

BROOKLINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Human Services Subcommittee
Report on Veterans' Services Department FY24 Budget
Public Hearing Held via Zoom on March 3, 2023 at 6:15pm

Public Hearing: Attending were Susan Granoff, Subcommittee Chair; Subcommittee members Katherine Florio, David-Marc Goldstein, and Markus Penzel; William McGroarty, Director, Veterans' Services; Brookline residents Neil Gordon (TMM/AC).

Hearing Recording:

<https://brooklinema.zoomgov.com/rec/share/CAk8LaxMunJlfBKBWD3s3pz0KEciPiKB4QzCrWYJG4YV703I5RFVtFEqAdoxXq57.yKL7zNZ17MsxjE8e>

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Recommendation:

The Subcommittee unanimously (Yes – 4, No – 0, Abstentions – 0) recommends the FY24 override budget of \$322,728 for Veterans' Services, which includes \$25,000 in Veterans Benefits.

The Subcommittee does not recommend the FY24 base budget of \$297,728 which subtracts \$25,000 from Veterans' Benefits and will be the budget the Town Administrator will recommend should the override fail to pass. This vote was Yes – 2, No – 2, and 0 abstentions.

FY24 Budget: The department is asking for \$322,728, should the override pass, and is essentially level-funded. It is seeking an increase of \$620 over FY23's budget. This increase is primarily found in Salaries and represents an increase of 3% over the FY23 budgeted amount and is due to a cost-of-living adjustment to salaries applied in the middle of the year. The Other category, which accounts for 49% of the override budget, consists mainly of Veterans' Benefits (\$138,000), and \$18,500 to celebrate Memorial and Veterans Days.

Should the override fail, the subcommittee was told that this department's budget will be decreased by \$25,000. This will be taken from Veterans' Benefits which is part of the Other category. This line item consists of money put aside by the town to meet state and federal government requirements to pay certain living expenses and medical costs to veterans living in Brookline. We have been told that this amount is rarely used entirely, and the unused funds go to Free Cash. However, should these funds be needed, they will need to be provided by the town as a Reserve Fund Transfer.

Revenues: This category consists primarily of state Chapter 115 reimbursements although reimbursements from non-Chapter 115 spending is also included. The revenues are expected to be about \$81,264.

There are 2.0 FTEs, including a director, who also serves as the town's emergency preparation coordinator, and an assistant.

The budget can be found on pages 155 - 159 of Brookline's FY 2024 Financial Plan and at <https://brooklinema.zoomgov.com/rec/share/CAk8LaxMunJlfBKBWD3s3pz0KEciPiKB4QzCrWYJG4YV703I5RFVtFEqAdoxXq57.yKL7zNZ17MsxjE8e>.

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	FY22 Actual	2022-23 Budget	2024 Budget	Variance
SALARIES	159,439	161,321	161,341	20
SERVICES	1,788	2,388	2,388	0
SUPPLIES	575	1,150	1,150	0
OTHER	103,777	157,339	132,339	-25,000
BUDGETED CAPITAL	459	510	510	0
Total	266,038	322,708	297,728	-24,980
	FY22 Actual	2022-23 Budget	2024 Budget	Variance
REVENUES	60,986	62,341	81,264	18,923
Revenues Less Expenses	60,986	62,341	81,264	18,923

Discussion

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

The Camp Lejeune Justice Act, which was signed into law by President Biden as part of the PACT Act in August of 2022, addresses the approximately thirty years during which Marines and their families stationed at Camp LeJeune (Jacksonville, NC) were exposed to toxic chemicals in their drinking water. Because of this recent legislation, the work of the department has increased significantly. Although the department is not involved in the lawsuits this legislation has created, they do work with the veterans to submit claims. Because this new legislation also applies to the families of veterans who were stationed at Camp Lejeune for as little as thirty days during the years between 1957 and 1987, it is expected that this legislation could continue to create new work for this department for the next few years.

When asked about the handicapped wheel-chair accessible van with a lift that was part of the FY 23 budget, the subcommittee was told the town’s move to electric vehicles made purchasing a new van prohibitively expensive. The director chose not to seek an exception from the town – he believes it is important to support Brookline’s goal of a fossil free future.

Currently the director uses his own truck to transport veterans using wheelchairs. This vehicle does not have a lift, and there is no one to assist Mr. McGroarty should the combination of wheelchair and veteran be beyond his capacity. Mr. McGroarty believes his personal car insurance is sufficient to cover this use of his truck if he is not paid for this service. Concerns were raised about what would happen should Mr. McGroarty be injured performing this service.

As noted in last year’s discussion, the veteran population living in Brookline is an aging one, frail and susceptible at higher rates to illness: World War II veterans are in their nineties; Korean veterans are in their eighties; Vietnam veterans are in their late sixties and seventies; Gulf War

veterans range in age from fifty to seventy; and those who fought the War on Terror were in their twenties when they began to qualify for veterans' services and some are in their fifties now.

The number of veterans in Brookline is difficult to measure; the department becomes aware of veterans when they need the department's services. Most of the veterans served are men; less than ten percent are women. There is real concern that women who have served have been so marginalized for their service that they are not applying for the benefits they've earned.

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

A means test placed on veteran's care by the Bush administration in the early 2000s makes it difficult for those above the poverty line to receive benefits. However, most veterans living in Brookline have incomes above the poverty line and still need assistance. The department works with veterans to find programs that they may be unaware that they qualify for.

An injured veteran may wait six months to get their disability payments. This department can provide the money they need while they are waiting, as well as the support they need to get care and to make sure they don't get lost in the system. The department may be managing thirty to forty federal benefits claims at any one time.

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

Younger veterans with children who have completed their degree but have not yet found a job or veterans who lose their job need help to pay rent and feed their families while waiting for their first paycheck or unemployment check. Before the pandemic, Veterans' Services had an internship program designed to give these veterans eighteen hours of work a week to cover this time. This program was eventually expanded to include retirees. The department estimates that this program could be restarted for approximately \$25,000. In the past Town Departments have welcomed the veterans, the labor is free to them, and they have given the program enthusiastic reviews.

A resident in attendance at this hearing stated that this department has a small budget that gets stretched very far. He reminded the subcommittee that it is not true that smaller departments receiving cuts can find the money elsewhere. Departments like Veterans' Services, with a staff of two people and an increasing workload, do not have extra capacity to absorb cuts. They are already doing a tremendous amount for those who most need it with the small budget they are given.

Recommendation:

The Subcommittee unanimously (Yes – 4, No – 0, Abstentions – 0) recommends the FY24 budget of \$322,728 for Veterans' Services, which restores the \$25,000 in Veterans Benefits that could be cut, should the town fail to pass an override.

The Subcommittee does not recommend the FY24 base budget of \$297,728 which subtracts \$25,000 from Veterans Benefits, and will be the budget the Town Administrator will recommend should the town fail to pass the override. This vote was Yes – 2, No – 2, and 0 abstentions.

	ACTUAL 2021	ESTIMATE 2022	ACTUAL 2022	ESTIMATE 2023	ESTIMATE 2024
<u>Performance:</u>					
% of Claims Approved by the State	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
<u>Workload:</u>					
Recipients of Benefits (Monthly Average)	17	17	18	18	18
Service Recipients	1,000	1,000	1,200	1,000	1,200
Information Requests	1,200	1,200	1,200	1,400	1,600

**Questions from the Human Services Subcommittee to the Director of Veterans' Services
in Advance of March 2, 2023 FY24 Budget Public Hearing**

1. Have there been any changes in your department's functioning during the past year? If so, what?

Fortunately, we have been very stable, someone tried to bump my assistant last summer Claudia but working with HR and the BOS we were able to prevent that from happening.

2. Have there been any significant challenges that your department has faced during the past year that may impact its ability to deliver services in the future or that may have financial consequences for the Town, either in the coming fiscal year or beyond? If so, please describe.

The biggest challenge for my office has been new federal legislation that has expanded federal compensation for medical conditions linked to dioxins and burn pits. This resulted in a substantial increase in veterans requesting assistance filing VA compensation claims. Other than our time this has no financial impact on the Town as the funding is all federal. We are not involving the Town in Law suits filed by individuals against the government for conditions linked to toxic water at Camp Lejeune

3. Did you purchase the wheelchair accessible van with a lift that you had planned to purchase during the past year?

No, I had found as an affordable wheelchair accessible van but it was gasoline powered not electric. I contemplated requesting a variance to purchase a gasoline vehicle but I have grandchildren, the need to reduce carbon emissions is greater than our need for the van. I am currently looking for an affordable electric powered van.

4. If the override doesn't pass, your department is scheduled to lose \$25,000 from the \$138,152 that has been budgeted for veterans' benefits in FY24 (-18%). How would this lost revenue impact your department? How much have you actually been spending annually on this line item during the past 5 years (FY17 to FY22 actuals)?

The majority of our operational funds are used to pay MGL-115 veterans' benefits. Predicting what our funding needs for MGL-115 benefits is similar to the DPW forecasting for their snow budget, every year is different. I believe that we will be able to manage if the override doesn't pass. However, should we have a surge in request

for aid that causes us to exceed our budget we will have to ask for supplemental funding.

5. What percentage and dollar amount of your expenses are currently privately funded or from grants? What are the sources of this funding? Are they likely to remain consistent sources?

The veterans' office is fully funded by the Town. The majority of assistance we provide to our veterans is through federal programs and has no impact on my departments budget. The MGL-115 benefits are paid as payroll through the Town. The cost of most of those benefits are shared with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts which reimburse the Town for qualified benefits at a rate of 75% or 50% depending on the type of expenditure.

6. If there were no budgetary constraints, are there one or two things on your department's wish list that you would like to see the Town fund? Please describe.
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 1. **Purchase an electric van.**
 2. **Restoration of our internship program for veterans and expanding it to qualified dependence.**
7. Each department has a list of objectives for FY24 in its budget. Your department lists 9. In your view, what are your department's three most important overarching objectives for the coming fiscal year?
 1. **To continue to provide to Brookline veterans and their families the highest level of service and the most aggressive advocacy possible.**
 2. **Assist the growing number of Brookline veterans wishing to file claims for damages due to dioxin exposure. Changes in the federal laws and extensive advertising from attorneys has left many veterans confused as to their rights and eligibility.**