

ADVOCATE for legislation designed to strengthen outreach efforts to Florida’s veterans – specifically female veterans and hard-to-reach populations – to help ensure access to benefits to which they are entitled.

BACKGROUND:

The Sunshine State is home to the third-largest veteran population in the nation – 1.43 million in total as of 2023. Thanks to the leadership demonstrated by the Legislature and the Governor, Florida has made strides toward becoming one of the most veteran-friendly states in the country. Numerous pieces of legislation, signed into law in recent years, have established additional resources, supports and career development opportunities. Despite these efforts, many veterans continue to endure financial hardship.

Veterans Service Officers (VSOs) play a critical role in ensuring that veterans, especially for those struggling to make ends meet, are able to access earned state and federal benefits, including essential services like housing assistance and health care. VSOs also help save the state a considerable amount of money by reducing the burden on programs like Medicaid; according to the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs, state VSOs generate a return on investment of \$63.00 for every \$1 invested.

Florida has an opportunity to build upon the good work that has been done on behalf of its veterans and ensure that policies and investments are achieving their intended impact.



WHAT CAN BE DONE:

- **Enhance outreach efforts.** Invest in programs and initiatives designed to engage veterans and connect them with vital supports. This includes funding additional VSO positions, innovating outreach strategies, and providing additional funding to help advertise and promote free services.
- **Focus on hard-to-reach populations.** Outreach initiatives must account for populations that are harder to reach, such as young veterans and female veterans. Female veterans are often unaware that they are eligible for certain benefits and specialized programs.

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT:

Many veterans in Florida are struggling financially. In 2019, 6% of Florida’s veteran population earned incomes below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Another 23% earned above the FPL, but below the **ALICE** threshold which is the amount necessary to afford basic expenses like rent, groceries and transportation costs.

Female veterans are a rapidly growing population. Florida is home to 168,000 female veterans—the second-largest number in the nation.