

Office Gives Free Assistance to Veterans and Their Families

Every county in Florida has a service that helps veterans with VA claims and other issues.

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THE VILLAGES

One is a retired chief operations specialist with the Navy. Another is a retired chief master sergeant from the Air Force. The third served in the Air Force as well.

Combined, they served 77 years in the military.

Now, they all serve Florida veterans.

Every county in Florida, including Marion, Lake and Sumter, has a dedicated veteran services office, which is funded by the counties to serve veterans and their families in a variety of ways.

Each office has at least one dedicated veteran services officer who is on the front lines acting as the go-between for the veteran and the services available to them, at no cost to the veteran.

The bulk of their work is helping veterans handle issues associated with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"The majority of our assistance tends to focus on helping veterans and their families obtain VA disability, pension and burial benefits," said Rick Blair, Sumter County Veteran Services Office manager. "However, we will attempt to assist with any issue a veteran might have with the VA. Some examples include health care concerns, education benefits, VA home loan certificates of eligibility and replacement of military records, just to mention a few."

According to 2015 census data, there are 32,903 veterans in Lake County, 37,477 veterans in Marion County and 19,045 veterans in Sumter County. Last year, the Lake County office served about 9,500 veterans, the Marion County office helped about 7,500 and the Sumter County office helped about

BY THE NUMBERS

Total veteran population

per county (2015):

Lake: 32,903

Marion: 37,477

Sumter: 19,045

Number of people each office served in 2016:

Lake: About 9,500

Marion: About 7,500

Sumter: About 4,000

4,000. These numbers do not include family members who were helped.

"We're here to help you work your files, work your appeals, work your notice of disagreements, file your claims, get whatever documentation you may need to go ahead and explain to the VA why you believe that you've earned this compensation or you're eligible for a pension," said Mark Godinez, veterans service officer for Lake County.

In addition, veterans also can receive help filing for new military paperwork, such as a DD 214 discharge paper, proof of service history or medical records.

"We also assist veterans seeking to replace lost medals awarded while serving on active duty," said Jeffrey Askew, director of Marion County veteran services.

All three offices also help the homeless and incarcerated veteran populations. Officers visit incarcerated veterans to ensure they are receiving the benefits to which they are entitled, and they help homeless veterans receive medical care and pensions.

"We're very dedicated," Godinez said. "We're very devoted to our veterans."

The offices also sometimes assist with more physical needs. The Sumter County office recently helped a veteran get a new walker after his was stolen.

"Our office coordinated with the prosthetics department at The Villages VA clinic and he was issued a new walker, which allowed him to regain

his independence," Blair said.

"While we are always happy when our assistance results in veterans and their families obtaining the VA disability and pension entitlements they've earned, we are also ecstatic over the little wins that occur when our actions result in a better quality of life for our veterans."

And the offices aren't limited to helping veterans just in their county. Any Florida veterans or their families can receive assistance from any of the offices.

"As a matter of fact, we get a lot of veterans from Osceola, Orange County, Volusia," Godinez said. "We have some coming in from Polk County. We've had a couple from Marion County. Any veteran that comes in here, we will help. It doesn't matter whatsoever."

Each office offers similar assistance, most of which aims to educate veterans on what services and entitlements are available to them.

"That's what we're trying to do here, is get the information to the veterans, because there's so many veterans in the United States that have no idea what their benefits are," Godinez said.

Last year, Marion County's office brought in about \$14 million in new revenue to veterans from the VA, according to Askew.

"It's not about the money," Askew said. "It's about improving their quality of life and helping people."

All three officers and their colleagues agree that at the end of the day, helping veterans improve their lives is what's important.

"We love our veterans, we love their families and we want to make sure that any kind of benefits that are available to them get awarded," Godinez said.

"I've always believed that information is knowledge and knowledge is power," he added. "So I go ahead and try to spread the information, spread the word so that at least the veterans and their family members are educated on what they could potentially be eligible and qualified for."