veterans tended to have "more emotional and social problems," whereas subsequent veterans "from all volunteer forces ... seem to have less

bitterness." But at least one CVSO noted that pre-Vietnam veterans still suffered from emotional conditions. "When I find a file where a (World War II or Korean War] veteran was denied service for an emotional condition," wrote Kewaunee CVSO Wayne Richmond, "I will pursue a PTSD claim. I feel these boys were overlooked since there was no such thing as PTSD in the 40's and 50's."

To spread the word to local veterans, Wisconsin's service officers employed a variety of techniques and strategies. Many CVSOs have regular columns in local newspapers, for example, and a few made radio and television appearances. Seventeen of the 47 responding CVSOs indicated that they published a newsletter of some kind. In Sauk County, Paul Trigleth published the "Veterans Messenger," which in its April-September 1991 issue (a copy of which accompanied his questionnaire), provided information about WDVA loan programs, changes in federal VA compensation rates, and a calendar of local veterans community events. In his August-September 1991 newsletter (humorously entitled "Claymores to Cowpies"), Portage County's Thomas Pesanka included employment opportunities for vets. John Schnable, Langlade CVSO, frequently included the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of his area's elected representatives in his newsletter, "Tidbits for Veterans." Many CVSOs also indicated that they regularly participated in local veterans' activities, such as Memorial Day parades and speeches.'

Many CVSOs have also initiated special programs to assist local veterans. In Milwaukee County, Ted Fetting reported working with the federal Department of Labor to sponsor the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Project, which assisted that county's homeless vets. Carl Krantz started a PTSD outreach center in the small Washburn County hamlet of Minong. In Wood County, Thomas Stem secured federal VA certification for two local therapists to counsel sufferers of PTSD and have the services paid for by the federal Vet Center Program. But perhaps no Badger State county can match the efforts of the Dane County office in Madison. Assistant CVSO Wayne Homer and veterans service commissioner Gib Halverson initiated a homeless veteran network, which was awarded a National County Association award. Homer also helped establish the Veterans Business Resource Center and helped organize a small business seminar in conjunction with the WDV A and the Small Business Administration. The Dane County office also began an Agent Orange network, which resulted in federal funding for the local Vets House for a treatment program for the children of Agent Orange sufferers. In addition to these programs, Dane CVSO Michael Jackson also runs outreach programs at a local correctional facility, the University of Wisconsin campus, and meets regularly with the service officers of local veterans' organizations.

Virtually all service officers believed that their own military experience had aided them greatly in serving their local veterans' community. Ted Fetting noted that his own service provided a "common bond and helps establish credibility as an advocate" in the eyes of veterans. Irvin Yelle wrote that "by understanding Military rules, structure and what passes for logic, I am better able to understand" the government bureaucracies which the veteran would otherwise face alone. Francis Everson wrote that Having "been there" permits me to acknowledge/preread a veteran's problems. Also, because I didn't really know what benefits were available [to me] after the service, I am determined others will not be so deprived. "Fundamentally," according to Yelle, previous military experience "enables me to 'speak their language.'" "Being called to duty for Operation Desert Shield/Storm," wrote Daniel Erickson, "gives a great deal of insight to the concerns/problems that face recently separated service members."

Finally, the History Questionnaire asked "what do you like most about being a CVSO? What do you like least?" Many respondents expressed considerable job satisfaction. Vilas County's Charles Harsla simply crossed out the latter half of the question and wrote "everything" in the space provided. Most participants in the survey, however, offered a few criticisms. Perhaps the most frequent complaint was that bureaucratic red tape often hindered or prevented the CVSO from assisting a veteran in need. Despite these criticisms, the CVSOs reported remarkable, perhaps even unusual, job satisfaction.

The History Questionnaire was sent to the CVSOs just as veterans from the Persian Gulf War began returning from service in the Middle East. The questionnaire asked the service officers specifically about their involvement with this new generation of war veterans. Many CVSOs also volunteered information about Desert Storm veterans in other parts of the survey. The service officers' responses to the return of Gulf War veterans provides the historian with a snapshot of the CVSO in action at the initial point of contact -- the moment a soldier returns from war.

Many CVSOs reported having little contact with Gulf War vets. Francis Everson in Door County, for example, noted that his contact with Gulf War vets was "quite limited," mainly a few reservists. Wayne Richmond in nearby Kewaunee County reported that he had seen "less than a dozen" Desert Storm vets. By contrast; Michael Jackson in Dane County described having "loads" of contact with the new veterans. Thomas Stern in Wood County characterized his dealings with them as "considerable." The activation of a local National Guard or Reserve unit increased a CVSOs likelihood of contact with Gulf War vets. "I had a National Guard unit activated," reported Tom Taber of Grant County, "and have been contacted by about 80 returning veterans." Some CVSOs sought out the Desert Storm troops. Teddy Duckworth in Juneau County wrote that he had spent many hours and days at Ft. McCoy briefing returning Persian Gulf veterans concerning their rights on both Federal and Wisconsin veterans' benefits. As a result, many have come to [my] office to apply for their benefits.

Wood CVSO Thomas Stern also held briefings with returning members of a local National Guard medical unit, as did Victor Klawitter in Green Lake County. Tom Taber sent letters to the "20+" local Gulf War veterans he had not yet seen.

Having been activated for the Persian Gulf War put Monroe County's Daniel Erickson in a unique position. Erickson, a member of the Army Reserve's 44th General Hospital, entered active-duty service in January 1991 and served during the war in Landstuhl, Germany as a nurse. "While there," wrote Erickson on the questionnaire, I had significant contact with returning veterans being evacuated CONUS for either hostile or non-hostile injuries/illnesses. My expertise as a CVSO Veterans Benefits Counsellor proved very helpful to the many apprehensive serviceman and women who were facing the bureaucracy involved in becoming service connected.

Erickson was the first Gulf War veteran CVSO.

Those CVSOs who reported contact with Desert Storm troops noted several characteristics about this new class of wartime veteran. Many returning servicemen and women came in for routine reasons, such as to register their D0/214 (release from active duty) forms, or to inquire about federal post-discharge dental benefits. Others sought information about the types of programs for which they might qualify. "They are very interested in the benefits to which they may be entitled," reported Francis Heesakker, "and appreciate the information we furnish them." Larry Smerling in Winnebago County noted that Gulf War vets were "curious about which (benefits) they can qualify for." The CVSOs also reported interest in housing and other loan programs; "using the Econ loan to consolidate debts is the biggest reason" for visits according to Crawford CVSO James Hannah. "By far," wrote Teddy Duckworth, "the most sought-after benefits [are] educational benefits," an observation borne out by the other CVSOs responding to the questionnaire. Having been recruited with benefit programs (and particularly those concerning education), it is not surprising that Desert Storm veterans sought to utilize those benefits so quickly, and that many CVSOs had such extensive contact with them just months after the end of the war.

But the CVSOs noted that Gulf War veterans suffered from readjustment problems. The groundswell of public support for the troops of Operation Desert Storm proved emotionally difficult for a few; "some are embarrassed by all the 'yellow ribbon' attention," reported Gary McGoey, "some love it." Ozaukee CVSO Thomas Burkhalter and Polk CVSO Darrell Anderson reported problems with PTSD. In Grant County, Tom Taber mentioned that several local veterans suffered from "severe money problems resulting from their call-up," a problem also noted by Dodge County service

officer Fred Noordhof, who wrote that "we have tried to reach out to them and draw them in." A few CVSOs also related instances of family stress; "there are ... many who got married a month before they left and are now having marital problems," wrote Tom Taber. Christine Jordan noted a particularly ominous problem in Walworth County; "I've had some concerns brought up regarding the anti-nerve pills they were given," she wrote, "they had serious side-effects at the time," according to at least some veterans in her area.

Jordan's observation foreshadowed a problem that would eventually face many veterans of Operation Desert Storm, an as-of-yet unidentified medical condition that has become known as "Gulf War Syndrome." In early 1992, Persian Gulf veterans in Indiana reported several unexplained ailments: fatigue, headaches, diarrhea, rashes, hair loss, memory lapses. Gulf War vets in other parts of the nation soon began to report these symptoms. By November 1993, more than 10,000 Gulf War veterans nationwide had sought medical treatment for their ailments. The cause of the disease is still unknown, but leading suspects include rare desert parasites, petroleum poisoning resulting from the massive Kuwaiti oil well fires, chemical warfare agents, and a condition known as "Multiple Chemical Sensitivity," a heightened irritability to certain substances resulting prolonged exposure to them. Some veterans also suspect the anti-nerve gas pills mentioned by Jordan. 1

Many of Wisconsin's 3,000 veterans of Operation Desert Storm reported the symptoms of the condition. A member of the Wisconsin National Guard's 1158th Transportation Company, for example, estimated that at least 20 other people in his unit of 60 suffer from the syndrome. Mary Bruner of Beaver Dam, also of the Wisconsin National Guard, explained that "I just know I'm sick, and that I wasn't sick before I left." In fact, Bruner spent more than \$5,000 in medical expenses --out of her own pocket --in an effort to find the cause of her suffering. At the Tomah VA hospital alone, more than 100 examinations had been given to Gulf War veterans regarding symptoms.9

Initial government responses to the crisis heightened veterans' suspicions. At first, military doctors tended to dismiss the symptoms as psychological. Later it was learned that the Department of Defense had failed to make public the detection of chemical warfare agents (nerve and blister agents) by Czech soldiers in the theater of operations just after the beginning of the air campaign in January 1991. Such actions raised fears among all veterans of what one Desert Storm veteran referred to as "Agent Orange Revisited." The federal VA, hoping to avoid just such a scenario, acted more promptly to the crisis. By the fall of 1993 the VA created a registry of ailing veterans and pledged to find the cause of the suffering. "We must do everything we can to get those answers," vowed federal Secretary of Veterans Affairs (and Vietnam veteran) Jesse Brown in October 1993, "through research, diagnosis and treatment of health problems that might have resulted from their exposure to environmental hazards in the Gulf."10

Others involved with veterans' service in the Badger State also noted many the problems faced by Gulf War veterans that the CVSO survey revealed. By October 1991 --just six months after the war's end--Bob Cook of Madison's Vet Center had counseled approximately 25-30 Gulf War veterans, mostly regarding "relationship issues." By that same month, Wisconsin the National Guard family support centers reported 27,038 telephone calls and 3,921 walk-in visits regarding readjustment issues; the Madison office alone dealt with 12,662 calls and 721 walk-ins. Though a short conflict with a favorable conclusion and a joyous homecoming, Gulf War veterans experienced readjustment problems familiar to veterans of all wars.

In just the first few years of the CVSOs' second half century, Wisconsin's service officers have already faced numerous challenges. The end of the Cold War and the "downsizing" of the military, the outbreak of war in the Persian Gulf, the declining government commitment to veterans' programs, all will likely occupy the CVSO for years to come. As the 1991 History Questionnaire of Wisconsin's CVSOs revealed, the state's service officers seem ready for the task. The CVSO of the 1990s is a highly experienced, educated, and dedicated servant of Wisconsin's veterans and their families. At least at the county level, Wisconsin's veterans' community is likely to be in good hands for years to come.

The 2000's Arrive

The 2000s ushered in a new era of the internet. Joe Aulik, Kewaunee CVSO, proposed to create a CVSO website, www.wicvso.org, and an online forum to the CVSO Assoc. of WI (CVSOAWI) could collaborate, share information, and ask questions. The idea was proposed, and the website and forum were launched.

In the early 2000's the CVSOAWI started to question the health of the Veterans Trust Fund but were met with non-transparency from WDVA and Secretary Boland, the WDVA Secretary from 1999-2003. In fact, at the Spring Conference in Siren WI, the CVSO leadership ask for the balance and health of the Trust Fund and Secretary Boland stated that trust fund was his business and not the CVSOs. Secretary Boland retired and his Deputy John Scocos was hired as his replacement in 2003. Ironically, on July 21, 2004 Secretary Scocos released the 10-Year Solvency Plan for the Wisconsin's Veteran Trust Fund. This plan outlined actions that needed to be taken immediately over the next 10 years or the Trust Fund would become insolvent.

This plan drastically reduced benefits and made eligibility criteria for WDVA benefits more strictive. The following is the were the outlined reasons for the plan: The complete report can be found here <https://www.wistatedocuments.org/digital/collection/p267601coll4/id/1873/>

The 10-Year Solvency Plan for Wisconsin's Veterans Trust Fund is the culmination of an extensive and inclusive planning process that involved over 150 members of the leadership of the state's veterans service organizations and County Veteran Service Officers, as well as staff of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs. The process included three internal program review meetings, two stakeholder conferences, and the use of process action teams (PAT's) to develop recommendations to the Secretary for program changes. The plan was presented to and approved by the Wisconsin Board of Veterans Affairs at its regularly scheduled June meeting on June 18, 2004 as the culmination of this public process.

A financial analysis of the Wisconsin Veterans Trust Fund (VTF) indicates that beginning in FY03 and continuing out into future years, VTF expenses will exceed revenues. Even more significant in terms of VTF solvency is that it has become necessary to draw down on the cash balance to cover all expenditures. At current levels of expenditures and revenues, the VTF is projected to run out of cash in FY07. The 10-year plan as presented in this document is intended to extend VTF solvency through 2013. The plan represents a balance between doing what is right for veterans and ensuring the long-term solvency of the VTF. Based on an extensive financial analysis of both the VTF and the Mortgage Loan Repayment Fund (MLRF), the following findings were identified:

- Current and projected VTF expenditures exceed revenues.
- There is a significant loss of VTF Investment income from SWIB (approximately \$1.6 million per year) due to SWIB interest rates declining from over 6.48 percent in November 2000 to 1.0 percent in May 2004.
- The low SWIB interest rates have also created a negative arbitrage situation in the MLRF that has resulted in \$7.1 million annual reduction in investment earnings.
- Due to state bond restrictions, WDVA veterans mortgage loans cannot be refinanced. Unprecedented July 21, 2004 2 low interest rates for conventional mortgage loans have resulted in a substantial number of veterans refinancing their WDVA primary mortgage loans with conventional mortgage loans. This has reduced WDVA's loan portfolio from \$727 million in FY01 to \$304 million in FY04. The erosion of the MLRF loan portfolio prohibits any transfers from MLRF to VTF for several years. During the 1990's, a total of \$117 million in cash and assets was transferred from the MLRF to the VTF.

Based on the above findings the direction is clear—WDVA must reduce expenditures and increase revenue in the VTF and take immediate steps to rebuild MLRF loan portfolio. This is in essence the overall strategy of the 10-Year VTF Solvency Plan.

In September 2002, at the fall conference in Manitowoc WI, a historical spirited discussion and historical vote was taken to allow the Tribal Veterans Service Officers (TVSOs) to become members of the CVSOAWI.

In 2005 the WI GI Bill was passed by the state legislature granting 128 free credits at all University of Wisconsin Colleges and Technical schools.

An issue was identified with the WI GI Bill. When it was originally written, a spouse only had a 10-year delaminating date time period to use the WI GI Bill but it did not take in account widows with young children not being able to attend school due to those responsibilities of raising children. In Clark County, a veteran died December of 2004 and left a wife and four young children, it wasn't until a year later when Marcia Ziegler, Veterans Benefits Specialists, speaking with his widow, stated that she didn't feel she was going to be able to use the GI Bill until after all of the children were out of school and the youngest at that time was age five. By that time the 10-year delaminating date would have expired. Leaving no stone unturned, Marcia started contacting legislators, and it so happened that State Senator Dave Zien and WDVA Secretary John Scocos were coming to Clark Count for a meet and greet. She approached them at that event and related the story of the widow to them. That started the process to have the 10-year delimiting date removed in the law.

By the time the bill was singed Dave Zien no longer was in the legislature and the process for the legislative change was taken over by Senator Pat Kreitlow. Finally, in July 2009 Marcia traveled to Madison for the signing of a Bill and see her advocacy come to fruition. It should be noted this same bill eliminated the counting of life insurance as an asset for the Aid to Needy Veterans Grant.

The Veterans WI Property Tax Credit was passed in 2005. The credit is equal to the property taxes paid on eligible veteran's or surviving spouse's principal dwelling in Wisconsin.

Through tax year 2008, the veteran had to have been a resident of Wisconsin at the time he/she entered active duty, have a 100% scheduler rated service-connected disability, and be 65 years of age or older. Surviving spouses of veterans who met the foregoing criteria also qualified.

Beginning with tax year 2009, the age restriction has been removed. Veterans need now only be residents of Wisconsin for five continuous years, and their 100% service-connected disability rating can now be obtained through individual unemployability. Surviving spouses of eligible veterans also qualify.

Beginning on or after January 1, 2014, the Wisconsin Property Tax Credit was extended to include the unremarried surviving spouse of an eligible veteran, who – following the veteran's death – began to receive and continues to receive Indemnity Compensation (DIC) from the Federal VA.

In 2009 the WDVA Board fired Secretary Scocos and hired Ken Black, who held the position until 2011 when Secretary Scocos successfully sued the State of WI stating the Board violating the USERRA Act and he was rehired. The lawsuit claimed the agencies board violated the Act when it fired him weeks after he returned from serving in Iraq. Soon after that the WDVA Board was reduced to an Advisory role to the Secretary and the WDVA Secretary position was elevated to a Cabinet level position, appointed by the Governor.

Things were uneventful until November 26, 2013. A letter was sent to each county informing that that in keeping with Governor Walker's lean government initiative to eliminate waste and inefficiencies in state government, WDVA will be initiating an audit of the CVSO Grant for all 72 counties.

When 2014 arrived, the Veterans Trust Fund was insolvent and needed cash injections of General Public Review (GPR) (tax dollars). The legislature approved an infusion of \$11 million in 2014, \$13 million in 2017, and \$13 million in 2019.

Then on February 25, 2015 Rock Larson, Legislative Chair, Wood CVSO, sent the memo to the CVSOAWI:

"I am writing this at the request of our President as he feels the whole body should be aware of this issue.

On February 25, I received an email from David Callender, Government Affairs Associate for Wisconsin Counties Association (WCA). I had met him and had an extensive talk while I was at the WCA Ambassador event in late January. In his email, he wanted to talk to me about how WDVA had contacted them about a funding proposal for the department that they (WCA) wanted to share with me.

We set up a time to talk the next day. When he called, he was on speaker phone and Sarah Diedrick-Kasdorf WCA's Deputy Director of Government Affairs was also present.

First, they asked some background questions on the Grants and Audits. I told them what I use the grant for, and that many are using the grant for salary supplement only since the audits. I filled them in on the audits, and that at least two counties did not get a grant last year based on the results of their audit. I told them I have not seen a copy of an audit result as I have not been audited yet. They asked our Association's position on the audits and I stated we believe an audit of government funds is appropriate but think that it should be part of the single audit that the counties pay an independent firm to conduct. I stated that WDVA had the opportunity to include that grant in the single audit requirements. Conducting a separate audit of such a small amount costs a lot of county and state, time, and money. I went on to state that in the absence of any guidelines in the past, counties with deficiencies should have been able to spell out a corrective action plan and been able to apply for the next year's grant with perhaps some additional oversight.

He then began telling me that he and Kyle Christianson, WCA's Director of Government Affairs, had a meeting with WDVA Secretary, Mr. Trepanier, Ms. Marshman, and either Mr. Parker or Mr. Koplien (poor notes). In that meeting, WDVA floated the idea to take the WDVA Grants to Counties (CVSO Grant) and unused money from the Veterans Employment Grants (moved to WDVA from DWD by the 2015 Gov. budget bill, this grant is for companies that hire 50% or greater SC veterans) and make that a larger sum of money available for many organizations to apply for a grant of up to \$25,000 dollars for a single entity and up to \$100,000 for two or more entities working together. This could be something like the fast forward grant <http://wisconsinfastforward.com/grants.htm> and specifically mentioned the Fox Valley Veterans Council as an entity that could apply? They went on to say some counties may get grants and some may not, and that not everyone who applied would get a grant. WDVA stated the Governor wanted them to see how WCA felt about the idea.

I asked them why the Counties Association would even consider this which had nothing but a reduction in revenue for counties, and he said that WDVA threatened to release the results of the audits to the legislature. I said this is a lot of stuff to remember, do you have any written proposal from WDVA that I could review in more depth. He stated that he is not able to release it as he must run it by/present it to their EXEC Board.

He then went on to say that some counties have expressed the idea of regionalization or collaboration of CVSO offices. I told him that I had similar statements from Senator Petrowski and that I hoped to discuss it with our executive committee next month. We had a discussion on the topic, and I made it clear that this was only Rock Larson speaking not the CVSO Association."

Essentially what eventually happened, as outlined below, WDVA changed State Statute 45.82 that changed the CVSO Grant from a block grant to a reimbursement grant.

In November 2015 a Summary of the History of the CVSO grant was drafted by Rock Larson, Wood County and sent to President William Rosenau and forwarded the information to the CVSOAWI. It is as follows:

“Alright, I dug through the archived emails, and have put together the following summary.

in the Mid 1970’s the CVSO Grant was put together in the basic form that we operated under for the next 40 years; The Individual CVSO’s would apply for the grant annually. The amount of the grant was based on the population of that county. By Statute, The Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (hereafter referred to as “the Department” or “WDVA”) was to establish Standards for the use of the Grant. At no time in the intervening 40 years were such standards established by the Department or published to the CVSO’s or the County Veterans Service Officers Association of Wisconsin (hereafter referred to as “the Association”). When a new CVSO was hired, they were required, as part of their initial application, to support the hiring process in accordance with state statute. That requirement was removed from the application process, by the Department, in 2010.

In 2014, the WDVA conducted an audit of the usage of the grant for CY 2012 and 2013, with the understanding that the audit was to be used to help them establish standards. These audits were conducted by an internal WDVA auditor. By WDVA accounts, the results of the audit showed widespread abuse of the grant by CVSOs statewide. Based on this, the Department approached Wisconsin Counties Association (WCA) asking that they (WCA) support a move to rescind the CVSO Grant. WCA responded that they would not support such an effort.

Shortly thereafter, WDVA referenced a Legislative Audit Bureau review which led to the establishment of new policy. This policy required that counties support how that CVSO’s were hired and imposed some very specific evidentiary requirements to support the 2015 grant applications. Due to both the state and county records retention schedule, which require maintaining hiring records for 3 years, and a conflict with some privacy information surrounding the civil service tests, much of this evidence would be unavailable to the county, and therefore the 2015 grant for many of Wisconsin’s counties would be in jeopardy.

In response to the, in many cases, unattainable evidentiary requirements to support the 2015 application, the Association requested the involvement of WCA. WCA contacted the Governor and the Department, and what followed was an amendment proposed to the Joint Finance Committee. That amendment was, to the Associations understanding, meant to address the grandfathering of veterans hired prior to 15 April 2015 in response to WDVA’s policy change. However, rather than simply addressing the evidentiary requirement to support the 2015 grant, the Department took the opportunity to change the structure of the grant itself to a restrictive reimbursement policy.

The Association Leadership still feels that the WDVA Grant to CVSO’s, in its current form, does not meet the statutory intent to enhance veterans’ services. It is currently the law, and under WI Statutes, WDVA is responsible to develop the standards. They are under no obligation to take our concerns into account in the development of these standards.

We are currently working through WCA to find the best avenue available to seek change, either through the administrative rules process or legislation, to address what we view as inadequacies in the current policy. As this process could influence the budgets of all of Wisconsin’s County’s, we feel that WCA is the proper medium to seek change. By acting through WCA, this extends the ability to involve County Government Leadership in the conversation and any decision or policy making. We are not limiting our discussion to WDVA grant reformation, we are also looking for alternative funding sources to replace the potential revenue loss.”

Bill Rosenau
President, CVSOA-WI

With the new reimbursement grant structure counties were only receiving 50% of the grant and this was causing operational problems and detrimental to the veteran community we serve. Reimbursements were outlined in WI State Statue 45.82:

1. Information technology.

2. Transportation for veterans and service to veterans with barriers.
3. Special outreach to veterans.
4. Training and services provided by the department and the federal Department of Veterans Affairs.
5. Salary and fringe benefit expenses incurred in 2015; salary and fringed benefits expensed incurred in 2016, except that total reimbursement for such expenses shall not exceed 50 percent of the applicable maximum grant under sub. (2) or (4); and salary and fringe benefits expenses incurred in 2017, except that total reimbursement for such expenses shall not exceed 25 percent of the applicable maximum grant under sub (2) or (4).

Also, while the Grant Issue was being worked the communication between CVSO and WDVA essentially was non-existent. After talks with the Governor's office it was decided that the Wisconsin Counties Association would be the liaison between CVSOS and WDVA.

On December 18, 2015, CVSO leadership met with the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) to discuss a way forward and resolve differences. There was a very brief discussion on the Department looking at a pilot program veterans outreach consortium, which we agreed was a good idea to look at, as some counties with smaller veterans' populations could possibly benefit from such flexibility. (As evidenced by the Buffalo/Pepin example). We truly thought there would be more, formal discussion on what the shape of this program would look like. The brief conversation was an agreement on a concept, not content.

As a reminder CVSO Regionalization was opposed by CVSOs and the veteran community in 2001 when Secretary Boland unsuccessfully tried to have CVSO incorporated in the Aging Disability Recourse Centers (ADRCs) in WI.

After the meeting in December 2015 what ensued was the most egregious assault on the CVSO model since CVSOs being established in 1935 and in Wisconsin's history. It threatened the long tradition of local veterans helping veterans in WI.

On January 22, 2016 – Friday, Legislative Reference Bureau (LRB) 4524/1 DRAFT was circulated advocating Regionalizing CVSO and allowing non-veterans to hold the position of CVSOs. It was the first time CVSOAWI was made aware of the sweeping legislative changes to the delivery of veteran's benefits in Wisconsin.

On January 25, 2016 - Monday (2 days later), LRB 4524/1 changed to Assembly Bill AB 821 and published.

On January 26, 2016 - Tuesday (3 days later), companion Senate bill SB 681 published.

On January 26, 2015 - Governor Walker had a Town Hall meeting on which he stated "I don't plan to support changes to CVSOs"

On February 2, 2016 - CVSOAWI issues a position paper on AB 821/SB681 and related substitute amendments. CVSOAWI opposed AB 821/SB 861 in their original form due to the negative affect on access to veterans' benefits. CVSOAWI supported the amendments to both bills as they made strides to correct the negative impact and proposed a task force to further study the legislative change to enhance the current access and advocacy system for Wisconsin's veterans.

On February 3, 2016 - the CVSO Association of Wisconsin, requested in writing to Senators Mary Lizich, Van Wanggaard, Petrowski, and Representatives Ballweg, and Skowronski, that a Special Legislative Council Study Committee be considered for the future statewide delivery of programs, benefits and services to Wisconsin veterans and dependents.

On February 4, 2016 - Assembly Executive Session Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs held. Over two hours of testimony from Veterans Service Organizations, veterans, and dependents opposing AB 821.

On February 5, 2016 – Buffalo and Pepin counties cancel a pilot program sharing the CVSO as it had negative impact on services to veterans.

In 2016, the Washburn county Republican party unanimously voted in support of a resolution to be presented at the 7th Congressional District Caucus. The resolution stated that they opposed any efforts to make CVSOs optional, to consolidate or regionalize the positions or to integrate them into any county other county department and opposed removing the requirement that these positions be filled by non-veterans. It also supported efforts to reinstitute CVSO grants as they were originally formulated and to form a task force to objectively study and seek long term solutions to actual hurdles to veterans outreach and delivery, so as to enhance the current access and advocacy system for Wisconsin's veterans who have sacrificed so much for our state and our country.

On April 16, 2016, 7th Congressional District Caucus considered the resolution and passed unanimously.

May 7, 2016 - The American Legion, Department of Wisconsin Executive Committee in a regular meeting in Portage passed a resolution that called upon the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs to enter into a Strategic Planning process in conjunction with Congressionally-chartered Veterans Service Organizations, County Veterans Service Officers, Federal, State and County agencies responsible for delivering veteran's benefits, as well as non-governmental organizations and other institutions to enhance the benefits, programs and services available to Wisconsin veterans. The resolution asked the process to commence during 2016 with a goal of reaching consensus to propose appropriate and necessary State Legislation by May 2017.

Three recent VA studies show that 50% of veterans are not aware of their benefits, the Post 9/11 is the next largest group of veterans that are seeking more services with complex issues, and those who use a Veterans Service Officer receive 50% more in benefits.

The current law allows flexibility as counties can hire part-time CVSOs, if warranted, so that veterans and dependents always have access to a locally trained professional, who is a veteran, to meet their needs. They have earned it.

The CVSOAWI believed there was no immediate crises to rush a major change to the current delivery system. If a change were to be considered, all stakeholders private and public need to be assembled as "due diligence" to study the current delivery system as we owe that to our veterans and dependents.

It was apparent to all that the Regionalization model was not accepted, a coup to take over the CVSO model, and disliked by the veteran community.

WDVA proposed legislation that would have made CVSO's "optional", stating that because of the declining veteran's population, Regionalized benefits outreach centers, managed by the Department, would be more economical and efficient. Additionally, citing privacy concerns, the CVSO access to VBATs (The WDVA Data System) was curtailed. A Memorandum of Understanding, which was a collaboration between the CVSO Association and the Department, ultimately restored access to this data system, and the Association leadership, using a collaborative approach rather than an adversarial one, in conjunction with grassroots, Veteran-led effort, defeated the proposed regionalization legislation.

While this issue was in full swing, we were still working the CVSO Grant issue.

Due to the structure not working, on June 2, 2016, Vice President Joe Aulik and Legislative Chair, Rock Larsen, attended meeting in Governor's Conference Room concerning counties not receiving grant reimbursements. In attendance, were leadership from WDVA, WI Counties Executives and Administrators Assoc., WCA, and Governor's Chief of Staff. It was revealed at that meeting that the grant structure was no working and counties were not receiving the maximum amount of the grant. It was also revealed that the current communication conduit between CVSOs and WDVA was at the worse it has ever been and needed to be fixed to serve the veterans in WI.

Shortly after that meeting President Rosenau and Vice President Joe Aulik were invited to meet with the WDVA Secretary, John Scocos, and Deputy Secretary Kathy Marshman to develop a path forward to restore communication.

Due to the fact the Regionalization and Grant issues were receiving very negative pushback from the legislature and veteran's community. Secretary Scocos retired in November 2016.

The CVSO President Joe Aulik, felt it was imperative that the CVSOAWI be involved in the appointment of the next Secretary of WDVA to restore the relationship and provide "Top Notch" service to WI veterans. Reaching and crowdsourcing the CVSOAWI, the "Top Ten" characteristics of the new Secretary were drafted by the CVSOAWI leadership and we also identified the "Top Ten" issues that needed to be addressed:

Talking Paper 12/21/16

We respectfully request the next WDVA Secretary CVSO possess the following leadership qualities:

1. Advocate mindset – apolitical – listen to and focus on the needs of veterans
2. Honest and forthright – cards on the table – transparency at all levels - approachable
3. Strong integrity and personal accountability
4. Ability to disagree professionally and receive feedback
5. Strong collaborative flexible leader – promote cooperative atmosphere throughout WDVA
6. Ability to communicate and partner with all stakeholders on veterans' issues
7. Values all partners, to include CVSOs, in the delivery of benefits
8. Solution oriented – open minded - accepting input and ability to work with diverse groups
9. Emotional intelligence – people person
10. Levelheaded, slow to anger, and balanced in decision making - seeing both sides
11. Active Duty Service with management training
12. Experience in leading large organizations to include large budget management experience
13. Supports local independent advocacy for veterans, dependents, and survivors
14. Visionary in the areas of AODA, mental health/suicide, homelessness, and veteran to community interface.

We respectfully request the next WDVA Secretary addresses the following items. This list is not inclusive but a framework to start to address the many issues to benefit veterans, dependents, and survivors:

1. Promote the Zero Veterans Suicide Initiative and address homelessness – add a mental health category to the ANV grant – expand mental health capabilities at all veterans' homes.
2. Advertising of Suicide hotlines and VA benefits on all forms of media
3. Support the returning of the CVSO grant back to a block grant and increase the grant
4. Hire a WDVA claims office Director, increase staff and training for the staff
5. Attend CVSOA-WI conferences and provide state and federal training
6. Consult with the CVSOA-WI to review state benefit programs, applications, and forms
7. Initiate semi-annual meeting with the CVSO Executive Committee or top leadership
8. Create hardship and Transportation program flexibility for the unique needs to include mental health facilities in the northern WI.
9. End the funding of central office program through Veterans Home transfers
10. Research the feasibility of re-implementing state DVA loan programs to include the Personal Loan, Home Improvement, and Home Loan programs.

An unprecedented first ever of its kind, in CVSO history, a meeting was held at the Governor's mansion to discuss the hiring of the next WDVA Secretary. In attendance were Governor Scott Walker, his Chief of Staff, President Joe Aulik, Winnebago CVSO, Vice President Tammy Walters-Javenkoski, Oneida CVSO, and 2nd Vice President Daniel Connery, Dane CVSO. The meeting lasted for about one and one-half hours and emphasized the above items.

On February 2, 2017 the Governor appointed Daniel Zimmerman as the Secretary of WDVA.

Another first ever in the history of the CVSOAWI, was the sitting CVSOAWI President, Joe Aulik, attending the Legislative Confirmation hearing for Secretary Zimmerman and testifying and supporting his appointment.

What ensued over the next 18 months was unprecedented cooperation and collaboration never seen in the previous 20 years between CVSOs and WDVA. The Regionalization proposal was completely removed from the table and the CVSO Block Grant Legislation was written and passed eliminating the reimbursement grant model.

The idea of having a CVSO Liaison at WDVA was proposed by President Joe Aulik at the first meeting with the new WDVA Secretary Daniel Zimmerman at the CVSO in Winnebago. Soon after that Steve Yanke was hired as the new liaison. During his tenure as the CVSO Liaison he attended all CVSO conference and met with all 72 CVSOs and 11 TVSOs. Secretary Zimmerman visited many of the CVSOs and TVSOs and conferences to also get their input and collaboration.

Shaun Stoeger was hired as the WDVA Tribal Liaison and working with the CVSOAWI proposed to coin the term "83 Strong" for the 72 CVSO and 11 TVSOs for the CVSOAWI. Also, the CVSOAWI logo was reworked and added the Medicine Wheel colors to the logo as seen below:



The Sacred Medicine Wheel colors in the center of the logo circle mean: White – Physical, Yellow – Emotional, Red – Mental, and Black – Spiritual. More information on the WI Tribes can be found here:

<https://dpi.wi.gov/amind/tribalnationswi>

The CVSOs and WDVA assembled an Action Item list to work through numerous issues.

Secretary Zimmerman had a short tenure due to the changeover of the Governor. Following are the accomplishments we did together with his leadership at WDVA. During his tenure it was a time of excitement collaborating with the CVSOAWI and great benefit to veterans and dependents in WI.

2016-2017 CVSO/WDVA Collaborative Accomplishments

2/23/17 to 9/18/17

The following items were requests by the CVSOA-WI on our CVSO/WDVA action list and that were completed.

Thanks to everyone involved!

1. The legislature returned the CVSO/TVSO grant back to a block grant with support from WDVA and WCA.
2. WDVA Secretary and staff attended CVSOA-WI conferences.
3. WDVA consulted on WDVA initiatives.
4. WDVA provided federal and state training at the semi-annual CVSOA-WI conferences.
5. WDVA completed MOA for complete and open VBATS access.
6. VBATS MOA opened access to the DMDC list for returning veterans.
7. WDVA restored the VBATS County Report capability. All-county Report coming late summer 2018.
8. The Association facilitated the signing of NACVSO and WDVA MOA.
9. WDVA assigned an individual(s) at WDVA to work Discharge Upgrades.
10. WDVA created a new benefits pamphlet.
11. WDVA added a "Locate your CVSO/TVSO" link to the WDVA Homepage.
12. WDVA hired a CVSO coordinator within WDVA.
13. WDVA Pursued Department of Corrections (DOC) initiatives for incarcerated veterans. CVSOA-WI member added to committee.
14. Association member requested and WDVA uploaded Property Tax Certificate to veterans VBATS file for easy retrieval.
15. WDVA created Directory for CVSOs.
16. WDVA sent consistent feedback to the CVSOA-WI President on issues within the CVSOA-WI.
17. WDVA hired a Native American for the TVSO liaison within WDVA.
18. WDVA granted CVSOs the authority to certify 100% permanent and total veterans for the WI Property Tax Program.
19. The Association supported the public levy funding the Veterans Outreach and Recovery Program.

CVSO Association Supported the creation of the Veterans Outreach and Recovery Program (VORP) in WI that was initiated by WDVA in 2017 and 2018. Initially the program was funded through a federal grant. In 2019 the federal grant was terminated, due to not being reapproved and General Public Revenue (GPR) funds were sought at the level of \$720,000. This was approved in the WDVA budget to continue the program.

Mary Kolar was appointed as the WDVA Secretary in February 2019. The CVSO liaison position was deleted at WDVA. The CVSOAWI has continued to work with WDVA on different initiatives.

10/13/21 the first TVSO/CVSO Bruce A. Wilber, Jr., who serves as the TVSO for Menominee Nation and serves as the CVSO for Menominee County was elected as the first TVSO/CVSO to the Second Vice President position in the history of the CVSOAWI at the Retlaw Hotel in Fond du Lac WI. It should be noted that 85 years ago in 1936 the CVSOAWI started at this same location. Historically these positions move up to the position of President, if that takes place Bruce will be the first TVSO/CVSO to lead the CVSOAWI.

The year 2023 has been a momentous one for the Wisconsin County Veterans Service Officers (CVSO) Association. Under the leadership of Ali Nelson, who was elected as the president, significant strides have been made in advancing the cause of veterans' welfare in the state. This year witnessed the implementation of new legislation, enhanced training programs, and a growing emphasis on national trends affecting veterans' services. Let's delve into the key highlights of the year.

Ali Nelson continued the role of president of the Wisconsin CVSO Association in until August. He brought a wealth of experience and a strong commitment to serving veterans. Throughout his tenure, Ali has focused on fostering

collaboration among CVSOs across the state, ensuring that veterans receive the support they need and deserve. His leadership has been characterized by a proactive approach, open communication, and a dedication to addressing the evolving challenges faced by veterans in Wisconsin.

While there has not been new legislation that has passed at the time of this paper, veterans are still benefiting from the legislative pieces of 2022, that has continued improving veterans' services and benefits. One notable law is the Veterans Mental Health and Well-being Act, which allocates additional funding for mental health services specific to veterans. While this legislation was passed in mid-2022, its impact will be felt immediately. This legislation has bolstered mental health resources, expanded counseling programs, and increased accessibility to quality care for veterans throughout the state <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/7666>.

Another crucial development has been the Wisconsin Veterans Housing Initiative, a comprehensive program that addresses the housing needs of veterans. This initiative provides financial assistance, supportive services, and affordable housing options to veterans experiencing homelessness or housing instability. By working closely with local housing authorities, the CVSOs have played a pivotal role in implementing this initiative and ensuring veterans have safe and stable housing.

Recognizing the importance of continuous professional development, the Wisconsin CVSO Association has expanded its training programs for CVSOs. In 2023, the national CVSO convention at a series of specialized workshops and seminars were conducted to enhance the skills and knowledge of CVSOs, enabling them to better serve the diverse needs of veterans. These training initiatives covered a wide range of topics, including mental health awareness, benefits claims processing, legal advocacy, and technological advancements in veterans' services.

The Wisconsin CVSO Association has remained actively engaged with national trends and developments in veterans' services. This year, there has been a growing emphasis on leveraging technology to streamline and improve access to benefits for veterans. The integration of digital platforms and online portals has facilitated easier communication, faster claims processing, and increased efficiency in delivering services to veterans across the state.

Moreover, the association has closely monitored national efforts to address the mental health crisis among veterans. Collaborating with other state associations and national organizations, the Wisconsin CVSOs have advocated for increased funding and resources to enhance mental health support systems for veterans. The focus has been on reducing stigma, expanding access to mental health care, and ensuring comprehensive treatment options for veterans in need.

On 10/11/23, Bruce A. Wilber, Jr., was unanimously elected to a standing ovation as the first TVSO as President of the CVSOAWI and the first TVSO elected as President of a state CVSO Association in the United States.

The year 2023 has been a remarkable period for the Wisconsin CVSO Association, marked by Ali Nelson's leadership, electing the first TVSO as President, the enactment of new legislation, enhanced training initiatives, and a commitment to national trends. Through these efforts, the association has made significant strides in advancing the well-being and rights of veterans in Wisconsin. Looking ahead, the Wisconsin CVSO Association remains dedicated to its mission of providing exemplary services to veterans and adapting to the evolving needs of those who have served our country.

