



Delivering Post-9/11 Service Bonus to Veterans

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Executive Summary

On May 6, 2022 passage of the Omnibus Veterans and Military Affairs bill recognized the service and sacrifices of our heroes who answered the call to protect all of us. The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) partnered with Minnesota IT Services (MNIT) and Minnesota Management and Budget (MMB) to facilitate this program for eligible veterans, currently serving service members or veterans' beneficiaries. The bill included the Post-9/11 Veterans Service Bonus program (Post-9/11 Bonus) which, coupled with a later January 2023 statute change, provided a total of \$39,880,000 in benefits payable to eligible veterans who served from 9/11/01 to 8/30/21.

As soon as the bill was passed, unsurpassed collaboration between teams from MDVA, MNIT, and MMB built a system in less than two months that was capable of accepting and processing applications and disbursements. Within 60 days of bill passage, the teams developed an online system that processed veteran applications from entry to payment and began accepting the first applications on July 6, 2022. Upon verification and approval, applicants received a check in the mail in about two weeks. This money makes a big difference in veterans' lives who may be experiencing economic hardship.

This swift implementation was aided by developing an expansion portal to the existing Veterans Application Tracking System (VATS). VATS was designed with an eye to accommodate potential future benefit programs like this. VATS is Minnesota's primary platform for veterans, MDVA, and County Veterans Service Offices to interact with each other. It offers a one-stop-shop for veterans to easily apply for and track benefits. On the business side, VATS shares data that allows MDVA and state procurement staff to process applications and issue benefits seamlessly.

Why it matters: "Our service members and their families make incredible sacrifices to preserve the safety and freedom of our state, nation, and world," said Governor Tim Walz. "This bonus recognizes the service and sacrifices of our heroes who answered the call to protect all of us."

To say that the program has made a significant impact on veterans and surviving dependents' lives is an understatement. In the grand scheme, \$600, \$1200, or \$2,000 can go a long way in a veteran's life. Recipients of this bonus can use the money to pay credit card debts, medical bills, housing, and car payments, among other financial needs.



24,207

Number of applications processed by MDVA as of April, 2024



\$25.4M

Bonuses paid to veterans, currently serving members, and surviving dependents



15,000

Applications received in the first 30 days



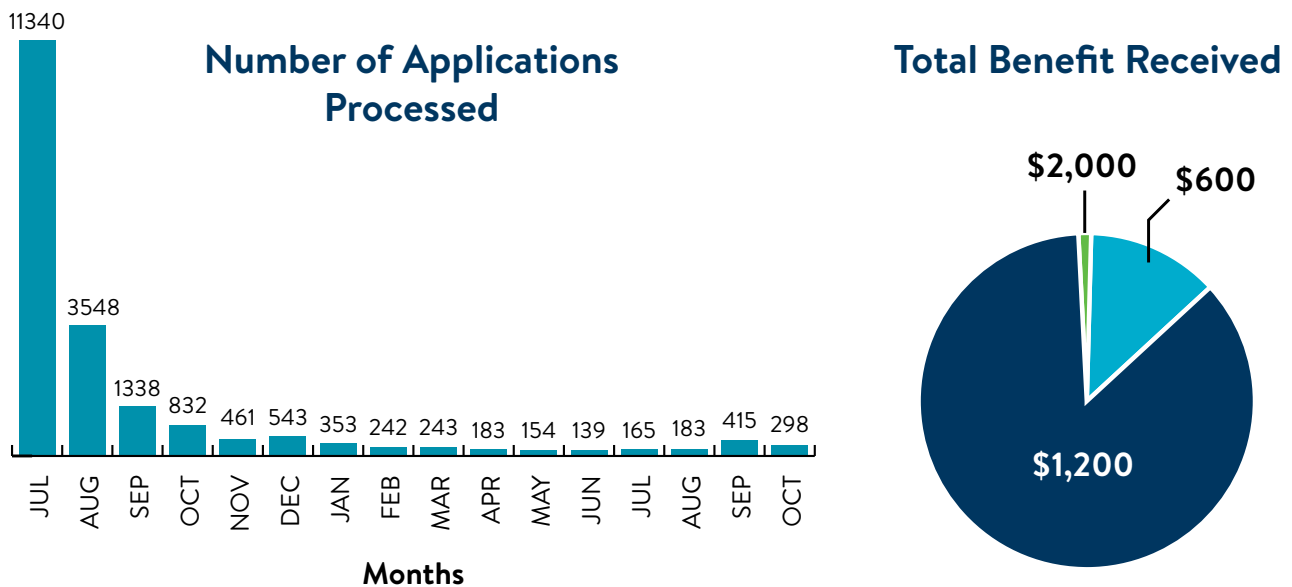
510

Average number of applications received per day

Idea: Minnesota's Veteran Population

According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 294,000 veterans live in Minnesota. The Post-9/11 Bonus program targets veterans who served between September 11, 2001, and August 30, 2021. This segment represents approximately one-third of the veterans living in Minnesota.

This effort addresses only one of multiple programs designed to provide benefits and support to Minnesota veterans and their families. Without the ability to reach veterans through MDVA's programs, more veterans may become homeless, more families experience economic instability, and their quality of life decreases.



Implementation: Elements of Success

Priorities

Implementing the Post-9/11 Bonus program was the top priority for the Legislature, the Governor, MDVA, and MNIT. MNIT's strategic objectives promote a customer focus, prioritize the voice of the end user, and improve citizen services by leveraging emerging technology with intention.

Accessibility is a high priority for Minnesota, MNIT, and for MDVA. Integral to our function as government agencies is the right of all members of the public to access public information. Accessibility testing was conducted early and throughout the development to make sure the Post-9/11 Bonus portal met the [State's Accessibility Standard](#).

Existing state security procedures mitigated our risk. Developed code was scanned for vulnerabilities and the production release met acceptable code vulnerability requirements.



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-Minnesota Governor Tim Walz

Person-Centric

MDVA and MNIT approached this project from a person-centric perspective—what do veterans need and how they can get it efficiently and in a timely manner? Based on customer feedback when developing the VATS system, we knew navigating veteran benefits can be a daunting task that often increases veterans’ stress and disinterest in pursuing their benefits.

We used that feedback and end user acceptance testing to incorporate person-centric parameters for the Post-9/11 Bonus benefit portal. This streamlined portal embraces technology in the way that our veterans expect to receive modern services. Veterans and beneficiaries can easily access the VATS portal via the computer, tablet or cell phone, create an application, upload required documents, and hit the submit button. MDVA is able to process applications quickly, often the same day an applicant applies. Customer service feedback has been nothing short of excellent.

Setting an Example

Veterans live in every state in the nation, and while this project was specific to veterans, every state faces the same challenges when it comes to state and federal mandates that provide benefits and support to that state’s residents. The methodologies, development, design, strategies, and functionality are concepts that can be shared universally. The Post-9/11 Bonus program, and indeed the entire VATS implementation, has been a success story in outreach, implementation, and swift disbursement of benefits and bonuses in appreciation of our nation’s heroes. MDVA and MNIT encourage sharing our development strategies, design concepts, methodology, interfaces, and functionality with other states through discussions and demonstrations.

Agile Makes a Difference

We had a short Agile development window (3 sprints/6 weeks). Development began in May and closed at the end of June. As the application system was implemented, the payment system was being completed. With little lag time, MDVA installed the payment process, maximizing turnout time and ensuring the payments could be made as quickly as possible. The project then focused on testing, and tracking/fixing issues until July 5. The first applications for the Post-9/11 Bonus were accepted and processed on July 7. The final go-live decision required MDVA to approve the release based on application testing results, code security scan results, and overall application functional readiness based on the final sprint review.

MDVA and MNIT support a connected culture of collaboration, scalability, and sustainability – every person involved in the project was engaged from beginning to end. With Agile, everyone stayed informed, knew what needed to be done, and delivered on time. We discovered two issues that were addressed quickly in the first 3 hours after launch.

Partnerships are Key to Success

In the case of the Post-9/11 Bonus program, community partnerships have been a key ingredient in getting the word out, which directly reduced the cost of marketing the program through other channels. MDVA participated in community events such as the Yellow Ribbon Program, job fairs, reintegration programs, and veterans' fairs to raise awareness. Community awareness and acceptance was managed through the marketing efforts of MDVA, the Governor's press conference, and outreach to all County Veteran Service Officers (CVSOs) to promote awareness of the Post-9/11 Bonus program and provide instructions to apply for the bonus.

For the successful implementation of the bonus program disbursement, MDVA collaborated with the Minnesota Management and Budget, MDVA Programs and Services Division, the County Veterans Service Offices, and other veteran service organizations in the state, and with MNIT partners for the technical development.

MDVA also recognized the key role that the CVSOs play in reaching veterans individually across the state. All CVSOs in all 87 counties were given VATS access and training so they could upload applications on behalf of the applicant. Interdepartmental relationships help bridge the chasms that typically lead to missed opportunities to assist veterans.

Getting the Work Done

At the program's inception, the Minnesota Legislature did not appropriate administrative funding to disburse the service bonus. MDVA Programs and Services estimated the initial operation cost at \$150,000. Since the program utilizes the existing infrastructure, the overhead cost is substantially tiny relative to the amount processed.

This accomplishment is unique because of the remarkable pace at which MNIT and MDVA delivered results. We seamlessly developed an application intake process, swiftly released it, and refined our internal procedures in real-time as applications poured in. This approach epitomized the essence of producing a minimal viable product within an agile framework, allowing us to adapt and iterate rapidly to meet evolving needs.

MDVA initially assigned 35 staff to the project, with 26 processing the applications in the first four months. Once operation became steady, the Programs and Services Division's 12 Higher Education Regional Coordinators absorbed the duties. Seamless operation has been possible through the collaborative effort of MDVA, Minnesota Management and Budget, MNIT, the CVSOs, and other veteran service organizations in the state. MDVA leveraged the functionality of the Veterans Application Tracking System (VATS) to create and maintain veteran and claimant records for case management.

Future Planning Pays Off

VATS was developed by MDVA business owners and MNIT developers, business analysts, and project managers. VATS is designed to be flexible and nimble to easily accommodate future program changes just like the Post-9/11 Bonus.

We harnessed the power of established technologies such as .NET Core, which is a free and open-source software platform developed by Microsoft. The user interfaces, secure login, portals, and applications are developed in an Angular UI framework, and Azure DevOps was used to meticulously orchestrate and deploy

our solutions through automated CI/CD pipelines. Our dedication to implementing industry-leading practices within these platforms has allowed us to address critical business requirements swiftly and effectively. Our streamlined process serves as the linchpin of successful rapid implementation of innovative functionalities within remarkably short timeframes.

Dynamic reporting provides granular reports and audits. Automated workflows for benefit approvals, appeals and denials allow MDVA staff to manage applications quickly and make decisions on benefits from anywhere, anytime. Likewise, veterans can submit applications online with a single, master database sharing their data across various programs and services.

Impact

Here in Minnesota, we’re mission driven. MNIT supports MDVA every step of the way in its continued successful mission to provide benefits and support to Minnesota’s veterans and beneficiaries.

As of April 2024, MDVA sent bonus payments totaling \$25,477,800 to 24,207 veterans in all 87 counties. Within a few weeks of the program approval, MDVA assembled a system and a team to process applications within 24-48 hours of submission.

Success is measured by meeting these objectives:

1. Veterans can electronically submit applications for the Post-9/11 Service Bonus, upload documentation, track the progress of their application, and ultimately receive the payment.
2. MDVA can administer submitted applications to determine eligibility and fulfill the bonus request as appropriate.
3. CVSOs and others could access the VATS portal, review the applications, and support needs of veterans and update the application.

Applicant Type	Count	Total Paid
Veteran	20,662	\$21,749,200
Active Duty Service Member	3,399	\$3,486,000
Surviving Spouse	71	\$114,000
Surviving Dependent	13	\$22,000
Surviving Parent	58	\$99,400
Surviving Sibling	3	\$6,000
Estate	1	\$1,200
Total Recipients:	24,207	\$25,477,800

Recognition

The Veterans Application and Tracking System plays a key part in getting veterans connected to programs like the Post-9/11 bonus quickly and easily. MDVA's SOAR program collaborates with key organizations and community groups to provide Minnesota's homeless and at-risk veterans with expanded access to Social Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits. SOAR stands for SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery.

On March 20, 2024, the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) [received their fifth Abraham Lincoln Pillars of Excellence Award](#) from the U.S. Department of Veterans for their work to address the current five top-line issues: customer experience with VA benefits and services, eliminating the claims and appeals backlog, eliminating veterans homelessness, delivery of services to Tribal governments serving Native American veterans, suicide awareness and prevention and innovative state programs.



“Minnesota is on track to become the fourth state to end veterans homelessness, and we’re using a nation-leading outreach program to reach that goal,” said Governor Walz. “I’m proud of our team at MDVA who are dedicated to connecting veterans to their critical benefits. This recognition reflects Minnesota’s commitment to providing the best services and care for our veterans.”



“The SOAR program has established itself to be one of the most important homelessness prevention strategies in Minnesota’s drive to be the fourth state in the nation to effectively eliminate Veteran homelessness,” says Brad Lindsay, MDVA Commissioner. “I’m proud that this team’s dedication and focus on building relationships is being recognized by the VA.”



A Worthy Investment

A 6-week long development, testing and implementation of the Post-9/11 Veterans Service Bonus project, VATS's flexible architecture proved its worth to support future MDVA program needs.

Foundationally, VATS combined databases to ensure statutory requirement limits are upheld, provide applicants a secure, streamlined, online experience to apply and check the status of applications, and deliver MDVA staff a smooth and efficient user interface portal to accurately process claims. VATS is tied to the Minnesota account system, State-Wide Integrated Financial Tools (SWIFT), for accurate, timely payments to beneficiaries.

The program was such a success, that the agency sought additional funding to provide to veterans. The coding of the solution allows us to easily implement new programs or make adjustments to existing ones.

When you think of the 45,000 eligible veterans whose lives will be impacted by the Post-9/11 Veterans Service Bonus, the benefits are immeasurable. And when you consider the 300,000 veterans who live in Minnesota, no effort is too great to provide the benefits and support they have earned.