

TEXAS VETERANS COMMISSION

JOURNAL

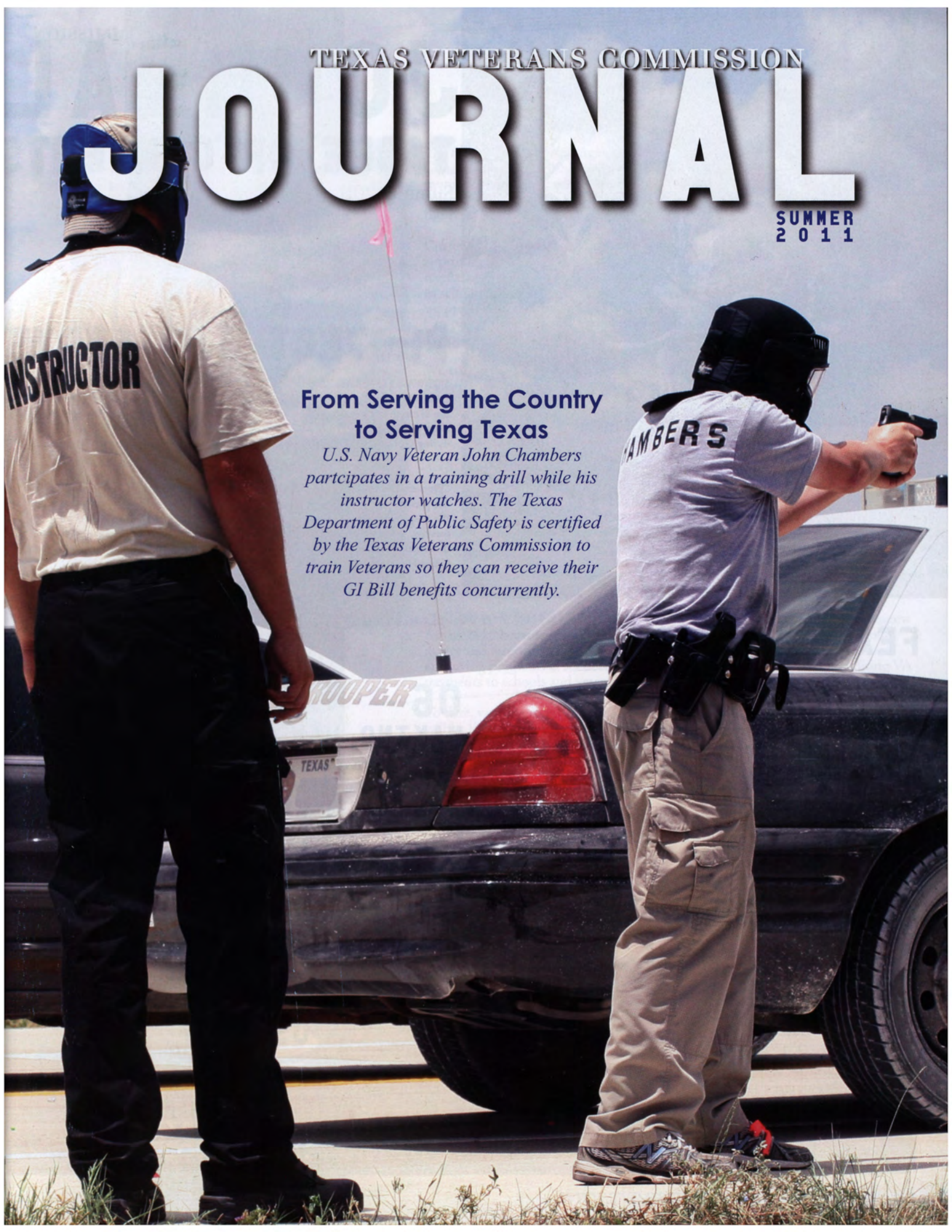
SUMMER
2011

INSTRUCTOR

From Serving the Country to Serving Texas

*U.S. Navy Veteran John Chambers
participates in a training drill while his
instructor watches. The Texas
Department of Public Safety is certified
by the Texas Veterans Commission to
train Veterans so they can receive their
GI Bill benefits concurrently.*

CHAMBERS



JOURNAL

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Summer 2011

PROTECT AND SERVE

FORWARD OPERATING BASE INKERMAN, Helmand province, Afghanistan - Lance Cpl. Neal D. Grogan, an M249 Squad Automatic Weapon machine gunner with the 81mm Mortar Platoon, Weapons Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, along with his Afghan National Army counterpart, holds security for a compound during Operation Kalawal Sunrise in the village of Faiscal within Sangin, Afghanistan, June 1.

"We were able to build rapport with the people of the village and continue to show our presence in the areas of operation. We are in the holding phase of Sangin and want the people on our side. We also want the village to look to the Afghan soldiers for their security," said Grogan, from Cedar Hill, Texas. "Partnering with the Afghan soldiers on this operation helped the villagers and trained the soldiers." Grogan, 22, graduated from Cedar Hill High School in 2008 before enlisting in the Marine Corps.

Photo by Cpl. Benjamin Crilly

Cover Photo by Rachel Howell, Texas Veterans Commission, Austin

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U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Derek Duckett and other veterans completed the training program at the Department of Public Safety while using his GI Bill benefits through the On-the-Job Training program.

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The first State Approving Agencies (SAAs) were formed after World War II when Congress determined that each state should create an agency to approve and monitor programs of education and training for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) education benefits. In Texas, the Veterans Education Department of the Texas Veterans Commission serves as the State Approving Agency for Texas.

Currently, our primary responsibility and focus is the review, evaluation, and approval of programs of education and training under federal and state laws and regulations. We also monitor these programs by conducting annual on-site visits to schools and employers with Veterans receiving GI Bill benefits. In addition, we provide technical assistance and training to school officials and employers. We also participate in outreach activities to promote the use of GI Bill educational benefits.

We currently have 1,232 schools and employers with approved programs. In FY2010, our activities included:

- Conducting 1,164 on-site visits to schools and employers;
- Responding to 9,513 calls and emails from Veterans, institutions, and employers;
- Mailing 19,263 information letters and brochures to recently discharged Veterans;
- Contacting 431 prospective employers/schools; and
- Participating in 61 Veterans Benefits/Job Fairs and 39 Transition Assistance Program briefings.

On January 4, 2011, the Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2010 became law (PL 111-377). PL 111-377 dramatically changes our duties and responsibilities as the SAA. This law changes our historic role from approving programs at schools and training establishments to one of auditing VA payments to schools and veterans.

To date, we have received little information and guidance on how these changes will be implemented on October 1st. However, we continue to work with VA and Congress to ensure that Texas will continue to protect student Veterans and safeguard their benefits.

Regardless of the changes, the Veterans Education staff will continue to ensure that Texas Veterans receive access to the quality educational and training programs they have earned.

Sincerely,

Connie Jacksits
Director, Veterans Education



**TEXAS VETERANS
COMMISSION**

The Texas Veterans Commission is the State agency serving the needs of our veterans and their families. Its purpose is to serve Texas veterans, their dependents or survivors in all matters pertaining to veterans' benefits and rights. The Texas Veterans Commission administers four programs: (1) Claims Representation & Counseling, (2) Veterans Employment Services, (3) Veterans Education, and (4) Fund for Veterans' Assistance. Through these programs, TVC helps obtain state and federal veterans' benefits, such as compensation, pension, death benefits, employment assistance, educational assistance, hospitalization and outpatient care, as well as numerous other benefits and privileges.

U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Derek Duckett salutes Lamar Beckworth, deputy director of the Texas Department of Public Safety, Texas Sen. Tommy Williams, and Allan B. Polunsky, chair of the Public Safety Commission, during his graduation ceremony. Duckett completed his training while receiving GI Bill benefits through the On-the-Job Training program.

FROM SERVING THE COUNTRY TO SERVING TEXAS

Story and Photos by Rachel Howell, Texas Veterans Commission, Austin

Some people are meant to be public servants and enjoy serving their community. U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Derek Duckett is one of these people.

After being discharged from the Marines, Duckett, a Veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom, wanted to be a Texas Ranger. He periodically checked the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) website to look for openings until one day he saw a posting for a state trooper.

He applied for the position and was accepted into the DPS Academy and the Field Training Officer Program to become a Texas State Trooper.

“Upon arriving at the DPS Academy, I wasn’t aware that I was eligible to utilize the GI Bill while completing my training,” said Duckett. “I was thrilled to find out that I was.”

The DPS Field Training Officer Program is approved by the Texas Veterans Commission to provide On-the-Job Training (OJT) so that Veterans enrolled in the program can also receive their GI Bill benefits concurrently.



Left Top: U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Derek Duckett receives the Norman E. Zator Award at the Texas Department of Public Safety graduation from Valerie Brown, assistant director at the Texas Department of Public Safety.

Left Middle: U.S. Air Force Veteran Nicolas Gassiot crouches behind his patrol car during a training drill at the Department of Public Safety facility in Florence, Texas. Instructors, who are also troopers, lead the recruits through real-life training with their full gear and weapons. Though the weapons have paintballs instead of bullets, every person in the area must wear protective gear.

Left Bottom: U.S. Navy Veteran John Chambers listens to his instructors during a training drill on dealing with a high-speed car chase. During the drills, instructors could stop the action in order to give advice and instruction to the recruits.



Right: U.S. Navy Veteran John Chambers bends down to handcuff a suspect who had led Chambers on a high-speed car chase during a training drill. The suspects and the instructors are troopers who help the recruits learn how to respond in the field.

FIELD TRAINING OFFICER PROGRAM

The program is 1,080 hours in length, normally completed in 24 weeks. During the training, the Probationary Trooper (recruit) leaves the classroom to train in real-world situations a trooper will likely encounter in the field.

Recruits must successfully complete the program to become a Texas State Trooper. Students study tactical vehicle operation, firearms, use of force, effective report writing, communications skills, and first aid, as well as other topics. Physical training and Arrest & Control Tactics training are also core elements of the program.

Part of the Field Training Officer Program takes place on a modern firearms range in Florence, Texas. The facility opened on June 1, 2003, and is located on approximately 44 acres. It includes a rifle range, shotgun range, tactical shoot house and tactical range.

At the facility in Florence, recruits learn to react to realistic situations such as routine traffic stops that can turn deadly and high speed car chases on highways and backroads. The instructors are also troopers, who take the time to show the recruits how to handle themselves during the training drills. This is part of the final exam to make sure the recruits are ready for work after training.

CLASS LEADER

With his previous military experience, Duckett was a natural to be his class's Drill Instructor,



HOW DO EMPLOYERS BENEFIT FROM HAVING APPROVED PROGRAMS?

Tax Break: The Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) is a federal income tax benefit administered by the U.S. Department of Labor, for private, for profit employers who hire from target populations, such as Veterans.

Recruiting: Approved programs provide excellence to any business, industry, or agency in attracting mature, well-disciplined employees that have positive work habits.

Retention: Entry-level employees receiving monthly subsistence checks from the VA are less likely to look for another job just for a marginal salary increase.

Company-directed training: As the employer, you direct the training, thereby ensuring the eligible employee becomes familiar with your work processes, methodologies, equipment and policies and procedures.

Community Enhancements: Establishments with approved programs are providing an important service to the veterans in their communities. In addition, national studies show that the VA dollars can create economic growth in a community as much as three times. Every VA dollar paid to Texas veterans directly benefits the economy of the State.

For more information on how to apply to train Veterans through the Texas Veterans Commission Veterans Education Program, please visit <http://www.tvc.state.tx.us/about/apply-to-train-veterans>.



which included leading the class in all physical activities.

“I was also responsible for the organized movement of the class around the academy and the driving/shooting range and to call the cadence at graduation as all of the class marched into the auditorium,” recalled Duckett.

Duckett credits his success in training to his experience with bootcamp and the discipline required to be in the Marines. He received multiple awards at graduation including the Norman E. Zator Academic Achievement Award for having the highest grades in his class.

“In addition to the academic award I received at graduation, I was also awarded the Distinguished Fitness Award for our class the day before from our fitness instructor,” said Duckett. “I believe my time in the military helped prepare me for the DPS Academy as I already had a level of self-discipline above those of my classmates who had never experienced an environment similar to military boot camp.”

ON-THE-JOB TRAINING

Under the OJT program, Veterans eligible for GI Bill educational benefits can receive a monthly check through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) while learning work processes, methodologies, equipment, company/agency policies, and skills under the

direct supervision of a skilled trainer. Effective Oct. 1, 2011, Veterans will also be able to use the Post-9/11 GI Bill for OJT and apprenticeship training programs. Individuals perform according to training outlines developed from U.S. Department of Labor standards, industry standards, and/or the company’s job description for the position. The Texas Veterans Commission is the state agency that approves GI Bill OJT programs in Texas.

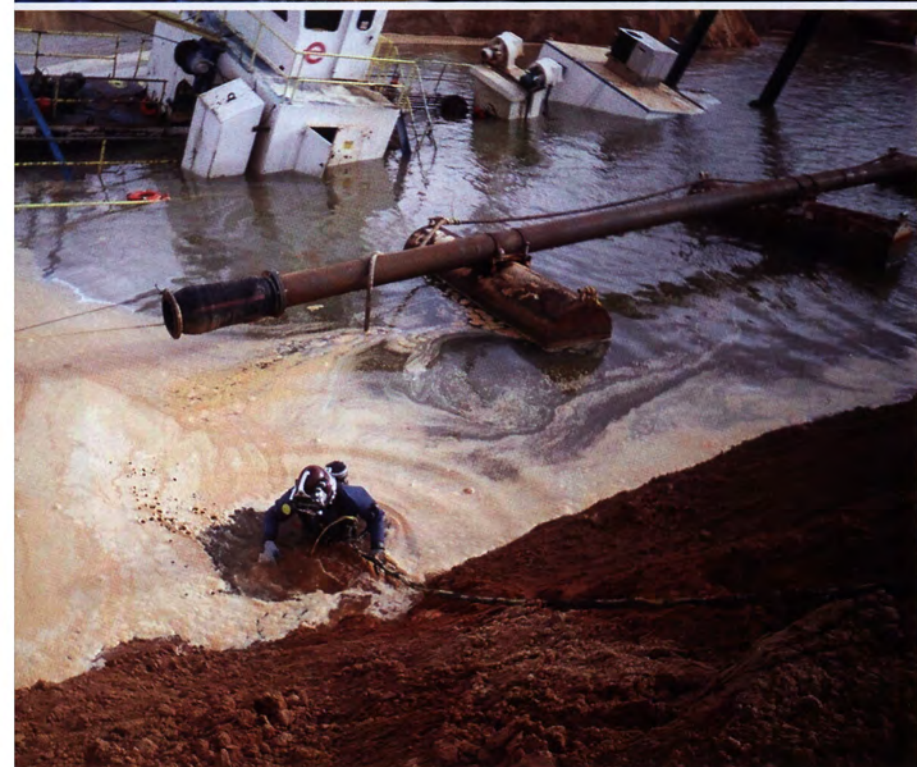
OJT programs normally range from six months to two years in length. While receiving GI Bill benefits, eligible employees are in training, performing a new job, and earning wages.

“The process was made very easy for those of us applying for benefits by the training staff at the academy,” said Duckett. “I turned in a copy of my DD-214, my military transcripts, and my college transcripts and they pretty much handled the rest. All I really had to do was monthly verify my attendance at the academy through the VA’s website W.A.V.E.”

Graduating in July 2011 from the program, Duckett is stationed in Texas City and working in Galveston County.

“While I had been out of the military for over 3 years before starting the academy, I believe it was the training and values provided to me through the military that made me as successful as I was in my training,” said Duckett.

Because of those values, Duckett is likely to continue that success in the field. 🏠



Photos provided by Neptune Underwater Services

Clockwise from top: A Neptune Underwater Services diver and U.S. Navy Veteran is lifted out of the Gulf of Mexico after conducting a structural inspection on an oil rig. A U.S. Army Veteran and Neptune Underwater Services diver holds onto the side of an oil rig that he is conducting a structural inspection of in the Gulf of Mexico. A U.S. Marine Corps Veteran and Neptune Underwater Services diver works to salvage and raise the sunken dredging barge located behind him.

MAKING WAVES

Story by Linda Alexander, Texas Veterans Commission, Dallas

The small town of Mansfield, Texas, just south of Dallas/Fort Worth hosts a unique On-the-Job Training (OJT) program – Commercial Diver (Underwater).

Not many can boast of enduring the demanding training at Neptune Underwater Services (NUS). Since the Texas Veterans Commission Veterans Education Program approved the program to train veterans in 2008, Neptune Underwater Services has successfully trained five GI Bill-eligible Veterans. Veterans with military dive training are prime candidates for the program.

In Texas, positions such as police officer, firefighter, classroom teacher, budget analyst, supply management specialist, funeral director/embalmer, scuba diving instructor, surface maintenance repairer, and cabinetmaker are examples of currently approved programs.

This training program is provided by NUS, which provides a complete range of commercial diving and inspection, repair, and maintenance services to clients in the oil and gas, shipping, public works, defense, and marine infrastructure industries.

“By combining state-of-the-art equipment, the precise allocation of resources, and highly experienced personnel, NUS has the capability to complete projects of any scale, to the highest of safety and industry standards,” said Bryan Nicholls, general manager of the Mansfield location. “In addition, this division has achieved an excellent performance record and reputation

for delivering quality services.”

These services include: inspection, repair, and maintenance of offshore and submerged structures; certified subsea and topside welding and cutting; inland and offshore pipeline repairs and abandonments; oil rig inspections, support, and positioning; and many more. They also train for salvage operations, fire suppression, potable water storage facility inspections and cleaning, HAZMAT diving (biohazard, chemical, and nuclear), and emergency response which includes hurricane and natural disaster response and remediation planning, oil and chemical spills, and recovery of sunken objects.

Another service is the Neptune Dry Underwater Welding System, NEPSYS. NEPSYS is a unique technology that produces a permanent, surface quality weld in an underwater environment. It achieves quality welds that satisfy structural dry welding codes and has been granted patents in Australia, the United States and Europe. The system was developed to improve conventional methods of offshore maintenance and repair.


“If it’s within 300 feet underwater, we can take care of it,” said Nicholls. “Regardless of the task, we are 100% committed to safety and quality.”

NUS is considered an “emergency responder” for natural disasters, as well as municipality infrastructure and has provided services around the world that include inland and offshore

support projects related to Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Ike, and support projects related to the 2010 Gulf Oil Spill.

This training is both physically and mentally demanding. In order to prepare for this profession, trainees must be able to be submerged underwater for long periods of time, work in adverse conditions such as low visibility, inclement weather, confined spaces, and have excellent mechanical aptitude.

Underwater, a diver must be able to perform at the same level as his above water counterparts. During this intense training, trainees can expect to become familiarized with diving equipment and set-ups, with diving physics, physiology, decompression theory, and emergency response, and with basic rigging and the use of general construction tools. They will also learn to understand and maintain commercial diving equipment, such as building and repairing dive hoses, troubleshooting and repairing diving air compressors, troubleshooting and repairing ancillary hydraulic, electrical, and diesel powered equipment, and operating decompression chambers.

For more information on NUS, please visit <http://www.neptunems.com/services/diving-services/overview.aspx>. For more information about the OJT program and training programs, please visit <http://texas-veterans.com/education/on-the-job-training>. 

Children and siblings of deployed servicemembers receive services through Fund for Veterans' Assistance

By Rachel Howell & Leta Scott,
Texas Veterans Commission, Austin & Houston

The Texas Veterans Commission Fund for Veterans' Assistance has also funded two new grantees that specifically address the needs of children who have or have had parents deployed.

According to the National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, children of military parents who have been deployed may suffer from insecurities, sense of loss of safety, anxiety, and shock. All children are likely to worry about their deployed parents' safety, and young children may have difficulty understanding why their dad or mom is gone. Educators and school personnel may notice behavior changes among the children of newly returned servicemembers such as expressed feelings of guilt, increased need for attention, fear of the returning parent, or lack of responsiveness to peers or adults.

With funding from the Texas Veterans Commission Fund for Veterans' Assistance beginning in July 2011, Communities in Schools (CIS) of Bell-Coryell Counties will place eight degreed professional staff in seven public schools in the Fort Hood area to provide academic, behavioral, and social support to students from military families.


CIS staff will focus on individual/group counseling services that will address each student's needs including deployment issues, crisis

intervention, mentoring, anger management, alcohol and drug awareness as well as support to encourage student achievement and success including tutoring, reading and homework clubs, and pen pal programs.

The CIS staff will be located in Shoemaker High School, Audie Murphy Middle School, Smith Middle School, Clarke Elementary, Clear Creek Elementary, Duncan Elementary, and Montague Village Elementary. Shoemaker will have two site directors who will be responsible for case managing children of Fort Hood Veterans and active duty servicemembers due to its large enrollment. All other campuses will have one director.

Also funded through a grant from the Fund for Veterans' Assistance, the Hope for Heroes program at the Samaritan Center in Austin began serving Veterans in September 2010.

The Hope for Heroes program supports all members of the family and includes services to servicemembers, Veterans, and their families for all stages of deployment and returning to civilian life. Hope for Heroes counselors can help with specific concerns during deployment, with family communication upon return, and with children having a difficult time with parents or siblings who are deployed.

Through these programs, the Texas Veterans Commission is working to make sure all Veterans' needs are addressed and that helping Veterans starts with the Texas Veterans Commission. 

Texas Veterans Commission assists servicemembers around the world

By Rachel Howell,
Texas Veterans Commission, Austin

Through a currently deployed employee, the Texas Veterans Commission has reached Afghanistan to help a servicemember in need.


A Marine received several collection notices from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for a medical treatment the VA claimed he had received between deployments. Since the Marine was in Afghanistan, his wife tried to work with VA to find out what the treatment was. She was continually told that they could not give her that information.

The Marine then talked to those in his chain of command about the collection notices until someone asked 1st Lt. Jeff Williford, a Texas Veterans Commission employee, what the Marine should do.

1st Lt. Williford contacted Jim Richman, director of Texas Veterans Commission Claims Counseling and Representation, to see what could be done.

Richman talked to someone in the VA who stopped the debt collection for the duration of the Marine's deployment.

The diligence of Richman and 1st Lt. Williford shows that the Texas Veterans Commission is dedicated to helping all of those men and women who are servicemembers or Veterans.

For assistance from the Texas Veterans Commission, please visit www.TexasVeteransCommission.org. 

VA begins work in Texas for new Outpatient Clinics

By Rachel Howell,
Texas Veterans Commission, Austin

During June and July of 2011, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) broke ground on two new outpatient clinics in Texas.

On June 17, representatives from the Texas Veterans Commission attended the groundbreaking ceremony of the new VA Outpatient Clinic in Austin, Texas, and on July 22, the Texas Veterans Commission was on hand at the groundbreaking ceremony for the new VA Specialty Outpatient Clinic in Corpus Christi.

Tom Palladino, executive director of the Texas Veterans Commission, and Jim Richman, director of Claims Counseling and Representation for the Texas Veterans Commission, at-


tended the ceremony in Austin along with U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett, Thomas C. Smith, director of the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System, and Allen Bergeron, City of Austin Veterans Consultant.

In Corpus Christi, Texas Veterans Commission Vice Chair Al Cantu joined over 100 Veterans, medical providers and representatives from around the state at the site of the 33,000-square-foot clinic that will open next year.

The new VA Outpatient Clinic in Austin will be the largest free-standing clinic of its type in the nation. The current Clinic provides primary care, urgent care, and more than 20 areas of specialty of care. Additional space at the Southgate building on I-35 houses mental

health, health care for homeless Veterans, and home-based primary care services. All operations at the current clinic and Southgate Building will be moved to the new Clinic so that Veterans will have the convenience of obtaining their outpatient medical care at one location.

The Specialty Outpatient Clinic in Corpus Christi will be a convenient location for the South Texas Veterans who normally travel to San Antonio or Houston for specialty medical, dental, surgical and mental health care.

The clinic will include new services such as mental health, cardiology, pulmonary, dermatology, endocrinology, urology, ophthalmology, dental, podiatry, physical therapy, prosthetics, and orthopedics. 

GI Bill affects student Veterans for fall semester

By Terry O'Neill,
Texas Veterans Commission, Austin

In January 2011, the Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Improvements Act was signed into law. Under this law, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will pay all public Institutions of Higher Learning (degree granting institutions) in-state tuition and fees; however, private Institutions of Higher Learning will be capped at \$17,500 annually beginning Aug. 1, 2011.

On Aug. 3, President Barack Obama signed into law House Resolution 1383, the Restoring GI Bill Fairness Act of 2011, which will protect Veteran students who were enrolled in private institutions of higher learning on or before Jan. 4, 2011, from potentially paying thousands to remain in college.

Many Veteran students who are enrolled in private colleges for the Fall 2011 semester were worried how they would pay for school without the benefits initially offered through the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Dan Borgerson, an Operation Iraqi Freedom Veteran, was one of these students.

Borgerson, a U.S. Army Veteran, served from August 1998 to February 2003. In April 2005, he resumed active duty and served until April 2008 in communications. He was a member of the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell and also served in the 486th Civil Affairs.

When Borgerson was first discharged from the service, he wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life. During a visit to Oklahoma to see his sister, she suggested that he move to Austin.

Borgerson talked to a Texas Veterans Commission Veterans Employment Representative in Austin in September 2008 to assist him with finding a job.

"I contacted a friendly woman who talked with me a few minutes, looked on her computer screen and said 'I might have job for a clean cut guy!' said Borgerson.

The woman helped him with his resume. He applied at GT Distributors, a Law Enforcement and Military Supply Specialty store, and was hired a few days later.

While working full time, Borgerson decided to use his Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits and enrolled in an online college.

Since the GI Bill paid his tuition, he was able to work and go to school. He completed an Associate Degree in Criminal Justice in December 2009 but wanted to get his bachelor's degree.

Borgerson looked into attending the University of Texas at Austin and St. Edward's University. Tuition is approximately \$8,500 to \$9,800 annually at the University of Texas and \$28,500 at St. Edward's. At the time that Borgerson was making his decision, the Post-9/11 GI Bill paid the tuition and fees and a monthly equivalent Base Housing Allowance for all Institutions of Higher Learning. Borgerson decided to attend St. Edward's.

He enrolled in St. Edward's in the fall of



Photo provided by Dan Borgerson

U.S. Army Veteran Dan Borgerson stands outside of the GT Distributors where he holds a full-time position. Because of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, Borgerson is able to work full-time and attend St. Edward's in order to receive a bachelor's degree.

2010 and began majoring in Global Studies with a minor in Arabic. This summer he is spending two months at Queen Alliah Amman University in Jordan to study Arabic. After graduating, Borgerson would like to work with the Foreign Service or the FBI.

Under the Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Improvements Act, Borgerson would have had to pay about \$11,000 out of pocket for the next two years plus any additional fees.

The Restoring GI Bill Fairness Act of 2011 will affect students accepted or

enrolled in private schools and using the Post-9/11 GI Bill when the Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act was signed into law. During the period beginning on Aug. 1, 2011, and ending on July 31, 2014, Texas Veteran students will be able to receive payment for tuition up to \$1,539 per credit hour and fees up to \$12,130 per term.

"This is awesome news!" Borgerson said after learning of the new law.

Students in seven states, Arizona, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Texas, will qualify.

To learn more about the Texas Veterans Commission Veterans Education Program and find approved programs, please visit <http://Texas-Veterans.com/education/overview>.

Restoring GI Bill Fairness Act of 2011 FAQs

I'm at a private school in one of the covered states, but my school has already submitted my enrollment for the Fall term. How do I get the additional amount for tuition and fees covered?

Your school certifying official will need to submit an amended enrollment certification to VA with remarks stating "Student eligible for restored rates" to verify that you were enrolled in that school on or before Jan. 4, 2011, and that the tuition and fees for full-time attendance in that program exceeded \$17,500 during the 2010-2011 academic year. Upon receipt, VA will review your claim and process any additional payment due.

I transferred schools during the 2010-2011 academic year; am I eligible for the increased payment?

You may be eligible for the increased payment if you were enrolled in your current school on or before Jan. 4, 2011 and the tuition and fee charges for full-time attendance in your program of education during the 2010-2011 academic year exceeded \$17,500.

If you have not been continuously enrolled in your current school since Jan. 4, 2011, or the tuition and fee charges for full-time attendance in your program of education did not exceed \$17,500 for the 2010-2011 academic year, the tuition and fees payable to you during the 2011-2012 academic year will be capped at \$17,500 (or the appropriately reduced amount based on your eligibility percentage).

Veteran transitions out of military successfully through TAP

By Bonnie Fletcher,
Texas Veterans Commission, Austin

In 2002, Elizabeth Amezaga, a two-time combat Army Veteran, found herself in the middle of transitioning out of the military to civilian life. She took advantage of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) at Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas, in order to receive guidance and assistance with life after the military.

TAP is a comprehensive three-day workshop at military installations nationwide. In Texas, with professionally-trained workshop facilitators from the Texas Veterans Commission provide the TAP training.

After joining TAP, Amezaga fell under the supervision of Luis Paniagua, TAP Facilitator at Fort Bliss. She found Paniagua was very educated about all Veteran services, programs and benefits.

“Mr. Paniagua’s mission to help Veterans is something very personal to him because he is also a Veteran,” said Amezaga. “He has gone above and beyond to make sure I received the proper services and to make sure I was taken care of.”

Paniagua, a U.S. Army Veteran, understands that being a Veteran is a critical aspect in his position.

“Making the connection with the servicemembers is vital,” said Paniagua. “Once the Veteran knows that I am a Veteran as well, it makes it easier to freely communicate their concern regarding returning to the civilian workforce.”

TAP was established to meet the needs of separating servicemembers during their period of transition into civilian life by offering job-search assistance and related services.

Through a partnership among the Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs, and Department of Labor Veterans’ Education and Training Service, TAP gives employment and training information to armed forces members within 180 days of separation or retirement.

An independent national evaluation of the program estimated that servicemembers who had participated in TAP, on average, found their first post-military job three weeks sooner than those who did not participate in TAP.

Also, servicemembers leaving the military with a service-connected disability are offered the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP). DTAP includes the normal three-day TAP workshop plus additional hours of individual instruction to help determine job readiness and address the special needs of disabled Veterans.

In the past year, Texas conducted 360 TAP workshops with 16,033 participants. The TAP Seminars provide service members and their spouses with job search techniques, interviewing skills, resume preparation, employment and training services, Veterans’ benefit information, and labor market information.

Additionally, mock interviews, dress for success demonstrations and employer panels are conducted. Employer panels consist of local area employers giving insight and answering questions on what they are looking for when interviewing and hiring employees.

“I had the right person talk to me, educate me, and encourage me, to take the right



Photo provided by Elizabeth Amezaga

Elizabeth Amezaga, a U.S. Army Veteran, went through the Transition Assistance Program at Fort Bliss and now is employed at the El Paso Vet Center.

steps”, said Amezaga. “He turned a very uncertain and confused twenty year old into a very successful professional who has had the opportunity at great things.”

Paniagua was able to find employment for Amezaga with a local U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as a work study, while she attended school and worked on her bachelor’s degree in accounting.

Amezaga then started working temporarily at the El Paso Vet Center thanks to a recommendation from Paniagua and was offered a permanent position in 2004.

She started working with Veterans and their families to provide mental health services and worked directly with the mentor who brought her to her current position, Luis Paniagua.

Since working with the El Paso Vet Center, Amezaga has been active with multiple Veteran Organizations, and she has spoken at many events including a nationally televised Veterans Day Ceremony at the Vietnam Memorial Wall in front of 15,000 people.

Amezaga gives credit to Paniagua and the TAP program for her many personal and professional successes in life. Currently, Amezaga is working on her master’s degree and continues to serve Veterans just as she was served.

The Texas Veterans Commission works closely with the TAP program ensuring the information being taught is always up to date and applicable for all Veterans.

“The Texas Veterans Commission is always looking for ways to improve the Transition Assistance Program by being productive in all issues concerning Veterans,” said Paniagua. “Moreover, we are giving the opportunity to incorporate ideas that will benefit Veterans as well as the organization, and the Texas Veterans Commission is always ready to help and assist all of us in the field.”

For more information about the TAP program, visit <http://www.turbotap.org/register.tpp> or <http://texas-veterans.com/employment/transition-assistance-program>.



Photo provided by Luis Paniagua, Texas Veterans Commission, El Paso

Luis Paniagua begins a Transition Assistance Program (TAP) presentation at Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas. The TAP seminars provide employment assistance to servicemembers who are transitioning to civilian life.

\$5.4 million awarded in latest round of Fund for Veterans' Assistance grants

By Sarah Tillman,
Texas Veterans Commission, Austin

On May 18, the Texas Veterans Commission awarded \$5.4 million in grants to 21 organizations through the Texas Veterans Commission Fund for Veterans' Assistance (FVA).

With projects starting July 1, 2011, the newest grantees have programs for individual and family counseling, housing and services for homeless, financial assistance, legal clinics, and emergency transportation for medical events.

"For many of the men and women who served their country with honor, the transition to life as a civilian is met with unanticipated obstacles," said Thomas Palladino, executive director of the Texas Veterans Commission. "The organizations receiving these grants offer programs that focus on helping Veterans overcome these obstacles."

One grantee, Project MEND, provides Veterans with assistance in acquiring prosthetics, orthotics and other medically necessary assistive technology prescribed to them by a medical professional but not available through their U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits.

"We are so grateful for the opportunity to have the chance to expand our services even more to our Veteran population," said Cathy Valdez, executive director of Project MEND. "Thanks to the grant award, we will be able to assist our disabled Veterans and their families

with assistive technology necessary for their rehabilitation and recovery."

Also addressing rehabilitation and recovery, Ride On Center for Kids (R.O.C.K.) provides Horses for Heroes, an equine-facilitated therapy (EFT) program, that targets Veterans and soldiers suffering from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injury and/or depression, as well as those in Warrior in Transition and Army Wounded Warrior programs, to help them reconnect with their families and communities.

R.O.C.K. was awarded a second grant to add a family component which will include EFT sessions for couples, spouses and families, as well as family events that will feature resiliency exercises and EFT.

Funds will also support a pilot program for homeless Veterans, add a summer camp for children of deployed service members, and allow R.O.C.K. to offer training workshops for mental health professionals and therapeutic riding centers throughout the state.

"With the grant monies, we will be able to



Photo provided by Kris Gonzalez, R.O.C.K.

Ssg Carthais (Curtis) Davis rides Leroy during a Horses for Heroes session while Nancy Krennek, R.O.C.K. Founder & Physical Therapist, checks balance and position of Davis prior to riding.

expand our Horses for Heroes program to more than triple the number of Veterans and service members we serve and add an essential family component," said Kris Gonzales, director of Equine Facilitated Learning / Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy at R.O.C.K.

The next round of FVA grants applications opened July 29, 2011. To be notified of upcoming FVA grant opportunities, please send your name and email address to grants@tvc.state.tx.us or visit www.tvc.state.tx.us/about/fund-for-veterans-assistance.

Fund for Veterans' Assistance funds program in San Antonio that gives emergency assistance and referrals

By Troy Davenport,
Texas Veterans Commission, Austin

Catholic Charities of San Antonio was awarded a Fund for Veterans' Assistance grant in January 2011 for the Military Family Relief Project (MFRP), a program providing emergency assistance and counseling services to Veterans and their families residing in San Antonio and surrounding counties. Services include emergency financial assistance, case management, transportation services, family and individual counseling and employment, training and education assistance.

Since March 1, 2011, 200 Veterans and family members were served through financial

assistance, counseling and transportation assistance services through MFRP. By providing these services to Veterans and family members, Catholic Charities hopes to prevent homelessness, eviction or foreclosure as well as utility disconnection.

"Most clients need assistance with rent, mortgage, utilities, phone and medical bills," said David Wagner, project manager for MFRP. "Catholic Charities is one of the very few agencies in San Antonio who offers immediate financial assistance that will cover complete rent for one or more months and complete payment of utility bills."

MFRP staff surveys participants to keep up with the needs of Veterans and their families.

Unemployed and under-employed Veterans have noted a need for increased employment assistance. In an attempt to meet participants' needs and address root causes of financial instability for Veteran families, MFRP added an employment assistance element to the program.

"Catholic Charities has become very familiar with the needs of Veterans and their families," said Ester Geffre, director of MFRP. "Currently our emphasis is referral to other employment providers."

MFRP refers Veterans to their local Texas Veterans Commission Veterans Employment Services counselors to provide employment assistance to their participants.

Message from the President of the Veterans County Service Officer Association of Texas



At the upcoming Texas Veterans Commission 64th Annual Statewide Training Conference, I will complete my second and final term as president of the Veterans County Service Officers Association of Texas (VCSOAT). It has been an honor serving as your president, and I truly enjoyed working with the officers and members of the association. The officers and I set out to become more involved with the training, holding regular meetings, adding more members, and reaching out to our state leaders. We indeed met those goals.

I was very pleased on how well your executive committee and the Texas Veterans Commission staff were able to partner and work together to hold the Spring Conference this past April in Austin. We had over 120 attend the training and all except the initial training attendees, paid their own expenses with no assistance from state funds. That was a first for many. When the Texas Veterans Commission and VCSOAT were considering holding the Spring Conference, we did not expect to have over 50 attend due to the lack of funding sources, but you all proved us wrong. You also proved that the training that has been provided through the years is considered valuable even when funding sources were cut.

The Texas Veterans Commission and VCSOAT have been working on the upcoming Statewide Training Conference set for Houston in September, and I know you all are looking forward to getting the most from that. With training we can all serve our veterans with the most up-to-date information on benefits and claim procedures.

At the Statewide Training Conference, we will have officers' elections. Elections will be held during the regular business meeting. Please consider serving as an officer of the association. The association can only grow with your involvement.

Again, thank you for letting me serve as your president for the last two years, it truly was an honor.

Signed,

Tim L. Vasquez

President

Veterans County Service Officers Association of Texas

First Veterans workshop held in Bee County



Photo by Al Puga, Bee County Veterans County Service Officer

Texas Veterans Commission Claims Counselor Philip McGill speaks with a Bee County Veteran about the benefits he may be entitled to. On June 23, the first ever Veterans Workshop was hosted at the Bee County Exposition Center.

By Rachel Howell,
Texas Veterans Commission, Austin

On June 23, Bee County hosted its first Veterans Workshop at the Bee County Exposition Center with 86 Veterans attending to learn about the benefits earned through service in the Armed Forces.

Working with the Texas Veterans Commission and other Veterans organizations, Veterans County Service Officer Al Puga organized the event.

"I received lots of positive feedback from our Veterans here in Bee County," said Puga. "This is the first time we've had an event of this type in Bee County, and I'm hoping to double the numbers for the next one."

Texas Veterans Commission Claims Counselor Philip McGill attended the event to educate Veterans about their benefits such as disability compensation or filing an appeal with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and state benefits such as Hazlewood Act or property tax exemption.

Chris Garcia from U.S. Rep. Rubén Hinojosa's office, Jim Mickler from the Texas Veterans Land Board, and representatives from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, the Area Agency on Aging of the Coastal Bend, the VA and others were also present to give the Veterans assistance. 🇺🇸

Legislature recognizes value of the Texas Veterans Commission

By Rick Svatora,
Texas Veterans Commission, Austin

The 82nd Texas Legislature passed a budget with only a slight, two percent decrease in spending for the Texas Veterans Commission. On June 17, 2011, Gov. Rick Perry signed the budget into law, and it takes effect Sept. 1, 2011.

Due to the leadership of budget writers Sen. Steve Ogden and Rep. Jim Pitts, the Texas Veterans Commission's budget for three of its core program areas – Claims, Education, and Employment – was restored to adjusted Fiscal Years 2010-2011 levels. Under House Bill 1, as introduced, the Texas Veterans Commission faced a 20 percent cut to those programs. The restoration in General Revenue funding amounts to over \$2.5 million for the agency.

The Texas Veterans Commission's success this session was due to the support of a number of legislators committed to the agency's service to Veterans.

Rep. John Otto, chair of the House Appropriations subcommittee that wrote the budget for the Texas Veterans Commission, was the first to increase funding by providing \$800,000 to the Claims budget. He also funded the Texas Veterans Commission's request for a Women Veterans Coordinator.

Rep. Ralph Sheffield, vice chair of the House Defense and Veterans' Affairs Committee, passed an amendment on the House floor to restore the Claims budget.

The funding provided for the coordinator in the final budget will allow Texas to assist women Veterans to attain equitable access to services. Texas is the only state, of the six largest states, without a Women Veterans Coordinator. The population of female Texas Veterans is expected to grow by over 26 percent from 129,393 in 2003 to 163,249 by the end of the 2012-2013 biennium.

As part of the Legislature's actions, the Texas Veterans Commission Fund for Veterans' Assistance will also start administering the Veterans Housing Assistance Program, beginning Sept. 1, 2011. Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, chair of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Military Installations Committee, led the effort and worked with Sen. Tommy Williams to transfer the program from the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs to the Texas Veterans Commission. The move, advocated by Gov. Rick Perry, was seen as necessary because of the Texas Veterans Commission's close working relationship with the Veterans' community. The program will provide at least \$585,000 in grants per year to modify homes of injured service members, provide temporary housing for caretakers of severely injured service members, and provide rental assistance to Veterans and their families.

In addition, legislators worked tirelessly to enhance and protect the agency's Fund for Veterans' Assistance. Sens. Wendy Davis and Van de Putte, as well as Reps. Joe Pickett, chairman of the House Defense and Veterans' Affairs Committee, and Joe Farias worked closely with Veteran Service Organizations to pass the following bills:

- Senate Bill 1635, by Sen. Davis and Rep. Joe Farias, creates an option on vehicle registration renewal forms to enable individuals to donate directly to the Fund for Veterans' Assistance. The Texas Department of Motor Vehicles played a lead role in the passage of



Photo by Rachel Howell, Texas Veterans Commission, Austin

Texas Veterans Commission Executive Director Thomas Palladino stands with the House Defense and Veterans' Affairs Committee after Palladino presented Rep. Joe Pickett, chair of the committee, with a Certificate of Appreciation for the generous donation made to the Texas Veterans Commission Fund for Veterans' Assistance on behalf of the committee and Rep. Pickett.

the bill and will even absorb the start up costs to make the donation option a reality.

- Senate Bill 1739, by Sen. Davis and Rep. Pickett, will prohibit the use of the Fund for Veterans' Assistance for any purpose other than grants to meet the needs of Veterans or for the administration of the Fund. The bill will ensure that the money provided to Veterans through their purchase of the Veterans lottery ticket will only support services to Veterans and not be diverted for other budgetary purposes.

The Texas Veterans Commission has awarded \$14.5 million in grants to 60 local government and non-profit organizations that are projected to serve 91,444 Veterans and their family members. Services provided through the Fund for Veterans' Assistance include transportation to medical facilities, counseling for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), housing assistance for homeless Veterans, short-term emergency financial needs, Veteran courts, legal assistance, and career training.

Ultimately, legislators were persuaded by the message delivered by Veteran Service Organizations and the Commission that the agency benefits all Texans through its mission to serve Veterans:

- According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Texas Veterans Commission Claims Counseling and Representation was responsible for over \$2 billion in monetary benefits to Texas Veterans in FY 2010, alone. Claims counselors will continue to be busy; while the staffing numbers have not changed, the number of service-connected claims handled by Texas Veterans Commission counselors increased by nearly 20 percent last year;
- Legislators' support of Texas Veterans Commission's Veterans Education will help the agency continue to assist more than 67,000 Veterans receive GI Bill and Hazlewood benefits at Texas institutions of higher education; and,
- Texas Veterans Commission Veterans Employment Services (VES) will continue to have support to build on its success in finding over 34,000 Texas Veterans employment last year. VES's job assistance to Veterans results in \$1.8 billion in wages each year. 🇺🇸



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