



Veterans Update

from
Assemblyman
**Robin
Schimminger**



December 2009

Dear Friend,

Over the past year, I have had the opportunity to meet with many of you and with the representatives of various groups to discuss issues affecting veterans and their families. Therefore, I wanted to take this opportunity to update you on several topics that may be of interest to you.

Should you have any questions or want additional information on any of these matters, please feel free to contact my office at 873-2540.

Sincerely,

Disability Property Tax Exemption Extended to Lower-Income Vets

About a decade ago, we in the State Legislature created the Real Property Tax Exemption for Persons with Disabilities to assist lower-income, disabled homeowners with their property taxes. At the time, proof of disability was limited to individuals who had an award letter from the Social Security Administration, Railroad Retirement Board, U.S. Postal Service and the State Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped. This year, a new law was enacted to include an award letter from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs as proof of a disability, thereby extending the property tax exemption to many lower-income disabled veterans.

A sliding scale exemption, the Exemption for Persons with Disabilities is based on a person's disability, income, ownership, residency, and occupancy status. The exemption is not universal and is granted at local option with income eligibility limits and exemption amounts set by each municipality and school district within the parameters of the state statute. Within the 140th Assembly District, Erie and Niagara Counties, the Cities of North Tonawanda and Tonawanda, the Town of Tonawanda, the Village of Kenmore and the Tonawanda, North Tonawanda and Sweet Home School Districts all grant the exemption. (The Ken-Ton School District does not offer the exemption.) However, income eligibility and the amount of the exemption varies for each of these taxing jurisdictions. The disabled exemption can be granted in addition to a veterans' and STAR exemption, but properties receiving the Low-Income Senior Citizens' Exemption are not eligible for the Exemption for Persons with Disabilities.

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Earthquake Exercise Held in Tonawanda

The Spaulding Fibre site in the City of Tonawanda looked like a disaster area recently - and that was on purpose. Rubble piles simulated buildings that were destroyed by an earthquake leaving debris everywhere. Mock victims were lying in or on the rubble being tended to by first responders. Injured victims were transported to the city's Fireman's Park, where air ambulance helicopters and medical personnel were stationed to treat and transfer patients for additional medical care.



Checking vital signs... Assemblyman Schimminger is joined by Brig. Gen. Michael Swezey, commander of the National Guard's Joint Task Force, based in Buffalo, Denise O'Donnell, Deputy Secretary to the Governor for Public Safety, and Tonawanda Mayor Ron Pillozzi as they check with volunteer Sean Honan, an injured earthquake victim.

The scene provided realistic and grim images of the casualties, destruction, disorder and chaos that accompany a major earthquake.

The week-long scenario was part of Exercise Vigilant Guard, the largest emergency response exercise to have ever been conducted in Western New York. The premise was based on a 5.9 earthquake occurring in Buffalo with massive devastation to homes, businesses, highways and bridges as well as numerous deaths, injuries and dis-

placed people throughout Buffalo, Erie County and southern Niagara County. In response to this overwhelming disaster, local and state disaster declarations are proclaimed and the Governor mobilizes the National Guard.

The Vigilant Guard exercise was executed at several different sites - Lockport, the Niagara Falls Air Base, Erie County's Emergency Command Center in Cheektowaga - but the Spaulding site was perhaps the most dramatic. With carefully constructed structures replicating the damage caused to a collapsed hospital parking garage, complete with buried cars, first responders had to navigate



Inside the rubble pile ... Assemblyman Schimminger joins Gary Metzger and LTC Joe Cetta in inspecting the beginnings of a rubble pile that will represent a collapsed hospital garage. Inside the rubble pile is a car with dummies wired with sensors that will mimic cries and screams for help. Testing the top of the heap are City of Tonawanda Fireman Tom Wolf and Brian Metzger. Metzger Construction, a local company, built the rubble piles for the exercise.

unstable concrete slabs, rusty steel plates and other debris to reach and extricate victims from the rubble, decontaminate them, treat their injuries and evacuate them from the area. This was no easy task outfitted in decontamination suits, gas masks, hard hats, rubber gloves and boots!

Fourteen civil urban search and rescue teams, including teams from Toronto and New York City and four special emergency response National Guard teams trained at the Spaulding site. In addition, several search and rescue canine units and their handlers from the U.S. and Canada participated in the rescue exercises.

All told, more than 1,300 National Guard troops took part in Vigilant Guard. While most of the troops were from New York State, other units came from Vermont, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Ohio, Connecticut and New Jersey. In addition, for the first time there were international participants from Canada, South Africa, and Great Britain.

Vigilant Guard was developed as a result of lessons learned from the 9/11 terrorist attack and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and is organized by the National Guard and the United States Northern Command. Other participants included the Department of Homeland Security, federal and state emergency management offices, the New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs as well as a host of other federal and state agencies. There are two full-scale, national-level Vigilant Guard exercises held each year and this is the first time it has been held in New York State. The other exercise for 2009 was held in Montana in September.

Dedicating a Special Place

In June, Assemblyman Schimminger spoke to veterans, officials of Elmlawn Cemetery and guests at the dedication of the cemetery's Hill of Honor, a recently added veteran's burial section. Elmlawn officials also announced a program to provide a grave, burial services and marker setting for indigent veterans at no charge to their families. The graves will be located within the cemetery's Field of Honor.



Learning About the Needs of Women Veterans

Helen Jacob, Anna Mae Jones and Marie Shaffer, all veterans of World War II, are advocates for veterans, especially women veterans. Over the years, the contributions and sacrifices of military women have too often been overlooked in that their numbers were small and their roles limited. But that is changing. The percentage of women in the armed forces has risen and their roles have expanded. For example, 7,000 women served in Vietnam, mostly as nurses. By contrast, 180,000 women have already served in the Global War on Terror with virtually all assignments involving combat conditions. More than 500 women have been wounded or killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Today's military women are a new generation that serve as command officers, machine gunners, weapons inspectors, convoy drivers, pilots, mechanics and munitions experts.

With over 65,000 women veterans, New York State has the fourth largest women veterans' population in the nation. In general, our society has not fully adjusted to women's roles as combatants. Even though women veterans experience many of the same problems as their male counterparts, gender differences often impact on the means, methods and types of services they need and require. Since veterans services and veterans community-based agencies were designed in large part by men, and for a male population, attention must be paid to the gender differences in the service-delivery system.

Recently, the Assembly held hearings to examine the needs of women veterans, and expert testimony offered the following insights:

- Women veterans do not take full advantage of veterans' benefits to which they are entitled.
- More than 100,000 female soldiers who have served in the current war are mothers.
- Women veterans experience all of the reintegration challenges as men including complex physical, psychological and psychosocial problems such as substance abuse, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injury and depression.
- A third of the women in the military report that they have experienced Military Sexual Trauma (MST), which includes rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. MST survivors fear retaliation, rank of the perpetrator, demotion, and harassment.
- Women veterans are four times more likely to become homeless than non-veteran women. There are approximately 8,600 women veterans in New York State who are homeless.
- While government agencies are expanding gender-based services for women veterans, similar services offered by community-based agencies are insufficient.

Every year, 10,000 veterans – men and women – return home from combat to New York State. Transitioning back to civilian life after war is not easy, especially for the first generation of women who have experienced combat. As we greet our returning heroes with joyful celebrations, we must also make every effort to ensure that their homecoming also includes the services and resources necessary to return to civilian life.

Breaking ground for the Town Memorial



In May, Assemblyman Schimminger joined local officials and members of the Town of Tonawanda's Veteran's Memorial Committee to break ground for the monument. Assemblyman Schimminger secured two legislative grants totaling \$15,000 to assist with the construction of the memorial. Other participants in the groundbreaking ceremony are (left to right), Councilman Daniel Crangle, Supervisor Anthony Caruana, and committee members Peter Rizzo and Fred Kubus. Observing are Highway Superintendent Brad Rowles, Councilman Joseph Emminger, Erie County Legislator Thomas Loughran and Chief of Police Anthony Palombo.

Disability Property Tax Exemption *continued from page 1*

Eligible applicants must have a physical or mental impairment, not due to current use of alcohol or illegal drug use, that substantially limits that person's ability to engage in one or more major life activities, such as caring for one's self, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning or working. Certification of that disability must be submitted at the time of application.

The property must be the "legal residence" of the disabled person and must be occupied by that person unless he or she is absent while receiving in-patient, health-related services. If any portion of the property is used

for other than residential purposes, the exemption will be prorated.

Applicants must also meet income criteria, and the income of the owner, or the combined income of all of the owners, cannot exceed the maximum income limit set by the locality or school district. A copy of one's federal or state income tax return must be submitted at the time of application along with documentation of any non-taxable income that does not appear on the return. If for some reason an income tax return is not filed, the applicant must provide all necessary year-end income statements. For purposes of this exemp-

tion, all income is counted and includes disability and Social Security payments, public and private pensions, wages, all interest, dividends, net earnings from rentals, business or professional activities, unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, annuity payments, alimony and all other types of income. Income eligibility must be recertified each year.

Anyone interested in applying for the Exemption for Persons with Disabilities must do so before the March 1, 2010 assessment deadline. For additional information or an application, please contact my office or your local assessor.

End Notes

Operation Recognition

This program was created by the Legislature to award high school diplomas to honorably discharged World War II, Korean and Vietnam veterans who left school without graduating and entered the armed forces. While these individuals may not have met the high school requirements to graduate, they have since gained valuable life experiences that are not taught in the classroom.

Discounts on Licenses & Fishing Permits

Discounted hunting and fishing permits are available to honorably discharged veterans with a 40 percent or greater service connected disability rating (and are free for NYS residents who are active members of the NYARNG, US Reserve or on active duty). Applicants must be residents of New York State 30 days be-

fore applying for this benefit and submit the following documentation: Certificate of Release, Discharge from Active Duty and Certification from the VA of percent of disability.

Veterans Art Therapy Program

The Buffalo Vets Center, Roycroft Campus Corporation, the Arts in Education Institute and Medaille College have teamed up to offer a veterans art therapy program. Developed to allow veterans to explore their experiences and emotions through multiple art disciplines, the six-week program begins in January. The sessions will include theater, music, painting, video and drawing, and are taught by certified art therapists. Veterans' work will be presented in a gallery exhibit and public performance event at the end of the session.