

University of Massachusetts Boston

**ScholarWorks at UMass Boston**

---

Center for Social and Demographic Research on  
Aging Publications

Gerontology Institute

---

6-2020

## **An Assessment of Veteran's Services in the Town of Natick, MA**

Caitlin Coyle

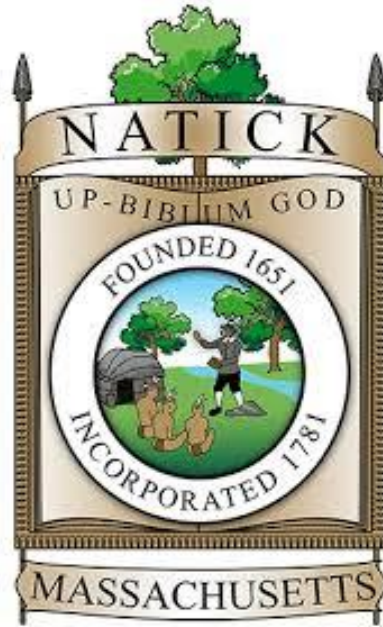
Thomas Kane

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/demographyofaging>



Part of the [Gerontology Commons](#), and the [Social Welfare Commons](#)

---



# **An Assessment of Veteran's Services in the Town of Natick, MA**

June, 2020

---

Commissioned by the Town of Natick

---

**Center for Social and Demographic  
Research on Aging,  
Gerontology Institute**  
John W. McCormack Graduate  
School of Policy & Global Studies

**William Joiner Institute for the  
Study of War and Social  
Consequences**

## Table of Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b><i>Contributors and Acknowledgements</i></b> .....                       | <b>1</b>  |
| Introduction .....  | 2         |
| The Natick Community-Senior Center and Department of Veteran Services ..... | 4         |
| <b><i>Methods</i></b> .....   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b><i>Results</i></b> .....   | <b>6</b>  |
| Demographic Profile of Natick Veterans and their Dependents .....           | 6         |
| Hearing from the Natick Veteran’s Services Department .....                 | 9         |
| Hearing from Resident Veterans.....   | 11        |
| Hearing from Resident Spouses & Widows of Veterans .....                    | 14        |
| <b><i>Conclusions and Recommendations</i></b> .....                         | <b>14</b> |

## Contributors and Acknowledgements

This report was produced by in collaboration between two research centers at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. The Center for Social and Demographic Research on Aging (CSDRA), a research unit within the Gerontology Institute at UMass Boston's McCormack School provides resources and research expertise to communities, non-governmental organizations, and other agencies through the Commonwealth. The William Joiner Institute for the Study of War and Social Consequences (WJI) addresses the social and health consequences of war through research, education, advocacy, and outreach support globally and serves veterans, veteran's family members, war refugees and all victims of war.

Caitlin Coyle, PhD of CSDRA, and Thomas Kane, PhD of WJI are primarily responsible for the contents of this report. Other contributors to the report are Jan Mutchler, PhD. We offer our appreciation to Paul Carew, Director of Veterans Services and ADA Coordinator for the Town of Natick and Susan Ramsey, Director of the Town of Natick Senior Center and Community Services for their leadership and guidance, and Sheila Young, Executive Assistant in the Veteran Services Department, for her valuable input in the Key Informant Interviews as well. We acknowledge with gratitude the Town of Natick for funding this project. As well we are grateful to the veterans and their dependents for their service and for sharing their thoughts as an invaluable part of the data collection.

### **For more information, contact:**

The Center for Social and Demographic Research on Aging  
Gerontology Institute  
University of Massachusetts Boston  
[CSDRA@umb.edu](mailto:CSDRA@umb.edu) | 617.287.7413

### **Recommended Citation**

Coyle, Caitlin and Kane, Thomas, "Natick Veterans Needs Assessment" (June, 2020). *Center for Social and Demographic Research on Aging Publications*

## Introduction

Massachusetts has some of the best and most comprehensive health services and financial and social support programs for veterans and their spouses or widows in the country. In addition to three high quality VA hospitals and a VA regional Office being within 45 minutes of the town of Natick, the veterans and their families also benefit from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts unique program of financial support for low-income veterans and their spouses and widows, under what is known as Chapter 115 of the Massachusetts State statutes.

The Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services serves as the state-based liaison office for benefits, services, and programs that specifically target veterans, including financial assistance, education benefits, employment services and training, housing loans, and residential nursing home care. The office also facilitates access to federal programs and benefits for which Massachusetts veterans may be eligible. A network of 222 veterans' service officers based in 351 cities and towns across Massachusetts is available to help veterans access and navigate eligibility requirements for federal, state, and local programs. It is the Veteran's Services Department's responsibility to inform and assist all veterans, regardless of whether they have just returned from active duty or are a veteran from any previous engagement or era. As well, they often organize annual celebrations and recognition of veterans and their families. These trained individuals serve as advisers and guidance counselors for local, state, and federal benefits (e.g., employment, housing, tax rebates, death benefits and information about Veterans cemeteries or grave markers, access to the VA health care system or service related disability status). All requests and information given are completely confidential. In theory, Veteran's Services Departments serve as the most local entry-point for a Veteran to access needed supports and services.

Natick is a relatively affluent town of over 35,000 inhabitants (in 2018), that was founded in 1670, and is located in the Western Metro Region of the Boston Metropolitan area and situated in Middlesex County, with Wellesley, Needham, Holliston, and Framingham as neighboring towns. Residents of the Town of Natick have a long and proud tradition of military service dating back to the Revolutionary War and the Town's support for its returning military veterans and their spouses or widows also dates back that far. Natick includes a community of the ancestors of Native Americans who were part of the original towns established by Reverend John Elliot for "Praying Indians" who had converted to Christianity in the 1600s in Massachusetts. Many of these native American Natick residents served proudly for the United States during the Revolutionary War against the British and their descendants continue to serve our country in the more recent wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the town honors them along with all the Natick veterans who serve their country.

In the Spring of 2020, the Town of Natick partnered with the University of Massachusetts to conduct an assessment of the current services provided by the Town and provide recommendations for how these valuable resources can be distributed more widely among residents. Examples of promising practices in reaching veterans are presented in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Summary of promising practices to engage with veterans and their families

| Goal                                       | Promising Practice   |
|--|--|
| <b>Engaging post 9/11 era veterans</b>     | <p>Become certified to train providers in “trauma informed care”<sup>1</sup> or “military cultural competence”<sup>2</sup> and offer this training to local nonprofits as a way of promoting referrals to your department.</p> <p>Consider using the question, “do you have any history of military service” as opposed to “are you a veteran” to try and reach those who may not readily identify with their veteran status.</p>                      |
| <b>Communicating with younger veterans</b> | <p>Connect with free re-integration programs to offer to local veterans and families<sup>3</sup>. This is a crucial service for those re-entering civilian life.</p> <p>In addition to social media, consider a “text campaign” that would periodically alert veterans of events or available services.</p>  |
| <b>Engaging with female veterans</b>       | <p>Create partnerships with community based organizations that serve women and seek permission to do in-person recruitment including participating in the organizations events by having an information table with staff (preferably female veteran or military affiliated). For example, head start programs, parent teacher associations, domestic violence shelters or rape crisis organizations, juvenile court or family court social workers</p> |
| <b>Engaging veteran families</b>           | <p>Offer kid-focus programming to learn about military families. Show screenings of Sesame Street’s “Talk, Listen, Connect”<sup>4</sup> initiative at the kids section of the public library or have a table at a local “touch a truck” event.</p> <p>For those who report being a widow or widower on the Town Census, include a follow-up question about whether their deceased spouse was a veteran.</p>  |

<sup>1</sup> Swords to Plowshares, a nonprofit organization, offers an in-person military cultural competency course called “Combat to Community.” The program can be tailored to meet the needs of mental health clinicians or law enforcement officials. [www.combattocommunity.org](http://www.combattocommunity.org)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.samhsa.gov/section-223/cultural-competency/military-veterans>

<sup>3</sup> Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program <https://www.yellowribbon.mil/>

<sup>4</sup> Offers bilingual resources and support to military families with young children facing challenging transitions in their life including coping with deployments, homecomings, injuries, and death. [www.sesamestreet.org/tlc](http://www.sesamestreet.org/tlc).

Specifically, UMass Boston's Center for Social and Demographic Research on Aging, and the William Joiner Institute for the Study of War and Social Consequences agreed to assist the Council on Aging and the Veterans Service Office for the Town of Natick to assess the current situation, services, and current and future needs of veterans and their families. This study includes identifying the priority veteran service needs and addressing the challenges to find effective ways to reach more Natick veterans of different eras and sociodemographic backgrounds so they can access needed and desired services, programs, and activities.

### The Natick Community-Senior Center and Department of Veteran Services

The Town of Natick has a Community-Senior Center which houses the Council on Aging, the Department of Human Services, and the Department of Veteran Services. There is a director that oversees all three of these units. The Department of Veterans Services serves Natick's veterans and their dependents with the state-run Veterans Benefits Program, filing for federal benefits, and offering counseling, employment training, and assistance with other veteran needs. The department is operated by two full time staff people. The Director, also a veteran, is responsible for all programs and service and provides consultation to veterans and their families. One additional full-time administrative staff person manages many of the applications and intake screenings. While the number of Veterans or eligible dependents served by the Natick Veteran's Service division is unknown, results of this study are clear that the current services being provided are invaluable to the recipients.

### Methods

Methods used in compiling this report include an analysis of existing data from the U.S. Census Bureau, three key informant interviews with three Town of Natick staff responsible for overseeing and implementing veteran services for the town, and an additional nine in-depth interviews with resident veterans and spouses of veterans. Approval for data collection methods was granted by the University of Massachusetts, Boston's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

### Demographic Profile

As an initial step toward understanding characteristics of the Town of Natick's older Veteran population through quantitative data, we generated a demographic profile of the City using data drawn from the decennial U.S. Census Bureau and the American Community Survey (ACS)—a large, annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. For purposes of this assessment, we primarily used information drawn from the most current 5-year ACS files (2014-2018) for the Town of Natick to summarize demographic characteristics of veterans living in Natick, including age, gender, household income, and disability status.

### Key-Informant Interviews

To gain deeper insight about both the current capacity of the Veteran's Services Department as well as the experience of living in Natick as a veteran or spouse of a veteran, we conducted 12 key-informant in-depth interviews. Veteran respondents and spouse/widow respondents were recruited through the Natick Veteran's Services Department and all had been served by this unit. Interviews were conducted with the following individuals:

1. Three municipal employees responsible for overseeing veteran related services and programs in the Town of Natick, including one who was a combat veteran.
2. Six (5 male; 1 female) resident<sup>5</sup> veterans of different service areas and branches of military (2 from the U.S. Marine Corps; 2 from the U.S. Army; 1 from the U.S. Navy; and 1 from the U.S. Air Force). These veterans served in a variety of eras (1 World War II veteran (1942-1948); one Korean War veteran (1950-1953); 2 Vietnam War veterans (1966-1972), 1 post Vietnam War peace time veteran (1979-1986); and one post 9/11 veteran (2004-2009). Ages of these veterans ranged from 37-97 years old. The majority of the veterans interviewed (4 of 6) had been deployed in war combat zones and experienced physical and/or mental trauma during their deployments.
3. Three spouses or widows of military veterans (2 widows; and 1 spouse). Of these three, 1 spouse served in the Air Force (no active duty), 1 served in the U.S. Marine Corps (4 years of active duty; 4 years of reserves), and 1 served in the Coast Guard (1 year of active duty). Their ages ranged from 64-82 years old.

All interviews were conducted during the period May 18, 2020-June 21, 2020, using a semi-structured key informant interview guide developed by the research team (see Appendix A and B). The interviews took between 1 and 1.5 hours each. Additional questions were asked during the interview emanating from the key informant's responses and additional feedback offered. Due to public health recommendations at the time of the study, all in-depth, key-informant interviews were conducted via telephone or video conferencing software. Content of these conversations included the various ways in which participants were connected to veteran services, how they learned of these resources, and what challenges or unmet needs remain as they continue living in Natick. Interviews were conducted by research staff from CSDRA and WJI. Each interview was audio recorded and analyzed for common themes and examples.

---

<sup>5</sup> 1 veteran and 1 widow/spouse participants did not currently reside in Natick; but both of them were provided with consultation and support by the Natick Veterans Services Department.



## Results

### Demographic Profile of Natick Veterans and their Dependents

According to the American Community Survey, there were 1,275 veterans living in Natick as of 2018 (see **Table 2**). This is slightly more than the count of veterans recorded by the Town's 2019 annual census that found 950 veterans. Using the American Community Survey data and current population data for the town by age group, Natick veterans make up approximately 4.4 percent of the adult population ages 18 and over in the town. This compares to veterans comprising approximately 5.5 percent of the total adult population of Massachusetts as a whole.

More than two-thirds of the self-reported Natick veterans in the survey were age 65 or older (66%). This means that Natick veterans are slightly older, on average, than those in Middlesex County (61% age 65 or older) and Massachusetts as a whole (58% age 65 or older).

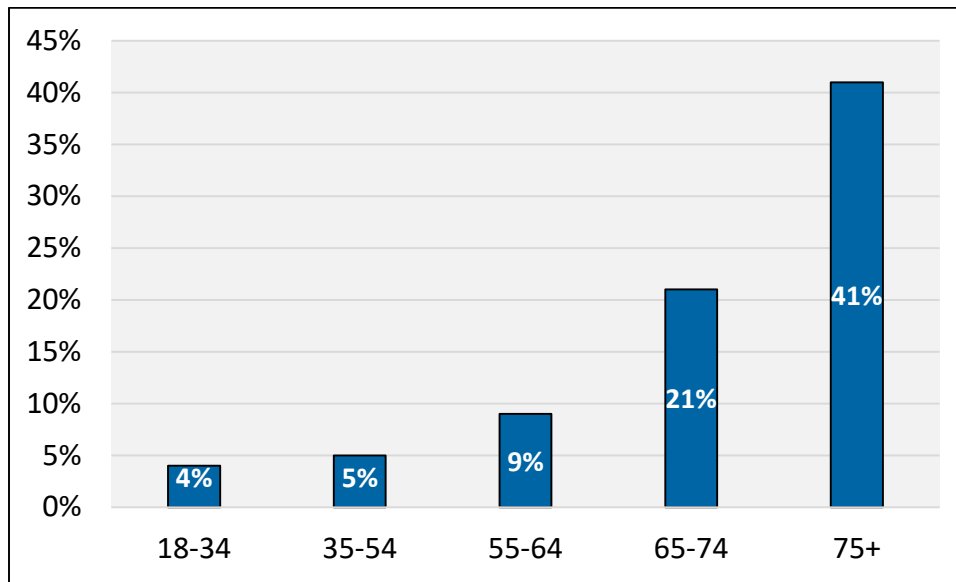
**Table 2.** Age distribution of veterans living in Natick

| Age Category  | Number living in Natick |
|---------------|-------------------------|
| <b>18-34</b>  | 137                     |
| <b>35-54</b>  | 252                     |
| <b>55-64</b>  | 206                     |
| <b>65-74</b>  | 298                     |
| <b>75+</b>    | 382                     |
| <b>Total:</b> | 1,275                   |

*Source: American Community Survey, 2014–2018, Tables B21001. Numbers are calculated from 5-year survey estimates.*

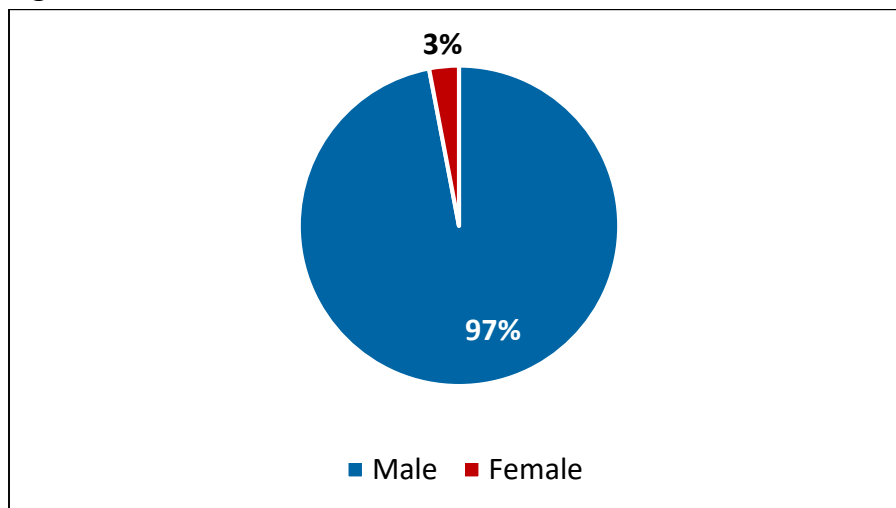
Another way to consider the age distribution of veterans in Natick is to review the percentage of each age group that reports veteran status. Due to the small number of female veterans, some figures reflect data for male veterans only. In Natick, 41% of men age 75+ served in the military, but just 21% of men age 65-74, and fewer than 10% of men under age 65 served in the military, suggesting that many of Natick's resident veterans are older adults (see **Figure 1**).

**Figure 1.** Percentage of each age-group in Natick that is a veteran, males only



Among them, most are male (see **Figure 2**). Among the 32 female residents reporting veteran's status, 22 of them are age 75 years and older, and only 10 female veterans in the Town who were under the age of 75. According to the Veterans Administration, women are the fastest growing segment of the veteran population<sup>6</sup> Despite small numbers at the present time, it is likely that Natick, too, will observe a growth in the number of female veterans in coming years.

**Figure 2.** Gender of Natick Veterans



Source: American Community Survey, 2014–2018, Tables B21001. Numbers are calculated from 5-year survey estimates.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). (2019). Available: [www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran\\_Population.asp](http://www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran_Population.asp)

**Table 3.** Period of service for civilian military veterans

|                   | N=     | %    |
|-------------------|--------|------|
| Any WWII          | 93     | 7%   |
| Any Korean        | 200    | 16%  |
| Any Vietnam       | 329    | 25%  |
| Any Gulf          | 150    | 12%  |
| Post 9/11         | 208    | 16%  |
| Only between eras | 314    | 24%  |
| Total             | 1,294* | 100% |

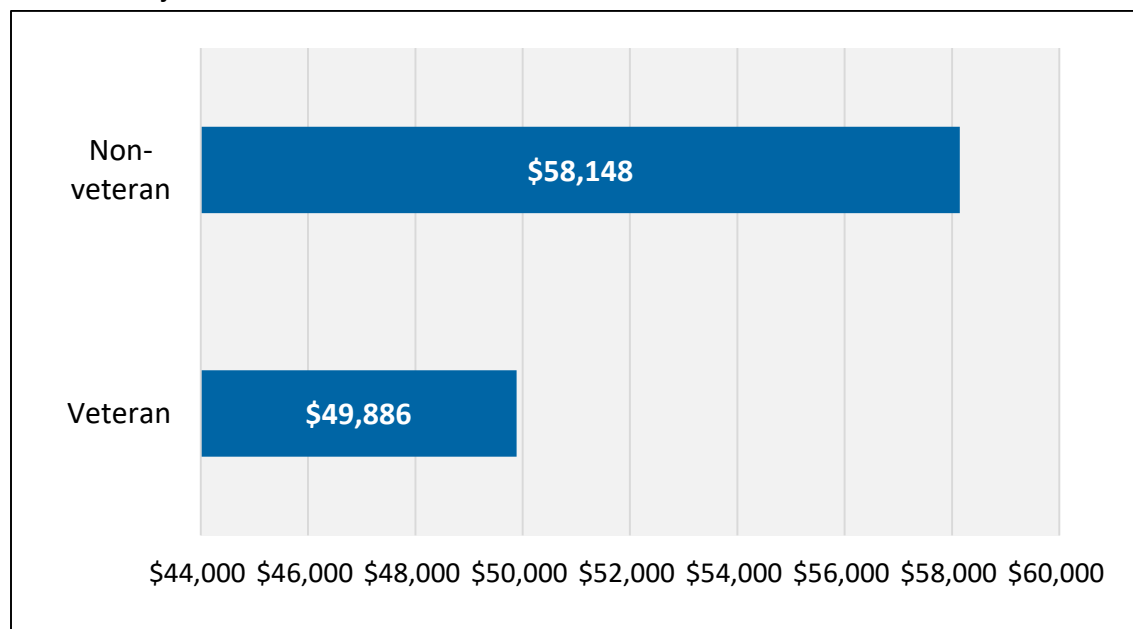
\*Note: 19 reported both Korean and WWII

*Source: American Community Survey, 2014–2018, Tables B21002. Numbers are calculated from 5-year survey estimates.*

This age distribution is reinforced by **Table 3** which shows that 48% of veterans served between 1941-1975, however 28% of Natick veterans report participating in “any gulf war” period which includes 1990-2000 and post 9/11/2001. This segment of veterans is likely young or middle aged. **Table 3** also indicates that about one-quarter of Natick Veteran’s served in between eras, suggesting that fewer of these veterans served in combat zones.

Veterans in Natick have less household income than nonveterans in Natick (see **Figure 3**). Because this population is mostly male, we compared these patterns to patterns for male veterans in both Middlesex County and the State of Massachusetts. Both at the county and state level, male veterans have less income than male non veterans. Some of the income differential may just be that most of the veterans are older and retired compared to the non-veteran population, which may be younger on average and still working, thus with higher income on average than retirees.

**Figure 3.** Median household income for veterans in Natick compared to nonveterans, in 2018 inflation-adjusted dollars



*Source: American Community Survey, 2014–2018, Tables B21004. Numbers are calculated from 5-year survey estimates.*

Additionally, the proportion of veterans living in poverty is higher among veterans age 18-64 (9%) compared to veterans age 65 and older in Natick (2%). Although not as stark, a similar pattern is observed at the state level with 8% of younger veterans living in poverty compared to 5% of older veterans (Table C21007). Similarly, in Middlesex county 7% of younger veterans are living in poverty compared to 6% of veterans age 65 or older. These findings highlight the importance of reaching younger veterans to support them with enrolling in benefits that could lift them out of poverty and improve their quality of life.

### Hearing from the Natick Veteran's Services Department

The Veterans Services Office has two staff and they provide extensive assistance in connecting veterans and their spouse/widows with VA services as well as Chapter 115 State Statute financial support to eligible veterans and veteran widows. Key-informants from the Town of Natick's Veterans Service Department described the range of veteran support activities and programs currently underway on an annual basis and special programs and activities that take place for veterans and their families in the Natick community. During the past 10 years the Veteran Services Office has been responsible for assisting in Natick veterans and their spouses or widows in receiving financial benefits awards in excess of one million dollars annually, and in one recent year that amount exceeded 1.6 million dollars in veteran benefit awards.

The Department plays a crucial role in annual Memorial Day and Veterans Day events, and specific programs to help veterans involved with the justice system (i. e Veterans Treatment Courts), and veterans with alcohol and substance abuse problems (i.e., SMART Recovery veteran groups). The Veteran's Services Department is very involved with the activities and programs of the Natick Veterans Council. This Council includes representatives from the Natick American Legion and VFW Posts, the Marine Corp League. The key-informants also identified the several other veteran service organizations and veteran membership associations operating in the Town of Natick and in some neighboring communities as well (that some Natick veterans also benefit from). Other veteran support organizations operating in Natick include the Natick Jewish War Veterans Association and a representative of the DAV<sup>7</sup> in the Town of Natick, and local representatives for the national organizations Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA). Together, this network of Veteran-serving entities provide ample opportunity for resident veterans and their families to be socially engaged and have access to information about supports and services available to them. One key component to accessing these resources is the acknowledgement of need or expression of interest; and the necessary information about how to get involved.

The way veterans are identified and offered support services through the Veteran's Services Department in Natick is currently done through office walk-ins, contacts with veterans at community events and ceremonies ad hoc encounters, and through random bump-ins with veterans in-need. Some of the veterans are referred to the Veteran's Services Department by other veterans aware of the Veteran's Services Department and services provided there. However, there appears to be a need for a more systematic and specific outreach strategy to identify and engage more veterans, especially younger and female veterans, with a focus on specific priority areas and issues and underserved veteran's groups. The two staff members of the Natick Veteran's Service Department have been successful in mobilizing the local Military facility "Natick Soldier Systems Center"<sup>8</sup> and local Natick veterans membership organizations that meet monthly to serve the needs of many veterans in the community, but it is likely that more than half of the veterans in the community have not been successfully reached and connected to other veterans and/or to the support services available for them.

The services and assistance offered by the Natick Veterans Services Department and the Town of Natick are broad and impactful in a positive way for a number of veterans in the Natick community. Given the range of town departments that could help support veterans in Natick, it was suggested that the Veterans Council and/or the Veteran's Services Department be included in more of the town planning and development committees and meetings so that veteran's

---

<sup>7</sup> DAV is a nonprofit charity that provides a lifetime of support for veterans of all generations and their families through the provision of transportation, employment support, and benefits claims.

<sup>8</sup> <https://natick.armymwr.com/>

interests will be well represented (e.g., in Housing Development Committees; Transportation Committees; Community Services and Recreation Committees, etc.). It is obvious the Veteran's Services Department is stretched very thin, with the small amount of staff at the Veteran's Services Department office and the wide range of recurring and special activities and responsibilities of the Veteran's Service Department for the Town of Natick. Having additional interns or veteran volunteers could significantly help the VSO increase the reach and impact of the VSO's outreach efforts to Natick veterans of all backgrounds and eras.

### Hearing from Veterans

Most of the veterans interviewed were aware of some of the veteran assistance programs that the Natick Veteran Service Officer and others were engaged in, including the Veteran Treatment Courts Program for all of Middlesex County; the SMART Recovery program groups for specifically for veterans. Some of the veterans participated regularly in the annual Natick Veterans Day, Memorial Day, and July 4<sup>th</sup> activities, including parades, picnics, special talks by VA representatives or government and military leaders, monument dedications, and flag and geraniums placing at graves of veterans. Some of the veterans were aware of veteran activities and programs in neighboring communities including Needham, Wellesley, or Framingham and had made some connections with those activities as well. All of the veterans interviewed expressed a sense of pride in their military services, and that their service strengthened positive values in them for their lives including the sense of service, commitment, and working as a team and with a mission.

Most of the veteran respondents agreed that financial challenges, healthcare needs; alcohol/substance misuse, and housing affordability were crosscutting issues affecting veterans of different ages and service eras. Older veterans appeared to be dealing with more chronic health issues and accessibility issues; while younger veterans were facing stresses related to transitioning back to civilian life, school, community, and civilian employment. The majority of the veterans interviewed (4 of 6) had been deployed in war zones and experienced physical and/or mental trauma during their deployments.

Natick was viewed by all veterans interviewed as a very veteran friendly community because of the number of organizations serving veterans and their families, and most of the veterans were active members of these types of organizations located in Natick, including the VFW, American Legion, Am Vets, and The Marine Corps League. There is also the Natick Jewish War Veterans Association and representatives of Vietnam Veterans of America and DAV working with veterans in the town of Natick. A local Military installation (i.e., the Natick Soldier Systems Center) also engages with local veterans and veteran activities in the Town. Two of the Natick veteran

membership organizations have their own buildings and outdoor facilities, and the Town of Natick also provides space for veterans related events.

One finding, even among the war veterans interviewed who had experienced serious trauma during combat service, was that it often took years before these veterans were able to access VA health and social support services. It often was the case that veteran respondents' connections to VA benefits and health and social support services was made only after an individual veteran acquaintance would persistently and patiently encourage the war veteran to apply for benefits and would also help them through the sometimes long and frustrating application and approval process. These individual veterans who offered help to other veterans included the town Veteran's Services Officer, and active members of DAV, VFW, and other veteran organizations. Most veterans did not have contact with the Veterans Administration's health care system and service-connected benefits until many years, even decades after their discharge, though they would have been eligible immediately after discharge if they had been properly connected to VA services. Obstacles the veterans identified to getting VA benefits and other veterans support included: (1) Lack of personal knowledge of the range of veterans benefits and services offered and available; (2) Lack of understanding of the process for applying for benefits; (3) Belief they are not eligible for benefits or support services; (4) Intimidated, frustrated, or too proud to go through the application process; and (5) Lack of knowledge of how good the VA and other veteran's services really are today.

The active military and veteran population from the post 9/11 era has seen a dramatic increase in the number and proportion of service members who are women, and women veterans are now the fastest growing proportion in the U.S. veteran population. Although we only had one female veteran participate in this study, outreach to female veterans should be an increasingly important component of reaching younger veterans in Natick. Nationally, women veterans make up about 9 percent of the U.S. veterans population, but that percentage is projected to double to 18 percent in the next 25 years in 2045.<sup>9</sup>

Alcohol and/or substance abuse issues were also reported as being common problems that many veterans struggle with regardless of era. While the Natick Veteran's Service Department is actively supportive of area support groups (e.g., SMART Recovery), referrals to local Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Al Anon, or Narcotics Anonymous (NA) could be avenues for continued outreach and support for veterans struggling with substance abuse issues.

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/10/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population/>

The cost of living in Natick was perhaps the one negative aspect of living in the community as a veteran. Participants described financial and housing problems due to the high cost of living in the Town. According to the demographic profile previously reported, veterans have lower household incomes to begin with and thus the fragility of their ability to remain in Natick is likely heightened compared to nonveterans.

There was consensus among most veteran respondents that there was an underrepresentation of younger veterans, female veterans and minority veterans in the veteran's membership organizations in Natick. However, since we do not know the gender and race/ethnic composition of the veteran population in Natick it is difficult to know the extent of underrepresentation. A younger veteran interviewed said that younger veterans are interested in more outdoor activities with peers, and family activities and other activities of greater interest to younger people. Several veterans stated their own experience of being so busy with school, career building and family in their early years as a veteran that they just didn't have the time or perceived need to receive benefits and support from the VA or other veteran organizations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the veterans interviewed in some negative ways. For example, one veteran had been furloughed without pay for at least two months at the time of the interview, and his wife's work hours were also cut, putting them under financial pressure. One older veteran had difficulty getting proper healthcare due to the restrictions on access to health services during the pandemic. It is quite possible that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed more veterans in the low-income category, making them more likely to be eligible for Chapter 115 financial support. Another negative impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on Natick veterans (as with almost everyone) is the social isolation experienced with the stay at home orders and shutdown of many social and economic activities.

It would be an opportune time for the Town of Natick to do as comprehensive as possible census of all Natick veterans and widows of veterans, and survey their current situation, needs, and preferences. It is also important to note that all veterans interviewed were able to use mobile phones and zoom communication technology during the ongoing pandemic which helped to reduce the sense of social isolation, and some of the veterans participated in regular veteran's social support meetings through the use of Zoom and FaceTime. Emails, online websites and Veterans Newsletters also kept most of the veterans informed about veteran services or programs during this difficult time period.



## Hearing from Spouses & Widows of Veterans

Support provided by Veterans' Services was not only invaluable in terms of the benefits that have been received by these families; but also because upon establishing a relationship with the division, widows/spouses felt a sense of comfort in knowing that if they ever needed something or ran up against a challenge, they knew where to go for guidance and support.

Lack of identification with spouse's veteran status inhibits spouses/widows from actively seeking services and supports. This is connected with their spouse's lack of identification with veteran status.

There is a perception that in order to seek services or supports, the individual needs a specific reason or issue to be resolved. Spouses/widows were surprised that when they communicated with the Veteran Service Officer, it was a conversation more about "getting to know one another" and that available services and supports could be offered in response to the family's eligibility and particular situation.

Their interaction with Veterans Services was "happenstance". In other words, they did not seek out services directly nor were they actively recruited by the division. Taking a more proactive approach was suggested by participants of this study. For example, it was suggested that Funeral Home Directors could also help identify widows and widowers of veterans and provide information to them about potential benefits they may be eligible for through the State of Massachusetts Chapter 115 Statute and/or the Veterans Administration and also could make referrals for them to contact the Veteran's Services Department in Natick if their deceased spouse was a veteran.

There were concerns about perceived long wait-times at the VA, complicated paperwork, and the possibility of being ineligible which created mental barriers to accessing benefits for the spouse/widows and also for the service-person themselves. As a result, individuals may wait until a crisis emerges before they apply for benefits or services through the Veteran's Services Department.

Although not always at the forefront of their minds, spouse/widows described the pride they (and their children) had when celebrating their military veteran. In addition, interacting with other veteran families is a source of support and friendship that can strengthen the network of resident veterans and their families. For younger veteran's, at a different stage of the life course, spending time with family and friends is of particular importance.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Key informants generally agreed that more could be done to reach more veterans in the community of different service eras, branches of service, and age, gender and racial/ethnic

categories. It must be said that we recommend that the Natick Veteran's Services Department Veteran's Services Department staff should continue to provide its valuable support for veterans applying for VA disability status or other VA Healthcare benefits, and for State of Massachusetts Chapter 115 financial support for low income veterans; and in organizing the annual events including Memorial Day, Veterans Day, July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration, flag and flower placing on veteran's graves, and in supporting other Natick veteran's membership organizations special events such as social/sports events such as picnics and kayaking at Camp Arrowhead. The VSO and Veterans Service Office has provided highly valuable support of veterans with substance abuse problems and veterans involved in the criminal justice system issues (e.g., support for the regular SMART Recovery program peer support groups for veterans; and support, and veteran mentors for the Veteran Treatment Courts program in Middlesex County).

The dedication, personal commitment, expertise and active participation of the Natick Veteran Service Department staff in the above mentioned annual and ongoing activities is significant. This VSO team has helped many Natick Veterans and their spouses/widows establish their eligibility and receive benefits from the Veterans Administration, the State Statute Chapter 115 program, and also in connecting Natick veterans to local programs to support the housing, transportation and mental health and well-being needs of the veteran community in Natick. The Department's activities in these areas need to be fully supported by the town, including their efforts to identify and reach more eligible veterans and their families to receive these services. Based on their suggestions, we make the following recommendations to the Town of Natick and the Veterans Services Department. The VSO and Veterans Services Department needs more human resource support in order to increase the offices ability to reach more veterans and provide services to them.

### **Main Recommendations:**

In addition to consideration of the promising practices listed in Table 1., we offer recommendations to be considered as the Natick Veteran's Services Department considers how they can continue to adapt and align with the needs of local veterans and veteran families. Based on the data presented in this report, we make the following recommendations to the Town of Natick and it's Department of Veteran's Services:

1. Establish a process by which the Natick Veteran's Service Department can track and report data annually on the number of residents served and demonstrate impact of their services. Examples of the types of indicators and data that could be collected annually to measure progress and impact include: (a) Number of veterans and number of spouses/widows screened for benefits or services; (b) number of veteran, spouses/widows receiving new and/or continuing services; (c) number and total amount

of veteran awards and grants contributed to by the Natick Veteran Services Department; (d) number of veterans participating in veterans-related events; number of Natick veterans or dependents receiving VA services; number of veterans and their dependents receiving Chapter 115 financial support.

2. Develop a public service campaign to identify and engage more Natick veterans in veteran support programs and for service to the community. There could also be a campaign for the non-veteran Natick community, for example, that could be called “Thank a Natick Veteran” and would encourage residents of Natick (via social media, Town distributed communications and the network of veteran-serving organizations in the area) to identify a veteran (or more) in their neighborhood and get them to sign up at online site to be known to the Town as a veteran. Consider an incentive to residents for the number of Natick veterans they can refer.
  - a. In marketing materials, be clear about the fact that “veterans deserve services, support and benefits they earned in service of their country”, or that you don’t need to “have a problem” to seek services or supports from the Department; but rather you can “come have a chat” or “we want to hear about your (or your family’s) military experience” as a way to communicate a welcoming and open-door environment.
  - b. Incorporate a public service campaign and slogan to identify and engage more Natick veterans for receiving benefits and for providing support services in Natick, with special messages and proposed activities to attract younger veterans, female veterans and minority veterans.
  - c. When this updated list has been established, conduct comprehensive census/survey of all Natick veterans to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the age, gender, race, socioeconomic status, their needs for services and contact information of veterans in Natick.
3. The Veteran’s Service Department should continue having an outreach presence at local celebrations and memorials for veterans (Memorial Day events; Veterans Day events; July 4<sup>th</sup> and other military historical celebration events); and they should continue organizing special talks from Veteran’s Services Department, VA, and non-governmental Veterans support organizations for veterans and their spouses, families, and widows in the Natick community about veteran benefits and support services.
  - i. Consider expanding sites for local outreach to young veterans, female veterans and veteran spouses or families. For example, include funeral homes, women’s organizations or parent-teacher organizations.

4. Reinforce the capacity of the Natick Veterans Service Office by engaging more volunteer veterans, interns or veteran families in the community activities and programs. The volunteers could serve as peer- mentors, outreach workers, or service support specialists. This type of “Natick Veterans Corps” would not only serve the community, but they would receive support from it in return. Veterans are an enormous community resource if mobilized with a mission and purpose.
  - a. Explore opportunities to serve as supervising organization for veteran interns from local colleges.
  - b. Consider the assembly of a Town-appointed veterans advisory board. This board would include resident veterans or families to provide guidance and support to the Department of Veteran Services and to the Natick Veterans Council
5. Sponsor a one-day retreat for veteran service organizations in Natick. The purpose of the retreat would be to develop a 3-5-year strategic plan for the Natick Veterans Service Department. This group could engage in a review of the Natick Veterans Service Department’s mission statement and identify its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. Through this work, clear priorities (and associated measurable goals) could be established for the next three years and the group can discuss how the network can support the Veterans Service Department in meeting its goals.
  - a. Include in this strategic plan a shared strategy for reaching veterans that are not already connected to these organizations (e.g., younger veterans, female veterans, and minority veterans). This could include the “Thank a Natick Veteran” recruitment campaign and the planning of events that are geared towards these populations. For example, consider evening and weekend programming for veterans that are still working and offer family-oriented programming, or start a “Veterans Job Seekers Club” or “Veteran Young Professionals Network” in the region, and offer speakers and workshops aimed at promoting career advancement.
6. Become more engaged with social media strategies (Facebook; Instagram, Twitter; blogs or forums, etc.) for reaching more Natick veterans, and for interacting with them, and informing them and assisting them about upcoming programs, support services, and benefits available in Natick and in the Greater Boston area. By increasing the social network presence, the Department would have an outlet to share veterans-related information on support services, social activities, ceremonies, events, talks, benefits (healthcare, housing, financial, transportation, legal, social support), veteran discounts, wellness services, etc.) and would provide a place for Natick veterans to interact with each other.

7. Develop partnerships with local college/university veteran's offices to collaborate on innovative programming that could be introduced to both student veterans and resident veterans for an intergenerational experience, which could include cultural and academic programs, career professional development activities, and wellness support services. For example, Music Therapy for Veterans; Veterans Writers Workshop; Veteran Theatre Group; Mindfulness Yoga; Vet to Vet Peer Support; "veterans exchange program" where student veterans can spend a day in Natick to learn about community-based veteran's services and resident veterans can spend a day on the campus of a local campus to learn about their offerings.