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## Proposal for Establishing Veteran Representative Walk-In Office and Committee Space in Manchester

### Highlighted Changes and Considerations

As we submit this updated proposal, we recognize the financial realities facing our town and respectfully offer a flexible model for consideration. We welcome feedback, suggestions, and any collaborative solutions that could make this vision a reality—while remaining fiscally responsible.

### Key Updates:

- **Bridgeport Model Added:** Bridgeport employs a full-time Director of Veteran Affairs earning \$73,343 annually—demonstrating how other municipalities prioritize veterans through a dedicated, salaried city role.
- **Use of VA Regional Data to Justify Local Need:**  
Newly included data from the Director of Hartford VA Regional Office shows that of the **2,613** veterans residing in Manchester, **only 27%** are currently receiving VA benefits. Additionally, **6.9% have a homeless flag** on file with the VA, and **15.5% have a VA-backed home loan**—highlighting a large, underserved population that includes many **local taxpayers and homeowners**. This reinforces the urgent need for a local, trusted access point to connect veterans to support.
- **Office Space Flexibility Expanded:**  
In addition to the Eighth Utilities District Building (preferred), the proposal now includes consideration of any vacant municipal building, including the Mary Cheney Library after its transition, to meet accessibility needs for older or mobility-limited veterans.
- **Expanded and Multi-Use Office Space Consideration:**  
The proposal now emphasizes the need for a **dedicated, flexible space** that not only serves veterans seeking walk-in services and support, but also functions as a location for **Veterans Advisory Committee meetings and coordination**.
- **Reinforced Case for Paid Staff vs. Volunteer Limitation:**  
Although a volunteer stipend model is still included, the Committee emphasizes the importance of a dedicated part-time paid position, noting that volunteers or committee volunteers cannot always respond during work hours—creating service gaps that a W2 employee could fill.
- **Year-to-Date Impact Added:**  
The Committee has now documented over 250+ veterans connected and served through its Coffee House events, outreach efforts, and direct referrals—demonstrating consistent demand for a dedicated veteran point of contact.
- **Committee Support in Development and Coordination:**  
The Veterans Advisory Committee will actively assist the Town in developing the role, coordinating the hiring or selection process, identifying training and certification needs, and supporting overall program implementation and oversight.

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## Updated Proposal – Revised Model with Original Framework

### Introduction

On behalf of the Veterans Advisory Committee, we are submitting this proposal as a collective to establish a **Veteran Representative Walk-In Office and Committee Space in Manchester**. We are grateful for the support and the opportunity to begin offering services to veterans through WorkSpace. Based on feedback from the committee and local veteran data, we propose establishing a permanent, such as at the **Eighth Utilities District building or a similar venue**, depending on availability. This space will allow us to offer consistent walk-in hours while also providing meeting space for veterans who need assistance outside of those hours.

The individual hired for this role should not necessarily be someone already in the town but ideally a Veteran and, eventually, a certified veteran claim representative. This approach will ensure that the representative can effectively intake veteran claims from the grassroots level. Many veterans do not trust the VA and tend to stay away from its services. By having a veteran in this role, we aim to build trust and demonstrate that we are all on the same team, supporting each other from the ground up. This support will extend into the community to ensure that those who served this country receive better support for the future.

### Preliminary Data & Need

Manchester is home to a total veteran population of **2,292** (2,092 males and 200 females), with the following age breakdown:

- **18-24 years old:** 212 (170 males, 42 females)
- **35-54 years old:** 432 (398 males, 34 females)
- **55-64 years old:** 429 (357 males, 72 females)
- **65-74 years old:** 723 (671 males, 52 females)
- **Over 75 years old:** 496 (494 males, 2 females)

In addition, federal data indicates that **682 veterans are enrolled for VA benefits**. However, **only 163 veterans from the Vietnam Era are currently receiving compensation and pension (Comp/Pen) benefits**. This data, retrieved from the VA Benefits Director, highlights a significant gap in the reach of available resources, emphasizing the need for enhanced outreach and targeted support to connect eligible veterans with the benefits they deserve.

As this group continues to age, they face increasing challenges, particularly regarding healthcare, financial support, and VA claims assistance. Establishing a permanent Veteran Representative office will enable us to prioritize these veterans and better meet their complex needs. It is clear from these statistics that **we have work to do** to ensure that veterans—especially those from the Vietnam Era—receive the support and benefits they are entitled to.

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### **Additional Data Insights & Community Realities**

Recent data provided by the Hartford VA Regional Office further underscores the urgency of having a dedicated veteran presence within Manchester:

- Of the 2,613 veterans in Manchester, only 27% received a VBA benefit this fiscal year, and only 35% have ever received a VBA benefit.
- 6.9% of local veterans have a homeless indicator (flash) on record.
- Approximately 15.5% have a VA-backed home loan, highlighting that a significant portion are homeowners and taxpayers.

This gap can only be closed by meeting veterans on a more personal, local level—with walk-in access, proactive outreach, and trusted peer guidance from within their own community.

### **Current Year-to-Date (YTD) Outreach**

Thanks to the Committee's outreach through our Veterans Coffee House, community events, and direct referrals, we have personally connected with and served over 250+ veterans year-to-date. These interactions include helping with:

- Benefit navigation
- Homeless Coordination
- Peer support
- Emergency needs and referrals
- Claim preparation and advocacy
- Resource Referrals

### **Examples of Established Veteran Service Offices Throughout Connecticut**

The following section provides examples of established Veteran Service Offices in Connecticut. These examples were gathered based on the research titled "*How towns fund a paid municipal veteran services representative (hereinafter 'vet rep')*," conducted by the Office of Legislative Research, provided by State Representative Geoff Luxenberg:

- **Bridgeport Vet Rep:** Bridgeport employs a full-time **Director of Veteran Affairs**, a salaried city position earning **\$73,343 annually**, reflecting a dedicated municipal investment in veteran services and infrastructure.
  - **Source:** [Bridgeport Job Advertisement \(PDF\)](#)
- **Bristol Vet Rep:** Bristol has joined five nearby towns to partner with a nonprofit, Vet Strong Community Center, to provide a veteran representative. This center, run by Donna Dognin, serves Bristol, Burlington, Harwinton, Plymouth, Thomaston, and Wolcott. Donna has been serving as the local veteran representative for the last 12 years. She created the nonprofit in 2016 to expand veteran services in the region. The towns have a cost-sharing agreement, each paying \$5 per veteran, based on U.S. Census data.

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- **Payment Model for Consideration:** If we start seeing veterans from surrounding towns, we could shadow this cost-sharing model in the future to expand our services beyond Manchester.
- **Danbury Vet Rep:** Danbury pays their veteran representative as a department head out of the city budget, demonstrating a strong commitment to veterans' services through significant municipal support.
- **Stamford Vet Rep:** Stamford pays their veteran representative, who also serves as the Director of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, with funding provided by the city. This dual-role model highlights how veteran services can be integrated with other important community functions.
- **Somers Vet Rep:** Somers has a very strong veteran representative program, with representatives serving on a volunteer basis. They receive a **\$1,500 stipend every six months** for the work they do, showing a cost-effective approach to veteran support that could also be considered as an alternative model.

The research did not identify any state or federal funding that would support a paid veteran representative. Although certain federal grants are available to municipalities to help them assist veterans, they usually must be used for specific purposes. Furthermore, it was mentioned that some areas of grants could be applied for, but there is a caution against relying on these funds long-term. In her experience, many of these grants are not supplied to the same entity for multiple years and are often available for only a few years or for one or two cycles.

#### **Expanded Services Provided**

This office will serve as a comprehensive resource hub, offering, but not limited to, the following services:

- **Claim Support:** Veterans will be triaged to Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) with federal and state agencies for VA claims assistance. Additionally, we will assist veterans in **filling out, faxing, and connecting them to services**, while our team will undergo **training and accreditation** to conduct **claim intake and submission**, similar to Somers, CT.
- **Resource Referrals:** We will guide veterans to verified federal and state agencies and vetted nonprofits. Additionally, **we will assist them in contacting these services** to ensure they are properly connected with the resources they need, such as housing, healthcare, and benefits.
- **Employment Assistance:** Refer veterans to federal and state employment programs, as well as nonprofits specializing in job placement, resume assistance, and interview preparation. We will also **help them get connected to these programs** by guiding them through the process and making calls with them when needed.
- **Financial Support:** Guide veterans by referring them to federal and state financial support agencies and nonprofits for assistance in managing benefits and budgeting. **We will help by contacting these services with them** to ensure they are connected to the appropriate financial support programs.

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- **Peer Support & Workshops:** Offer small group workshops to foster community ties through shared experiences, allowing veterans to connect with each other.

### Dedicated Staff

We propose hiring a **part-time Veteran Representative to begin**, with the potential to expand to full-time as the need for additional support becomes evident. This representative will:

- Manage walk-in hours and provide guidance.
- Assist with filling out forms, submitting documentation, and connecting veterans with needed services.
- **Help veterans contact and connect with relevant services** to ensure they receive support.
- Coordinate appointments and follow up with veterans who need additional support.
- Track service data and assist with administrative tasks.

### Funding Request and Allocation

As part of this updated proposal, we recognize the current financial landscape and submit this version with modified considerations. We aim to offer a model that is both impactful and mindful of budget constraints, while still allowing Manchester to build meaningful support for its veteran population.

### **Updated Cost & Staffing Considerations**

***\*\*Committee members are unpaid volunteers who often must assist veterans during working hours—fielding calls or stepping away from their paid jobs to assist Veterans. This isn't always sustainable. A paid representative ensures continuity, responsiveness, and dedicated service.\*\****

While the stipend model remains a viable alternate path (mirroring Somers), we now emphasize that the ideal structure would be a part-time, paid W2 Veteran Representative, who can fully dedicate their time to serving veterans.

A \$50,000-\$75,000 estimate would comfortably fund this role, including:

- Salary
- Training & VSO certification
- Case management software subscriptions
- Outreach materials and operational support

**Alternative Path Consideration:** Alternatively, we are proposing an approach modeled after the Town of Somers, which has successfully implemented a volunteer-based Veteran Representative program that has proven effective in serving their community.

### **In Somers:**

- Two Veteran Representatives volunteer their time

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- The town provides office space, phone, computer, and fax access
- Each volunteer receives a \$1,500 stipend every six months

**After meeting with officials in Somers and reviewing the demands of the role, we believe their current stipend does not fully reflect the time and service involved. For Manchester, we recommend:**

- A higher stipend is recommended—such as \$6,000 every six months, or distributed as a monthly payment—to appropriately support one qualified veteran volunteer.
- Access to town-provided office space and equipment (phone, computer, fax)
- Coverage of certification costs to accredit the volunteer as a Veteran Service Officer (VSO)
- Inclusion of software subscriptions to support veteran casework and claims management, allowing the representative to securely track appointments, benefits activity, follow-ups, and referrals

#### **Looking Ahead – Regional Sustainability:**

Should this office begin serving veterans from surrounding towns, we encourage consideration of a regional cost-sharing model, like the one used in Bristol, where nearby communities contribute based on veteran population. This would support long-term growth while distributing costs across municipalities.

#### **Proposed Office Hours**

- **Walk-In Hours:** Two or more days a week, with 4-6 hour shifts, until a steady need is met.
- **Appointments:** Priority appointments can be scheduled outside these hours for high-needs veterans, such as Vietnam veterans.

#### **Proposed Office Space**

While the Eighth Utilities District Building remains the **preferred location** for this initiative, we are open to exploring any **vacant or underutilized town-owned property** that can meet the needs of Manchester's veteran community.

Potential options include:

- The **future repurposing of the Mary Cheney Library** building, once the new facility is operational
- Other **accessible, municipally-managed buildings** that offer flexibility and privacy

The ideal location would serve multiple purposes:

- Provide **walk-in access** and **private meeting space** for veterans to receive services and guidance
- Offer a **dedicated area for the Veterans Advisory Committee** to host meetings, coordinate efforts, and connect directly with the community

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- Ensure **physical accessibility and comfort**, particularly for older or mobility-limited veterans

This shared, consistent space would allow veterans to feel supported, seen, and connected to both services and civic leadership—all in one familiar and trusted location.

### **Conclusion**

The Veterans Advisory Committee respectfully requests support to establish a permanent Veteran Representative walk-in office, preferably at the **Eighth Utilities District building or a comparable location**, depending on availability. With over **800 aging Vietnam veterans** in Manchester, this office will provide critical services to meet their growing needs and close the gap in benefits access.

We strongly believe that this initiative will significantly benefit our community, especially those veterans who are most in need. We look forward to discussing this proposal further and welcome your feedback.

**Respectfully,**

**Town of Manchester – Veterans Advisory Committee**

### **References**

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4. Bridgeport, CT, Paid Position – Director of Veterans Affairs:  
[https://www.bridgeportct.gov/sites/default/files/2023-09/Director%20of%20Veteran%20Affairs%20Job%20Advertisement\\_0.pdf](https://www.bridgeportct.gov/sites/default/files/2023-09/Director%20of%20Veteran%20Affairs%20Job%20Advertisement_0.pdf)