



from
Assemblyman

Robin Schimminger

Fall 2015

Dear Friend,

While it is important to honor the men and women who now proudly serve in our nation's Armed Forces, it is equally important to honor those individuals who have taken off their uniforms and returned to civilian life. Responding to the needs of our veterans, who are as diverse as the generations they represent, is a debt owed to all those who served. During my time in Albany, I have taken actions personally and as a member of the State Assembly to address veterans' concerns and this year was no exception.

This report highlights some of the actions taken during the 2015 State Legislative session in regard to veterans. If you should have any questions, please feel free to contact my office at 873-2540 or by e-mail at schimmingerr@assembly.state.ny.us.

Sincerely,

Thank a Vet Program

There are numerous businesses across our state and nation that strive to make life a bit easier for our veterans and military personnel by offering discounts on their products and services. Here in New York there are over 12,000 businesses statewide that offer Thank a Vet discounts. This distinction has prompted the Military and Veterans Discount Center to rank New York State as number one in the nation in regard to veteran discounts. In the Erie-Niagara region there are more than 1,100 area businesses offering discounts through the Thank a Vet program.

Veterans and military personnel interested in participating in the Thank a Vet program can obtain a complimentary photo ID card that can be presented at participating businesses for discount offers on purchases or services.

To assist Erie County veterans with obtaining a discount card, I will be partnering with the Erie County Clerk's Office and sponsoring a "Thank a Vet" program on Thursday, October 22nd from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Brighton Community Church, 1225 Brighton Road (at the corner of Parkhurst) in the Town of Tonawanda.

At that time, the Clerk's Office will issue discount cards to honorably discharged veterans who are residents of Erie County and file their original discharge papers (DD-214, DD-256 or NGB-22) with representatives of the County Clerk's Office. The original documents are scanned on site and returned immediately. For the veteran, filing discharge papers is free of charge, and certified complimentary copies of recorded discharges are made for veterans or their immediate families

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RECOGNIZING VIETNAM VETERANS

The Town of Tonawanda Veterans Memorial was the backdrop for the Vietnam Veterans Recognition Ceremony on July 2nd that honored more than 250 Ken-Ton residents who served in Vietnam. Assemblyman Schimminger gave the invocation, "A Veteran's Prayer," at the beginning of the ceremony. Following the ceremony, Schimminger and Michael Kasperek (far right) thanked two fellow Cardinal O'Hara High School alumni, Rick Topolski and Dave Miller, both of whom served in Vietnam.

Assemblyman Robin Schimminger

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Homeless Veterans

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development there were approximately 58,000 homeless veterans in America on a single night in January 2013. That number has likely increased given the number of veterans who are struggling with joblessness and the medical scars of wartime service such as post-traumatic stress disorders, traumatic brain injuries and alcohol and substance abuse. At one time, homeless veterans were predominately male, but the federal Government Accountability Office now reports that the number of women veterans has increased by more than 140 percent in the last decade and that many homeless women veterans have children in their care.

These nationwide statistics are alarming and most likely mirror the homeless veteran population here in New York State. That being the case, it is imperative that the state begins to identify and explore the needs of homeless veterans in greater depth so that appropriate resources can be made available to this

high need population. Toward that end, the Assembly has unanimously passed legislation that directs the key state agencies—the Division of Veterans Affairs, the Office of Temporary and Disability Services, the Office of Children and Families and the Department of Labor—to conduct an in-depth study to gather information on the number of homeless veterans in the state and how many of them have children.

On a related matter, last year we in the Legislature created the Homeless Veterans Assistance Fund that allows New Yorkers to contribute to a fund that will assist homeless veterans with housing and housing-related expenses. Donations and gifts in any dollar amount can be made to the fund via an income tax check-off that will be printed on state income tax forms beginning with the 2015 tax year.

We cannot ignore the harsh reality of homeless veterans, and we must do more to help these veterans find a place to call home.

Renaming the Twin Cities Highway

Just before the start of this year's Memorial Day weekend, area Vietnam veterans joined local officials as the Twin Cities Memorial Highway (Rte. 425) was rededicated as the Twin Cities Vietnam Veterans Memorial Highway in memory of the young men from the Tonawandas who died in Vietnam. Joining Assemblyman Schimminger, who authored the state law renaming the arterial, in displaying the sign that has been erected at each end of the highway are Tonawanda Mayor Rick Davis, Dennis Smilinich of VVA 77, State Senator Rob Ort of North Tonawanda and Tom Konopka of VVA 77.



On July 3, 2014, Governor Cuomo affixed his signature to the legislation authored by Assemblyman Schimminger that re-designated the Twin Cities Memorial Highway as the Twin Cities Vietnam Veterans Memorial Highway. Following this year's rededication ceremony, Assemblyman Schimminger presented Nancy Metzger of Tonawanda, whose brother, Mark Vanderheid, died in Vietnam, with a ceremonial copy of the statute affixed with a pen used by the Governor to sign the bill into law. Identical pen sets were also presented to John Fox, whose brother, Thomas J. Fox of North Tonawanda, also died in Vietnam, and to the Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 77 for display at their headquarters and museum located in the City of Tonawanda.

Veteran Driver's License Fees to Be Refunded

Back in 2012, New York State began issuing driver's licenses and non-driver photo identification cards with a veteran designation printed on the left hand corner. When the law went into effect, veterans who wanted to replace their old license with a veteran designation license had to pay a \$12.50 license replacement fee unless their license was up for renewal.

In 2014, we in the State Legislature abolished the replacement fee for veterans requesting a replacement license with the veteran designation. While this was an important step going forward, it still left more than 11,000 veterans across the state who had already paid the replacement fee.

To correct this disparity, I joined with my colleagues in both houses of the Legislature this year to pass legislation that would provide refunds to veterans who paid a fee to obtain a veterans' notation on their driver's license or non-driver ID card. That legislation was signed into law on August 13th. With this law now in place, the State Department of Motor Vehicles will be issuing refunds of \$12.50 to veterans who paid this license replacement fee between October 3, 2012, when the original veteran's license law went into effect, and December 7, 2014, when the fee was abolished.



DISCUSSING VETERANS' INITIATIVES

Erie County representatives of the Erie County American Legion—Erie County Commander Paul Steward of Hamburg, Suzanne Quirk of Angola and Tom Deinzer of Lakeview—met with Assemblyman Schimminger in Albany earlier this year to discuss issues important to veterans.

Criteria for Veterans' Nursing Home Expanded

New York State is home to the second highest population of veterans in the United States. As our veteran population aged, the need for long term care became evident and the state opened five skilled nursing facilities, including one in Batavia that I helped lead the effort to establish, for honorably discharged veterans and their dependents.

Eligibility for the state's veterans' nursing homes is limited to applicants who had entered active duty from or are residents of New York State, and had at least 30

days of active service. Priority admission is given to a veteran and a spouse who both require skilled nursing care, followed by "wartime" veterans, "non-wartime" veterans, spouses and un-remarried surviving spouses, and Gold Star mothers and fathers.

During the current legislative session, the definition of "wartime" veterans was expanded to include those who served in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn and Operation Inherent Resolve.

State Grants to Assist Local Veterans Organizations

Every year I receive numerous requests from community groups seeking financial assistance for special projects. While discretionary state legislative funding for local projects has been limited in recent years, I am always ready and willing to go to bat for the local governments and non-profit civic and cultural organizations in my district when these funds become available. This year I am pleased to report several successes for our local veterans' organizations.

The Stephen Sikora Post has been approved for a \$20,000 legislative grant for renovations to

the interior and exterior of their building as well as parking lot improvements. The Vietnam Veterans of America, WNY Chapter 77, will receive a \$4,500 grant for the purchase of museum display cabinets and the replacement of color guard uniforms. Another \$10,000 grant has been awarded to the nationally acclaimed American Legion Band of the Tonawandas, which was formed by World War I veterans in 1929, for acquiring performance equipment and materials, replacing worn uniforms and performing a future concert at Niawanda Park.

Proper Burials for Indigent Veterans

One of the issues on this year's Albany legislative agenda was the burial of indigent and often homeless veterans who don't have any funds, insurance or next of kin to assist with funeral expenses when they pass. To ensure that indigent and homeless veterans receive the honors in death that their service in life merited, various congressionally chartered veterans' organizations, such as the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars and Vietnam Veterans of America, have stepped in to make funeral arrangements using resources available from the federal and state governments to cover burial costs.

While funeral costs have increased over the years, government reimbursements have not risen, forcing

many veteran organizations to use their own funds to cover burial expense shortfalls. To address this issue at the state level, two important steps have been taken. First, in the 2015-16 state budget the Legislature included \$250,000 to be distributed to veterans' organizations to supplement the current cost of indigent burials. Second, we passed legislation that I supported to increase the state burial allowance from \$900 to \$2,000. The state veteran indigent burial stipend offsets burial costs not covered by the federal government or a social services program. This legislation will soon be sent to the Governor for his consideration.

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if needed. Original discharge papers are proof of military service and can be used to establish eligibility for a variety of state benefits, including property tax exemptions, civil service credits and tuition assistance.

Although the Niagara County Clerk's Office does not have the portable equipment necessary to conduct an outreach program, discount cards are issued at the Niagara County Clerk's Office at 175 Hawley Street in Lockport between 9:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. In addition to one's discharge papers, applicants must also present government-issued photo identification, such as a driver's license, that displays a Niagara County address.



Veterans Update

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