

Legislative History of the Department of Veterans Affairs

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November 16, 2020 | 2020-R-0267

Issue

Provide an overview of the legislative history of the Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs' (DVA) establishment.

Summary

The legislature established the DVA as a state agency in 1986 ([PA 86-175](#)). The legislative record indicates that the proposal to establish the agency originated around 1985 when a Public Safety Committee subcommittee explored establishing a state veteran's department to provide a centralized point of contact for veterans and help them identify and obtain benefits. The subcommittee received input from stakeholders such as the Vietnam Veterans of America, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and Marine Corps. The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women and a governor's task force conducted a separate, joint study on issues pertaining to women veterans, as well (Public Safety Commission Transcript, HB 5064, February 18, 1986).

In 1986, the Senate voted unanimously in favor of the legislation establishing the DVA; 145 House members voted for it and one against. The law took effect July 1, 1986.

The Veterans' Home, which merged with the DVA in 1988, predates it by more than 100 years ([PA 88-285](#)). A private citizen founded the Fitch's Home for Soldiers (later renamed the Veterans' Home) in 1864 after the Civil War. It came under state oversight in 1887, and in 1927 the legislature established the Veterans' Home Commission. All healthcare facilities under its authority,

including the Veterans' Home, were required to provide eligible veterans with state-funded hospital admission, food, clothing, care, and treatment ([1887 Spec. Acts 215](#) and [1927 Pub. Acts 264](#)).

Department of Veterans Affairs

The legislature established the DVA in 1986 ([PA 86-175](#)). In floor debates, legislators stated it was created to provide veterans and their families a centralized point of contact and assist them in obtaining benefits. Prior to the DVA, municipal veterans' departments and various veteran organizations (e.g., the VFW) were the primary resources for such assistance. But not all municipalities had such departments and many veterans, particularly women veterans, were not members of such organizations (House Transcript, sHB 5064, April 17, 1986 and Senate Transcript, sHB 5064, April 28, 1986).

The proposal appears to have stemmed from an interim study conducted in 1985 on maximizing federal benefits to Connecticut's veterans. A Public Safety Committee subcommittee conducted the study and solicited input from stakeholders, including representatives from the VFW, American Legion, Vietnam Veterans of America, and Marine Corps. The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women conducted a separate, concurrent study on issues pertaining to women veterans, as well (Public Safety Commission Transcript, HB 5064, February 18, 1986).

The subcommittee collected information regarding the financial benefits provided to veterans in the state. Connecticut ranked last among all states in per capital federal grants to veterans and was one of 14 states that did not have a state veteran's department, according to a Connecticut Veteran's Coalition Forum representative. One subcommittee study found that many veterans who were eligible for federal benefits were not receiving them and instead depended on state financial and health care assistance. And, committee members heard testimony suggesting the department would garner additional federal funds to veterans, resulting in reduced state spending (Public Safety Commission Transcript, HB 5064, February 18, 1986).

The Public Safety Committee additionally held two public hearings on the bill. All individuals who testified or submitted testimony on the bill supported its passage, including representatives from the following organizations:

- Vietnam Veterans of America, chapter 120
- VFW, post 71
- American Legion, post 45
- Connecticut Veterans Coalition Forum
- Veterans' Home and Hospital

- Disabled American Veterans, chapter 12
- Vietnam Veterans Agent Orange Victims
- Permanent Commission on the Status of Women and Governor's Task Force on Women Veterans
- National Organization of Women, Connecticut chapter, and
- Veterans Administration Advisory Committee on Women Veterans

Although all of the testimony in the legislative record supported the bill's passage, several individuals testified that they supported its passage with amendments, such as removing a requirement that the department head perform functions in the field and adding a requirement that at least one service officer be a woman (the latter of which was incorporated).

The bill received bipartisan support. The Senate passed it unanimously; in the House, one member voted against and 145 for it (House Transcript, sHB 5064, April 17, 1986, and Senate Transcript, sHB 5064, April 28, 1986). The act took effect July 1, 1986.

Veterans' Home (formerly Fitch's Home for Soldiers)

The precursor to the current Veterans' Home was the Fitch Home for Soldiers (the Home), established by Benjamin Fitch in 1864 to provide care for Civil War veterans and their orphans. Located in Darien, it eventually included a hospital, chapel, library, residence hall, and administrative facilities (DVA, "[About Us](#)").

In 1887, Darien residents petitioned the selectmen to seek state oversight of the Home due to deteriorating conditions following Fitch's death (ConnecticutHistory.org, "[Fitch's Soldiers' Home Closes](#)"). That year, the Connecticut General Assembly passed legislation allowing the transfer of the home to the Connecticut Soldier's Hospital Board "for the reception, care, and support of soldiers, sailors, and marines who served in the war of the rebellion" ([1887 Spec. Acts 215](#)).

In 1927, the legislature passed legislation establishing the Veterans' Home Commission (later renamed the Veterans Home and Hospital Commission) and transferred to it oversight of the Home and "any incorporated hospital in the state, any state hospital for the insane or any state or county tuberculosis sanatorium." The Commission was comprised of state agency representatives and eight governor-appointed veterans. The law required that all hospitals under the commission's purview provide eligible veterans with hospital admission, food, clothing, care, and treatment at the expense of the state ([1927 Pub. Acts 264](#) and [1947 Pub. Acts 319](#)).

In 1940, the Home closed and the residents were moved to a new facility in Rocky Hill (ConnecticutHistory.org, "[Fitch's Soldiers' Home Closes](#)"). And, in 1988, the legislature moved oversight of the Veterans' Home to the newly-created DVA ([PA 88-285](#)).

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