

Veterans Service Office Helps Soldiers Find Benefits



The Clay County Veterans Service Office helps connect former soldiers with the benefits they're entitled to from their service. Veteran Tom Figliuzzi transferred from Otter Tail County in 2006 and now works as Clay County's Veterans Service Officer.

By: Jacob Underlee

The question from many local WWII veterans is simple- what are my benefits? However, the answer, according to Tom Figliuzzi, is often much more complicated.

Figliuzzi is Clay County's Veterans Service Officer (VSO), a position he has held since transferring from the Otter Tail County position in 2006. As VSO,

he helps local veterans of all wars and branches access military benefits for financial assistance.

Located in Moorhead's Clay County Family Services Center at 715 11th Street North, the Veterans Service Office works to help veterans of all wars understand and use the benefits accrued during their military service.

"The federal benefits are 99.9%

the same for all veterans," Figliuzzi said.

However, the sheer number of options available to each person makes each situation different. Figliuzzi's office contains a volume roughly the size of a phone book with all the different federal benefits available. The key to helping a veteran is to narrow down the options and find exactly what they need.

According to Figliuzzi, veterans that seek assistance from the office either know exactly what benefits they're looking for, or have no idea where to begin.

The first step is to schedule a one-on-one, hourlong meeting to discuss the veteran's situation. Family are welcome to attend these meetings, which are carefully scheduled to prevent crowding and give each person an equal amount of time.

"We try to get as many people as we can to physically show up," Figliuzzi said. "And we'll devote a whole hour to the veteran and the family."

Depending on the veteran's age and life situation, some benefits may not be necessary. In the case of WWII soldiers, many are increasing in age and are more focused on health issues rather than things like job training or college funds.

Figliuzzi and his associate, Veterans Benefits Program Coordinator Jennifer Williams, speak to the veteran and determine which needs must be taken care of.

"We come up with help for each veteran," Figliuzzi said. "Those are the types of strategies we try to look for. The day of 'tell me my benefits' is over. Everything now is case-specific."

Once the initial meeting has occurred and the veteran's needs are understood, a new case file is created. The veteran is then free to stop in the office anytime. Figliuzzi reviews the cases and decides which strategy will be most successful, then contacts the veteran as needed.

There are also state benefits to consider in addition to the federal.

"What most people aren't



The Veterans Service Office currently has around 10,300 case files of local veterans. The office works with veterans of all ages and from all wars.

aware of, including the majority of veterans, is that there's also a state VA," Figliuzzi said.

Jennifer Williams handles state benefits, as well as the Ultimate Honors Program, which provides a Bronze Star Marker for a burial site and a Presidential Memorial Certificate for Minnesota veterans.

The office currently has around 10,300 case files in operation. Even after a veteran dies, the file will remain open to keep in contact with the family of the deceased.

In addition to Figliuzzi and Williams, the office employs a part-time receptionist as well as a host of volunteers. The volunteers are veterans that freely give their time to keep the office up and running.

"There's no other volunteer

program like this," Figliuzzi said. "Not in Minnesota, not in any other state. We've become a model, not only for the state but the nation."

The Veterans Service Office also provides an "Ultimate Honors" room, where veterans and families can view examples of memorials, and also to reflect on their loved one's service.

The Clay County Veterans Service Office is open Monday to Friday, from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

For Figliuzzi, the work he does isn't considered charity. Rather, it's a way to help the soldiers who gave of themselves to protect the country throughout its history.

"It's what is owed to them," he said. "I think our veterans have earned that."