



THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS  
OFFICE OF THE VETERAN ADVOCATE  
100 HANCOCK STREET, 6<sup>TH</sup> FLOOR  
QUINCY, MA 02171

March 5, 2024

The Honorable Michael J. Rodrigues  
24 Beacon St., Room 212  
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Aaron M. Michlewitz  
24 Beacon St., Room 243  
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Chairs Rodrigues and Michlewitz,

The Office of the Veteran Advocate (OVA) submits this proposal for fiscal year 2025 funding with a focus on successful establishment of the office to successfully support Massachusetts' veterans and their families. The OVA was created in Massachusetts General Laws (MGL), chapter 144 of the Acts of 2022. With the appointment of the Veteran Advocate in November of 2023, the office began actions to establish full functionality to meet the requirements specified in MGL chapter 115B, section 2.

OVA mission: The Office of the Veteran Advocate is dedicated to safeguarding the well-being and upholding the rights of veterans under the care of the Commonwealth. OVA ensures veterans and their families receive compassionate, timely, and effective services, while advocating for their rights, benefits, and dignified treatment. We strive to foster collaboration among state agencies, facilitate access to federal and state benefits, and conduct thorough investigations to enhance the quality of care provided to veterans.

OVA responsibilities per MGL chapter 115B, section 2.

There shall be an office of the veteran advocate, which shall be independent of any supervision or control by any executive agency. The office shall:

- (i)** ensure that veterans in the care of the commonwealth or receiving services under the supervision of an executive agency in any public or private facility receive humane and dignified treatment at all times, with full respect for the veterans' personal dignity and right to privacy;
- (ii)** ensure that veterans in the care of the commonwealth or receiving services under the supervision of an executive agency in any public or private facility receive timely, safe and effective services;
- (iii)** aid and coordinate with local veterans service officers to ensure veterans receive all available state and federal benefits;
- (iv)** examine, on a system-wide basis, the care and services that executive agencies provide veterans;
- (v)** advise the public and those at the highest levels of state government about how the commonwealth may improve its services to and for veterans and their families;
- (vi)** develop internal procedures appropriate for the effective performance of the office's duties;
- (vii)** act as a liaison to all state agencies providing services to veterans to ensure each veteran receives necessary services and care;
- (viii)** assist in developing procedures for the executive agencies to best **serve** the veteran community;

(ix) act as a liaison to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs and all other relevant federal agencies to advocate on behalf of the veterans of the commonwealth; and  
(x) investigate incidents where a veteran suffered a fatality, near fatality or serious bodily or emotional injury while receiving services from an executive agency, or circumstances which result in a reasonable belief that an executive agency or a constituent agency failed in its duty to care for a veteran and, as a result, the veteran was at imminent risk of, or suffered serious bodily or emotional injury or death.

Report annually to the governor, the senate president, the speaker of the house of representatives, the senate and the house committees on ways and means, and the joint committee on veterans and federal affairs on the activities of the office, including, but not limited to,

a. an analysis of the delivery of services to veterans and recommendations for changes in agency procedures which would enable the commonwealth to better provide services to and for veterans and their families and

b. priorities for implementation of those changes to services.

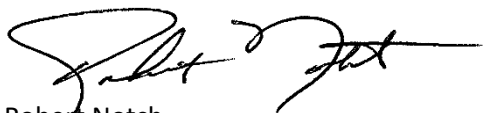
The report shall be made public on the website of the veteran advocate.

The total OVA budget proposal for FY25 is \$2.017M. Salaries and benefits are 93% of the total, while office space, travel, IT hardware, and services comprise the remaining 7%. This proposal includes the minimum essential staff to meet OVA responsibilities stated in law. Enclosure 1 provides details of this funding estimate.

The current FY25 H.2 budget proposes a standard 2% maintenance increase over FY24 funding for OVA, resulting in a FY25 proposal of \$765,000. This amount is inadequate for OVA to reach full functionality and limits capabilities to only roughly 30% of the OVA statutory tasks. To meet all its statutory requirements, OVA analysis determined an initial minimal staff of 11 people is required. Five positions are planned for hire in FY24 and six are planned for FY25. The salaries and benefits estimate for these 11 is \$1.876M. Enclosure 2 provides a matrix alignment of positions to statutory requirements.

In FY24, the OVA received \$750,000 in appropriations as startup funding. Expenditures for the office began in January 2024 after financial accounts were created and appropriate permissions delegated. With only half of the fiscal year remaining, OVA expects to expend \$385,000 of FY24 appropriations and to request carry over of the unspent funds to FY2025.

With adequate funding, the Office of the Veteran Advocate is committed to advising you and the public about how the commonwealth may improve its services for veterans and their families and builds relationships with federal and state executive agencies to best serve the veteran community. I welcome the opportunity to assist you and your staff in reviewing OVA funding needs. Please reach out to me with any questions.



Robert Notch  
Veteran Advocate

Enclosures as stated.

OVA Letter dated February 21, 2024

Enclosure 1. Office of the Veteran Advocate FY25 Budget Proposal

	<b>FY25 Request</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Regular Employee Compensation	\$ 1,420,000	staffing at 11 personnel to meet statutory requirements
Regular Employee Related Expenses	\$ 10,000	Travel to national convenings - Veterans Homes, VA Communities and State Veterans Services. Statewide travel for investigations, reviews and coordination.
Special Employees	\$ 20,000	interns/fellows
Pension and Insurance Related Expenses	\$ 426,000	estimate 30% fringe
Administrative Expenses	\$ 5,000	Development and printing of informational materials
Facility Operational Expenses	\$ 1,000	TBD based on space determination
Energy Costs And Space Rental	\$ 48,000	\$4k per month rent
Consultant Services to Departments	\$ 50,000	Consultant work
Equipment Purchase	\$ 2,500	veteran recognition displays
Benefit Programs	\$ 20,000	Continuing Education \$20,000
Information Technology Non-Payroll Expenses	\$ 14,500	IT hardware & software for new staff; select phones & service
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 2,017,000</b>	

