

25 July 2022

POC: Susan Vervaet Riveland  
Service Area: Communications & Marketing, Outreach  
DVS Director: Tina Parlett-Calhoun

The **mission** of *Communications & Marketing, Outreach* is to spread awareness of DVS services and programs, as well as Virginia veterans' current issues.

*Communications* is unique among DVS service lines in that its customer base is both internal and external. It serves all Virginia veterans, but also serves all DVS service lines and programs, the Virginia War Memorial (VWM), The Virginia Veterans Services Foundation (VVSF), the Office of the Secretary of Veterans & Defense Affairs, and the Office of the Governor.

The **objectives of this service area** are many and varied:

- To coordinate social media content from all service-lines on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Linked-In
- To design and maintain consistent branding of the DVS
- To write press releases (several each month)
- To promote earned media partnerships and placement coverage for DVS activities
- To publish the E-newsletter monthly
- To promote special events
- To sensitively and skillfully manage information concerning veterans during times of crisis (such as the pandemic) and during transitional periods of governance
- To develop veterans-related talking points and write speeches for the Commissioner, Deputy Commissioners, Secretary of Veterans & Defense Affairs, and Governor
- To develop and analyze metrics for engagement rate on social media and earned media
- To promote veteran engagement with services and resources as offered by DVS

Some **key results in attaining these objectives** have been in the following outreach initiatives:

- Subsequent to the development and publication of the first agency e-newsletter, there has been an approximate 20% rise in overall appointment requests after each e-news distribution.
- Virginia's Veteran Resource Guide, proposed and developed by Communications, is now heavily used and requested.
- Commenced and sustained an aggressive earned media plan by cultivating media contacts at state, regional and national levels with editorial and field reporters who focus on veteran and military affairs. These efforts have resulted in EMV (earned media value) for DVS exceeding \$300,000 annually for the past five years – more than any other state agency.

- Developed a unique media partnership with CBS6 television, which has for the past two years produced and aired the DVS sponsored Veterans and Memorial Day ceremonies live on CBS6 and statewide affiliates. Average reach is now more than 50,000 per ceremony, vs. previous in-person reach of approximately 200-500.
- Developed data sharing agreements with both Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) and Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR).
- Collaborated on Welcome Home Letter Initiative for transitioning service members (TSM's); receive quarterly TSM list from DMV.
- Initiated a Direct Mail Campaign on July 18 to all Virginia veterans who may be eligible for the Virginia Military Survivors and Dependents Education Program (VMSDEP). Reach for this campaign is 5.500. Response rate will be tracked and evaluated accordingly.

In addition to these accomplishments from the past several years, **this past year has seen a noteworthy operational highlight** from *Communications* in its efforts to mitigate or eradicate negative coverage due to COVID outbreaks at DVS veterans care centers. The Sitter and Barfoot Center (Richmond) earned ranking in *Newsweek's Best Nursing Homes 2022* of #2 in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

**Some key initiatives that have recently been launched:**

- After nine years of advocating for the hiring of an additional full-time *Communications* manager to handle Benefits /Team VETE (Veterans Education Transition and Employment), the position has been approved and funding has been allocated. Authorization has been given to commence the hiring process, which will begin in the next few weeks.
- The **Gold Standard Database** is an initiative launched by Commissioner Gade that will ultimately hold veteran-centric data in one database. This will facilitate a more comprehensive, expedient approach to providing services for both DVS agencies and external state agencies. Once established, the database will also provide *Communications* with consistent contact details, enabling more effective outreach. Funding for this new initiative was approved in the recently passed budget. *Comms* director has confirmed the RFP for the pilot component of this initiative is on the street.
- **Virginia is for Veterans Campaign:** *Comms* director helped Policy Director, Claudia Flores, obtain a meeting with Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC) regarding the potential use of a Virginia is for Veterans logo and tagline, to which VTC currently holds the rights. After many months of collaboration, DVS secured approval to use a specific version of the logo, without visual elements. Commissioner Gade reached out to VTC executives to consider a version that has a flag component. That design work is underway and will be subject to VTC final approval. Conversation continues in a positive direction. Once approved, the campaign will incorporate wide use of this tagline and potential logo.

As identified by *Communications*, the **key challenges** for the continued success and enhanced productivity of this service line are a lack of both fiscal and human resources to address, specifically:

- Lack of awareness (resources available to veterans, public knowledge of needs of veterans)
- The need for strategic and consistent paid media placement (earned media placement not able to solve the gap in awareness)
- Need for more consistent in-person community outreach by all divisions
- Brand confusion between DVS and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

These challenges are difficult to overcome without the actual allocation of a specific budget for *Communications*, which does not exist at present.

According to the director, *Communications* has been turned down many times for specific budget requests that are intended to support outreach. Historically, funds that have been needed for the development of much-needed *Communications* initiatives have had to be redirected from surplus in other service lines or via other agency channels. The director has indicated that besides the funds that *have* been allocated for the hiring of the new full-time employee, Commissioner Gade has noted that he will be closely monitoring funds in each programmatic area that should be dedicated to outreach so that some of those funds can be allocated for use by *Communications* for marketing and research.

In moving forward, some of the **strategic opportunities** for *Communications* are:

- In the hiring of a V3 program manager, focus on recruiting a person with a business development background
- Need to formalize a V3 marketing plan; network with groups such as Virginia Manufacturers Association, Virginia Hospital and Healthcare Association, American Public Power Association (to name a few) to become brand ambassadors for the V3 program
- Continue to target veteran-centric data
- Continue to further build and refine the *Communications* service line, as budget allows

### **Final thoughts:**

It is my observation that the *Communications & Marketing, Outreach* service line has evolved through several administrations to become a strong, efficient, and creative force in supporting and furthering the success of the DVS. The foundation has been built, and it is strong. All service lines and programs of DVS benefit from a highly functioning and progressive communications team; therefore, the serious consideration of dedicated funding for *Communications* in future budget proposals should be a priority.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan Vervaet Riveland, POC