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BG(R) William Turner, Director

Laura Kelly, Governor

I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to showcase the achievements of the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs Office (KCVAO) team throughout 2023. On behalf of Governor Laura Kelly, Lieutenant Governor David Toland, and our dedicated team, it is with great pride that I present our 2023 annual report.

The heart of our mission lies in supporting and honoring the nearly 190,000 Veterans in the great State of Kansas. This report not only celebrates our successes but also outlines our ongoing efforts to enhance the quality of life for Kansas Veterans and their families, and, in so doing, encouraging Veterans and their families to call Kansas home.

Spread across the state, our team of professionals is passionately dedicated to providing unparalleled service to our Veterans. From assisting with VA claims, locating service records, and long-term nursing care, to ensuring dignified interments, we navigate the intricate network of state and federal Veteran benefits as staunch advocates, ensuring Veterans receive their well-earned benefits.

Our three critical programs - Veterans Services, State Veterans Homes, and State Veterans Cemeteries - operate with a focus on maintaining high-quality healthcare, assisting Veterans in obtaining entitled benefits, advocating for Veterans, service members, and their families. This included areas such as Veteran employment, homelessness, and suicide prevention. In addition, we partner with other state and federal agencies, as well as a multitude of nonprofit organizations, to synchronize both public and private resources to provide optimal services for our Veteran population.

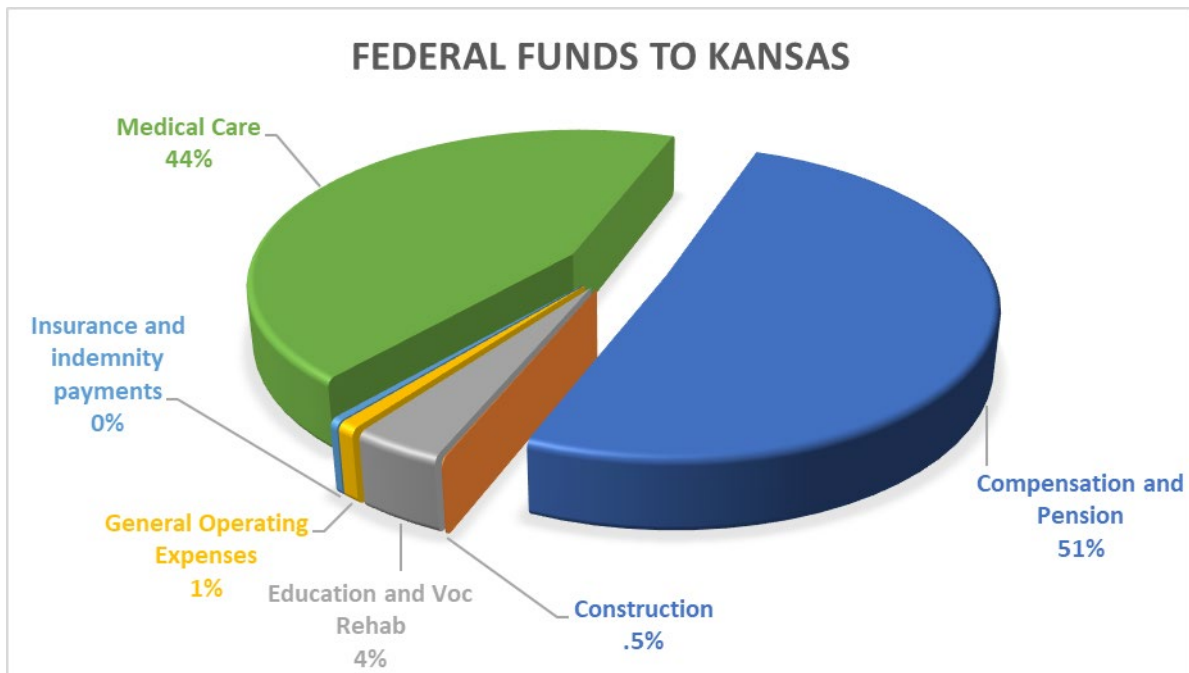
In 2023, we focused on strengthening our partnerships with the VA, regional state Veteran affairs agencies (Missouri, Nebraska, etc), and with Kansas stakeholders. Prioritizing collaborations with national, state, and community agencies, as well as private partners, enabled us to participate in numerous events throughout the state. Recognizing the changing Veteran demographics, we actively adapt our advocacy and benefit assistance programs to serve an increasing number of Vietnam Veterans while also connecting with our latest generation of post 9/11 Veterans.

I am proud to highlight our numerous 2023 successes. We have experienced double-digit percent increases of residents in our both of our Veteran Homes. Deliberate efforts have resulted in increased recruitment and retention of critical care providers resulting in reduced reliance on temporary agency staffing.

Accomplishments such as our fifth consecutive five-star rating for the Kansas Veterans Home, an increase to a three-star rating for the Kansas Soldiers Home, and the National Cemetery Administration Operational Excellence Award for the Kansas Veterans Cemetery at Fort Dodge showcase our dedication to excellence.

Our Veteran Services Representatives (VSRs) assisted in processing 14,780 claims in 2023, an increase of more than 40 percent over 2022. Our staff participated in 670 outreach events across the state, including 19 PACT Act specific events resulting in 6,813 PACT Act specific claims.

These engagements continue to pay dividends to the state as the latest Federal VA Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures indicates Kansas receives nearly \$2.15 billion annually in federal funds and compensation. This includes more than \$1 billion in compensation and pension payments and nearly \$1 billion in medical care for our state's Veterans. See graph below.



Our team looks to expand upon these achievements in the coming year by fostering further growth, collaboration, and sustained success in our ongoing commitment to serve those who have selflessly served our state and nation.

### Veteran Services

Calendar year 2023 was a notably active year for the Veteran Services Program with our VSRs actively participating in more than 670 outreach events. Throughout these engagements, they adeptly processed VA claims, disseminated information about KCVAO services, and addressed general inquiries pertaining to federal or state benefits.

For the first time since 2018 we achieved a significant milestone by fully staffing all VSR positions, including in our mobile units. Responding to the growing demand for services within the Kansas City metro area, we opened a field office at the Kansas City Kansas Community College to complement the existing Johnson County Community College Field Office. This strategic addition aims to enhance our ability to assist a greater number of Veterans in the Kansas City metro area.



Furthermore, our mobile team is in the final stages of formulating a comprehensive mobile outreach plan, targeting areas where Veterans are underutilizing VA services. In cases of appointment overloads, the team is prepared to seamlessly transition support to field offices.

During the 2023 session, the Kansas Legislature provided an additional \$150,000 in funding for our Veterans Claims Assistance Program (VCAP), in which the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and American Legion (AL) actively participate. This fiscal augmentation provided for moderate salary increases as well as empowers the VFW and AL to recruit additional Veterans Service Officers, further bolstering their presence at the Colmery-O'Neil, Dwight Eisenhower, and Robert Dole Medical Centers supporting Veterans and their family members.

Finally, our State Approving Agency (SAA) team continued to review, evaluate, and approve quality educational and training institutions for Veterans and their family members in order to utilize their GI Bill® educational entitlement. *GI Bill® is a registered trademark of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). More information about education benefits offered by VA is available at the official U.S. government Web site at <https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill>.*

To date there are 176 approved institutions in Kansas eligible for enrollment.

During 2023 our SAA team completed approvals of the following programs within the Kansas institutions:

Institutions of Higher Learning (Colleges and universities) - 1,985  
Non-degree institutions (vocational and technical schools) - 543  
Apprenticeship Programs – 8  
On-the-Job Training - 5  
Flight Training - 1  
Risk based surveys – 13

## Kansas Veterans Homes

Kansas currently operates two Veterans Homes, providing essential support to Veterans and eligible family members through assisted living and long-term care. These homes are the Kansas Veterans' Home (KVH) in Winfield and the Kansas Soldiers Home (KSH) in Fort Dodge. In 2023, KVH maintained its impressive Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services (CMS) five-star rating. Similarly, KSH saw an improvement, earning a three-star rating, up from two stars. The CMS rating process encompasses health inspections, staffing, and quality measures. These ratings underscore the dedication, hard work, and meticulous attention to detail invested in



delivering quality care to our residents. During fiscal year 2023, KVH provided 37,211 days of care to Kansas Veterans and their dependents. The average resident age was 79 and the average length of stay was 3.7 years. There were 62 admissions and 55 discharges with an average daily census of 98, reflecting a 13 percent year-over-year increase.

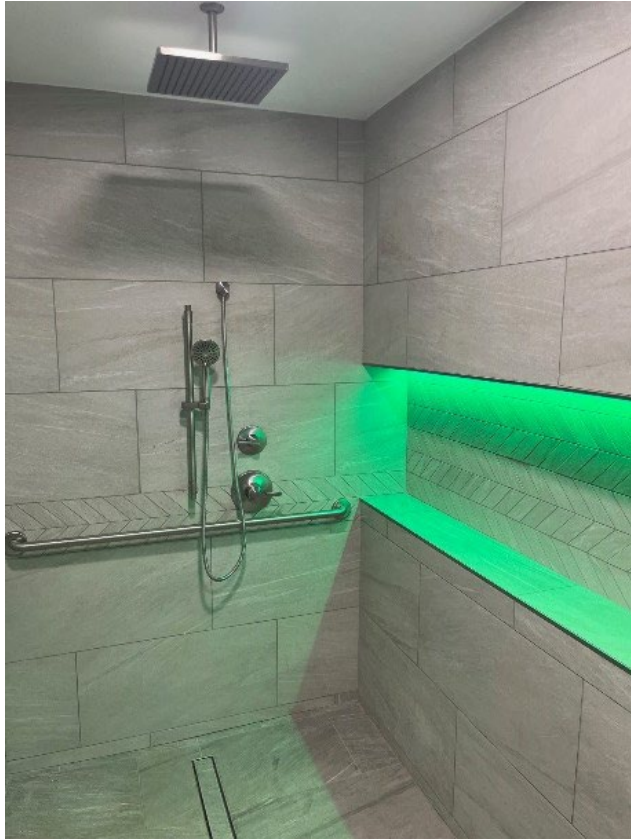


KVH received \$1.6 million in Medicare and Medicaid funding for eligible residents' care in fiscal year 2023. An additional \$6.7 million came through the VA per-diem program to support care and treatment.

<b>2023 Veterans by Branch of Service</b>		
Air Force	20	10%
Army	95	49%
Coast Guard	2	1%
Marine Corps	19	10%
Navy	37	19%
Non-Veterans	19	10%
Total Census	192	100%

KVH implemented a robust hiring campaign to meet the optimal staffing need of approximately 176 FTE based on census and acuity care level, especially while operating within COVID restrictions. In FY 2023, 14 FTE positions were filled, with nine in the nursing department. The 10 percent pay increase for nursing staff, initiated in December 2021, and 24/7 pay differentials applied to nursing salaries in January 2022, contributed to stabilizing nursing staff and attracting new talent, resulting in an overall staffing increase to 154 FTE positions. The staff morale is high, with a sense of appreciation for their hard work.

The Kansas Soldiers Home received more than \$3.02 million from the VA per diem program to support care and treatment in FY 2023. KSH received ~\$1.4 million in Medicare and Medicaid funding for eligible residents' care in fiscal year 2023.

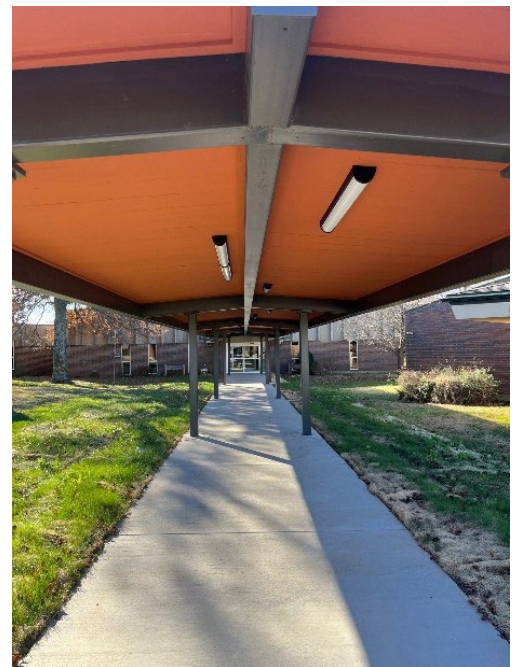


2023 Veterans by Era		
WWII	6	3%
Korea	12	6%
Vietnam	108	56%
Persian Gulf Wars	8	4%
Peacetime	39	20%
Non-Veterans	19	10%
Total Census	192	100%

Staffing at KSH increased significantly to a high of 102 employees, marking the highest staffing levels in several years. This surge in staffing resulted in a substantial decrease in temporary agency spending, projected to be at or below \$895,960.00 for the year, the lowest in the last five years. The improved staff levels

have resulted in a more stable care environment positively impacting Veteran care and contributing to a notable improvement in residents' well-being. Similar to KVH, the staff morale is high, with a sense of appreciation for their hard work.

In an effort to promote staff retention and growth, both homes initiated a tuition reimbursement program for nursing staff, with 50/50 funding from the VA. This program provides up to \$2,000 per semester for full-time staff to pursue further education in the nursing field. While not many of our staff took advantage of this opportunity in 2023, we will continue to advertise and promote this outstanding opportunity.



In FY 2023, the KVH facility completed several projects, including roof replacements, remodeling of three bathhouses in the long-term care facility, window replacements, and the establishment of a covered walkway to help protect residents and staff.

Operation of the KVH kitchen was turned over from Winfield Corrections to KVH in June 2023. This has proven transformative, giving the KVH the ability to operate its own kitchen leading to expanded hours of operation to meet residents' needs more efficiently, allowing for higher quality meal preparation and a 50% reduction in the cost per meal.

<b><u>Kansas Soldiers' Home</u></b>	SFY2022	SFY2023
Contracted Temp Agency Expenditures	1,039,391	\$1,197,849
Authorized FTE	117	117
FTE Filled	85	97
Vacancy Rate	27%	13%
Turnover Rate	49%	50%
Average Daily Census	86	91

<b><u>Kansas Veterans' Home</u></b>	SFY2022	SFY2023
Contracted Temp Agency Expenditures	\$2,041,621	\$2,063,074
Authorized FTE	196	196
FTE Filled	124.5	138.5
Vacancy Rate	34%	29%
Turnover Rate	61%	39%
Average Daily Census	89	102

The Kansas Soldiers Home undertook several major projects, such as painting and repairing several cottages, overhauling and replacing the fire alarm and monitoring system in Halsey Hall, and addressing storm damage by replacing several roofs and maintenance support vehicles.

In 2023, both KSH and KVH volunteer programs and activities resumed full operations post-COVID-19 shutdowns, resulting in volunteers contributing more than 1000 hours of service. The continued support from Veteran Service Organizations, civic and fraternal groups, and religious organizations has been remarkable. Their dedication is evident through numerous donations and sponsorship of activities, including bingo games, birthday parties, holiday celebrations, cookouts, and annual events such as the annual Legion Post Banana Run and annual car shows, significantly enhancing the well-being of residents.

Following the conclusion of the 2023 Legislative Session, KCVAO received the state's allocation of \$17.2 million for the new Northeast Kansas Veterans Home, meeting the 35% requirement for the VA grant. Collaborating with an architecture and design firm, we have developed the



schematic design for the facility. Our ongoing efforts involve working closely with subject matter experts to ensure that the new Veterans home offers optimal services and living conditions for residents while maintaining an efficient operating environment for staff.

The Federal VA has not released the FY 2024 State Construction Grant Priority funding list. Despite this, we are proactively advancing our preparations to swiftly initiate the next phase of this project once federal funding is approved.

Kansas Veterans’ Cemetery Program

Since 2002, the Kansas Veterans’ Cemetery Program (KVCP) has been dedicated to providing beautiful, dignified, and enduring memorials for Veterans, their spouses, and eligible dependents. In an effort to better serve the needs of Kansas Veterans and anticipate future requirements, the KVCP strongly encourages Veterans and their dependents to pre-certify for burial benefits. As of December 31, 2023, a total of 8,701 Veterans and dependents have pre-certified at one of the Kansas Veteran Cemeteries, showcasing a consistent upward trend year-over-year.



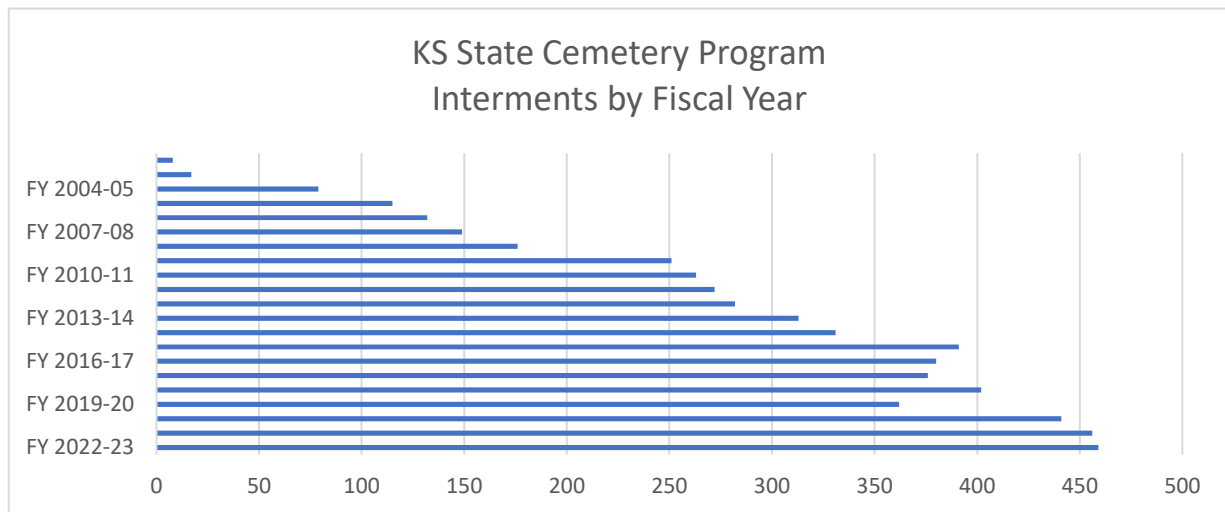
**Pre-certifications broken down by cemetery**

As of Dec 31, 2023	Fort Dodge	WaKeeney	Winfield	Fort Riley/Manhattan
<b>Pre-certifications</b>	1091	1469	3359	2782

Interments at our cemeteries across the state continue to increase, with a three interment increase in FY 2023. Presently, 70 percent of interments consist of Veterans, while the remaining interments are for eligible dependents. Each Veteran interment is eligible for a \$948 plot allowance reimbursement to the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs Office, marking an increase of \$55 per Veteran interment from the previous year. These funds support our daily operations, as well as purchases of new equipment.

In September 2023, the Fort Dodge Cemetery achieved distinction as one of only two State Veteran Cemeteries nationwide to receive the Operational Excellence Award from the National Cemetery Administration, following their triannual compliance visit conducted in 2022.

In August 2023, the National Cemetery Administration State and Tribal Grants Program announced an award of \$642,322 to the Kansas Veterans' Cemetery at Fort Dodge for a columbarium wall expansion. This project entails expanding the current columbarium wall with an additional 160 niches, along with irrigation, landscaping, and the installation of a Gettysburg Address plaque. Construction commenced in September 2023 and has been delayed due to severe weather conditions and supply chain issues. Currently, the construction is expected to be completed by April 2024. A ribbon-cutting ceremony is planned during our annual Memorial Day Service.



Several capital improvement programs were successfully executed in 2023 across all four cemeteries. Notably, Fort Dodge had soffit and fascia wrapped on their committal shelter, with the project slated for completion in mid-2024. Grave location kiosks and printers were upgraded at all four cemeteries allowing visitors to locate their loved ones grave site.

The Kansas Veterans Cemetery at Winfield received significant storm damage in 2023, resulting in the loss of 25 trees and damage to the committal shelter which will be repaired this year. Additionally, the KVCP is currently in the third year of a 10-year lifecycle equipment replacement plan (excavator, lawn mowers, gators).

Fort Dodge Cemetery is the only state cemetery without a scattering wall for bronze memorial plaques for individuals who choose to scatter their loved one's ashes at the cemetery. Currently, Fort Dodge has three bronze memorial plaques placed on small homemade pillars in an area designated for a future scattering garden wall. The KVCP is currently soliciting bids for this state funded project. Federal grants are not available for scattering wall projects.



### Information Technology

This year, the agency placed significant emphasis on enhancing cyber awareness across our network and IT training for our staff. We revised our policies to incorporate mandatory Security Awareness Training and ensured that IT considerations were integral to our agency's Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP). Agency leadership actively participated in state-level IT summits to stay informed about daily threats and vulnerabilities to our network and systems. While there were no major alterations to our IT systems overall, we diligently updated policies and procedures based on the recommendations from the IT audit conducted in 2023.

As directed by the Governors Executive Order, we updated our COOP to ensure it reflects current business practices and critical information for all our offices across the state. Additionally, we validated the emergency action plans for both Veteran Homes. We will continue to update the plan and ensure all staff understand the importance and actions needed to be taken during a natural or manmade emergency.

In closing, The Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs is proud to serve the Veterans and their family members. We look forward to building on our successes from 2023 making Kansas the primary location for Veterans and their family members to live, raise their families, and continue to contribute to the workforce.



BG (R) William A. Turner  
Director, Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs Office