

Mississippi SALUTE



Mississippi VA
SERVING OUR HEROES



*Our mission is to honor
Mississippi Veterans and
their dependents through
superior service, care,
and assistance.*

MISSISSIPPI

To say this year has been an interesting year would be an understatement. From the presidential election to the COVID 19 pandemic, our nation is in uncharted territory. But despite the turmoil and ever-changing world around us, one thing has remained constant: the service and commitment of the American Veteran. You, our Veterans, are the best of our nation. When called upon, you did not waiver to raise your right hand and put on the uniform of our nation and “stand in the breach” whether in combat or in peace. You are the role models for the next generation.

This example was lived out recently with the roll out of vaccines for the COVID 19 virus. The Veterans that live in the four Veterans homes, were some of the first to roll up their sleeves and get their shot, an example of continued leadership.

Veterans have continued to lead and serve this year. When the COVID 19 pandemic response caused a spike in nursing and nursing assistant salaries our state Veteran homes suffered. Because MSVA is a state agency, we did not have the flexibility to adjust to the volatile market. Veterans came to our rescue. Along with the Veterans serving in the Mississippi Legislature, legislative leadership, and Veterans organizations (the VFW and Mississippi National Guard Association specifically), Mississippi Veteran Affairs now has the legal flexibility to address the nursing shortage and to provide a stable professional staff of caregivers for our Veterans in the Mississippi State Veteran Homes.

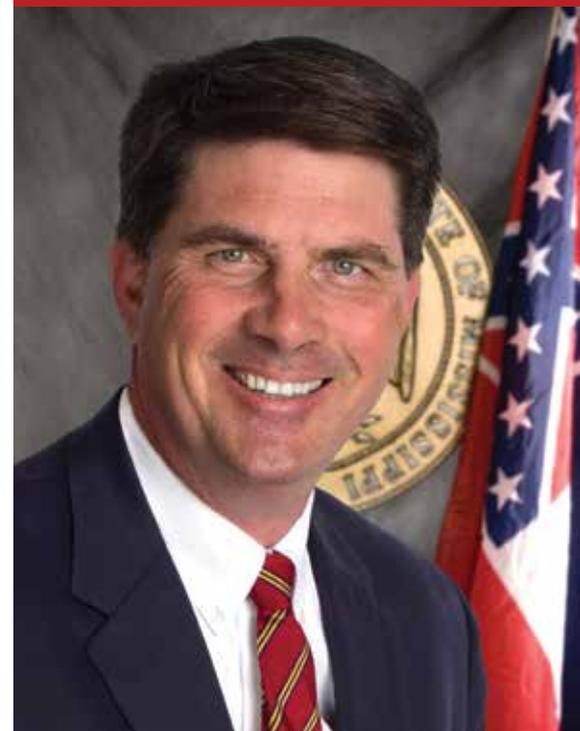
While 2020 will always be defined by COVID 19, it is only a part of our story and successes. Like many of you, MSVA embraced video conferences and technology to get our day to day tasks completed. We partnered with our state leaders and military bases to virtually celebrate Memorial Day and address suicide prevention in September through social media. It truly has been a time of innovation and resourcfulness. But even with staff working from home and telecommuting, MSVA continues to file your claims and appeals with the Veterans Benefits Administration. Mississippi’s Veterans receive over \$1 billion dollars in pensions and benefits and we are honored to assist them in acquiring their well-deserved benefits.

At the end of 2020, Mississippi received great news. Gulfport and the Mississippi Gulf Coast were named in the top ten places for Veterans to live. The Navy Federal Credit Union and Operation Homefront conducted a nationwide survey recognizing our strong commitment to the military, affordable housing, great schools and Veteran targeted employers. This achievement by Mayor Billy Hewes and the City of Gulfport should make us all proud. And at the end of it all, they discovered what many of us already know: Mississippi is a great place for Veterans to call home.

I hope you enjoy the latest issue of ***Mississippi’s Salute!***

Welcome to the latest issue of

Mississippi SALUTE



Stacey E. Pickering
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
MISSISSIPPI VETERAN AFFAIRS

BOARD Members



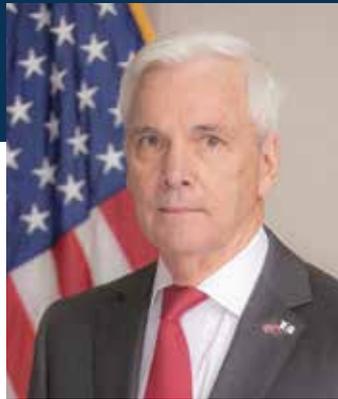
James H. Garner
CHAIRMAN

Biloxi, Fifth Congressional District

Major General James H. Garner, U.S. Army Retired, enlisted in the National Guard July 1951 and was commissioned in 1953. He retired in 2000. During his 45 years of service, General Garner served in various commands and primary staff positions. He was a charter member of 2d Battalion, 20th Special Forces Group (Airborne) which he commanded for five years. Other commands include 192d Transportation Company, 31st RAOC, 114th Area Support Group, and STARC Troop Command. He served on active duty with Headquarters Company, XVIII Airborne Corps, Fort Bragg, N.C.

Major General Garner, was appointed adjutant general for the state of Mississippi by Governor Kirk Fordice in 1992 and was reappointed in 1996. His awards and decorations include Distinguished Service Medal, Legion of Merit, Meritorious Service Medal, Army Commendation Medal, Master Parachutist Badge and Special Forces tab.

He was appointed to the veterans affairs board by Governor Hayley Barbour and reappointed twice by Governor Phil Bryant. He currently serves as the chairman of the board.



Mendal G. Kemp
VICE-CHAIRMAN

Madison, At Large

A native of Carthage, Mississippi, Mendal Kemp earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Mississippi and a master's degree from Mississippi College. Kemp served in the United States Army Reserve from 1966 to 1969 as a member of the 173rd Petroleum Supply Company. From August 1968 to August 1969, Kemp's company was activated and deployed to Vietnam. In 1982, Kemp joined the Mississippi National Guard where served in the 213th Medical Brigade until his retirement in 1996.

From 1970 to 1994, Kemp worked for the Mississippi State Department of Health where he served as director of health facilities licensing and certification. Kemp served as V.P. of programs, operations, and development for Mill Creek Management in Austin, Texas, from 1994 to 2002, and as director of rural health for the Mississippi Hospital Association from 2002 to 2017. Presently, Kemp serves as the Madison County veteran service officer.

Kemp lives in Madison, Mississippi, with his wife Rita Kemp. They have two daughters and four grandchildren. He currently serves as vice-chairman of the board.



Mike McGrevey

Decatur, Third Congressional District

Mike McGrevey serves as deputy director of Mississippi Development Authority. In this position, McGrevey oversees the agency's business recruitment, retention and expansion efforts. He also leads the agency's work in supporting budding entrepreneurs and small businesses and promoting Mississippi products in export markets around the world.

McGrevey has served in several positions throughout Mississippi, including vice president for finance and administration, chief financial officer and chief of staff for Mississippi State University; president of the Montgomery Institute, president and chief operations officer for an education company, chief administrative officer for the City of Meridian and executive director of Kemper County Economic Development Authority. McGrevey served in the U.S. Air Force for 20 years.

McGrevey holds a bachelor's degree in banking and finance from the University of Southern Mississippi, a master's in management, and a Ph.D. in education from Mississippi State University. He and his wife, Ada, have a son, daughter and two grandchildren. McGrevey was appointed by Governor Phil Bryant to serve on the Mississippi Veterans Affairs Board.



James (Max) Fenn, Jr.

Summit, Fourth Congressional District

James "Max" Fenn, Jr. is a protective security advisor with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

During his military career, Fenn served in the United States Marine Corps, Marine Corps Reserve, and Mississippi Army National Guard from 1980-1998. He attended boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina. As a member of the Battalion Landing Team 2/6 and the 22nd Marine Amphibious Unit, Fenn responded to the 1983 terrorist bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut Lebanon as a quick reaction force member.

Fenn participated in the Battle of Khafji during Operation Desert Storm, 1991, as a member of 2nd Force Reconnaissance Company and II Marine Expeditionary Force. Fenn also participated in Operation Uphold Democracy in the Republic of Haiti as a member of ODA 2061, C Company, 2nd Battalion, and the 20th Special Forces Group. He attended numerous schools including the USMC Amphibious Reconnaissance course, U.S. Army Airborne School, U.S. Navy Dive School, U.S. Army Jumpmaster Course, U.S. Army Ranger School, and U.S. Army Special Forces Assessment and selection followed by the U.S. Army Special Forces qualification course-18B, weapons sergeant.

Fenn lives in Summit, Mississippi, with his wife, Anita, and two sons. He was appointed by Governor Phil Bryant to serve on the Mississippi Veterans Affairs Board.



Deborah Walley Coleman

Madison, At Large

Colonel Deborah Walley Coleman joined the Mississippi National Guard in 1985, retiring at the rank of colonel. She served as: administrative clerk with 114th Area Support Group, Hattiesburg, platoon leader with the 786th Transportation Company in Desert Shield/Desert Storm, Lucedale, detachment commander, Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion, Meridian, company commander, Headquarters and Headquarters Company 106th Support Battalion, Monticello. Additional positions included a tour during Operation Iraqi Freedom III with the 184th Container Management Element in the Baghdad area; distribution management chief, the 184th (E) Sustainment Command, Support Operations Division; and as counterdrug coordinator, Joint Forces Headquarters, Mississippi Army National Guard.

Coleman graduated from the University of Southern Mississippi with a B.S. in Business Administration, and graduated from Belhaven University with her MBA. Coleman is currently employed with the Mississippi Joint Legislative Budget Office.

Coleman currently resides in Madison, Mississippi, and was married to the late Colonel Robert Stacy Coleman. They have two sons, Robert Hunt and Matthew Wiley. Coleman was appointed by Governor Phil Bryant to serve on the Mississippi Veterans Affairs Board.



David H. McElreath

Oxford, First Congressional District

David Hughes McElreath, Ph.D., a native of Oxford, Mississippi, was commissioned in the U.S. Army National Guard 1975. After serving in the 155th Armored Brigade, he accepted a commission in the United States Marine Corps as an infantry officer, retiring as a colonel in 2004 after commanding at the platoon, company, battalion, and group levels. He is a graduate of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, where he later served on faculty; the United States Army Command and General Staff College; the Joint Warfare School (United Kingdom); and the U.S. Army War College. Upon his retirement, McElreath returned to Mississippi where he served as the commander of the Mississippi State Guard within the Mississippi Military Department.

McElreath is a professor of legal studies at the University of Mississippi. He received a Bachelor of Public Administration and a Master of Criminal Justice from Ole Miss, a Master of Strategic Studies from the U.S. Army War College and a Ph.D. from the University of Southern Mississippi. His teaching and research interests are in homeland security, law enforcement and correctional operations.

McElreath currently resides in Oxford with his wife, Leisa. They have three daughters and three grandchildren.



George E. Irvin, Sr.

Jackson, Second Congressional District

Brigadier General George E. Irvin Sr. is U.S. Army, Retired. He served in the Deputy Operations Office Multinational Force. General Irvin served in Iraq in Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2004-2005. During his service he received the Joint Service Commendation Medal.

General Irvin served for over thirty-six years and completed eighteen different military schools from 1978-2007. He later received a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture Education from Alcorn State University, a Master of Agricultural Education/Secondary School Administration from Mississippi State University, and a Master of Business Administration from Jackson State University.

General Irvin is retired from the USDA (rural development) where he was the national veteran's coordinator. General Irvin resides in Jackson, Mississippi, with his wife, Sarah. They have five children and ten grandchildren. General Irvin was appointed by Governor Phil Bryant to serve on the Mississippi Veterans Affairs Board.

Around the HOMES

Mississippi Veterans Home **COLLINS**

3261 Highway 49
Collins, MS 39428



Tommie Carr ADMINISTRATOR

TCarr@msva.ms.gov
(601) 765-0519

Tommie Carr has served the Mississippi Veterans Home at Collins since 2012. A graduate of the University Southern Mississippi, Carr holds a degree in healthcare administration. Carr has over 25 years of healthcare experience. As a proud daughter of a Veteran, Carr is devoted to provide superior service to the Veterans in the home. Carr's personal connection to Veterans greatly influences and drives her passion to serve. When she is not hard at work in the Collins home, Carr likes to spend any free time she has with her family. Carr is originally from Ellisville but presently resides in Seminary. We thank Tommie Carr for her hard work in keeping the Veterans in Collins healthy, happy, and dignified.

Larry Banks

VSO/ADMISSIONS
LBanks@msva.ms.gov
(601) 765-0519





Around the HOMES

Mississippi Veterans Home

JACKSON

4607 Lindbergh Drive
Jackson, MS 39209



Gerald Johnson

ADMINISTRATOR

GReed@msva.ms.gov
(601) 353-6142

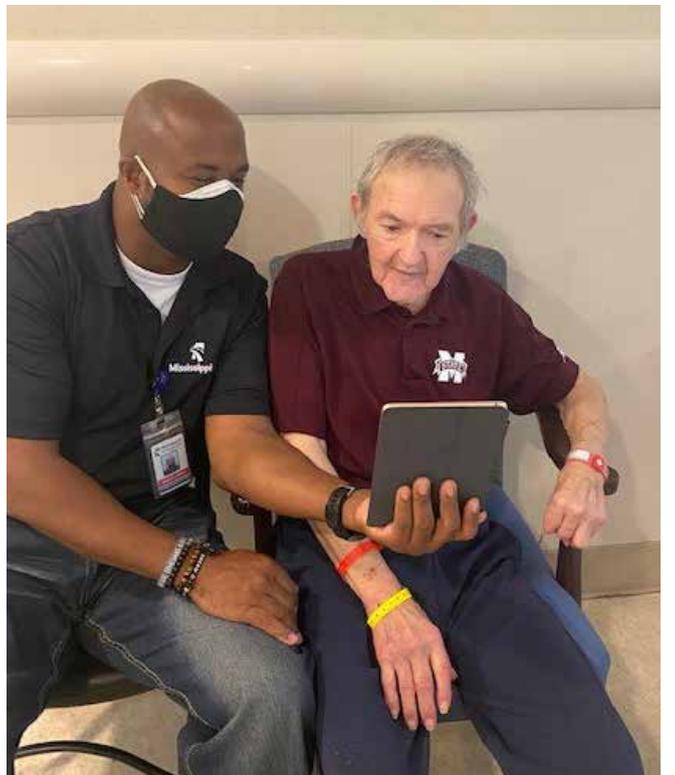
Gerald Johnson has served the Mississippi Veterans Home in Jackson since 2009. A graduate of University of Southern Mississippi, Johnson holds a degree in social rehabilitation services. She has a long and distinguished career in public service, holding licenses in social work and nursing home administration. It is evident that she has passion for service to others. When asked how she is able to so effectively lead the Jackson home, Johnson responds, "When you put the Veterans needs above everything else, the rest takes care of itself." Johnson is a proud former resident of McLain, Mississippi, but currently resides in Jackson. MSVA is lucky to have a seasoned and dedicated public servant to lead and serve our Jackson home.

Harvey Smith

VSO/ADMISSIONS

HSmith@msva.ms.gov
(601) 353-6142





Around the HOMES

Mississippi Veterans Home **KOSCIUSKO**

310 Autumn Ridge Drive
Kosciusko, MS 39090



Tadé Ward

ADMINISTRATOR

Tward@msva.ms.gov

(662) 289-7044

Tadé Ward has served the Mississippi Veterans Home in Kosciusko since 2021. Prior to being promoted to administrator of the Kosciusko home, Ward served as the assistant administrator of the Mississippi Veterans Home at Collins, where she distinguished herself as a leader. Ward holds a Bachelor of Science from the University of Southern Mississippi and a Master of Business Administration from the University of Mississippi. Originally from Lagos, Nigeria, Ward has lived in the United States since 1995. Ward is the newest member to our administrative leadership at MSVA. We are so happy to be able to share her eagerness and passion to serve as she assumes her new position in Kosciusko.

Amanda Hughes

VSO/ADMISSIONS

AHughes@msva.ms.gov

(662) 289-7044





Around the HOMES

Mississippi Veterans Home **OXFORD**

120 Veterans Drive
Oxford, MS 38665



Brent Avant

ADMINISTRATOR

BAvant@msva.ms.gov
(662) 236-1218

Brent Avant has served the Mississippi Veterans Home at Oxford since 2019. A graduate of the University of Mississippi, Avant holds a Bachelor of Arts in leisure management a Master of Arts in parks and recreation management. Unsurprisingly, Avant is a lover of outdoor recreation. Originally from Winona, Avant is a long-time resident of Oxford where he has lived since 1999. His professional history details 20 years of healthcare experience in mental health, hospice care, and long-term care. Avant has been a licensed nursing home administrator since 2015. According to Avant, it is an honor to be able serve the men and women who have sacrificed so much. MSVA thanks Avant for his dedication to our Veterans.

Regina Tutor

VSO/Admissions

RTutor@msva.ms.gov
(662) 236-1218





2020 Navigating a Global Pandemic



EDITORS NOTE: How does one go about writing 2,500 words about a healthcare system’s experience navigating a global pandemic? A year into the pandemic, roughly 410 days as this is written, there seems to be no end in sight. Where to begin?

We could describe the endless days of uncertainty worrying about when the next shipment of personal protective equipment (PPE) was going to arrive. How, seemingly overnight, the CFO and the chief of staff were suddenly PPE and medical procurement specialists (Is 5,000 pounds of chemical disinfectant a lot?).

There are endless stories demonstrating the dedication of our MSVA team members. There’s the nursing home administrator staying overnight and having to be ordered home to rest. Nurses and CNA’s working double and triple shifts to ensure that shifts were covered. And the employees in other

divisions stepping up, often outside their comfort zones, and into roles outside their specialty. Or the day when the executive director drove to every paint supply store within a 50-mile radius, buying out stocks of Tyvek coveralls. And, of course, that time 5,000 pounds of disinfectant was delivered to the main office and creating the question of “how do we get it off the truck and where do we put it?” And yes, it was a lot.

We could profile the COVID economy, how an outbreak causes spending to skyrocket and revenue to plummet. The potential stories are endless. Faced with an abundance of story ideas and limited space, we decided to cover three themes: the early part of the pandemic; the challenges we faced and how we met them; and the innovative ways MSVA worked to keep our residents connected and engaged during the pandemic. – **MSVA Editorial Team**

Preparing for the Inevitable

When Executive Director Stacey Pickering addressed the Mississippi Veterans Affairs Board in December 2019, the purpose of the presentation was to provide a look ahead at 2020. The December meeting serves as a preview of new initiatives and programs planned for the year ahead—a road map of intended accomplishments. Of course, no one knew that 2020 had its own plan.

How could anyone have known? It would be another 23 days before the World Health Organization (WHO) reported a “pneumonia of unknown cause” in Wuhan, China. Three days later, January 8, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued the first nationwide alert for the virus called New Coronavirus and later, COVID-19. Then, on January 20, the first recorded U.S. case of coronavirus was reported in the state of Washington.

“The first U.S. case was an alarm bell for us, as well as the rest of the country,” Executive Director Pickering said. “It was impossible to know everything about the virus at the time, but we were determined that MSVA would be as ready as possible to combat the virus.” Executive Director Pickering quickly formed a pandemic response team, consisting of the key executive team members. The team tracked the progress of the virus across the country, while developing protocols and contingency plans for when COVID would arrive in Mississippi.

Signs were placed at the entrances of the Veteran’s homes dissuading visitors and informing anyone with a cough or fever not to enter. All personnel were in-serviced on screening protocols, and the homes began screening visitors with questionnaires and temperature checks.

On March 11, 2020, the Mississippi Department of Health (MSDH) reported the first confirmed case of COVID-19. The following day, the Mississippi Veterans Homes at Collins and Jackson were closed to all visitors and non-essential personnel. The Kosciusko and Oxford homes followed suit on March 16.

The hard work and preparation paid off. MSVA was able to remain COVID free for another 48 days. When the Kosciusko home experienced an outbreak on April 29, 2020, there were over a million cases nationwide and 6,569 cases in Mississippi. Those 48 days enabled MSVA to continue to prepare and learn from what was transpiring elsewhere.



The Challenges of COVID

In the first months of the pandemic, MSVA faced a seemingly insurmountable problem: a lack of PPE. In a normal year, each home kept a small supply of N95 and surgical masks for use during the flu season. Beginning in March, mask-wearing was strongly encouraged in the Veterans homes. By the end of the month, they were mandated. MSVA needed thousands of masks and other PPE at a time when the world was experiencing a worldwide shortage.

Luckily, MSVA was in a good position despite the worldwide shortage of medical grade masks. MSVA utilized innovative solutions and resources to bridge the gap.

“MSVA’s strict protocols made the difference,” Executive Director Pickering said. “Our success in keeping COVID-19 out of the homes for as long as we did enabled us to source and use cloth masks for as long as we could.”

In other words, as long as the homes remained COVID free, the homes could use cloth masks to good effect, thereby reserving the medical grade masks MSVA was stockpiling for later use. Using social media, MSVA put the call out to the Veterans community requesting

assistance. The response was overwhelming. MSVA received thousands of masks from groups such as the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), American Legion Auxiliary, and Boy Scout troops, among many others. And the response was not limited to Mississippi. Packages from all over the country were sent to provide relief.

It soon became clear that the demand for masks would outstrip the community support; therefore, MSVA turned to Mississippi businesses for assistance. MSVA was able to acquire thousands of high-quality masks from Blue Delta Jean Company, at cost, for use in the homes. Using the partnership with Blue Delta as a model, MSVA began teaming up with different industries to source PPE. MSVA



was able to source hand sanitizer from local distilleries, including Wonderbird Spirits in Taylor, Mississippi. Gail McInnis Productions, a Hattiesburg-based costume company, designed and manufactured isolation gowns.

Once MSVA experienced its first outbreak, however, the use of cloth masks was no longer an option. Luckily, by then, MSVA had made good progress sourcing and stockpiling PPE. Thus, when we made the transition to medical grade masks, MSVA was ready.

Even with a solid PPE supply line in place, MSVA knew we had to be conservative with mask usage. In May, MSVA partnered with Mississippi State University’s Center for Advanced Vehicular Systems (CAVS) to build a mask decontaminator. The CAVS team converted a pickup truck tool box into a sterilization device that uses UV light technology to sterilize masks for reuse.

This was not MSVA’s only utilization of innovative technology. In May, Collin Edgin, MSVA director of life and safety, oversaw the installation of modular needlepoint bipolar ionization air purification systems in all four Veterans homes. This state-of-the-art technology works to safely clean indoor air.

Another critical issue throughout the pandemic was staffing. During a COVID outbreak, staff is just as susceptible to contracting the virus as residents. A staffing shortage in a skilled nursing facility is a critical safety issue. MSVA is thankful for its partnership with the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency (MEMA), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the Veterans Administration, particularly the G.V. (Sonny) Montgomery VA Medical Center (Jackson VAMC) and the Memphis VA Medical Center (Memphis VAMC). During the most critical staffing periods, MEMA, at MSVA's request, was able to submit resource requests to FEMA who tasked the VA to provide staffing augmentation. Although the staffing augmentation was primarily for nurses and CNAs, in July, MSVA was the first state Veterans home system in the country to request and receive chaplain support from the VA.

"Clinically trained chaplains are critical in times like this," Executive Director Pickering said. "The VA Medical Center staff helped us treat the total person during the COVID 19 pandemic. They understood that this was not just physical. It was an emotional, mental and spiritual struggle."

It was not only the residents who benefited from the chaplains; the chaplains also helped the nursing home staff deal with the stressors of work, sickness, and death. "Our Veterans and staff needed help in dealing with their emotional and/or spiritual struggles during the numerous COVID 19 positive cases. The work of the chaplains was a game changer. Their presence was a stabilizing factor during a time of fear and uncertainty."

In addition to outside staffing assistance, MSVA employees in other divisions were ready and willing to step in and fill the gap. When the housekeeping staff at Oxford went down due to a COVID outbreak, our veteran service offices (VSOs) answered the call. The VSOs spent two weeks at Oxford doing the job of housekeeping.



Many VSOs found the experience to be an enriching experience and were the first to volunteer for service at another home when needed.

The most successful tool in combatting the virus has been MSVA's ability to test and test often. Partnering with the MSDH, the MSVA has been able to conduct weekly COVID-19 testing. The ability to conduct weekly tests enabled us to quickly identify an outbreak and take immediate action to mitigate the spread. Between March and December, the Mississippi Veterans Home System conducted a total of 53,820 COVID-19 tests.

Keeping Residents Connected and Engaged

Of the many firsts wrought by this pandemic, the most drastic may be family separation and lack of social engagement. Normally, the Veterans homes enjoy unrestricted visitation, which is critical for our residents' quality of life. Likewise, social engagement is a priority in the skilled nursing setting. Studies have demonstrated that social engagement is important for residents' psychological, physical, and cognitive health. COVID-19 makes both family visitation and social gatherings dangerous. Finding a way to accomplish these activities was a challenge from the start of the pandemic.

"We knew family visitation was going to be an issue early on," said Pam Thrash, director of operations. "We started brainstorming early to come up with creative ways to accomplish visitation using technology."

When the homes closed to visitors in March, MSVA announced a plan for virtual visits. Using applications such as Facetime, Zoom, and Skype, MSVA began scheduling residents and families for virtual visits. This was not as easy as it sounds. Our residents are mostly seniors, therefore, many of the people on the other end of the visit are also seniors. While we were able to have a social worker assist the resident, oftentimes that facilitation was lacking on the other end. To solve this problem, MSVA wrote step-by-step instructions for each platform and had the social workers send them out to resident's family members.

As the pandemic stretched into months, it was clear that virtual visits alone would not suffice. In April, MSVA announced a new visitation model, window visits. A window visit is just as it sounds, the resident is inside, while the visitor is outside. Communication is achieved via a two-way communication device such as a phone or radio. Although, residents and family members were unable to embrace, window visits allowed them a face-to-face experience.

Window visits were successful; however, like virtual visits, eventually, the demand for a more personal visit intensified. In August, MSVA announced indoor visits in homes that were not experiencing active COVID-19 cases. In each home, there is a day room and a lounge area which are side by side and separated by an interior wall with a long window. Privacy dividers were set up to create visitation stations on both sides of the glass. This enabled the homes to safely conduct indoor visitation with each party on opposite sides of the glass.

Several months after the homes began indoor visits, outside visits were introduced. Depending on the COVID status of the relevant home, residents and family were able to visit outside while keeping a safe distance. Ultimately, we look forward to formally reuniting our residents with their families. MSVA is working on a plan to host a “family reunion” as soon as safety conditions are met.

Social engagement was also a challenge. During normal times, each Veterans home conducts activities to keep our residents engaged. This involves social outings, as well as in-home activities. Of course, COVID put a hold on all such activities. Therefore, the homes faced the challenge of finding ways to self-generate activities while remaining safe.

The activities staff rose to the challenge. The homes hosted socially distant bingo, a speaker system to call bingo down a hall. Fishing rodeos replaced casino visits. This was a challenge at Oxford, as it is the only home without a pond. The solution? MSVA brought the pond to the residents. Large tanks were filled with water and stocked with catfish and everyone was guaranteed a catch. We hosted car parades inviting families to drive the circuit around the facility with signs as residents looked out of the windows. At a parade in Oxford, the mounted police showed up and galloped around the grounds putting on a good show.

MSVA also used technology to keep residents engaged. MSVA upgraded their It's Never Too Late (iN2L) technology. iN2L is hardware and software that uses a combination of expansive content and easy-to-use technology with the goal of enriching seniors' lives. This includes interactive games that focus on memory and problem-solving, a generation-specific juke box, and trivia contests. We invested in SeniorTV to provide a more enriching program selection for residents. We introduced the Salute Minute, an in-house news segment focusing on issues and news important to our residents and Mississippi Veterans at large.

The pandemic has been especially hard for the Veterans in the Mississippi Veterans Home System. While combating the virus, MSVA has been equally committed to combating social isolation. We continue to think of new and exciting ways to keep our residents connected and engaged. MSVA looks forward to putting this pandemic behind us, and getting back to in-person visits and competitive bingo!



What We've Learned

The MSVA family is strong. MSVA is extremely proud of the dedication and resilience of the staff, both in and out of the homes. From nurses and CNAs working overtime and sleeping on cots to VSOs swinging mops and doing laundry, it is clear that our team is dedicated to getting the job done.

The MSVA family extends beyond our employees and the Veterans we serve; it includes our residents' families; the service organizations and Friends of MS Veterans that support our operations; our state and federal leadership; and our partners at Grove Medical, Mid South Rehab Services, and RWB Hospitality, Inc., among many others. We could not have navigated this crisis without these friends and partners.

MSVA's mission is to honor Mississippi Veterans, and their dependents, through superior service, care, and assistance. 2020 was a year like no other in MSVA history. Navigating the pandemic was not easy. But through it all, we can confidently say, that MSVA stayed true to its mission every step of the way.

It is unclear when this pandemic will end. However, we are hopeful that a major corner has been turned. As of February 1, 2021, the residents and staff of the Mississippi Veterans Home System completed the vaccination process. All residents and staff who were willing and able to receive a vaccination were afforded the opportunity to be vaccinated. MSVA is hopeful that the vaccinations represent the beginning of the end of this pandemic. One resident put it best: “If this is a war, vaccination day is our D-Day.”

Know Your State Specific Veteran Benefits

For the updates on changes to benefits, please visit www.msva.ms.gov/benefits

AD VALOREM TAX EXEMPTION

Any Veteran having a service-connected, total disability and who has been honorably discharged from military service shall be exempt from all ad valorem taxes on the assessed value of homestead property and to extend such exemption to un-remarried surviving spouses of such Veterans.

Miss. Code Ann., §27-33-75 and §27-33-67

HUNTING & FISHING LICENSES

Veterans who have a total service-connected disability from the Veterans Administration are not required to purchase hunting or fishing license, but must have on their person proof of age, residency and disability status while engaged in hunting or fishing.

Miss. Code Ann., §49-7-5.

PRIVILEGE TAX

Persons who are 65 or older, blind, deaf, or with loss of hand or foot, or loss of use of the hand or foot or who can provide documentation that they are 50% disabled to perform physical labor and whose annual gross income is \$900.00 or less are exempt from payment of privilege tax for specified businesses.

Miss. Code Ann., §27-15-227

IN-STATE TUITION FOR NONRESIDENT STUDENTS

Any Veteran, as defined by Title 38 of the United States Code, or a person entitled to education benefits under Title 38 of the United States Code is authorized in-state tuition.

Miss. Code Ann., § 37-103-25

VETERANS DESIGNATION ON DRIVER LICENCE

Miss. Code Ann., § 45-3-9, §63-1-35, and §45-35-3

PROFESSIONAL LICENSE RECIPROCITY

Miss. Code Ann. § 73-30-15

STATE RETIREMENT

Members of the state Public Employees Retirement System who served in the armed forces of the United States or who served in maritime service during periods of hostility in WWII shall be entitled to up to four years credit for active duty in the armed forces or in such maritime service, provided they entered state service after discharge from the armed forces or after completion of such maritime service. Credit may be extended beyond four years for those persons who can provide positive proof that they were retained in the armed forces or such maritime service during WWII by causes beyond his control and without opportunity for discharge.

Miss. Code Ann., §25-11-109.



Mississippi VA
SERVING OUR HEROES

Veterans Legal Clinic

Open Every Friday at MS College School of Law
151 East Griffith St, Jackson, MS 39201
9:30 a.m to 2:30 p.m

FREE LEGAL SERVICES FOR VETERANS

Veterans can also access free legal advice
by visiting our website

www.msva.ms.gov/legal

Mississippi Veterans Memorial CEMETERIES

Mississippi Veterans Affairs operates two Veterans memorial cemeteries in Newton and Kilmichael, where we offer various burial options for Veterans, spouses, and dependents. We provide a perpetual resting place for those Veterans as we are especially aware of the sacrifices and hardships endured by our Veterans and their families.



Mark Lawson

DIRECTOR OF CEMETERIES
mlawson@msva.ms.gov

Mark Lawson serves as our director of cemeteries. Lawson joined Mississippi Veterans Affairs in June 2012 and presently serves as the director of cemeteries overseeing the state veterans cemeteries' operations in Newton and Kilmichael. Lawson served as an air traffic controller in the United States Navy for 20 years. He deployed in support of Operation Restore Hope, Operation Southern Watch, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. He also served at Naval Air Station Corpus Christi, Texas, Naval Air Technical Training Center Pensacola, Florida, and Naval Air Station Meridian, Mississippi. He resides in Kilmichael with his wife, Penny. Lawson and his teams at both locations aim to demonstrate the utmost sensitivity and compassion to our resting heroes.

For more information
on our cemeteries, visit
www.msva.ms.gov/cemeteries

Newton

248 Honor Circle
Newton, MS 39345

Brittany Strickland CEMETERY REPRESENTATIVE

BStrickland@msva.ms.gov
(601) 683-2959

Kilmichael

2 Legion Road
Kilmichael, MS 39747

Lady Nix CEMETERY REPRESENTATIVE

LNix@msva.ms.gov
(662) 262-4232





Wreaths Across America





On December 19th, 2020, we celebrated the annual 'Wreaths Across America' event in Newton and Kilmichael. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we could not invite the general public to these hallowed grounds, as is our standard. However, we wanted to provide our resting heroes' families the opportunity and accessibility during the holiday season.

Historically, the tradition dates back to 1992. The Worcester Wreath Company had a surplus of wreaths after the holiday season, so they decided to donate them to Veterans cemeteries—in particular, the United States National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia. The annual tribute went on quietly for several years until 2005, when the event received national attention via photos from Arlington and other state veteran cemeteries across the country that decided to participate.

Each December on National Wreaths Across America Day, the mission to remember, honor, and teach is carried out by coordinating wreath-laying ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery, as well as more than 2,100 additional locations in all 50 states, at sea, and abroad.

We were proud to partner with the non-profit organization Friends of Mississippi Veterans in honoring our close to 1,300 Veterans and their dependents buried at our memorial cemeteries. We thank them and the many donors that supported this year's event. We also want to thank the families of those buried at our cemeteries. During both war and peacetime, to serve our great nation is a true sacrifice, and we want you to know that we at MSVA have not forgotten about that sacrifice. That sacrifice involves you as well.

MSVA State APPROVING AGENCY

660 North Street, Suite 200
Jackson, MS 39206



Cathy McGruder-Jones, Ed. S.

DIRECTOR

(601) 576-4867

cmcgruder@msva.ms.gov

Cathy McGruder has served as director of the State Approving Agency since 2013. MSVA's SSA Division promotes and safeguards quality education and training programs for Veterans; ensures greater education and training opportunities for Veterans, and protects the integrity of the GI Bill. In short, it safeguards Veterans' valuable educational benefits by ensuring that eligible programs offer worthwhile degrees and training. A graduate of Jackson State University, McGruder-Jones holds a Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood & Family Education, a Master of Science in Education and Special Education, and a Specialist in Education in Psychometry. Presently, McGruder-Jones is pursuing a Doctorate in Psychology with emphasis on brain and behavior. McGruder-Jones is the mother of a beautiful baby girl and is fluent in American Sign Language.



The State Approving Agency (SAA) inspects and approves new education and training programs at higher learning institutions, community and junior colleges, vocational-technical schools, flight schools, on-the-job training and apprenticeship programs for G.I. Bill® education eligibility.

If you have questions concerning a school or a training program being approved to teach Veterans, reservists, and dependents under the G.I. Bill®, please contact the Mississippi VA State Approving Agency at (601) 576-4867. For a full list of our partners, visit www.msva.ms.gov.



Ruth Braxton

VSO II / SAA

rbraxton@msva.ms.gov

(601) 576-4855

Supporting Our Heroes

STATE VETERANS CLAIMS DIVISION

MSVA claims department employs veteran service officers to provide free advice and guidance to Veterans and dependents regarding VA claims, casework, hearings, appeals, and discharge upgrades. Claims division employees with MSVA hold accreditation from the following Veteran organizations:

- Ex-Prisoners of War
- American Legion
- American Red Cross
- Fleet Reserve Association
- Veterans of Foreign Wars

Chris Ellis

DIRECTOR OF CLAIMS

1600 East Woodrow Wilson, Room 116
Jackson, MS 39216
P.O. Box 55949 – Jackson, MS 39296
(601) 364-7182
cellis@msva.ms.gov

STATE VETERAN FIELD OFFICERS

MSVA has placed trained VSO's throughout the state to aid both Veterans, Veteran service officers, and congressional representatives.

Teddy Reed

DIRECTOR OF FIELD OFFICERS

3503 Morningside Drive
Hattiesburg, MS 39402
(610) 264-4629
treed@msva.ms.gov

Ken Patterson

STATE VETERANS FIELD OFFICER

TUPELO
2705 West Jackson Street,
Tupelo, MS 38801
(662) 840-2480
kpatterson@msva.ms.gov

Patrisha Sotomeneses

STATE VETERANS FIELD OFFICER
STARKVILLE

250 Bailey Howell Drive – Room 118
Mississippi State, MS 39762
(662) 325-6719
psotomeneses@msva.ms.gov

Tommy Strickland

STATE VETERANS FIELD OFFICER
MERIDIAN

1000 Highway 19 North
Meridian, MS 39307
(601) 576-4853
tstrickland@msva.ms.gov

Will Mobley

STATE VETERANS FIELD OFFICER
OXFORD

George Street House
15 University Circle
University, MS 38677
(662) 915-2583
wmobley@msva.ms.gov

Marcus Richardson

STATE VETERANS FIELD OFFICER
DESOTO

365 Loshier Street – Suite 200
Hernando, MS 38632
(662) 449-2811

Jerry Wiley

STATE VETERANS FIELD OFFICER
DSU CLEVELAND

Delta State University
Kent-Wyatt Hall – Room 162
1003 W. Sunflower
Cleveland, MS 38733
(662) 846-4613
jwiley@msva.ms.gov

Glenn Robinson

STATE VETERANS FIELD OFFICER
USM LONG BEACH

730 East Beach Boulevard
Hardy Hall, Room 203
Long Beach, MS 39560
(228) 214-3362
grobenson@msva.ms.gov

Dewayne Gill

STATE VETERANS FIELD OFFICER
ALCORN STATE UNIVERSITY

1000 ASU Drive
Lorman, MS 39096-7500
dgill@msva.ms.gov

VA HOSPITAL STATE VETERANS FIELD OFFICERS

The MSVA Hospital service officers provide free advice and guidance to veterans and dependents with VA claims, pertaining to VA medical care and treatment problems, hospitalization, and nursing home placement issues. Our hospital service officers provide free representation to veterans on issues of disagreement and at personal hearings held in the VA Hospitals in Biloxi, Jackson, and Memphis.

Cathy Adams

STATE VETERANS FIELD OFFICER
JACKSON VA MEDICAL CENTER

1500 E. Woodrow Wilson Dr.
D-116 Module A
Jackson, MS 39216
(601) 364-7182
cadams@msva.ms.gov

Luis Torres

STATE VETERANS FIELD OFFICER
BILOXI VA MEDICAL CENTER

400 Veterans Avenue
Building 3, Room 146
Biloxi, MS 39351
(228) 523-5253
ltorres@msva.ms.gov

Marcus Richardson

STATE VETERANS FIELD OFFICER
MEMPHIS VA MEDICAL CENTER

1056 East Raines Rd
Room 173
Memphis, TN 38116
(901) 523-8990
mrichardson@msva.ms.gov

Serving Veterans Most Often Overlooked

Over the last several years, Mississippi Veterans Affairs (MSVA) has partnered with the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) to form and operate a unique and innovative program to reach and assist incarcerated Veterans. The Housing Unit for Military Veterans (HUMV) is operated out of the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility (CMCF) and uses military and Veteran-centric themes to prepare incarcerated Veterans for life after prison. The programming includes counseling and job training, coupled with good order and discipline which equips incarcerated Veterans to reenter society as productive citizens.

“There are many different reasons why a Veteran may find him or herself in trouble” said MSVA Executive Director, Stacey E. Pickering. “Many times, an offending Veteran’s situation can be tied directly back to his or her service. Whether it is self-medicating through drug and alcohol abuse, or mental health issues as a result of things that occurred in battle, some Veterans find their lives off track and get in trouble. HUMV is simply one additional tool to help these Veterans find their way.”

Currently, there are 3,393 Veterans under supervision of MDOC, and 1,028 Veterans in an inmate status at any one of the 21 state facilities. Across the nation, there are more than 26 states with prison programs for Veterans. Most often, these programs are operated at the county level. Mississippi is the only state where the statewide incarcerated Veterans program is directed by its State Board of Veterans Affairs. MSVA and MDOC have built a stable, proactive reentry program that will have a major impact on recidivism.

The HUMV program occurs during a Veteran inmate’s final 12-18 months of incarceration. Veteran inmates willing to

MISSISSIPPI STATEWIDE INCARCERATED VETERANS PROGRAM



HUM-V

MSVA HOUSING UNIT FOR MILITARY VETERANS
AT CENTRAL MISSISSIPPI CORRECTIONAL FACILITY



participate in the program, and who are judged good candidates for the program, are transferred to CMCF in Pearl and placed in the designated housing units specifically for military Veterans: The Barracks and the Garrison. Currently, the Garrison houses 60 male participants. HUMV hopes to expand the occupancy to 130 Veterans by spring. The Barracks provides space for 24 female participants.

HUMV is divided into two parts: Basic Training and Veterans Career Education and Training Center (V-CET). During basic training, Veterans participate in intensive training covering such topics as good citizenship, computer literacy, cognitive behavior therapy, anger management, and addressing issues surrounding co-dependent relationships.

V-CET is a technical school where Veterans learn vocational skills and receive job training. V-CET is housed in an 11,000-square-foot vocational training center at CMCF. V-CET has the potential of becoming one of largest, most cost-effective and productive career education training centers in the state. V-CET focuses on developing employment skills; evaluating personal and professional strengths and weaknesses; and preparing for reentry. It offers a technical computer-based learning lab and certified instruction in nine trade areas.

Program participants with verifiable experience and long sentences have been certified as instructors through the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER).

“This is a proven job-focused reentry program for Veterans,” Pickering said. “Since its inception, the program’s workforce placement rate for those Veterans completing the program and able to work upon release, stands at 65%.”

Thus far, the jobs that the Veterans are placed in reflect an average hourly wage of \$13.81, or approximately \$28,725, annually. An even more notable statistic is the program’s recidivism rate. “The statewide recidivism rate is around 38.4%” Pickering said. “Our program is tracking right at 4%. This is a program we think everyone can get behind.”

HUMV is just one piece in the plan to help Veterans in distress. Other important programs include a Veteran legal clinic and Veterans treatment court. In February 2020, MSVA, in partnership with Mississippi College School of Law and the Mississippi Military Department, began operating a Veterans legal clinic. In May of 2020, Executive Director Pickering was appointed to the Mississippi Supreme Court’s State Intervention Courts Advisory Committee.

Show pride in your service with a new veterans car tag.

Visit your local tax collector to purchase a veterans license plate.
All proceeds go to support the State Veteran Home System and
State Veteran Memorial Cemeteries.



Profiling HEROES

First Lieutenant **Edward Lee Bruton, Ret.**

Edward Lee Bruton was born in the mountain town of Troy, North Carolina.

Bruton lived a small-town life early on. Troy's population was about 2,300 at the time. His father was a car mechanic and a boot factory worker. Edward enjoyed simple activities such as little league baseball, church basketball, or a movie at the local walk-in theater.

As Bruton grew into his teenage years, he faced a stark reality, similar to just about every American adolescent boy – Selective Service, better known as “The Draft.” And the Vietnam War took Bruton from his bubble to a country on the other side of the world. “I did not want to get drafted, so I joined,” said Bruton. He joined the United States Army as a clerk-typist just one year after entering Western Carolina University.

He then went through a series of aptitude tests and, upon review, was given the option of entering Officer Candidate School (OCS). He called his father to tell him that he was going to attempt the OCS route and his father replied, “You do not want that.” Bruton returned to notify the recruiter of his decision to stay enlisted as a typist. He did not anticipate the response of, “You know they are going to put you in the infantry, anyway, right?” Bruton finally decided to attend Officer Candidate School in Fort Knox, Kentucky, where he received his commission as a second lieutenant. His first assignment was to be a training officer at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. He stayed there for nine months and then attended jump school. Initially commissioned to be an armor officer, the Army reassigned him as an infantry officer.

In 1968, Bruton received his deployment orders to Vietnam. He arrived in the summer at his new unit, stationed about 80 miles outside of Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital. He had joined a “crypt platoon,” a group specializing in ambush attacks. “There was one night where we were trailing some NVA (North Vietnamese Army) and VC (Vietcong) when we ran into a friendly scout patrol. The patrol suggested they were possibly on their way to attack the bridge,” Bruton said. The bridge was a vital supply line over



the Saigon River used by both the United States and South Vietnamese forces. They crept along the trail when machine

gunfire erupted. “We ran into a force that far outnumbered us. We were caught in a crossfire,” he said. They were pinned down with nowhere to go. That is when the young leader took control. Bruton quickly radioed for mortars while waiting for air support. “One member of my platoon was killed and one injured.” Bruton then directed the helicopter gunfire towards the enemy while the rest of his platoon pulled back. “That probably kept the bridge from getting overrun and blown,” he said. For his actions, Bruton received the Silver Star.

Two days later, his radiotelephone operator (RTO) stepped on a booby trap, sending him to Japan for medical treatment and, coincidentally, shrapnel into Bruton's leg. The RTO survived, and Bruton was awarded the Purple Heart. He was awarded a second Silver Star for repelling an enemy attack when his crypt platoon was ambushed after capturing a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) scout. None of his platoon members were injured.

For 11 months and 16 days, Bruton faced constant ground attacks, ambushes and air raids. He fought with valor and honor through it all until he returned home in the summer of 1969. Upon returning, Bruton joined the Army Reserves, received captain's rank, and finished his degree at Western Carolina. He followed that up by completing his Master of Business Administration at Troy State University. In 1974, Bruton left the Army Reserves and began working for Michelin Tire Company.

In November 2019, The State of Mississippi and the Federal VA recognized Bruton for his military service. He was one of seven Veterans inducted into the G.V. Sonny Montgomery Medical Center's Wall of Honor. His wartime accolades include the Silver Star with Oak Cluster, the Purple Heart, the Bronze Star and the Soldier's Medal.

Bruton is retired and lives in Oxford with his wife. His hobbies include visiting his fellow brothers-in-arms at the State Veterans Home at Oxford and shooting his rifle with his sons.

Lieutenant General

Wayne O. Burkes

USAF, MSANG, Ret.

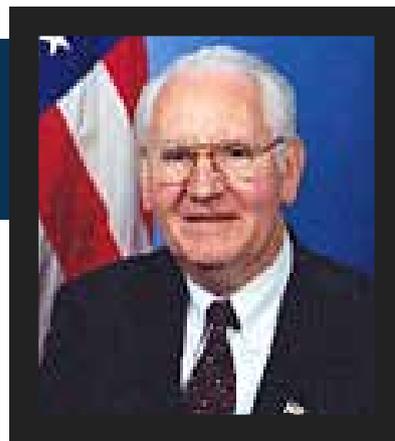
Wayne Burkes was born December 6, 1929, in Neshoba County, north of Philadelphia, Mississippi, and raised on the family farm.

Burkes graduated from Arlington High School and East Central Mississippi Community College and continued on to Mississippi College, earning a B.A., M.Ed, and LL.D. He received his Master of Divinity from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. He also pursued graduate studies at the University of Southern Mississippi. For many years, Wayne was an active alumnus of Mississippi College. For his many contributions to his alma mater, they awarded him the Order of the Golden Arrow and the Mississippi College National "M" Club Distinguished Service Award.

In his military life, Burkes served close to 40 years in the Mississippi Air National Guard, where he experienced two active duty tours. During those years, he graduated from the Air Force pilot training school, Industrial College of the Armed Forces, and the Air War College during his career. While serving in the Air Guard, Burkes attained over 7,000 hours of flight time in eight different aircraft, serving as a command pilot and achieving major general's rank before retiring as a lieutenant general.

Burkes worked tirelessly as an advocate for Veterans in our state, serving as chairman of the Mississippi Veterans Affairs Board. There he was instrumental in the construction of the Mississippi Veterans Memorial Cemetery at Newton. He was also a life member of both Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and the Military Order of World Wars.

As a public servant, Burke served as a teacher, counselor, and administrator at Hinds Community College. He held active membership in Phi Delta Kappa and Kappa Delta Pi professional educator societies. In 1976 he was elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives and served for



four years. From there, he served ten years in the state Senate. His public service journey continued as the state's central

Mississippi highway commissioner until President Bill Clinton appointed him as a U.S. Surface Transportation Board member from 1999-2003.

As a Baptist minister, Wayne served several churches in central Mississippi, ending with 24 years as a bi-vocational pastor of the Bolton Baptist Church. In retirement, he continued to give his time and gifts, officiating at weddings and funerals, counseling his many friends, and serving as a visiting minister. He served as a trustee of Baptist Hospital Systems, was a member of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board, and a local deacon in First Baptist Churches of Clinton and Jackson.

In recognition of his service to Mississippi, in 2014, Governor Phil Bryant presented Wayne Burkes with the state's Distinguished Civilian Service Medal.

As Burkes' health began to decline, he chose the State Veterans Home at Kosciusko for continued care. On Tuesday, May 5, 2020, Wayne O. Burkes passed away peacefully at the age of 90 at our Kosciusko home. The chapel at the home has been dedicated to Burkes in his honor. People who knew Burkes best use the following words to best describe him; leader, public servant, mentor, teacher, and friend.

He was preceded in death by his parents Dewitt T. Burkes and Cleo Gentry Burkes, first wife Ruthine Ferguson Burkes, and his brothers Winford, Willard, Wausie, Billy Joe, and Tommy.

Burkes is survived by his wife Ann Rushing Burkes, his sons Ted and Tim Burkes, grandchildren Malorie Paxson, Jonathan Burkes, Luke Burkes, Ian Burkes and Audrey Burkes, great-grandsons Lincoln and Colin Paxson, and his brother Johnny Burkes.

On the MOVE

MSVA understands the importance of human capital.

Our leadership team is constantly striving to recruit and develop talent—and 2020 was no exception. In 2020, MSVA was pleased to add new leaders to our ranks and to move existing employees into exciting new roles. Featured are three such individuals who we felt were representative of the whole.



Melissa Wade Director of External Relations

Melissa Wade joined MSVA in May of 2019 as executive assistant to the executive director. Upon joining MSVA, Melissa quickly distinguished herself as a leader by spearheading such initiatives as the Military Women's Summit, Suicide Prevention Month, and the second Sporting Clays Tournament, all while managing the executive director's demanding itinerary. In recognition of her stellar performance, Melissa was named director of external relations in May 2020. In her new role, Melissa is responsible for overseeing project management; communicating with the legislative leadership and the congressional delegation; cultivating ongoing external relationships; and assisting with the promotion of the agency to external groups and organization.



Ray Coleman Communications Director

When Executive Director Pickering took the helm at MSVA, he immediately recognized that the agency suffered from a lack of external communication. There was a great need to rethink how MSVA should deliver its messaging to the public at large. While MSVA, under Executive Director Pickering's instruction, took immediate steps to lay the groundwork for a department, it was critical that we recruited someone with the requisite talent, knowledge, and expertise to create and run a fully functional communications department. In 2019, MSVA recruited Ray Coleman to take on that task. Ray brings fourteen years of public affairs expertise to MSVA, including director of communications for the Mississippi Attorney General's Office, director of external affairs for the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency, and television anchor and reporter for 16-WAPT News in Jackson. Since coming on board, Ray has worked hard to grow our outreach and launch new programs to help get our message to the community.



Caroline Kennard Director of Events

Caroline Kennard returns to MSVA in a new and exciting role as director of events. Caroline joined MSVA in October 2018 as communications director with the mandate of creating a sorely needed communications department. Caroline hit the ground running launching Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram sites, as well as overseeing the development of MSVA's new website. Caroline took a leave of absence in May 2020 in order to serve as a logistics coordinator with the Committee on Arrangements with the Republican National Convention. With Caroline's return and new position as the director of events, she is responsible for coordinating the planning and logistics for all off-site events and board meetings. Caroline has also been tapped to be the face of our new Salute Minute video program. Welcome back Caroline!

All Hands on Deck

Our Veterans homes experienced staff shortages throughout the pandemic in all areas of operation due to COVID-19. What initially appeared to be a concern quickly became another example of the MSVA mission of "Serving Our Heroes." Staff from the claims and state approving agency divisions put their regular duties on hold and assumed roles within the homes. Whether it was housekeeping and maintenance duties or administrative assistance, MSVA's team concept was on full display when it mattered most.





Sporting Clays COMPETITION

Friends of Mississippi Veterans in partnership with MSVA and Mid South Rehab Services hosted the second Sporting Clays Competition on Thursday, October 15th, 2020.

For the past two years, this event has been held to benefit Friends of Mississippi Veterans (FOMV). FOMV is a 501C that was established to support the Veterans in the Mississippi Veterans Home System, as well as to support certain activities in the Mississippi Veterans Memorial Cemeteries. This year's event was held in memory of Lieutenant General Wayne O. Burkes, former chairman of the Mississippi Veterans Affairs Board.

The competition was held on the picturesque grounds at Providence Hill Farm. Spanning 1,250 acres, our participants had access to their sporting clay range, normally complete with 14 stations. Last year, we had 45 teams register for the shoot. This year, we garnered over 60 teams for the event. The staff at Providence Hill Farm was kind enough to add more stations to accommodate the number of teams present. Providence Hill Farm also provided golf carts for ease of access to the range.



Between the morning and afternoon sessions, lunch was held at the member's clubhouse. Another Broken Egg served an exquisite spread of roasted chicken and vegetables, various sides, bread pudding, and, very fittingly, fried quail. After lunch, we held a raffle and auction, hosted by MSVA Executive Director Stacey Pickering. There was an abundance of door prizes, donated by numerous local businesses and organizations.



The auction featured a 1996 Honda Magnum motorcycle, donated by CEO and President of Mid South Rehab Steven Cole, and firearms donated by Two Gun Tactical.

In addition to thanking our partners, MSVA would also like to extend gratitude to the special guests and speakers who participated in the event. The evening prior to the event, Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith and Congressman Steven Palazzo attended the sporting clays reception at the Country Club of

Jackson. Also, on hand that evening was Mississippi's own Sarah Thomas, who, in 2015, became the National Football League's (NFL) first full-time female official and who would later add officiating a Super Bowl to her lists of firsts.

On the day of the shoot, we were pleased to have such distinguished participants as Congressman Steven Palazzo, Treasurer David McRae, Speaker Philip Gunn, Commissioner Andy Gipson, Commissioner Mike

Chaney, and Attorney General Lynn Fitch and former U.S. Congressman Gregg Harper. Information about the competition and Friends of Mississippi Veterans was broadcast to SuperTalk Mississippi's listeners throughout the state. We are so grateful anytime we can garner statewide exposure from such a renowned and accessible platform like SuperTalk.

Executive Director Pickering, the Mississippi Veterans Affairs Board, and Friends of Mississippi Veterans



would like to thank all of the men and women who helped make this event a great success. To everyone who donated and participated, your contribution to our Veterans is invaluable. Last year, we were able to raise over \$57,000. This year, with the help of all of our generous donors and participants, we were able to raise nearly \$110,000. With this money, Friends of Mississippi Veterans will begin construction of a new pavilion at the Mississippi Veterans Home in Oxford.

“We have already started planning next year’s event,” Executive Director Pickering said. “We strive to improve upon the previous year’s event. This

is such a great event, with an even greater cause: supporting the Veterans of Mississippi.”

We are proud to announce that we will be expanding next year’s event to include a golf tournament as well as the sporting clays shoot. The golf tournament and the skeet shoot will be on different days, so whoever would like to participate can choose which event interests them more. Or, better yet, you can opt for registering for both.

We cannot thank our participants, donors, staff, and partners enough for their generosity. We hope to see everyone and more for next year’s fundraiser.





Upcoming EVENTS



Military Women's Summit

MARCH 26, 2021

Bay Breeze Event Center / Keesler Air Force Base

An event catered to female Veterans, retirees, active duty, reserves, and National Guard are invited to attend. Multiple guest speakers will focus on the topic of "Owning Leadership."

Memorial Day

MAY 31, 2021

Will be held at the Mississippi Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Newton, Mississippi, and the North Mississippi Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Kilmichael, Mississippi.

Please visit www.msva.ms.gov for more information.



Suicide Prevention Training

SEPTEMBER 2021

In observance of Suicide Prevention Month, we have created a virtual training session for clergy and the general public who would like to learn more about suicide awareness—and how to help. This year we will be inviting all clergy to Jackson, Mississippi, for a one-day training.

For more information, please visit www.msva.ms.gov

NASVH

AUGUST 7-12, 2021

Beau Rivage Casino

Each year the National Association of State Veterans Homes (NASVH) hosts a summer convention to provide continuing education credits to our nation's veterans home administrators and directors. Earlier this year, Mississippi was awarded to be the host state for 2021. In addition to CE courses, this weeklong event includes a 100+ vendor expo, family activities, and nightly receptions and typically hosts 200-300 administrators along with their families.



Wreaths Across America

DECEMBER 18, 2021

REMEMBER the Fallen. . . HONOR those who Serve. . .

TEACH our children the value of Freedom. Wreaths Across America will take place at both of our cemetery locations in Newton and Kilmichael Mississippi. It is always a free event and open to all people. For more information on how to volunteer locally or sponsor a wreath for a hero, please visit www.msva.ms.gov

Friends of Mississippi Veterans Sporting Clays Competition

OCTOBER 11-12, 2021

Each year, MSVA, in partnership with Friends of Mississippi Veterans and Mid South Rehab Services, hosts our Sporting Clays Shoot to support the Veterans in the Mississippi Veterans Home System. Our 3rd Annual Sporting Clays Shoot is new and improved with the addition of a golf tournament on October 11th, with The Sporting Clays Competition to follow on October 12th. There will be a raffle, door prizes, and more. We hope to see you there!

Salute to Mississippi Gold Star Families with Mississippi Braves & Biloxi Shuckers

BILOXI SHUCKERS MAY 28, 2021

MISSISSIPPI BRAVES MAY 29, 2021

MSVA is proud to partner with the Mississippi Braves and the Biloxi Shuckers for a third season as we recognize Mississippi Gold Star Families. For more information on this event, please check our website at www.msva.ms.gov

Gulfport and the entire Mississippi Gulf Coast has been recognized as one of the top ten communities in the nation for Veterans.

CONGRATULATIONS
To the city of Gulfport

Ranked as the ninth-best city in America for Military Veterans by Navy Federal Credit Union & Operation Homefront.

- Education:** Gulfport School District is one of NINE "A" rated districts on the MS Gulf Coast.
- Affordable Living:** 9% lower than the national average.
- Healthcare:** \$54 million-dollar State Veterans Home to build on the MS Gulf Coast.
- Veteran-focused jobs:** (represented by a dollar sign icon)

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT THE FOLLOWING WEBSITES:
www.msva.ms.gov www.gulfport.ms.gov www.gulfcoast.org

Navy Federal Credit Union and Operation Homefront recently conducted a nationwide survey resulting in Gulfport being named the ninth-best city for Veterans. The study weighed the following factors: cost of living, housing price, crime rates, community diversity and outdoor recreational opportunities.

Every year, 250,000 military personnel transition from active duty to civilian life. These heroes leave their time of service with a desire and need for new employment, a new living environment, and new ways to serve. Mississippi wants to welcome Veterans into our diverse workforce and benefit from the unique experiences and advanced skill-sets they bring with them. Gulfport is leading the way.

Why is the Mississippi Gulf Coast the perfect fit for Veterans and their families? For Veterans and their families, job opportunities, education, and a military-friendly community are ranked highest in terms of priority. In addition to noting our state's "southern charm," the report highlights a low cost of living, excellent schools, and a unique employment market. Gulfport boasts a cost of living that is almost 10% lower than the national average. According to the Mississippi Department of Education, there are nine "A-rated" school districts along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The Gulf Coast also has services catered to Veterans and ample job opportunities.

The Gulf Coast is home to Keesler Air Force Base and the Naval Construction Battalion, and the VA Medical Center and National Cemetery. Proximity to these facilities' services allows veterans and their families to continue to benefit from their service. Whether it is accessing the base exchange or benefiting from topnotch VA healthcare, Veterans can stay connected to the military lifestyle. Additionally, these facilities, along with the Stennis Space Center, and the various government contractors on the coast, also serve as potential employers with jobs that can utilize Veterans' unique skills.

Over 187,000 Veterans call Mississippi home, with nearly 30 percent concentrated on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. This recognition from Navy Federal Credit Union and Operation Homefront confirms what we already know: Mississippi, particularly the Mississippi Gulf Coast, is on its way to being a nationally recognized military and Veteran retirement destination.

At Mississippi Veteran Affairs, our mission is to honor Mississippi Veterans and their families. Today, MSVA extends our appreciation and congratulations to Gulfport and Mayor Billy Hewes for being recognized nationally as a true "Hometown" for America's heroes.

Stacey E. Pickering,
MSVA Executive Director



Mississippi VA

660 North Street
Jackson, MS 39206
601-576-4850
Toll Free 877-203-5632



P.O. Box 1579
Jackson, MS. 39215
601-355-2224



American Legion
P.O. Box 688
Jackson, MS 39205
601-352-4986



P.O. Box 2027
Jackson, MS 39215
601-352-8904

