



**Caring for
America's Heroes.**

South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs

2025 Annual Report

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Who are we?

- The South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs (SDDVA) is a state agency dedicated to advising, counseling, and assisting veterans and their families as they navigate the complex network of federal and state benefits they may be entitled to.
- South Dakota's commitment to veterans' dates to 1889 with the establishment of the South Dakota Soldiers Home, and we continue to draw inspiration from generations of veterans whose service and sacrifice have strengthened our nation.
- Today, SDDVA operates the Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home and the South Dakota Veterans Cemetery and connects veterans and their families with the full range of benefits and services offered by the State of South Dakota and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Our mission is to provide high-quality, effective service and advocacy for veterans and their dependents, staying current with the new laws, applying them diligently, and continually improving the efficiency and responsiveness of our programs.



Who We Serve



The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reports there are 168 living World War II-era Veterans in South Dakota.

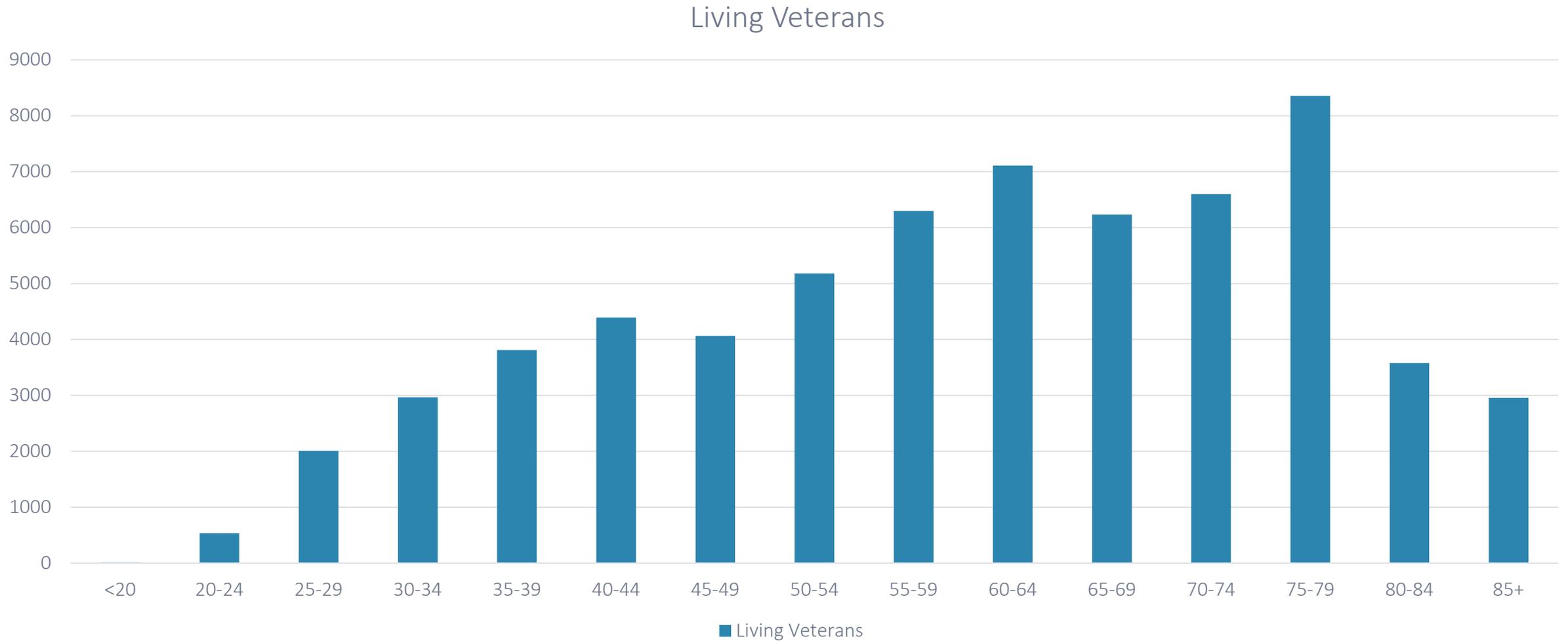
There are 31,985 living Gulf War-Era and pre-9/11 Veterans in South Dakota.

There are 1,719 living Korean War-era Veterans in South Dakota.

There are 12,679 living Peacetime Veterans in South Dakota.

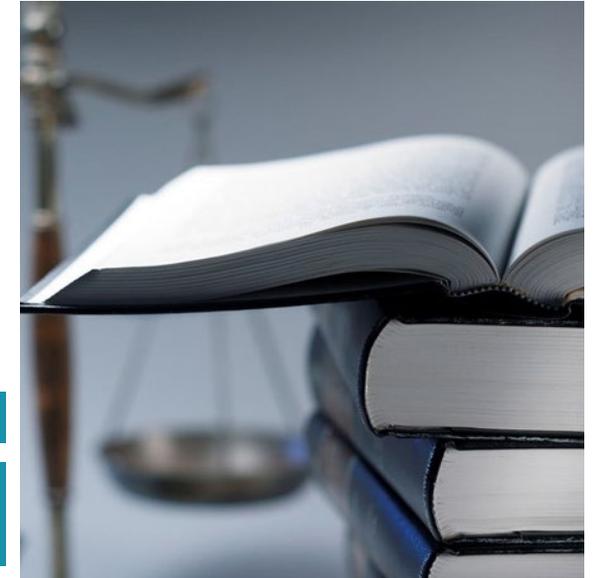
There are 19,223 living Vietnam War-era Veterans in South Dakota. SDDVA has seen an increase in disability claims filed on behalf of Vietnam Veterans due to the manifestation of acute diseases brought on by exposure to toxins and the passage of the Sergeant First Class (SFC) Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act.

Who We Serve - Demographics



2025 Legislative Highlights

- SB52 - Authorize the expansion of the South Dakota State Veterans Cemetery.
- HB1068 - Allow a student to wear certain military decorations at a school graduation ceremony.
- HB1160 - Waive the driver's license renewal period for members of the military and their families, and employees of the state department.
- HB1161 - Allow additional forms to verify military service for a veteran designation on a commercial driver's license or commercial learner's permit.
- HB1188 - All nonresident military members to purchase three-day temporary nonresident waterfowl licenses.



A close-up, high-angle view of the American flag, focusing on the field of white stars on a dark blue background. The stars are arranged in a grid pattern, and the bottom edge shows the red and white stripes. The lighting creates a slight shadow and highlights the texture of the fabric.

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SDDVA Benefits Division

Benefits Division – Claims Office

The South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs (SDDVA) benefits division provides comprehensive assistance to veterans and their families in securing U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits.

South Dakota offers additional state benefits to eligible veterans and dependents, such as reduced or free tuition at state schools, reduced hunting/fishing license fees, and property tax exemptions. SDDVA staff assist veterans in identifying and applying for those benefits.

The benefits division helps veterans and their family members file claims and navigate VA processes for disability compensation, nonservice-connected pension, survivor benefits, education benefits, burial benefits, and VA healthcare. In addition, the claims office supports county and tribal Veterans Service Officers (VSO) by helping them prepare, submit, monitor, and appeal claims to ensure accuracy and compliance with VA.



Benefits Division – Claims Office Overview

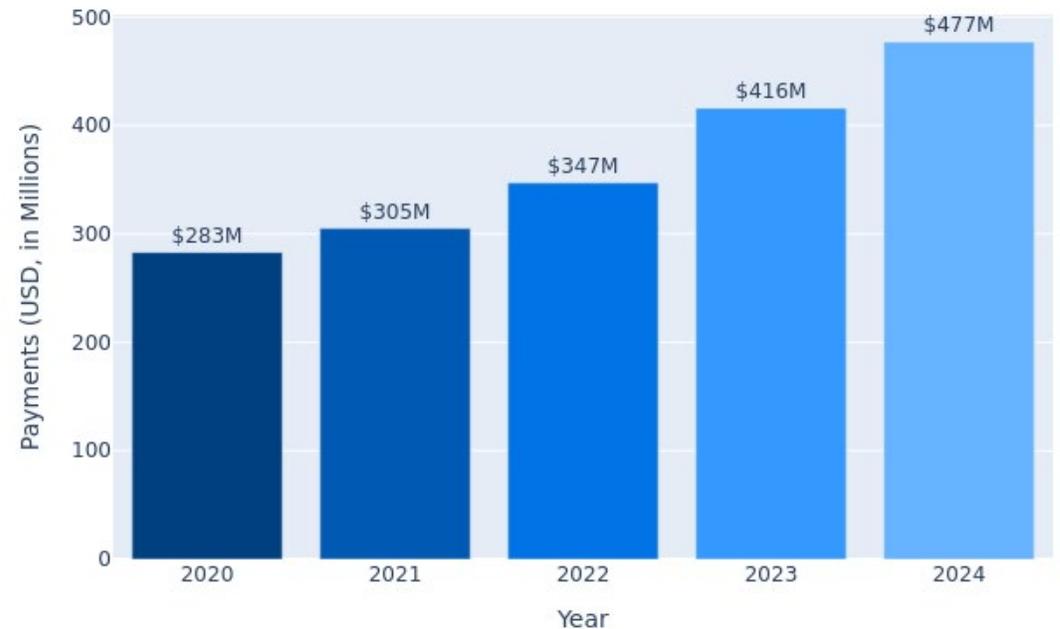
The SDDVA claims office is located at the Regional Office on the VA campus in Sioux Falls. Our claims office team consists of a program manager, 6 state veterans service officers (SVSO), and 3 claims examiners.

Our staff assisted 1,985 veterans/family members at the claims office and filed 13,312 claim-related submissions to the VA on behalf of the veterans/dependents seen by state, county, and tribal VSOs in 2025.

Economic Impact

In FY2024, the VA paid \$166 billion in compensation and pension benefits nationwide. Of that total, 23,000 veterans and eligible dependents in South Dakota received \$477 million in compensation and pension payments, injecting nearly \$40 million into communities across the state each month! (*Source: VA Annual Benefits Report, Fiscal Year 2020-2024*)

VA Payments to South Dakota Veterans (2020–2024)



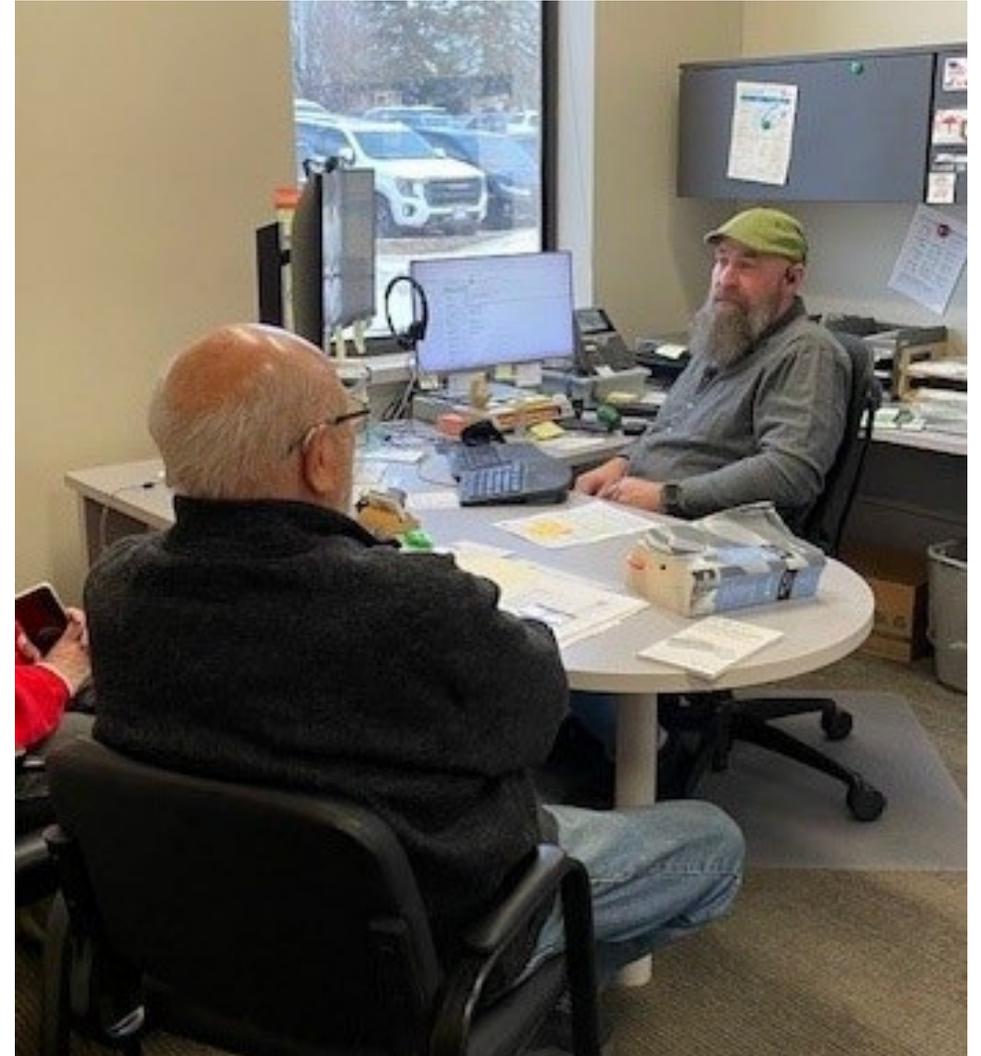
Benefits Division - Appeals

The SDDVA currently has 26 appeals pending decision, 20 appeals awaiting scheduling, and 1 hearing scheduled. BVA decisions returned in 2025:

- 5 appeals received favorable grants
- 2 appeals were denied
- 6 appeals were remanded back to the Regional Office for further development
- 1 appeal was dismissed

Due to the high number of appeals across the country, wait times are significant and vary significantly by docket (Direct Review, Evidence Submission, Hearing before a judge), ranging from 1-3 years. Recent VA data shows the average processing times as:

- 1-2 years for Direct Review
- 2-3 years for Evidence Submission
- 3-4 years for Hearings



Benefits Division – Field Operations

The Field Operations Division consists of a Field Operations Program Manager, a Training Coordinator, an Outreach Coordinator, and four Field Veteran's Service Officers.



Benefits Division – Field Operations

Training:

- Conducted Spring and Winter Mini Conferences and the Annual Benefits School.
- Field Operations received 1,170 hours of training.
- Staff provided 1358 hours of training across the state.

Outreach:

- Attended 152 events statewide, including:
 - South Dakota State Fair
 - The Sturgis Rally
 - What's Brewing's
 - Wreaths Across America
 - Retiree/Yellow Ribbons
 - Coffee with Vets
 - Veterans Stand Downs
 - Fallen Hero Bridge Dedications

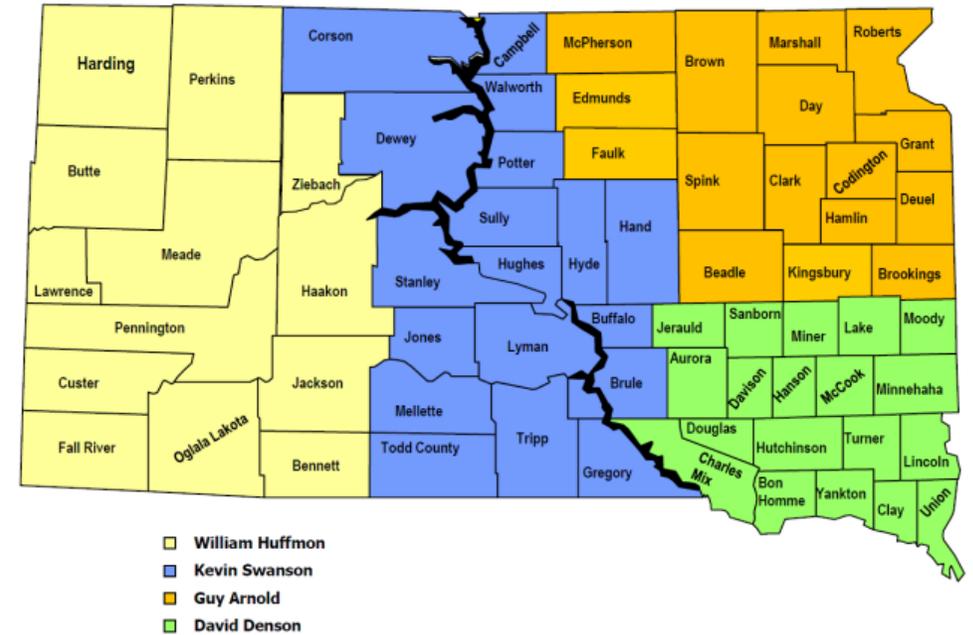
We assisted over 6,500 Veterans and family members at the various events.



Benefits Division – Field Operations Field Staff

The Field Veteran’s Service Officers (FVSOs) are divided into four regions—Western, Central, Northeast, and Southeast—to provide statewide coverage and support. They are responsible for training and assisting County and Tribal Veteran’s Service Officers in their regions.

This year, staff traveled a combined 113,174 miles to fulfill their mission of supporting veterans and their families, participating in outreach events, and conducting training sessions.



Education and Employment Programs

Our team helps veterans and their families access the education and training benefits they have earned and serves as the state approving agency (SAA) for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. We provide comprehensive oversight and up-to-date information on education benefits and resources, partnering closely with college and university staff to ensure that all veterans and family members maximize these benefits. Education and training opportunities include college degrees, certificate programs, on-the-job training, apprenticeships, flight training, and correspondence courses.

In 2025, there were 382 approved On-the-Job Training and Apprenticeship programs. A total of 145 veterans used their GI Bill for employment with 48 active firms and 56 active programs. In schools, 1,241 students used their GI Bill education benefits.

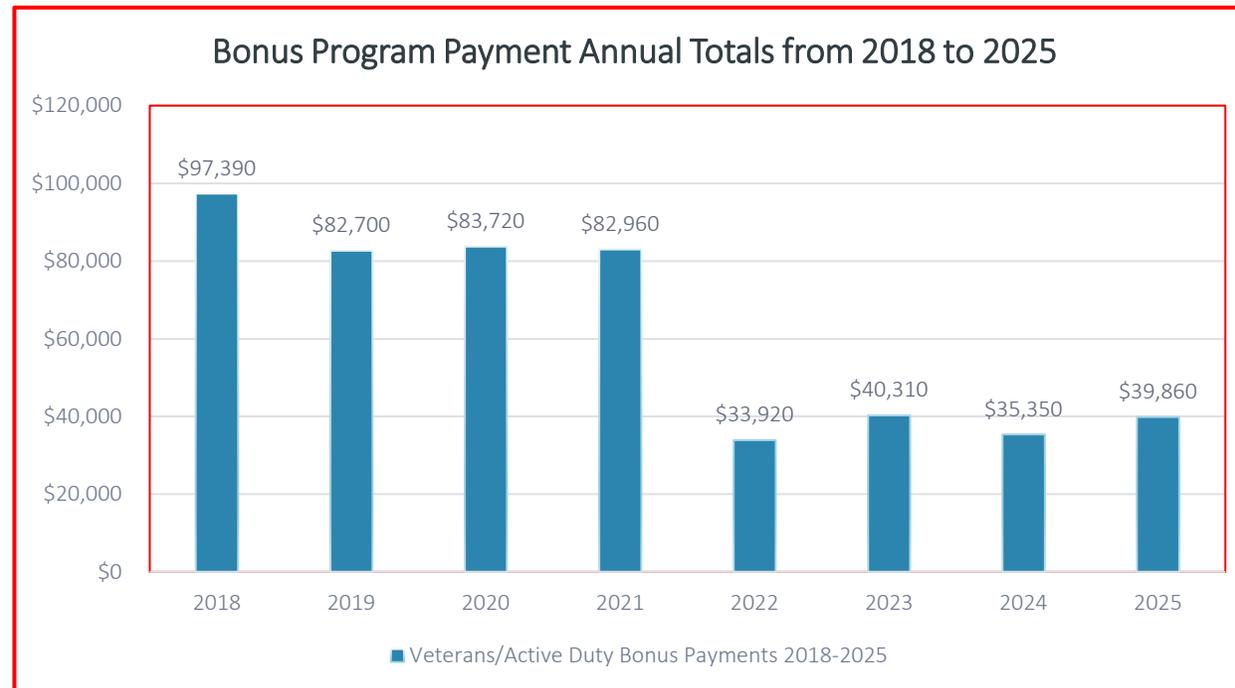
Veterans can use their GI Bill at 3 institutions of higher learning (technical colleges and public/private universities), 55 non-college degree institutions (high schools, welding schools, and trade schools), and one flight training school.



Veteran/Active-Duty Bonus Program

South Dakota is among a small group of states that offer bonus payments to active-duty servicemembers and veterans. The current bonus program disburses payments for service after August 2, 1990. \$500 is the maximum payment made for qualifying service between August 2, 1990, and December 31, 1992. Those with service after January 1, 1993, through a date to be determined, who meet certain guidelines, can also qualify for up to \$500.

In 2025, 99 individuals received payments totaling \$39,860 through the bonus program.



State Burial Benefits

HEADSTONE ETCHING REIMBURSEMENT:

The headstone etching reimbursement was approved by the 2023 South Dakota Legislature.

If the name, rank, branch of service, and dates of birth and death of a veteran are professionally etched into the back of a privately purchased headstone or marker, SDDVA will pay \$100 toward the cost incurred for that etching.

In 2025, SDDVA did not pay any etching reimbursement stipends. Two applications were denied because they did not meet the etching program specifications.



HEADSTONE SETTING REIMBURSEMENT:

A federal government headstone or marker is provided for the grave of veterans whose service qualifies for the memorial. The loved ones of veterans and servicemembers can choose from marble/granite flat markers, upright headstones, or flat bronze markers.

Among other information displayed, each stone/bronze marker includes the name, branch of service, and year of birth and death of the veteran or servicemember.

The South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs pays a \$200 stipend toward the costs of permanently setting the government marker/headstone. Applicants have one year from the date the headstone was permanently set to present the reimbursement claim to SDDVA.

In 2025, SDDVA paid \$43,000 to 217 applicants.

VETERANS BURIAL ALLOWANCE:

The South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs offers a Veterans Burial Allowance stipend. SDCL 33A-5-2 dictates that SDDVA will pay \$100 toward the expenses of a veteran or veteran's spouse if their family cannot pay because the decedent's estate is not sufficient to cover the costs.

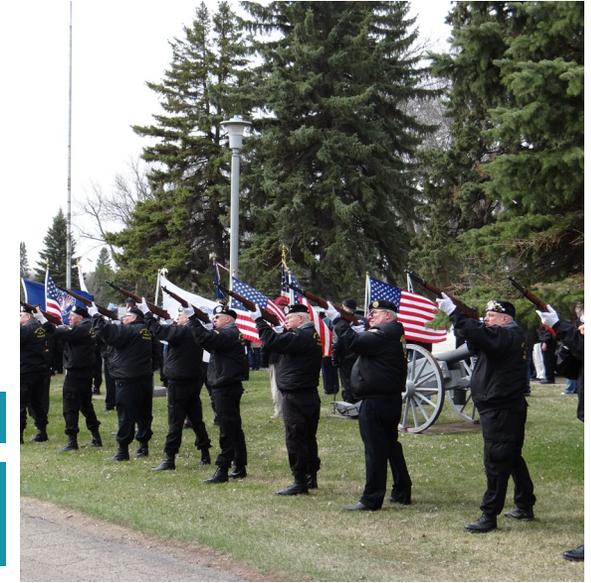
Applicants for the program must work through county or tribal veterans service officers to submit the forms. SDDVA did not receive any requests for burial allowance stipends in 2025.

Military Funeral Honors

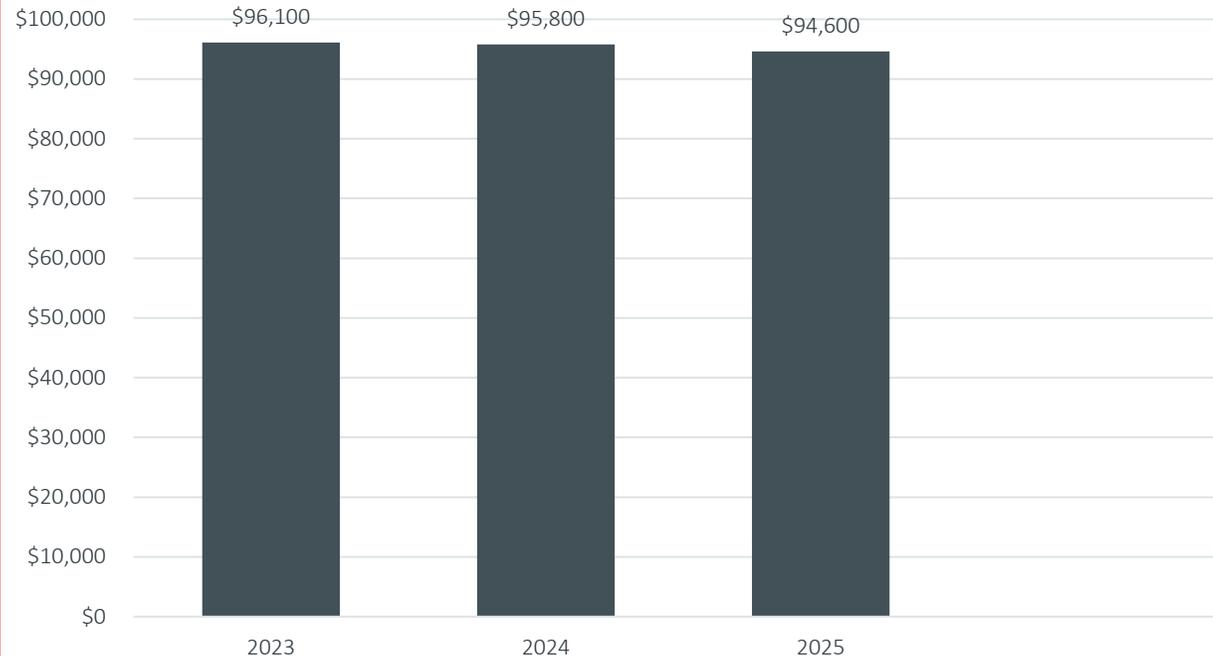
Military funeral honors are one of the benefits available for most servicemembers and veterans.

These services are conducted by honor guards to show gratitude and respect to the people who have defended our country.

In 2025, the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs received 953 requests for funeral honors under the \$100 stipend. \$94,600 was disbursed to veterans' service organizations across the state.



\$100 Military Funeral Honors Payment Annual Totals from 2023-2025



The top right corner of the image features a close-up of the American flag, showing the white stars on a dark blue field and the red and white stripes. The rest of the background is a solid dark blue.

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SDDVA Public Affairs

Public Affairs

PUBLIC AFFAIRS



The SDDVA Communications team is committed to fostering strong relationships and enhancing communication with strategic audiences. The team's mission is to inform, engage, and promote veteran-related programs and initiatives that advance the Department's objectives and support South Dakota's veterans, their families, and our partners.

A primary objective is to strengthen stakeholder relationships and increase awareness of, and participation in, SDDVA programs and services. Through a variety of communication channels, including printed materials, digital platforms, social media, and the SDDVA website.

The Department's official website, vetaffairs.sd.gov, serves as a centralized resource hub where visitors can easily access important information and services. Our site is fully mobile compatible, ensuring visitors can conveniently access resources on smartphones, tablets, or computers from anywhere in the world.

In addition, SDDVA maintains a statewide events calendar highlighting upcoming programs, observances, and community activities of interest to veterans and their families. The calendar is available at: vetaffairs.sd.gov/publicaffairs/upcomingevents.aspx

SDDVA invites anyone to connect through its official social media channels:

Facebook: facebook.com/SDDVA

Instagram: instagram.com/sd.dva/

X: x.com/SD_VetAffairs

LinkedIn: linkedin.com/company/sddva

Fallen Hero Bridge Dedications



In 2019, the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Military, and the Department of Transportation, with the Governor's endorsement, launched the Fallen Heroes Bridge Dedication Program. This program honors South Dakotans who were killed in action or remain missing in action by dedicating state bridges in their memory.

To date, 72 bridges have been dedicated in honor of 78 South Dakota service members. We have honored three World War I, 25 World War II, 11 Korean War, 28 Vietnam War, and 11 Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.



In 2025, 19 bridges were dedicated in the following counties: Campbell, Tripp, Brown, Buffalo, Grant, Spink, Brookings, Aurora, Harding, Lawrence, Turner, Marshall, Sully, Davison, Minnehaha, McCook, Yankton, and Kingsbury.

Bridges have been dedicated in the following counties: Aurora, Beadle, Bon Homme, Brookings, Brown, Brule, Buffalo, Butte, Campbell, Charles Mix, Codington, Corson, Davison, Day, Dewey, Douglas, Edmunds, Fall River, Grant, Gregory, Hamlin, Hand, Hanson, Harding, Hughes, Hutchinson, Jones, Lincoln, Lyman, McCook, Mellette, Miner, Minnehaha, Moody, Pennington, Perkins, Roberts, Sanborn, Tripp, Turner, Union, Walworth, Yankton, and Ziebach.



The Fallen Heroes Bridge Dedication Committee meets in April to select honorees. Bridge dedications are conducted from May through November. SDDVA currently has 117 pending applications (57 World War II, eight Korean War, 47 Vietnam War, and five OEF/OIF).

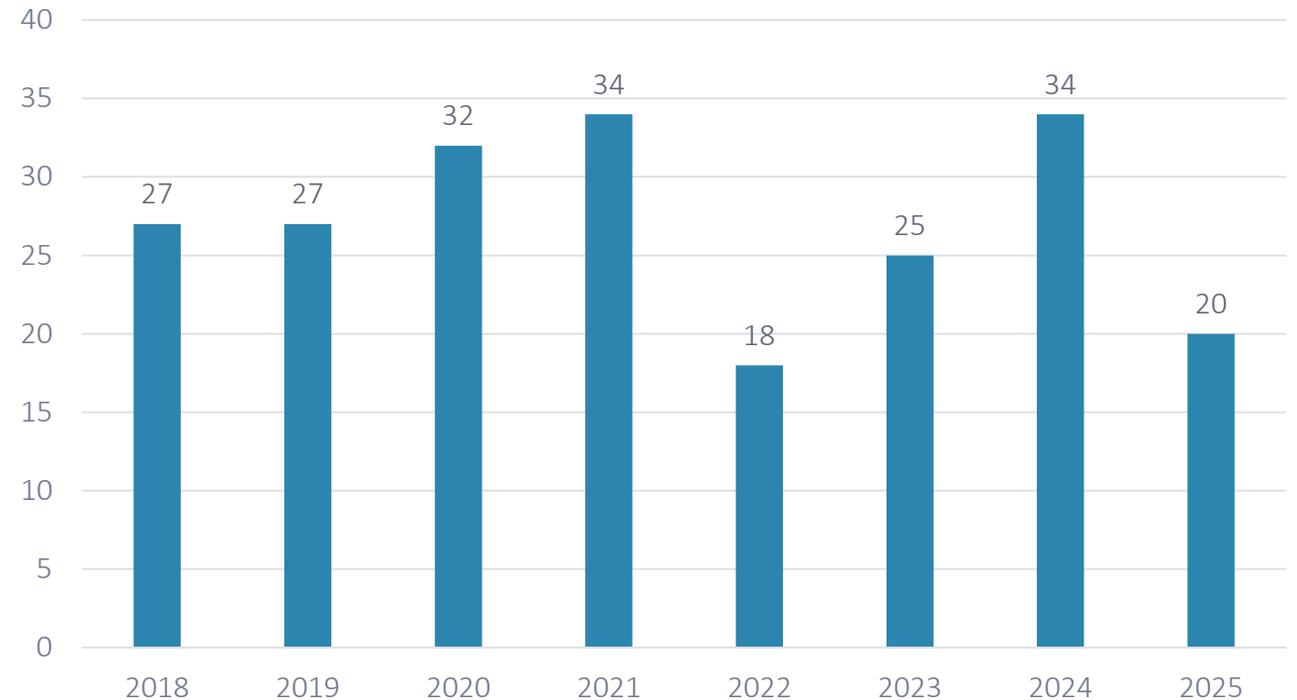
Veterans Suicide Awareness

The SD Suicide Prevention website (<https://sdsuicideprevention.org/>) is the central hub for information and resources. An interagency communication plan helps ensure consistent messaging through social media, posters, toolkits, and outreach materials.

SDDVA encourages everyone to do their “buddy checks” by reaching out to veterans through a visit, call, or email.

Veterans can reach immediate help by dialing 988 and pressing 1.

South Dakota Veteran Suicide Rates



Special Outreach Programs

WHAT'S BREWING:

In 2022, the Department introduced a new program called “What’s Brewing.” This program has been a great opportunity for our department to visit with veterans, hear firsthand about the issues they are experiencing, and brief them on new benefits and services. As advocates for South Dakota veterans, we need to know the challenges our veterans and their families face.

During these “brewing” events, our team addressed questions about veterans’ benefits, including compensation, education, pension, healthcare, burial, state veterans’ cemetery, and the state veterans' home.

In 2025, in partnership with C/TVSOs, there were 19 events held across the state.

VSO SALARY SUPPLEMENT PROGRAM:

SDCL 33A-1-30 and 33A-1-31 provides a reimbursement program for SDDVA to assist counties and tribes in paying the salaries of their veterans' service officers.

In 2025, 55 counties and three tribes made application for and were deemed eligible for a total reimbursement of \$184,593.

CALLING ALL RETURNING SERVICE MEMBERS:

Calling All Returning Service Members (CARS) is a program that the SDDVA uses to reach out to South Dakota residents returning from Active Duty.

This is an opportunity to provide a heartfelt welcome home, contact information for their local county or tribal veterans service officers or our state staff, and to answer any questions they may have about their transition back to civilian life.

In 2025, staff contacted 264 veterans via CARS.





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Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home

Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home - Overview

Every day is a day of gratitude at the Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home, where we provide high-quality health care in a community grounded in trust, dignity, and sharing. We see it not only as our responsibility, but as our privilege, to offer the care to those who answered our nation's call.

We provide person-centered care, designed and delivered to meet each resident's individual needs. We provide a combination of skilled nursing care, special care units for dementia and Alzheimer's, domiciliary care, rehabilitation services, recreational therapy, and work therapy programs.

Additionally, the Home is supported by dedicated volunteers from surrounding communities, veterans service organizations, and fraternal organizations who provide many additional supporting services and activities which enhance the lives of our residents. We are indebted to our volunteers and offer our appreciation.

The Veterans Home is subject to the regulatory standards of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs and the South Dakota Department of Health and undergoes annual licensure inspections by both agencies in areas of resident care, quality, and safety.





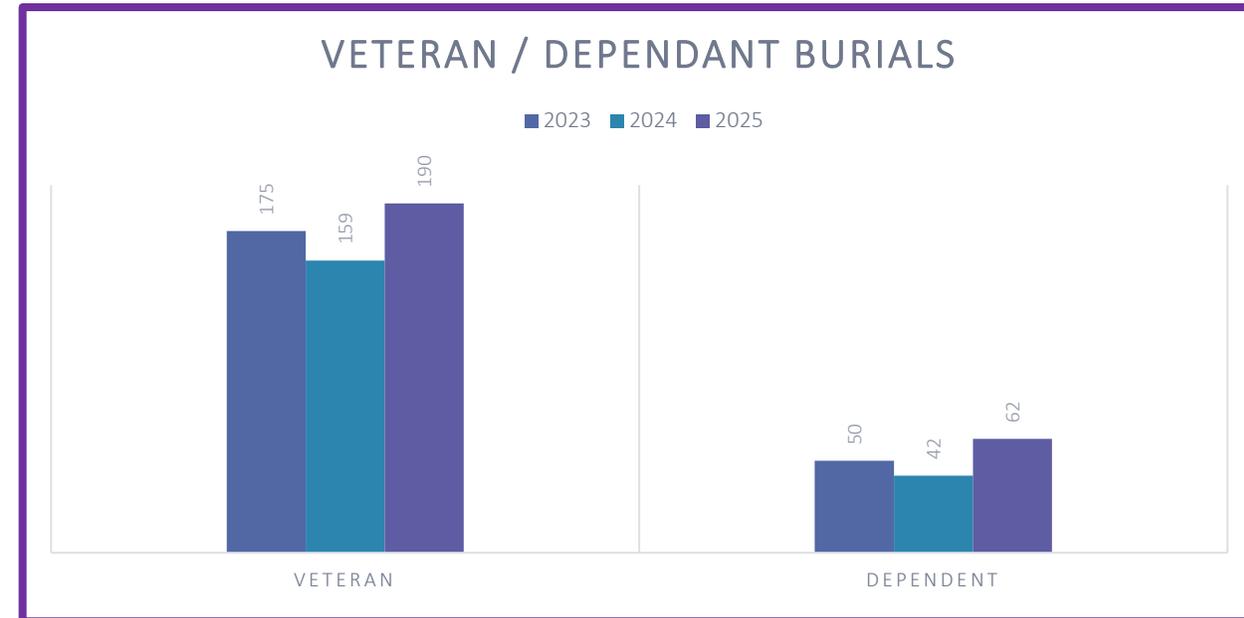
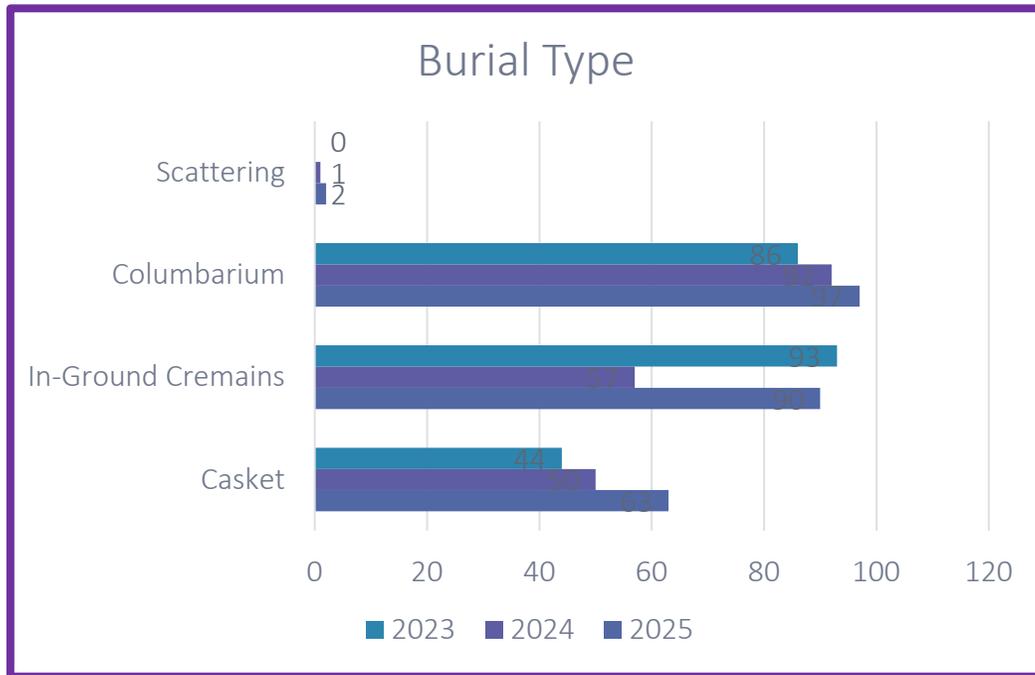
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South Dakota Veterans Cemetery

South Dakota Veterans Cemetery - Overview

The South Dakota Veterans Cemetery began burials in June 2021 and has laid to rest over 1,100 veterans and their dependents.

Burial options include casket, in-ground cremation, cremation columbarium, and scattering garden. All burial options are at no charge to the veteran and \$1,002 for an eligible dependent.



The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) conducts a yearly state and tribal satisfaction survey.

Respondents from 2025 for the South Dakota Veterans Cemetery are as follows:

- 100% agree or strongly agree that the overall appearance of the cemetery is excellent.
- 100% were satisfied or very satisfied with the committal service performed at the cemetery.
- 98.8% agree or strongly agree that cemetery staff is excellent.
- 100% agree or strongly agree that the upkeep of headstones, markers, or niches is excellent.

State Veterans Cemetery



Laid to Rest in 2025

252

Laid to Rest to Date

1,163

Applications Received in 2025

299



Military Honors Provided in 2025

150

Phone Calls and Walk Ins in 2025

Phone calls – 2,520

Walk Ins – 1,747



A close-up, high-angle shot of the American flag, focusing on the field of white stars on a dark blue background. The stars are arranged in a grid pattern, and the bottom edge of the flag shows the red and white stripes. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the fabric.

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Partners

South Dakota County and Tribal Veterans Service Officers

Aurora – Audrey Chapman
Beadle – Taylor Jans
Bennett – Kelly Boomer
Bon Homme – Vance Branton
Brookings – Matt Pillar
Brookings – Rusty Brandsrud
Brown – Aaron Walberg
Brown – Jesse Milbrandt
Brule/Buffalo/Lyman/Jones – Tim Thomas
Butte – Jasen Saivong
Campbell – Lester Goehring
Charles Mix/Douglas – Jerry Seiner
Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe – Tyson Thompson
Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe – Brittany Uses The
Knife
Clark – Darin Lewis
Clay – Noah Westergaard
Codington/Hamlin – Jay Roberts
Codington/Hamlin – Eric Lewis
Corson – Kevin Dyda
Crow Creek Sioux Tribe – Bonnie St. John
Custer – Todd Fish
Davison/Hanson/Jerauld/Sanborn – TJ Thomas
Davison/Hanson/Jerauld/Sanborn – Tim Storly
Day – Jeff Nelson

Deuel – Lynna Speier
Dewey – Marshall Totton
Edmunds – Barb Schaefer
Fall River – Darren Russell
Faulk – David Huss
Grant – Scott Malimanek
Gregory – Dale Reber
Haakon/Jackson – Terry Deuter
Hand/Hyde – David Sivertsen
Harding – James Pickett
Hughes /Stanley/Sully – Mike Mullen
Hutchinson – Scott Brewer
Kingsbury – Louis DuRandt
Lake – John Anderson
Lawrence – Kevin Bowen
Lincoln – David Ekle
Lower Brule Sioux Tribe - Vacant
Marshall – David Daberkow
McCook – Brian Havard
McPherson – Samantha Barrett
Meade – Sean Henderson
Mellette – Vacant
Miner – Timothy Reisch
Minnehaha – Tyler Grotewold

Minnehaha – Douglas Roderick
Moody – Jerrick Charles
Oglala Lakota – Jerlene Arredondo
Oglala Sioux Tribe – Shawnee Keith
Pennington – Thomas Vallette
Pennington – Robert Borries
Pennington – Heather Funk
Pennington – Chris Dieball
Perkins – Bridget Keller
Potter – Isaac Full
Roberts – Tanya McCarlson
Rosebud Sioux Tribe – Nellie Menard
Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate – Geri Opsal
Spink – Steve Wollman
Standing Rock Sioux Tribe – Claudette Walking Elk
Standing Rock Sioux Tribe – Ohiyesa Locke
Todd – Vacant
Tripp – Milton Douglas
Turner – Craig VanderZee
Union – Tony Stokely
Walworth – Peter Weinzirl
Yankton – Robert Stickney
Yankton Sioux Tribe – Dennis Rucker
Ziebach – Gary Cudmore

South Dakota County and Tribal Veterans Service Officers Association

The South Dakota County and Tribal Veterans Service Officers Association (SDVSOA) consists of county and tribal veterans service officers across the state.

The primary purpose of the SDVSOA is to promote and further the work of all county and tribal veterans service officers in the State of South Dakota and to ensure that all of the state's veterans and their families are reached and receive the care and benefits to which they are entitled. Current board members:

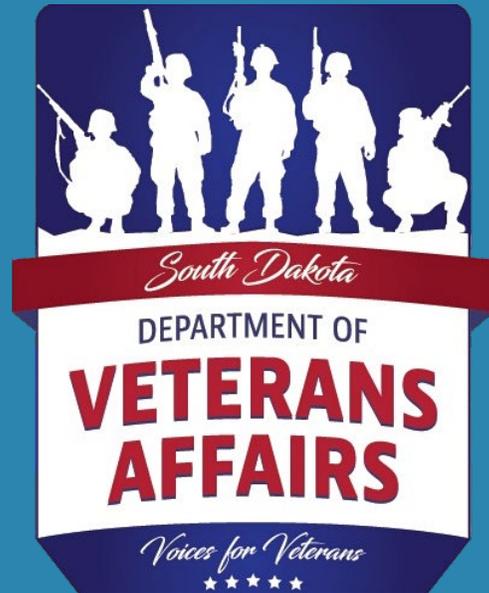
President—Aaron Walberg (Brown County)

Vice President—TJ Thomas (Davison/Hanson/Jerauld/Sanborn County)

Secretary-Treasurer—Sam Barrett (McPherson County)



Contact US



South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs
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Pierre, SD 57501-3100
605.773.3269

South Dakota Veterans Cemetery
25965 477th Avenue
Sioux Falls, SD 57104-6519
605.277.8094

Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home
2500 Minnekahta Avenue
Hot Springs, SD 57747-1129
605.745.5127

Facebook: facebook.com/SDDVA

Instagram: instagram.com/sd.dva/

X: x.com/SD_VetAffairs

LinkedIn: linkedin.com/company/sddva