

BROOKLINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Human Services Subcommittee
Report on Veterans' Services Department FY23 Budget
Public Hearing Held via Zoom on March 7, 2022 at 5 pm

Public Hearing: Attending were Susan Granoff, Subcommittee Chair; Subcommittee members Ben Birnbaum, Katherine Florio, David-Marc Goldstein, and Donelle O'Neal; William McGroarty, Director, Veterans' Services; Ruthann Dobek, Director, Council on Aging; Select Board Members Bernard Greene and John VanScoyoc; Administrative Services Director Devon Fields; Council on Aging Chair Yolanda Rodriguez; and Brookline residents Lesley Archabel, Carol Caro, Susan Cohen, Janet Gelbart, Neil Gordon (TMM/AC), Carol Seibert, David Trevvett, Melissa Trevvett, and Sonia Wong.

Hearing Recording:

https://brooklinema.zoomgov.com/rec/share/2_PBikIGruEc5PeMPFBjE-5iAGKJip0SVnlHDwu6SwhrCS2ajz1cl3jtc2OAvLWN.WnMSBcGDA_YfGGw1

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Recommendation:

The Subcommittee unanimously (5-0) recommends the FY23 budget of \$316,534 for Veterans' Services.

FY23 Budget: The department is asking for \$316,534, and is essentially level-funded. It is seeking only an increase of \$150 over FY22's budget. This increase is found under Salaries in Longevity Pay. The Other category, which accounts for 49.7% of the budget, consists mainly of veterans' benefits (\$138,000), and \$18,500 to celebrate Memorial and Veterans Days.

Revenues: This category consists primarily of state Chapter 115 reimbursements although reimbursements from non-Chapter 115 spending is also included. Revenues are projected to be about \$62,000. This is down \$10,000 from FY22.

According to the director, he expects fewer reimbursements for non-Chapter 115 expenses, and he expects his Chapter 115 reimbursements to decrease over time due to the aging veteran population. These two trends contribute to the projected decrease.

There are 2.0 FTEs, including a director, who also serves as the town's emergency preparation coordinator, and an assistant who also supports the Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Relations.

The budget can be found on pages 131-135 of Brookline's FY 2023 Financial Plan and at <https://stories.opengov.com/bRLTTOi0V/published/undefined>

	FY21 Actuals	FY22 Budget	FY23 Budget	Variance
SALARIES	\$157,749	\$154,997	\$155,147	\$150
SERVICES	1,788	2,388	2,388	0
SUPPLIES	194	1,150	1,150	0
OTHER	103,093	157,339	157,339	0
BUDGETED CAPITAL	459	510	510	0
Total	\$263,282	\$316,384	\$316,534	\$150
	FY21 Actuals	FY22 Budget	FY23 Budget	Variance
REVENUES	\$70,594	\$72,642	\$62,341	-\$10,301
Revenues Less Expenses	\$70,594	\$72,642	\$62,341	-\$10,301

Discussion

The department, as mandated by state law, assists eligible veterans and their dependents with financial aid and, for those who meet eligibility requirements, assistance with medical bills. The Department is reimbursed by the Commonwealth for 75% of approved benefit expenditures. The Veterans Affairs staff also helps veterans obtain benefits from the Veterans Administration (VA) and other federal programs.

Over the past year, the department has been seeing people by appointment Monday through Thursday, and working with people over the phone when possible. This is an adjustment required by the on-going pandemic, and because many veterans are older, frail, and because of health concerns, and susceptible at higher rates to all illness.

According to Director McGroarty, the population served is an aging one, frail and susceptible at higher rates to illness: World War II veterans are in their nineties; Korean veterans are in their eighties; Vietnam veterans are in their late sixties and seventies; Gulf War veterans range in age from fifty to seventy; and those who fought the War on Terror were in their twenties when they began to qualify for veterans' services and some are in their fifties now.

The number of veterans in Brookline is difficult to measure; the department becomes aware of veterans when they need the department's services. Most of the veterans served are men; less than ten percent are women. There is real concern that women who have served have been so marginalized for their service that they are not applying for the benefits they've earned. We were told of one widow, a World War II pilot, who had applied for her husband's benefits when she was entitled to a larger sum in her own right. The department took the time to discover this, and to get her the money she had earned for her years of service.

Some retired veterans can be helped with a few hundred dollars a month to cover rapidly rising rents and also purchase their prescriptions, but because their income is above the poverty line, they may not qualify for the state's Chapter 115 benefits. The department works to find a service connected disability - often loss of hearing - that will open up federally administered benefits.

A means test placed on veteran's care by the Bush administration in the early 2000s makes it

difficult for those above the poverty line to receive benefits. However, most veterans living in Brookline have incomes above the poverty line and still need assistance. The department works with veterans to find programs that they may be unaware that they qualify for.

Younger veterans with children who lose their job need help to pay rent and feed their families while waiting for their first unemployment check. An injured veteran may wait six months to get their disability payments. This department can provide the money they need while they are waiting, as well as the support they need to get care and to make sure they don't get lost in the system. The department may be managing thirty to forty federal benefits claims at any one time.

The department works with between eighteen and twenty-four people at a time for the state-provided, and town-administered Chapter 115 benefits. Some of the older veterans will qualify for Chapter 115 funds for the rest of their lives, some may be eligible for VA pensions and social security, and most of the younger veterans will be able to find work.

When asked about his priorities for FY23, the director mentioned purchasing a small handicapped wheel-chair accessible van with a lift to make it easier to transport veterans in wheelchairs to their medical appointments. To do this, he intends to use \$70,000 remaining of a gift left to the town by the widow of a Brookline veteran.

Recommendation:

The Subcommittee unanimously (5-0) recommends the FY23 budget of \$316,534 for Veterans' Services.

PERFORMANCE / WORKLOAD INDICATORS

	ACTUAL 2020	ESTIMATE 2021	ACTUAL 2021	ESTIMATE 2022	ESTIMATE 2023
<u>Performance:</u>					
% of Claims Approved by the State	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
<u>Workload:</u>					
Recipients of Benefits (Monthly Average)	17	17	17	18	18
Service Recipients	1,000	1,000	950	1,000	1,000
Information Requests	1,200	1,200	1,200	1,200	1,200