

Annual Report

2021



Our Values

S Support

E Excellence

R Respect

V Veracity

E Engagement



Message from the Director

On behalf of the Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services, I am privileged to submit the 2021 annual report for our agency. This report shines a light on the accomplishments of our team of dedicated professionals, as well as the programs and services we can only deliver thanks to the support of community advocates – including the unwavering support we receive from our state and federal partners. Enhancing the Veteran and military family experience is our prime directive – we are driven by customer feedback, Veteran data from our RIServes network, and input from community partners.

However, these past two years have not been without challenges for Rhode Island's Veterans and military families; with the advance of the COVID-19 pandemic we've all had to deal with elements of chaos around us. Despite these challenges, our employees continue to operate with a customer-centric mindset to make accessing services seamless, effective, efficient, and convenient for Rhode Island Veterans. We strive to deliver inclusive plans, programs and services to serve Rhode Island's Veterans, active duty, guard and reserve, and their families.

Mental health awareness has been a central part of Rhode Island's ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services ensures Rhode Island's Veterans, active duty, guard and reserve, and their families have access to free mental health resources and necessary supports. Rhode Island is a major participant in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's "Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans and Their Families". This national call to action brings together military, civilians, and Veterans on interagency teams to collaborate, plan and implement suicide prevention best practices and policies for service members, Veterans and their families. Rhode Island was recently recognized by the executive director of the National VA Suicide Prevention Program at the US Department of Veterans Affairs – in November 2021 – for our success in implementing the Governor's Challenge in our state. We will continue with this work, as one Veteran suicide is too many.

The success of the interagency work through the Governor's Challenge proves that we are stronger together – something that we've experienced as Rhode Islanders came together in extraordinary ways to help each other over the last twenty months. From our partnership with the Rhode Island Department of Health to ensure the residents of the Rhode Island Veterans Home were happily reunited with their loved ones in Spring of 2020, to our collaboration with the Rhode Island Funeral Directors Association and Division of Business Regulation ensuring Rhode Island's Heroes were afforded proper and solemn funeral services at the Rhode Island Veterans Memorial Cemetery – we assessed, implemented, evaluated, and collaborated to provide

exceptional services for Veterans and their families, while taking into consideration health and safety in order to continue programs and services.

As my team and I assessed and evaluated, we saw that those we served once again wanted – and needed – a walk-in and in-person service option despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

We discussed this need, and we took action – becoming one of the first offices to open to walk-in and in-person appointments in 2021.

We are constantly evaluating and striving to meet the needs of those we serve; our primary clients, Veterans and military families, have dedicated themselves to defending freedom and equality, which drives us to ensure all Rhode Islanders receive exemplary services from our agency.

To the Veterans and Veteran-serving organizations: just like in the past, your bravery, sacrifice and dedication proves that there is good in the world BEACON OF HOPE, etc.

To the active duty, guard and reserve: thank you for what you do for us every day. You show us what selfless service really is, and how we can look beyond ourselves to help others.

And, to the military families: service doesn't end with the person wearing the uniform. We know that our servicemember's sacrifices are their families' sacrifices as well.

More than sixty-thousand Veterans, active duty, guard and reservists call Rhode Island home, and I thank them for choosing the Ocean State. It is because of them, and their families, that we enjoy our freedoms.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K. Yarn". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Kasim Yarn
Director of Veterans Services

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I am forever grateful to those who served —
for their bravery, sacrifice and dedication.

We must take every opportunity to thank
them for their service and recognize their
families as well, especially Rhode Island's
Gold Star Families, who have shown
tremendous strength and continue to be an
inspiration.

– Governor McKee



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Mission

Effective immediately, The Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services maintains thorough knowledge of individual and social factors contributing to personal problems that affect the Veteran, active duty, guard and reserve, and/or their families, remains current on issues and trends impacting the work and mission of the agency, forms strong and successful partnerships locally, regionally and nationwide to address Veterans' issues in Rhode Island, in order to set conditions to reduce homeless Veterans, Veterans living in poverty, Veteran unemployment rates, ensure Veterans receive proper medical care, while continuing quality customer service at the Rhode Island Veterans Home and Rhode Island Veterans Memorial Cemetery and ensure every Veteran has an opportunity to make it in Rhode Island.

Vision

A community of partners, providing a collective impact to all Veterans, active duty, guard and reserve, and their families, in having equitable access to programs and services.



United in Our Work

The Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services is humbled to have the privilege of serving our state's Veterans. Our work is supported and amplified by countless advocates, community groups, non-profit organizations, families and individuals. We also have invaluable partnerships with municipalities, the General Assembly, and state and federal agencies. Their support was critical in delivering services to Rhode Island's Heroes as we have over the past year.



Values

The Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services' core values underscore the obligations inherent in our mission. The values define who we are, our culture, and how we interact with Rhode Island's Veterans, active duty, guard and reserve, and their families.

Our values are more than just words – they spell the word 'SERVE' – guiding us daily, reminding us that we serve America's Heroes.

Support: Be Veteran-centric; identify, consider, and advance the interest of Veterans.

Excellence: Strive for the highest quality and continuous improvement.

Respect: Treat all those we serve and colleagues with dignity and respect.

Veracity: Adhere to the highest professional standards and maintain the trust and confidence of all whom we encounter.

Engagement: Work diligently to provide excellent service to Veterans and others, regardless of their eligibility for RIVETS programs and services. Be driven by the Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services' mission and fulfill responsibilities as a public servant.

“In our beloved Ocean State, we make the needs of Veterans, active duty, guard and reserve and our military families, top priority, connecting America's Heroes to the benefits and vast network of social service providers.”

-Director Yarn



Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services (RIVETS) is committed to ensuring Veterans and military-connected Rhode Islanders are safe, healthy, and able to reach their maximum potential. RIVETS operates programs and services that assist Veterans, active duty, guard and reserve, and their families, ensuring they have opportunities for employment, housing, and other assistance. RIVETS provides care for Veterans at the Rhode Island Veterans Home, a community living center, enhancing their quality of life and sustaining independence. Our agency also operates the Rhode Island Veterans Memorial Cemetery, offering a solemn final resting place for our military Heroes and their eligible dependents.

Our primary clients, Veterans and military families, have dedicated themselves to defending the U.S. Constitution, including the Bill of Rights. Their dedication to freedom and equality drives us to ensure all Rhode Islanders receive exemplary services.

The Veteran-and military-serving organizations have historically segmented the Veteran population into related war cohorts, but it is increasingly apparent that this limited view of Veterans fails to capture the complexity and diversity of today's Veteran population. Conflict-related cohorts provide a starting-point, but enhanced data on Veterans can provide additional insight. RIVETS must look to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the U.S. Census Bureau for additional data, and we believe understanding differences in age groups, what Veterans did while serving in the military, and their education level before entering the military would provide a detailed

understanding of those we serve and help us to deliver better care and services that enhance outcomes. We also leverage the lessons learned by serving Rhode Island's Veterans and military families and use our RIServes data to help inform and influence delivery of our programs and services.

Due to this, in addition to it being the right thing to do, RIVETS prioritizes the continual improvement of our agency's inclusiveness to all aspects of diversity, to combat all forms of oppression, and works to build equitable and inclusive plans, programs and services to serve Rhode Island's Veterans, active duty, guard and reserve, and their families.

Director Kasim J. Yarn oversees all diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and is the lead member representing the agency on various DEI committees and working groups.

Enhancing the Veteran and military family experience is our prime directive –we are driven by customer feedback, Veteran data from our RIServes network, and input from community partners. These past two years have not been without challenges for Rhode Island's Veterans and military families; throughout the pandemic we've all had to deal with elements of chaos around us. Despite these challenges, our employees continue to operate with a customer-centric mindset to make accessing RIVETS services seamless, effective, efficient, and convenient for Rhode Island Veterans. We strive to deliver inclusive plans, programs and services to serve Rhode Island's Veterans, active duty, guard and reserve, and their families.



Veteran Cohorts in Rhode Island

According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2019: ACS 1-Year Estimate, TableID S2101) Rhode Island's Veteran population skews considerably more homogenous and older than the state's overall population. This data shows 81 percent of the Rhode Island population identifying as white alone, while almost 91 percent of the Rhode Island Veteran population identified as white alone. Also, we know Rhode Island's population is aging like most of the nation. However, our Veterans have already turned the tide on the age wave. Rhode Island Veterans age 65 and older comprise 61.4 percent of all Veterans in the state, versus just 22 percent of the general population falling into that age bracket.

Female Veterans

Women represent more than half of the population, but only about 10 percent of the military population. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimated there were 5,039 female Veterans in Rhode Island in 2017, representing about 8 percent of Rhode Island's Veterans. While the male Veteran population is projected to decline over the next 25 years, the female Veteran population is expected to remain consistent, at around 5,000 individuals. By 2045, women will represent 22 percent of Rhode Island's Veteran population, making them one of the fastest-growing Veteran cohorts.

Minority Veterans

Like the Veteran population in general, minority Veterans are older than the U.S. population. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimated there were 6,703 minority (all races/ethnicities except non-Hispanic White) Veterans in Rhode Island in 2017, representing about 13 percent of Rhode Island's Veterans. While the White, non-Hispanic Veteran population is projected to decline over the next 25 years, the minority Veteran population is expected to remain consistent, at around 6,800 individuals. By 2045, minorities will represent 33 percent of Rhode Island's Veteran population, making them one of the fastest-growing Veteran cohorts.

Veteran Unemployment

In Federal Fiscal Year 2021, the Rhode Island Veteran unemployment rate jumped to 9.9 percent, which was higher than the 6.6 percent unemployment rate for Rhode Island overall. Of course, starting in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted Veterans, active duty, guard and reserve, and their families much in the same way it has civilians. Unemployment, the increasing cost of living, housing, food and other staples, has forced many of RIVETS' clients to seek additional assistance from our agency and our partner-providers.

Aging Veterans

As a group, Veterans are older than the U.S. population. In Rhode Island, nearly 80 percent of Veterans are age 55 or older, in comparison to just 31 percent of the general state population being 55 and older.

Age Bracket	Number of RI Veterans
18-34	3040
35-54	7710
55-64	8515
65-74	15616
75 and older	16742

Building the Team



In March 2021, Meghan Connelly joined the Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services as the Strategic Planning Policy & Communications Administrator. Meghan came to the Office of Veterans Services from the Rhode Island Office of Healthy Aging, where she served over five years leading their policy, communications, and government affairs work.

In March 2020, Meghan was called upon to serve in an emergency response role due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She was instrumental in launching programs offering food delivery, housing, violence prevention, vaccinations, and other services to keep all Rhode Islanders healthy and safe. It was through her work during the pandemic that Meghan was exposed to the mission and work of Office of Veterans Services, and she saw how her skills and knowledge could be put to use ensuring Rhode Island's Veterans and their families are guaranteed every opportunity to flourish in Rhode Island.

With nearly eighty percent of Rhode Island Veterans age 55 or older, Meghan's background in programs and services for older adults and their families has already been put to good use, allowing the Office of Veterans Services to expand our relationships with Rhode Island's senior centers, Attorney General's Consumer Protection and Elder Abuse units, AARP-Rhode Island, as well as ensuring we are offering all potential benefits options - such as state home care and caregiver programs - when our clients come through our doors.

Meghan is most proud of her ability to build partnerships with community providers and is excited that she's been able to spend more time with the partners carrying out work on the frontlines as more Rhode Islanders become vaccinated. She looks forward to 2022 and hopes to meet many more Veteran advocates and partners in-person.

During her time at the Office of Healthy Aging, Meghan strengthened partnerships with community providers, implemented new - and enhanced current - programming for Rhode Island's older adults, adults living with disabilities, and family caregivers. She also helped guide initiatives through the legislative process, including the successful restoration of funding to local senior centers, expanded mandatory reporting of elder abuse, and the change of the agency name from Elderly Affairs to Office of Health Aging, recognizing that the narrative on aging must be shifted and it begins with the words we use.

One Team

The Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services maintains key partnerships with each of the state's social services agencies.

A "No Wrong Door" approach towards Veterans Services is core to the mission. Our valued partners at EOHHS, DHS, OHA, DOC, and DLT help RIVETS maintain a strong continuum of service to help Veterans and Military families thrive.



Rhode Island VetCorps

Objectives

- Increase retention and graduation rates for student Veterans and their families
- Expand student access to statewide benefits
- Further integrate RI institutions of higher education into the Veteran-centric RIServes benefits network

Implementation

- Select and train Navigators for each campus
- Provide substantial assistance via the coordination center to supplement campus student Veteran services
- Funnel workflow through RIServes platform, collect service and demographic data to further build needs assessment and guide future efforts

Beginning in 2020, the Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services was awarded funding by AmeriCorps to pilot a program known as Rhode Island VetCorps. The concept was to empower student Veterans to serve their peers and help build new resource hubs on campus to support Veterans and their families.

The program employs students and alumni as “Navigators”. Their role is to serve as a benefits concierge—offering academic counseling and peer support on-site, while also being trained as power users in the RIServes network. This enables access to the statewide network on benefits with the click of a button.

The initial rollout occurred during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, VetCorps completed its launch and pilot year with significant success. A hybrid model of remote and on-site work was adopted, focused around ease of access for student Veterans. Navigators leveraged technology to provide solutions from home, on campus, and everywhere in between.

In addition to providing support, Navigators also champion a project during their service. From mental health workshops to Veteran-centric campus staff training, Navigators develop their own professional skillset as they help others.

RI VetCorps now enters its second year. As more students return to campus, the need for services has grown considerably. Student Veterans and their families have demonstrated a clear need for support—both on and off campus.



RHODE ISLAND
VETCORPS

Rhode Island Veterans Memorial Cemetery

The Office of Veterans Services operates and maintains the Rhode Island Veterans Memorial Cemetery (RIVMC) in Exeter. It is a dignified, solemn resting place for Veterans and their eligible spouses or dependents. Situated on 280 acres, our state's Veterans cemetery showcases our everlasting appreciation for those who served this country honorably.

Averaging 98 internments per month, the RIVMC continues to be one of the busiest state Veterans cemeteries in the nation. During Fiscal Year 2021, the cemetery conducted 1173 committal services. Its staff consists of 14 employees, which includes 12 full-time personnel and two seasonal workers.

The RIVMC offers all Veterans and their families the opportunity to inscribe the Veteran's name on the memorial wall or memorial walkway. Notification of the memorial wall/walkway program is sent out each February.

In addition, many military units, organizations, and campaigns also have monuments throughout the cemetery to honor their respective Veterans. Monument design, placement, and installation is coordinated with the RIVMC leadership.

Future Plans

In 2021, the Office of Veterans Services and the RIVMC continued to build and maintain partnerships with several organizations throughout the state. These relationships not only promote the mission of providing Veterans a dignified resting place, but also strengthen the Veteran community through outreach, fellowship, and a sense of community.



The RIVMC Administrator participates as a member of the Rhode Island Historical Cemetery Commission and conducts outreach with the local Veterans service organizations, including the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Our partners include:

- **Funeral Directors Association of RI**
- **Gold Star Families**
- **Naval Station Newport**
- **Patriot Guard Riders**
- **Sons and Daughters of the Revolution**
- **The University of Rhode Island**
- **Rhode Island Job Corps of Exeter**
- **Rhode Island National Guard**
- **Home Depot of North Kingstown**
- **VA National Cemetery Administration**
- **National Grid Saluting Branches**

Rhode Island Veterans Memorial Cemetery

Ceremonies & Accomplishments

The Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services conducts an annual Memorial Day observance at the cemetery against the fitting backdrop of the World War II Monument. In 2021, a public ceremony was held within COVID-19 restrictions. The Governor and the Director of Veterans Affairs hosted approximately 300 members of the public in an outdoor ceremony honoring our departed Veterans.

Wreaths Across America was held publicly this year within current COVID-19 restrictions. Volunteers assisted to lay over 3,000 wreaths in sections of the cemetery. Throughout the year, the RIVMC hosts several events that promote our state's unending gratitude to those Veterans who have so ably served our country, to include 9/11 Patriot Day, Armed Forces Day (Echo Taps) Remembrance and Saluting Branches among others

RIVMC received a federal grant of over \$1.3M and has completed construction on a new set of Columbarium Walls. These two walls will form the initial portion of CW-4 in the complex that will eventually consist of 40 total walls to continue fulfilling niche cremation placements for over 50 years.

In 2021, the RIVMC worked with the Rhode Island Division of Information Technology to establish a state run website for Veteran Grave Flagging. This website was formerly maintained exclusively by volunteers, and now acts as a hub for Veterans Grave Flagging throughout the state.

The new website can be visited at:
riveterangravesflags.ri.gov

Flagging Initiative Program Goals

- Recognize & Honor Every Deceased Veteran within the State of Rhode Island via the placement of a US Flag on their grave.
- Ensure that only eligible Veterans are receiving Memorial Day Flags
- Identify those individuals and groups that are flagging these Veteran's Graves
- Provide a list and location of each Veteran buried in the state
- Assist groups in working as a team to provide improved & more complete coverage of every cemetery in the state, in order to flag more veterans in less time
- Provide a location where dedicated citizens can reach out and volunteer their time to assist with this program

riveterangravesflags.ri.gov



Rhode Island Veterans Home

The Rhode Island Veterans Home (RIVH) serves as a testament to our State's appreciation for all the men and women who served. The 260,000 square-foot facility was rebuilt from the ground up to provide state-of-the-art amenities and officially opened in 2017. The Home provides housing and care for Rhode Island's Wartime Veterans, and it is located on the same 100-acre parcel that has served as the home for Rhode Island's Veterans since 1890. The mission of the Veterans Home continues to be the delivery of high quality nursing care, responsiveness to resident health and safety needs, and the commitment to providing the highest quality of life for our Rhode Island heroes.

The Rhode Island Veterans Home is built upon the premise of interconnected service and accessibility for Veterans and their visiting families. The design concept focuses around "neighborhoods," which are groups of resident housing providing a closer and more personal sense of community. This community living design creates a home for residents and leads to more powerful, meaningful and satisfying lives, as well as ensuring a relationship-rich living environment.

Throughout the year, the staff of the Rhode Island Veterans Home have worked diligently to ensure health and safety, while maintaining quality of life for the Veteran residents. In 2021 the facility did not have an active resident case of COVID since the outbreak ending in February. In partnership, and with guidance from the Rhode Island Department of Health, thorough screening and testing procedures have been in place since March.

Keeping Veterans who are residing in the Home connected with their families was a necessity that we committed to implementing from the start. Visitations transformed from a series of strict policies requiring visitors to schedule an appointment, undergo a full symptom screening and temperature check, and then be escorted to a physically-distanced meeting area while utilizing a full set of PPE, to completely open except for a brief symptom check upon entering.

During the pandemic, the Veterans Home is able to utilize the facility design to designate two neighborhoods as quarantine units. One can be used for new admissions and residents returning from the hospital, as a precautionary quarantine measure. The second neighborhood can be used in the event of a positive case, and allows residents without severe symptoms to remain in this dedicated neighborhood while they recover.

Though the focus of this year has been the health and safety of residents at RIVH during the COVID pandemic, there have also been enhancements to the facility and operations. Efforts are underway to complete the conversion to a new shift scheduling and electronic medical records systems. In partnership with the University of Rhode Island, the on-site greenhouse continues to provide enrichment opportunities for residents. Among other activities, the URI Master Gardeners offer a gardening program. The program teaches residents how to grow and care for food and other plants. In addition, the Master Gardeners also donated poinsettias, bringing holiday cheer to the residents and staff during the 2021 season.



Our Residents

The staff at the Rhode Island Veterans Home remain steadfast in our commitment to providing residents an environment that is safe and truly improves their quality of life. As we continue to navigate the challenges of the COVID 19 pandemic, we are mindful of finding appropriate and best ways to enhance the lives of our residents.

The RIVH features plenty of outdoor space, and the design of the campus is conducive to outdoor open-air events which allow for ample social distancing. Our most highly attended event this year was the “War Veterans Tribute Cruise In”, an antique car show presented by a number of our community partners in conjunction with a resident planning committee.

The show brings the energy of our state’s automobile enthusiasts directly to the residents of the RIVH. It kicked off with a procession of antique vehicles, followed by a ride through by “Rolling Thunder”, a Veterans’ motorcycle group, and finished with a performance from the Bristol Warren Regional High School Band. The show was held on the front campus, and residents were assisted by staff so they could get out and enjoy the show.



RIVH Family Council

The partnership and support from Rhode Island Veterans Home families have always been essential to ensuring the quality of life of residents. Family members continue to provide instrumental, emotional and caring support, and are key partners to us at the Rhode Island Veterans Home. We work to provide an inclusive environment, fostering mutual recognition, respect, and a sense of belonging and acceptance for family members. As the pandemic evolved, and regulations allowed, we reopened to in-person visitation and have kept those guidelines. We’ve also reinstated the option for family members to join residents for meals, a popular benefit which has brought joy to many families over these past months.

None of this work could be accomplished without the support of our Family Council—a dedicated group of individuals, lead by Donna St. Angelo. The RIVH Family Council has met throughout the pandemic to share issues of concern with RIVH leadership, bring solutions and suggestions for best practices, and share information.

The RIVH Family Council meets monthly and continues to be an important advocacy voice for the residents.

The members of our community are key partners in helping to care for residents through the generous donation of time and resources.

The RIVH team would like to recognize Operation Support Our Troops and Mary Kay Salomone for their generous donation of a 2020 Ford Transit bus.

This new vehicle can transport 8 residents at once and has bariatric capabilities. Our team is excited to put it to good transporting residents to and from community events.



Rhode Island VetPass

For the past several years, the Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services has partnered with the Rhode Island Transportation Authority (RIPTA) to create a transportation solution for disabled and low income Veterans. Known as VetPass, the program has continued to evolve as it gathers more and more demand.

RIVETS quickly established transportation as a top need amongst the Veteran community. Transportation is commonly known as a co-occurring need, in that it often accompanies requests for food, housing, and employment assistance. Within the Veterans Services community, a wholistic approach is always the target approach to assisting our Veterans. As we continue to use our RIServes network to help Veterans, we are always listening to constituents and analyzing data to identify and solve service gaps, and transportation assistance is a perfect example of an identified adjacent need to the impactful services our existing network already provides.

Though the VA does offer transportation to and from appointments at the Providence VA Medical Center, there were scarce resources to help Veterans travel to and from places like work and the grocery store before the inception of VetPass. Our office heard loud and clear from both Veterans and our partners that transportation not limited to medical services was a significant need.

A key element of transportation assistance is flexibility. When RIVETS began exploring meaningful and cost-effective transportation assistance, leveraging RIPTA's low cost and wide reaching bus network was a natural

pairing. VetPass offers qualifying Veterans the ability to secure day-to-day, monthly, or reloadable RIPTA fare based on their need and circumstance.

In 2021, VetPass Program Director Jennifer Marquis-Caruso worked with RIPTA to ensure stability and continuous delivery of transportation assistance year-round.

VetPass now works closely with both the Rhode Island National Guard and the VA's Homeless Patient-Aligned Care Team (HPACT) to identify Veterans in need and quickly enroll them in the program. The partnerships are seamlessly connected through the use of the RIServes referral system.

VetPass currently provides recurring transportation assistance to over 40 Rhode Island Veterans.



WAVE

The latest iteration of VetPass utilizes RIPTA's new WAVE system, allowing riders to maintain a reloadable account accessible by both card and smartphone.

The card features security measures to help prevent misuse if lost or stolen. It also allows for Veterans to save a trip to the office and have their cards reloaded digitally.

Veterans Service Grant

In 2021, the Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services awarded a total of \$200,000 split between 11 recipient organizations. This combination of non-profits and institutes of higher education each designed a program to serve the Rhode Island Veteran Community from a list of 13 identified areas of need within the state. In 2021, RIVETS received 13 program applications, and funded or partially funded 11 of them.

Shri Yoga received funding to provide no-cost yoga classes to Rhode Island Veterans and their families. This year's program will hold a total of 170 courses across various locations in the state. Shri has partnered with the VA Wellness Center, the Vet Center, and the Rhode Island National Guard to provide classes on-site in areas convenient for service members. They have also establish "Shri Studio", a virtual option for those who still need to social distance but want to experience the benefits of yoga.



USA Veterans & Military Support Foundation (USAVMF) received funding to grow their programs capacity within the state. Chief among them are Food4Vets, which provides boxes of shelf-stable food for homeless or at-risk of homelessness Veterans. The primary distribution is handled via their partnership with the VA and state colleges to identify Veterans in need.

USAVMF also administers Operation Backpack and Coats4Vets, initiatives that help school-age Veteran family members and Veterans who need coats for the winter season.

The Providence Clemente Initiative, in partnership with Operation Stand Down Rhode Island, established a program that provides high level, humanities-focused education Veterans. Eligible students can receive up to 6 college credits for completion, and the course takes Veterans through a wide curriculum of history, philosophy, literature, and art. The program is guided by humanities scholars and explores how society handles the experiences of war and the transition back to civilian life.



13 Veterans Service Categories

- Poverty
- Homelessness
- Employment & Training
- Education
- PTSD, Agent Orange, & Burn Pits
- Disability Benefits
- Long-term Care
- Transportation
- Family Member & Caregiver Support
- Financial Planning & Services
- Legal Services
- Mortuary Affairs
- Transitional Assistance

RIServes

In 2017, the Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services launched the RIServes network, with 35 agencies and providers. Ours was the first-of-its kind community network across the entire state – offering enhanced coordination of care to fill gaps for our underserved clients. We saw that our Veterans and military families needed a true no-wrong-door to help them access benefits, including health care, housing, education, job training, legal and financial counseling, and so much more.

This was almost five years ago, and as we look back, it was an historic state-led transformation of our office and the way we operated. It was an investment and prioritization the State of Rhode Island made – Rhode Island said, “Rhode Island Veterans and military families matter,” and proved it by investing in RIServes and supporting the case management positions we have in our office.

RIServes utilized a “Coordination Center” model, which is a system that empowers service providers and partners throughout the state to offer assistance beyond their immediate areas of expertise. Providers are directly linked to the coordination center, which can help to both identify and direct co-occurring needs. If a Veteran is seeking heating assistance directly with a provider, the Coordination Center can assist by connecting that person with adjacent services like food and clothing. Utilizing this model, each provider acts as a door that opens both ways into the large network of Veterans benefits throughout the state.

Our administrative office acts as the hub and coordination center for Rhode Island Veterans, with two

case managers on staff, helping to identify needs, route clients to the most appropriate care based on eligibility and available services, and track interactions to ensure quality and timeliness.

We hear that navigating resources is the number one challenge for our Veterans – surmounting this challenge required coordination between public, private and non-profit entities who are now able to work together in real-time to ensure positive outcomes.

The most important part of RIServes is that every service member, Veteran, and their family can easily access the full range of comprehensive services required – and the design of the network brings the formerly dispersed array of resources into a single location where providers are vetted and verified.

RIServes has allowed warm hand-offs from one provider or referral entity to another – so we can make sure that a client is getting the services they’ve earned, deserve, and need – and most importantly, they don’t slip through the cracks.

Clients come into our network either through self-referral via the RIServes online portal, via a service provider, or through our office which acts as the network hub. This is the no-wrong-door concept at work.

With over 60,000 Veterans, active duty, guard and reserve members making Rhode Island their home, we are committed to ensuring those we are charged with serving are cared for and receiving the benefits they deserve.

RISERVES YEARLY SNAPSHOT – 2021

SERVING 5 COUNTIES WITH A VETERAN POPULATION OF 62,151 | TOP NEED: EDUCATION



256
Unique
Clients



440
Cases &
Referrals



130
Assistance
Requests



570
Service
Episodes



337
UniteRI Participating
Organizations



1667
Unique UniteRI
Users



89% Military Members & Veterans
11% Spouses, Family Members & Caregivers



75% Male | 25% Female

Mental Health Action

In the wake of COVID-19, millions of people have uncovered new mental health conditions and millions more have had their existing challenges exacerbated. That is why the Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services led the way in Rhode Island, and along with a coalition of more than 1,400 nonprofits, brands, government agencies and influential leaders nationwide, came together on the First Annual Mental Health Action Day to drive our culture from awareness to action on mental health.

We were lucky to be joined by leaders like Governor McKee and Executive Office of Health and Human Services Secretary Jones during a Facebook Live event which featured panels centered around reducing military mental health stigma, resources for Veterans, BH Link, and the impact of social isolation on mental health.

As Secretary Jones said, “In Rhode Island, we are taking steps to improve mental health resources and care—working across state agencies while engaging stakeholders and community members. We continue our efforts to deliver supports and services that meet the specific needs of Rhode Islanders and allow them to be healthy, safe and independent.”

While more people than ever before are comfortable discussing mental health, many fall through the cracks in the space between awareness and action—particularly those who have been marginalized or underserved by existing institutions.

That is why RIVETS ensures that if a Veteran, active-duty, reserve or guard, and military family member are in need of someone to talk to, that resources and help

are available. Not only does the RIServes peer-to-peer, confidential case management network provide referral to mental and behavioral health services, but RIVETS also ensures that other resources are actively promoted and available.

The Veterans Crisis Line is available 24/7, connecting service members, Veterans, as well as their family members and friends, with qualified, caring responders through a confidential, toll-free hotline. Call 1-800-273-8255 and press 1. Online chat and text is also available.

The Vet Center, located in Warwick, provides a broad range of counseling, outreach, and referral services to combat Veterans and their families. The Vet Center guides Veterans and their families through many of the major adjustment in lifestyle that often occur after a Veteran returns from combat. Call 401-739-0167 to connect to the local Vet Center. RIVETS can also make a referral to these services.

BH Link is a one-stop, statewide 24/7 call-in center at 401-414-LINK (5465) that connects people to appropriate care and resources when they—or someone they care about—is experiencing a behavioral health crisis. CH Link also offers a community-based walk-in facility at 975 Waterman Avenue in East Providence, where clinicians connect people to immediate, stabilizing emergency behavioral health services, and long-term care and recovery supports.

It is the priority of RIVETS that Veterans, active-duty, guard, reserve and military families know that they are not alone—we stand together at all times in service to our state, our nation and one another.

Governors Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Health Administration has partnered with the Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration through a call to action for state and local communities to implement the VA's 2018-2028 National Strategy for the Prevention of Veteran Suicide. The aim of the Nation Strategy is to prevent suicide among at-risk Service Members, Veterans, and their Families using a comprehensive public health approach. Rhode Island is advancing the Nation Strategy by facilitating state-wide policy-to-practice implementation plans. Rhode Island Office of Veterans Service Director Yarn co-chairs the Rhode Island team, along with Rhode Island Department of Health's Violence and Injury Prevention Program Manager. The Rhode Island Team consists of community and state-agency partners, including, but not limited to, RI National Guard, RI State Police, RI Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals, RI Executive Office of Health and Human Services, and others. Rhode Island was recently recognized by the executive director of the National VA Suicide Prevention Program at the US Department of Veterans Affairs – in November 2021 – for our success in implementing the Governor's Challenge in our state. According to the latest data from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, there were less than ten Veteran suicides in Rhode Island in 2019—but one suicide death is too many. We will not stop advocating for, and supporting, service members, Veterans and their families.

Veterans Services Strategic Plan

In 2013, the General Assembly directed the Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services (RIVETS) to work with other state agencies and community partners to develop, maintain, and annually update a statewide Veterans Services Strategic Plan (VSSP) for the delivery of services for Veterans and their families.

RIVETS serves more than 60,000 Ocean State Veterans and their families through the operation of the Rhode Island Veterans Home, the Rhode Island Veterans Memorial Cemetery, and the Rhode Island Veterans Resource Center. The Veterans Home in Bristol provides skilled nursing care to our Veterans. The Veterans Memorial Cemetery is a dignified and solemn resting place for Rhode Island Veterans and their eligible dependents in Exeter. The Veterans Resource Center in Warwick serves as the coordination center for RIServes, our referral network which connects Veterans, active duty, guard and reserve, and their families to benefits and resources.

The RI Office of Veterans Services acts as the lead agency to assist and direct access to community, state, and federal resources to those who have served in the Armed Forces and their families.



We are setting conditions to ensure every Veteran has an opportunity to flourish and be successful in Rhode Island by reducing homelessness, poverty, and unemployment among Veterans; increasing Veterans' access to healthcare; and maintaining quality, responsive client services at the Rhode Island Veterans Home and the Rhode Island Veterans Memorial Cemetery.

Support: Be Veteran-centric; identify, consider, and advance the interest of Veterans.

Excellence: Strive for the highest quality and continuous improvement.

Respect: Treat all those we serve and colleagues with dignity and respect.

Veracity: Adhere to the highest professional standards and maintain the trust and confidence of all whom we encounter.

Engagement: Work diligently to provide excellent service to Veterans and others, regardless of their eligibility for RIVETS programs and services. Be driven by the Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services' mission and fulfill responsibilities as a public servant.

By remaining faithful to our values, and continuing to provide quality care at the Veterans Home, quality customer service at the Veterans Memorial Cemetery, and acting as a resource hub for Veterans Services, RIVETS is able to focus on our objectives and desired end state.

Veterans Services Strategic Plan

Working with partners from several community, state and federal partners, the VSSP is executed through:

- (1) Task force and working groups with state and federal agencies (e.g., U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Corrections, Department of Labor and Training, Department of Children Youth and Families, Department of Human Services, Office of Healthy Aging, the Task Force of Incarcerated Veterans, the Rhode Island Judiciary, the Rhode Island State Police, and others);
- (2) RIServes, our coordinated network of community providers; and
- (3) Community outreach with state agencies, non-profits, Veteran service organizations, and municipalities.

Given the diverse demographics of Rhode Island Veterans, the work focuses on thirteen service categories. During the COVID-19 pandemic, like many Rhode Islanders, Veterans presented to the Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services seeking food, housing heat, and other essential needs assistance. They and their families also sought assistance with benefits and health care navigation, securing COVID-19 testing and vaccination, and other information and referral services. Legal and financial services were sought as part of housing needs, as well as transportation services for both medical and employment needs. Of course, we also saw changes in delivery of long-term care and mortuary services due to COVID-19. All of these increases and shifts in demand and delivery of services due to the pandemic

are influencing the way RIVETS provides programs and services. It has also provided us with insight and allowed us to advocate for changes, new programs, and partnerships that will benefit the Ocean State's Veteran population.

At RIVETS, we recognize that our reach is only limited by our ability to work together. We leverage municipal, state, and federal capabilities, ensuring we can have a collective impact for Veterans and their families throughout the following thirteen Veterans Service Categories:

- Veterans Disability Benefits
- Veterans Education
- Veterans Employment & Training
- Veterans Family Members & Caregivers
- Veterans Financial Planning Services
- Veterans Homelessness
- Veterans Living in Poverty
- Veterans Legal Services
- Veterans Long Term Care
- Veterans Mortuary Affairs
- Veterans PTSD, Agent Orange Health Effects, and Burn Pits Health Effects
- Veterans Transitional Assistance
- Veterans Transportation

RI2030: Veterans

As Rhode Island emerges from a once-in-a-century public health crisis, there is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build a more resilient, prosperous, and equitable state for all, including Veterans. Making the most of this opportunity will require a collaborative effort to address not only the issues caused by the pandemic, but also those that existed long before.

Governor McKee launched RI2030, crafting a vision both for the state's economic recovery as well as for what Rhode Island will look like in the years ahead.

The RI2030 plan presents both short- and long-term actions to improve the lives of Rhode Islanders and aligns with the focus areas within the Rhode Island Veterans Services Strategic Plan. The RI2030 plan can be found at ri2030.com.



Veterans Services Strategic Plan

Veterans Disability Benefits

The federal Department of Veterans Affairs provides service-connected disability benefits. The Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services assists Veterans with benefits counseling, application and appeals processes. In addition, RIVETS works with Veterans not eligible for VA disability compensation by connecting them with programs such as SSDI and the General Public Assistance, administered by the state's Executive Office of Health & Human Services and the Department of Human Services.

- RIServes continues to streamline the benefits navigation process.
- RIServes benefits from being part of the broader UniteRI network, offering access to hundreds of providers for Veterans, active duty, guard and reserve and their families.
- RIServes is the first 'no wrong door' referral system for Veterans in Rhode Island, allowing for warm hand-offs and follow-ups, ensuring clients get the services they need in a timely manner.

Veterans Education

Rhode Island's state colleges and universities waive tuition for Rhode Island National Guard members. They also provide free tuition for Service Connected Disability Veterans rated at 10% or higher. In addition, the federal VA administers the Forever GI Bill, which provides funds for tuition.

- RIVETS has increased its level of student Veterans advocacy amongst the state college campuses, and partnered with private higher education providers to deliver better access to resources for their Student Veteran populations.
- RIVETS has launched the VetCorps initiative on three public college campuses, and hopes to expand to private colleges in the near future. Through the VetCorps, we've hosted mental health and wellness programming, and expanded benefits counseling opportunities.

Veterans Employment & Training

The Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services continues to partner with the Department of Labor & Training's Veterans employment counselors to identify appropriate employment and training opportunities for those who've served. RIVETS also works with the Governor's Workforce Board, Rhode Island Department of Business Regulation and the federal VA's Vocational Rehabilitation program.

- Through collaboration with the Governor's Office, General Assembly, and state agencies, RIVETS continues to work towards the adoption of effective practices for the transfer of military and spouse licenses in good standing and substantially equivalent; licensure through endorsement; temporary licensure; and expedited licensing.

Veterans Services Strategic Plan



Veterans Family Members & Caregivers

Through RIServes, the Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services can help family members and caregivers navigate the benefits system and identify agencies that offer caregiver support. In addition, the federal VA offers caregiver assistance and the Vets Center provides caregiver and family counseling.

- RIVETS awards grants to nonprofit organizations to provide social services to family members.
- RIVETS has expanded the RIServes network to include more services accessible to family members.
- RIVETS works collaboratively with OHA, who in 2021 released the State of Rhode Island's first State Plan on Caregiving, which extends through 2023. Rhode Island has one of the highest general populations of adults over age 85, and our Veteran population skews much older as well. Our caregivers are supporting loved ones, ensuring they are aging with dignity and purpose. Caregivers have a tough job, and we are here to support them.

Veterans Financial Planning Services

The RI Department of Labor & Training offers vocational finance planning for its clients, and the RI National Guard and Naval Station Newport have financial counselors available for service members. The Providence VA offers free income tax return preparation and community partners like Operation Stand Down RI help with financial planning.

- RIVETS identifies partners for the RIServes network to offer free coaching to Veterans.
- All Veteran employment and training programs have financial counseling available as a supplementary service.

Veterans Services Strategic Plan

Veterans Homelessness

Rhode Island is making significant progress and has developed a shared vision with community leaders to identify and implement concrete steps to overcome barriers to permanent housing faced by Veterans.

- RIVETS Director is an active member of the RI Continuum of Care Committee (RICOC) and was appointed as co-chair of the RICOC Veterans Committee.
- RIVETS awarded grants to non-profit organizations providing social services to Veterans experiencing homelessness.
- RIVETS works with municipalities and agencies in ensuring housing developed for Veterans is providing person-centered services, so the Veteran has every opportunity to succeed.

Veterans Living in Poverty

While there are no Veteran-specific anti-poverty programs at the state-level, Veterans are eligible for the same programs available to all Rhode Islanders. For example, the state administers the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), child care assistance, and limited amounts of monetary assistance. Community partners such as Operation Stand Down RI, Veterans, Inc., Gateway to Independence, and the RI Coalition for the Homeless help Veterans who are unable to afford housing and other services.

- RIVETS increased supportive services to give homeless and at-risk Veterans access to needed assistance through the RIServes network.
- RIVETS awarded grants to non-profit organizations to provide social services to Veterans and family members experiencing poverty.
- RIVETS has strengthened partnerships with the RI Department of Human Services to better serve Veterans and military families who require food assistance. We have also been able to refer older Veterans who are just above Medicaid levels to the Rhode Island Office of Healthy Aging to explore options for long term services and supports that would allow them to age in their own home and avoid more costly nursing home placements.

Poverty rates are historically lower for Veterans than non-Veterans. Poverty rates for Black and Hispanic Veteran households are much lower than those of their non-Veteran counterparts. In 2017, Black Veteran households had a poverty rate of 9.6%, versus 23.2% for Black non-Veteran households, a difference of 13.7 percentage points. The rate for Hispanic Veteran households was 7.6%, compared with 18.6% for Hispanic non-Veteran households. The difference was less stark between households headed by white Veterans and white non-Veterans: 5.8% vs. 9.4%, respectively.

Pew Research Center

Veterans Services Strategic Plan

Veterans Legal Services

The RI National Guard has a legal assistance program for its members, as does the NAVSTA Staff Judge Advocate's office. The RI Bar Association offers reduced-fee and pro bono assistance through the Armed Forces Legal Services Project. Roger Williams Law School launched the Veterans Disability Appeals Field Clinic to represent clients appealing disability decisions before the VA and the Board of Veterans Appeals. The RI Veterans Treatment Court continues to serve Veterans with successful rehabilitation and treatment for service-related issues that have led to misdemeanor infractions.

- The RIDOC partnership for incarcerated Veterans continues to be a success, working to ease the reintegration into the community for Veterans following their release from incarceration.
- RIVETS awarded grants to non-profit organizations providing legal services to Veterans.

Veterans Long Term Care

The Rhode Island Veterans Home and the VA Long Term Care program offer options for Veterans seeking long-term skilled nursing care. In addition, RIVETS works with the state's Medicaid agency to determine other long-term care options for those Veterans who are not eligible for admission to the RI Veterans Home nor VA long-term care options.

- In collaboration with the RI Department of Health and the Providence VA Health Care System, RIVETS continues to look to expand services in both Providence and Washington Counties.
- RIVETS is committed to optimizing the health and well-being of Veterans with multiple chronic conditions, life-limiting illness, frailty, or disability associated with chronic disease or injury.
- RIVETS leadership participates in the Rhode Island Long Term Care Coordinating Council.
- RIVETS Strategic Planning, Policy and Communications Administrator has joined the RI Haven Elder Justice work group, ensuring the rights, needs, and issues impacting Veterans are included in the planning and work around elder abuse prevention.

Veterans Mortuary Affairs

The Rhode Island Veterans Memorial Cemetery (RIVMC) provides a dignified, final resting place for Rhode Island's Veterans and eligible dependents. The cemetery staff works closely with funeral directors and the RI National Guard's Honor Detail to arrange military honors and committal services. The state's General Public Assistance program helps to fund basic funeral services for those Veterans who do not have the means to pay for services and are not eligible for the RIVMC.

- On December 16, 2021, RIVMC cut the ribbon on a set of new columbarium walls as part of a multi-phase project which will eventually build 40 walls containing 14,000 niches. The project is expected to allow the cemetery to continue offering niche inurnment for more than a half-century.

Veterans Services Strategic Plan

Veterans Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Agent Orange Effects & Burn Pit Health Effects

In the wake of COVID-19, millions of people have uncovered new mental health conditions and millions more have had their existing challenges exacerbated. That is why the Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services lead the way in Rhode Island, and along with a coalition of more than 1,400 nonprofits, brands, government agencies and influential leaders nationwide, came together on the First Annual Mental Health Action Day to drive our culture from awareness to action on mental health.

- Rhode Island is an active participant in the VA Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans and Their Families, co-chaired by Director Yarn.
- RIVETS is a member of the Rhode Island Summit Policy Committee addressing Tobacco and other substance additions through the Center for Health Promotion.
- In 2021, RIVETS was added as a key member of the Adult Behavioral Health System of Care team at EOHHS, recognizing the importance of including the Veteran perspective in health and human services.

Veterans Transitional Assistance

Through an information-sharing partnership with the Department of Defense, RIVETS instituted an outreach program to recently-separated service members. A case manager welcomes the returning service member home, A case manager introduces him or her to the services offered by RIVETS, and lets them know that the office stands ready to assist with benefits counseling and resource navigation. The military also offers the Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) to those coming off active duty. The RI National Guard offers transitional assistance to its members returning from deployments.

- During normal operations, Naval Station Newport conducts a week-long TAP class and has partnered with Director Yarn to provide a brief to each new convening class.

Veterans Transportation

RIVETS quickly established transportation as a top need amongst the Veteran community. Transportation is commonly known as a co-occurring need, in that it often accompanies requests for food, housing, and employment assistance. Within the Veterans Services community, a wholistic approach is always the target approach to assisting our Veterans.

- RIVETS leverages RIPTA's low cost and wide reaching bus network, offering VetPass, a program for qualifying Veterans to secure day-to-day, monthly, or reloadable RIPTA fare based on their need and circumstance.

Veterans Services Strategic Plan

Our Partners

Our success is defined by our ability to work in a collaborative way with our partners. These efforts allow us— and our network of community providers — to maximize resources and make a collective impact on improving positive outcomes for our Veterans and their families.

Collaboration is key to our “No Wrong Door” approach; we leverage these capabilities to better serve Veterans and their families and ensure each and every person who seeks assistance is connected to the right programs and services.

To achieve our desired end state, the following partners have been crucial in effecting positive change for those we serve (listed alphabetically):

Rhode Island Commerce Corporation

Rhode Island Department of Behavioral
Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities and
Hospitals

Rhode Island Department of Business Regulation

Rhode Island Department of Health

Rhode Island Department of Human Services

Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training

Rhode Island Department of State


Rhode Island Office of Healthy Aging

Rhode Island National Guard

Rhode Island Office of Postsecondary
Commissioner

Rhode Island Public Transit Authority

Rhode Island Veterans Treatment Court



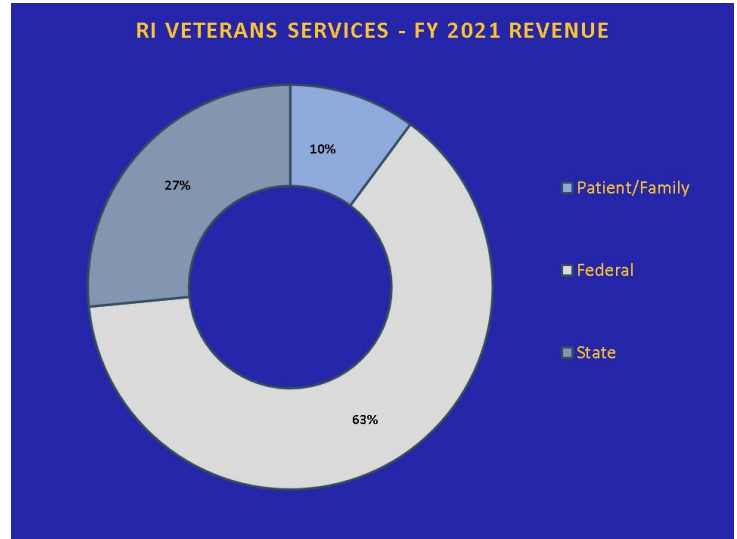
Our mission is made possible by the partnerships we hold with so many organizations throughout Rhode Island.

The RIVETS team thanks every service provider and all of the volunteers who donate their time to helping Rhode Island’s Veterans.

Revenue Totals

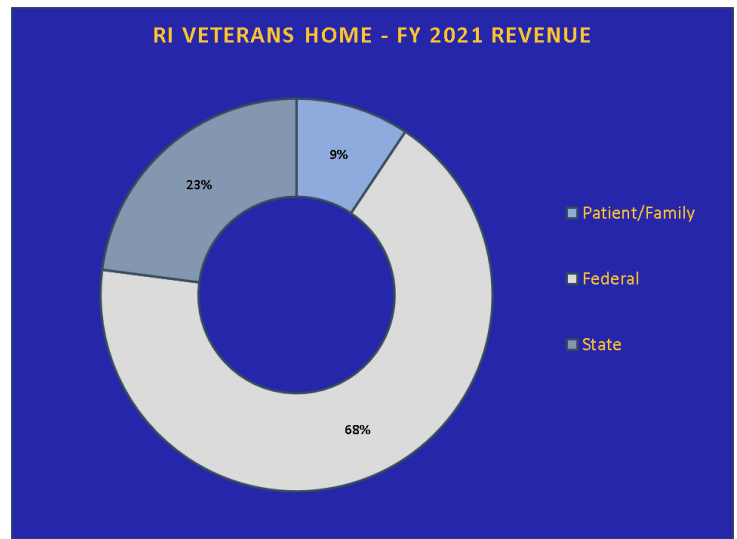
RI Veterans Services FY 2021 Revenue

Patient/Family	\$3,788,664
Federal	\$23,707,987
State	\$9,935,599
Total:	\$37,432,250



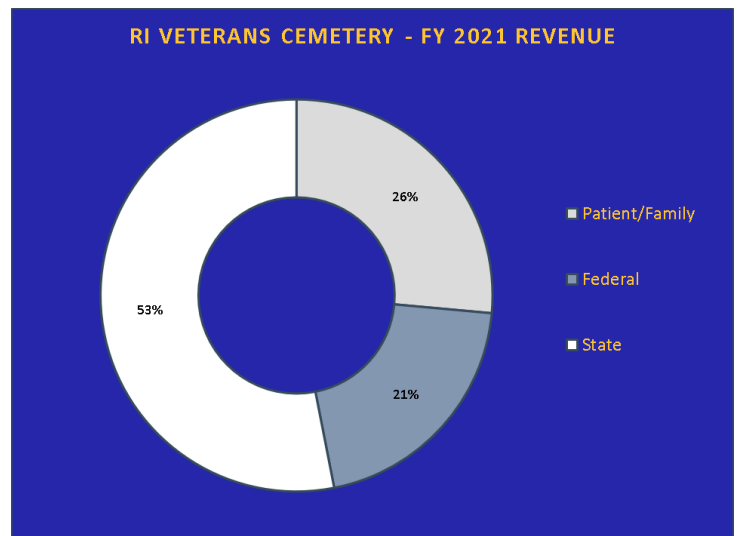
RI Veterans Home FY 2021 Revenue

Patient/Family	\$3,220,836
Federal	\$23,257,638
State	\$7,884,541
Total:	\$34,363,015

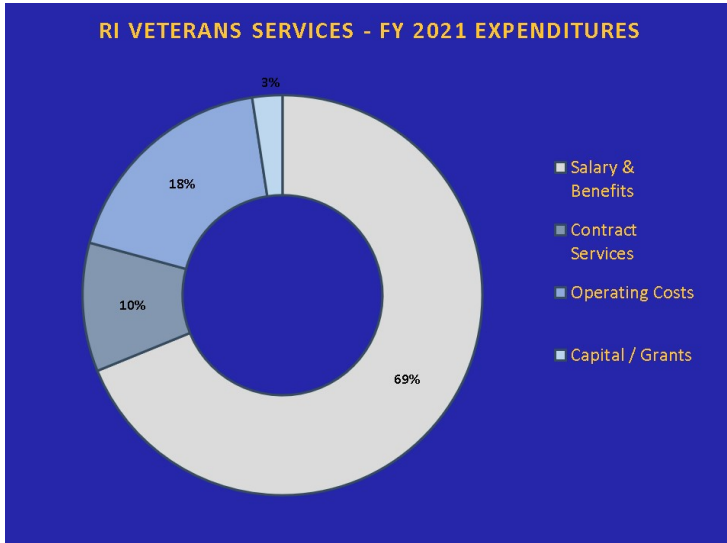


Veterans Cemetery FY 2021 Revenue

Patient/Family	\$567,828
Federal	\$439,701
State	\$1,139,753
Total:	\$2,147,282

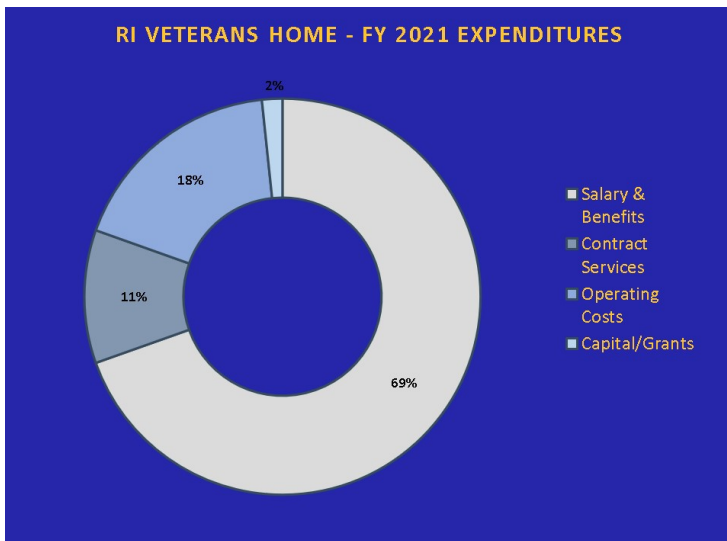


Expenditure Totals



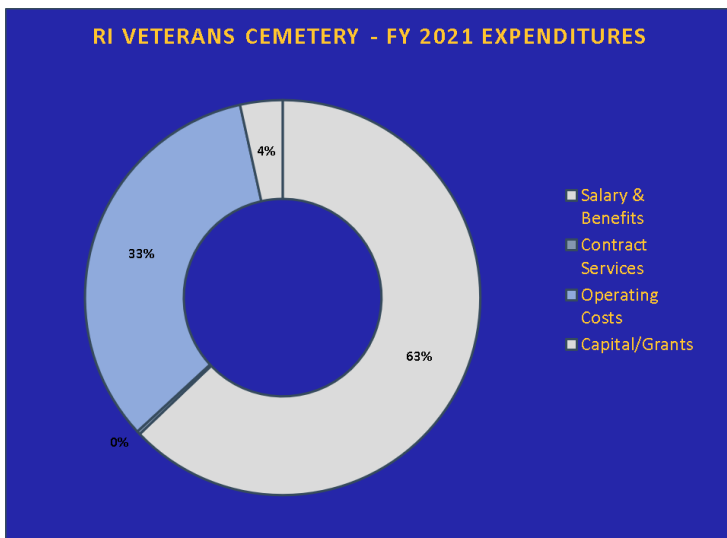
RI Veterans Services FY 2021 Expenditures

Salary & Benefits	\$25,764,222
Contract Services	\$3,891,726
Operating Costs	\$6,867,616
Capital/Grants	\$908,686
Total:	\$37,432,250



RI Veterans Home FY 2021 Expenditures

Salary & Benefits	\$23,907,297
Contract Services	\$3,735,390
Operating Costs	\$6,148,952
Capital/Grants	\$571,376
Total:	\$34,363,015



RI Veterans Cemetery FY 2021 Expenditures

Salary & Benefits	\$1,298,194
Contract Services	\$5,856
Operating Costs	\$689,591
Capital/Grants	\$71,496
Total:	\$2,065,137



Front and back cover photographs provided courtesy of Tim Blankenship, Interactive Media Manager, WaterFire Providence.

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