



2020 Annual Report



GRAND TRAVERSE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
2650 LAFRANIER RD, TRAVERSE CITY, MICHIGAN 49686

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This 2020 annual report is a compilation of data from various sources to show the direct impact that Veterans and their families have on Grand Traverse County. Our office assists them in applying for compensation, pension, healthcare, education, and a wide variety of other benefits to which they are entitled. This, in turn, allows them to maintain their livelihood and take advantage of the many opportunities Grand Traverse County has to offer.

Veterans and their families are a cornerstone in this county and provide an invaluable economic impact. With the assistance of the various veterans' organizations here in Grand Traverse County and other outreach programs, we ensure Veterans are made aware and maximize all the benefits and resources available to them. We work diligently to enrich the lives of every Veteran and their dependents that call Northern Michigan home.

The staff here at Grand Traverse County Department of Veterans Affairs is proud of the many accomplishments over the last year and the growth that we continue to experience. We strive to provide the best services to the Veterans and their dependents of Grand Traverse County because of the many sacrifices they have made while serving our country.



OUR MISSION

The Grand Traverse County Veterans Affairs Office strives to provide professional assistance to veterans and their families with understanding and accessing available benefits through Federal, State of Michigan, and local government agencies.

BACKGROUND

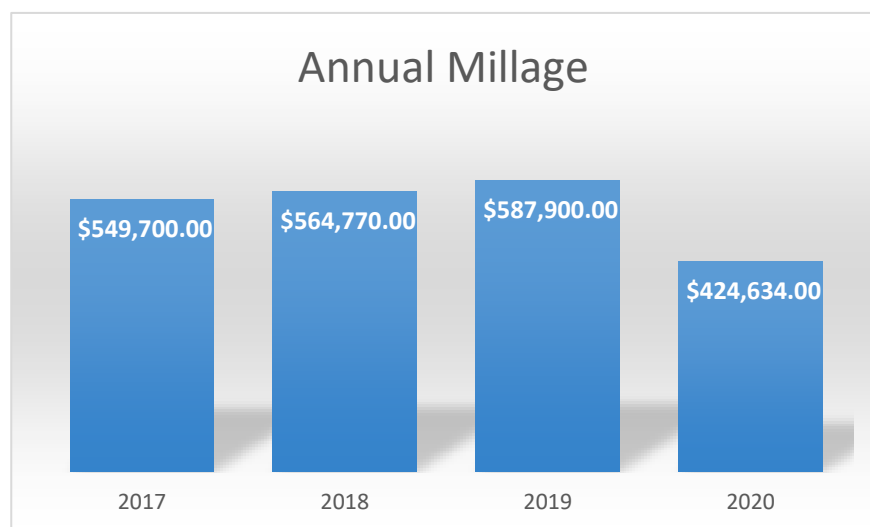
The Grand Traverse County Department of Veterans Affairs (GTCVA) was created November 27, 1991, by Grand Traverse County Commissioners resolution 277-91 of adoption of Michigan Act 192 of 1953 "An act to create a county department of veterans' affairs in certain counties, and to prescribe its powers and duties; to create the county veteran service fund and to provide for contributors to and expenditures from that fund; and to transfer the powers and duties of the soldier's relief commission in those counties."

The Grand Traverse County VA Committee is comprised of 7 veterans appointed by the Grand Traverse County Commissioners for 2-4 year terms. The office is comprised of a Director, an Office Specialist, and 3 Benefit Counselors (Veteran Service Officers).

The Grand Traverse County Board of Commissioners established a levy of .1185 mills in 2016. *In 2019, the office asked the Board of Commissioners to lower the millage to more closely mirror our expenses. Doing more with less!*

Our office has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Leelanau county to provide services for the veteran in their counties. During this MOU, GTCVA provides staff for their Administrator's office one day a week (Tuesday) in their county to visit and assist their veterans. The annual cost of the contract is \$46,618.

The FY 2020 Operating Budget was \$511,412 but actual 2020 Expenses were only \$396,442.



DIRECTOR'S COMMENTS



In 2020, COVID-19 locked down many county offices and businesses throughout Michigan. Our office was no exception.

The office had to adjust how services were provided due to the pandemic. All staff were trained to handle virtual appointments using an HD camera and microphone. All staff received a DocuSign account to be able to send documents securely for client signatures.

This was the first year that our office had been awarded the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency (MVAA) Community Veterans Service Fund (CVSF) grant to assist county offices in reaching veterans and their dependents. The office was awarded \$84,733.00. While the grant's focus is to increase public awareness of our office, some in-person outreach efforts were hampered due to COVID-19. Most of the grant was spent on advertising through television, radio, billboard, and social media.

While most training conferences were canceled, our VSOs were able to attend a virtual three-day training on how to directly represent veterans' claims at the VA Board of Appeals. This gave our VSOs more in-depth knowledge to handle appealed cases.

This year proved to be a difficult service provision year for our office and Veterans but was a great reminder of why offices like ours exist. Without a County Department of Veterans' Affairs, many veterans, dependents, and surviving spouses could have been lost with no guidance on their benefits. *Our office was instrumental in securing an estimated \$3.5 million in new benefits for Grand Traverse County Veterans, and their survivors from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).* This amount does not consider the money that we helped our Veterans save by assisting them in accessing VA healthcare, home loans, or educational benefits. Consequently, the office continues to be a significant and judicious governmental entity at the county level and continues to have an extremely positive impact on the economy of Grand Traverse County.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael W. Roof".

Michael W. Roof
Director

GTC COUNTY VETERANS' AFFAIRS BY THE NUMBERS

Grand Traverse has the 22nd highest veteran population in the state of Michigan. Grand Traverse is 41st (\$4.61) in the state when it comes to per capita compensation and pension benefits. The data below is the scope of work done from FY 2020.

OFFICE STATISTICS– FY 2020

Office Visits

Grand Traverse 1,458

New Clients

2018 424

2019 450

2020 239

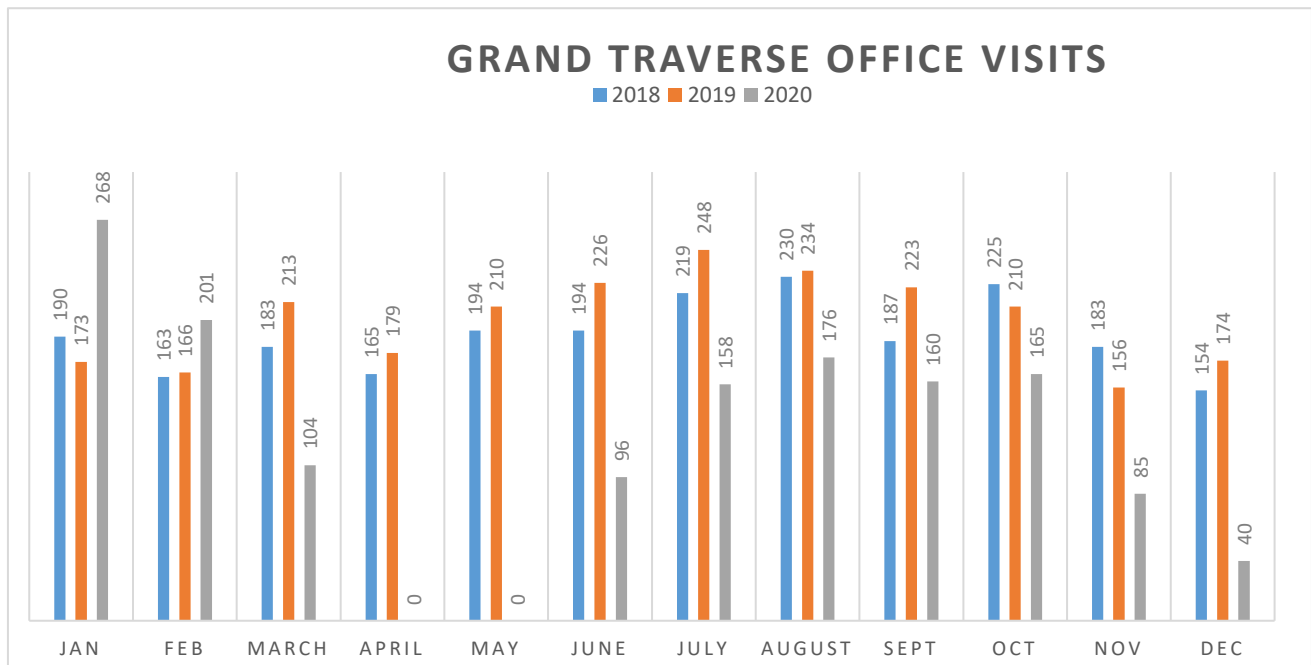
Phone Calls

Incoming 3,730

Outgoing 3,031

Mail

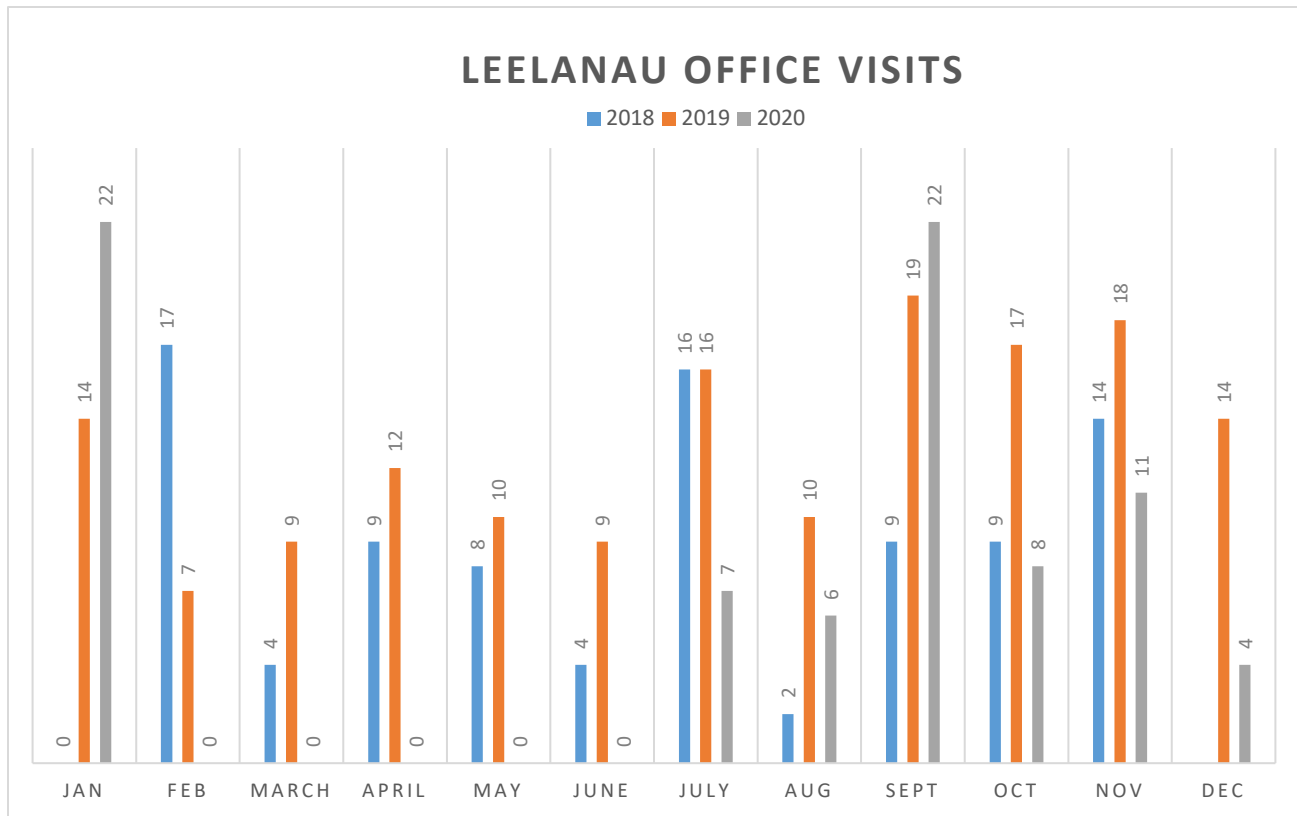
Outgoing Mail 253



The number of office visits in 2020 is 1,000 less than in 2019 due to COVID-19 restrictions. The Grand Traverse County buildings were locked to the public and in some instances, the office was working remotely. Looking at January 2020, there were 268 visits, which is more than any other single month in the last two years. All the advertising and outreach work done was directly correlated to growing awareness of the office; However, when COVID-19 hit and shut everything back down.

Office Visits

Leelanau 80 (90 less than in 2019)



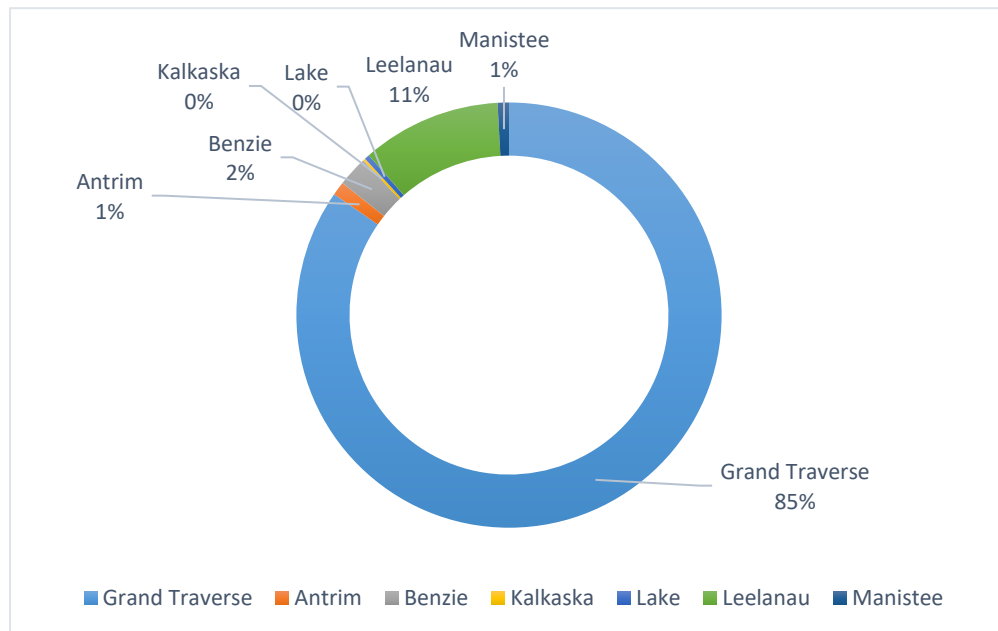
The Leelanau office is staffed only one day a week through set appointments and walk-ins.

Leelanau County was impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions as well. The county buildings were locked and staff worked remotely for sometime.

This is the same scenario that happened in Grand Traverse County. Looking at January 2020, there were 22 visits, which is more than any other month in the last two years. All the advertising and outreach work done was working to grow awareness of the office, then COVID-19 hit and everything slowed back down. There was some recovery in the months ending of 2020.

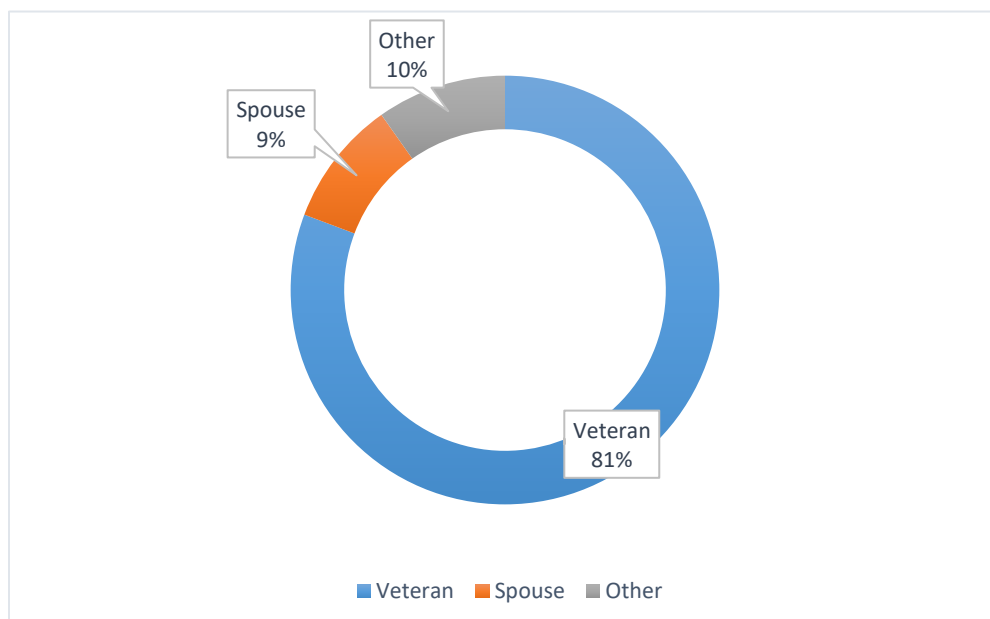
OFFICE VISIT DEMOGRAPHICS

The Grand Traverse Veterans Affairs Committee believes that our office should assist any veteran or dependant that visits our office. However, our office is restricted to only assist Grand Traverse County Veterans and dependants with financial assistance or the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund.



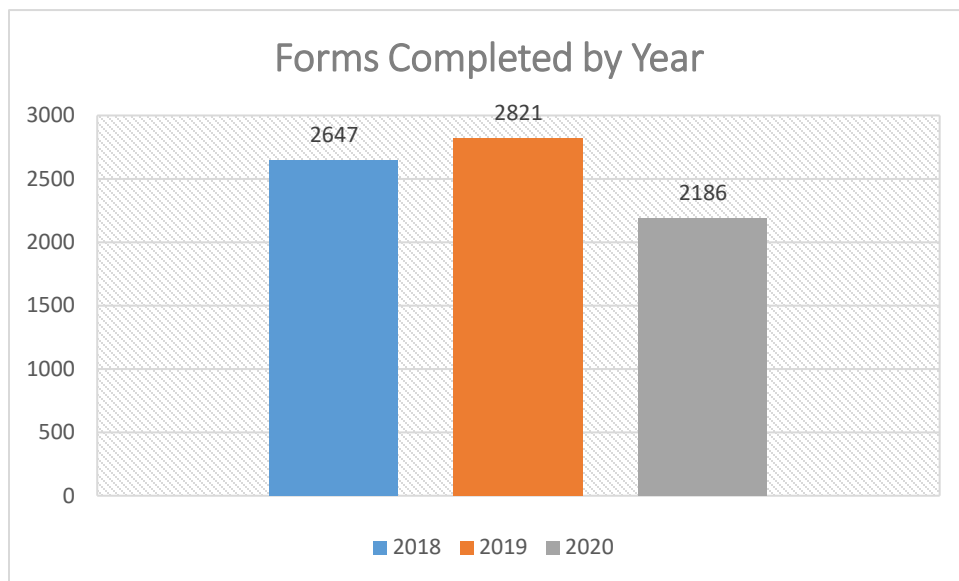
Compared to 2019 data, our office has seen a 6.5% increase in Grand Traverse County office visits.

With the reduction in Leelanau County office visits during COVID-19, it is possible that residents were making their way to the Grand Traverse County office.

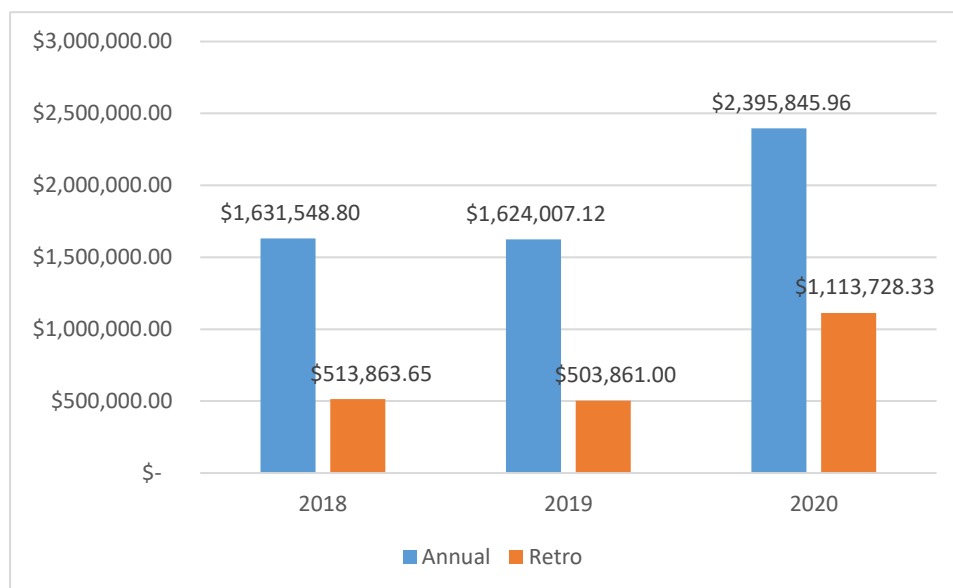


ADVOCATING FOR OUR VETERANS

Our advocacy work involves assisting in the filing of claims for compensation and pension, to local, state, and federal agencies which includes the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Our Veteran Service Officers track every claim that they process from beginning to end. While our work throughout the pandemic may show fewer forms completed, that does not mean the quality of work was affected.



Due to the increase of outreach services and great work done by our staff, the amount of VA benefit payments has substantially increased over the previous year. The chart below shows the amount of new annual compensation that the office was responsible for bringing into the area.



BURIAL & MARKER EXPENSES – FY 2020

Michigan Public Act 235 of 1911 (MCL 35.801-35.804) mandates the payment by the county of \$300 towards the burial of eligible veterans and their spouses and to set government markers. It is the duty of the Veterans Affairs Committee to administer this program.

While we processed 32 applications for burial benefits in FY20, we were only able to approve 23 County Burial Allowance applications for a total expenditure of \$ 5,850.00

In 2019, a new application was created that held applicants to the statute guideline of having under \$40,000 in assets. Which has resulted in fewer approvals.

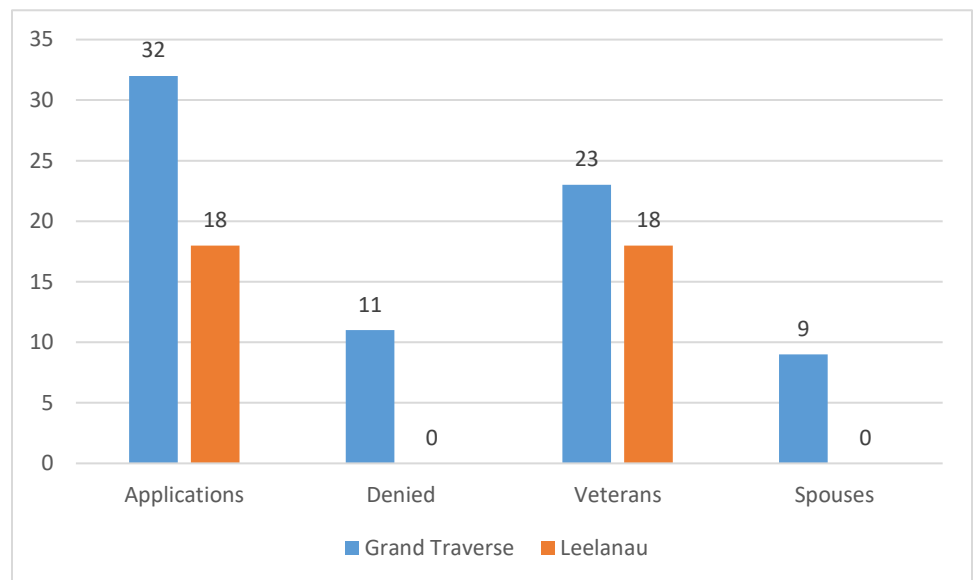
Burial Applications

Grand Traverse

2018	61
2019	54
2020	32

Leelanau

2018	22
2019	24
2020	18



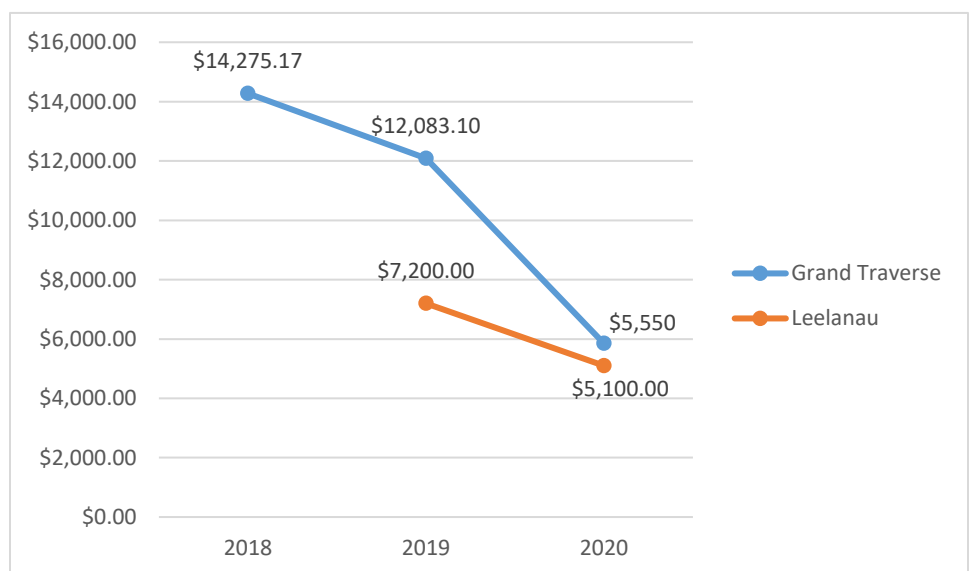
County Burial Expenditures

Grand Traverse

2018	\$14,275
2019	\$12,083
2020	\$ 5,550

Leelanau

2018	\$5,850
2019	\$7,200
2020	\$5,100



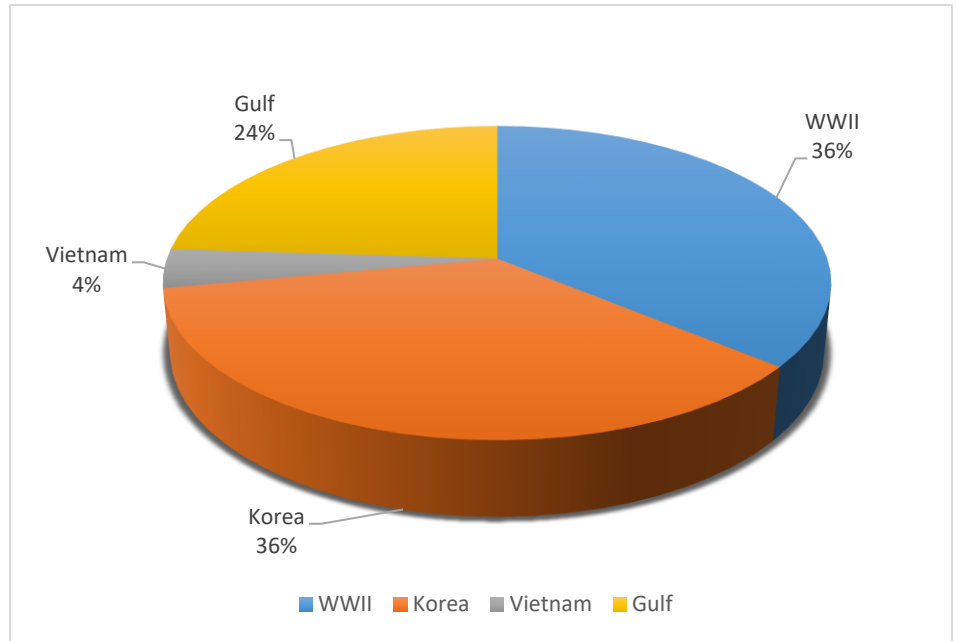
Burial Applications by Era

Grand Traverse

WWII	9
Korea	9
Vietnam	1
Gulf	6

Leelanau

WWII	8
Korea	4
Vietnam	0
Gulf	1



RELIEF EXPENSES – FY 2020

Under Michigan Act 214 of 1899, the county board of commissioners of each county shall annually levy a tax, not exceeding 1/10 of a mill on each dollar, to be levied and collected as provided by law, upon the taxable property of each township and city, for their respective counties, for the *purpose of creating a fund for the relief of honorably discharged indigent members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and women's auxiliaries and the indigent spouses, minor children, and parents of each indigent or deceased member who served during a period of war as described in 38 CFR 3.2.*

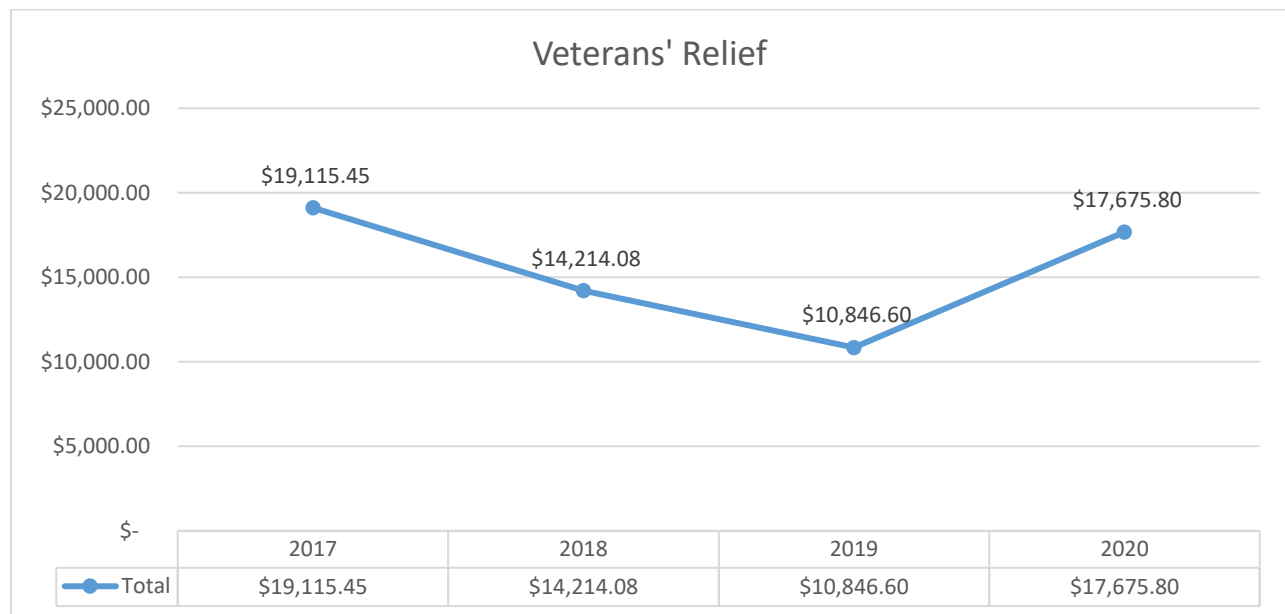
While the emergency relief budget for FY 2020 was \$25,000, only \$17,675.80 was spent.

Emergency Relief Applications

33 Approved

Annual Relief Expenditures

\$17,675.80



The Veterans' Relief fund saw an increase in expenditures due to COVID-19. Many more veterans and dependents were out of work or underemployed. The office continues to push emergency requests over \$1,000 through the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund.

GRANTS / AWARDS

The Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency (MVAA) created the Community Veterans Service Fund (CVSF) to assist the County Department of Veterans Affairs' throughout Michigan to raise public awareness about their services. Our office was awarded \$84,733 in FY20. The county received \$50,000 direct payment, and the remaining \$34,733 was repaid on a reimbursement basis. There was money "leftover" from 2019 so the award amount was higher than normal.

Projects paid for by the CVSF grant listed below:

- Postage \$14,409.77
 - The office was instrumental in mailing a copy of GATHER Veterans to every veteran in the county, for the purpose of connecting veterans to the office where they could get more benefits.
- Social Media \$11,082.00
 - The office partnered with GATHER Media to manage all social media platforms to help raise awareness of our services. Social media management consisted of posting a minimum of 3 weekly posts to FB, LinkedIn, and Twitter accounts.
- Billboard, Radio & TV Advertising \$ 55,352.97
 - The office contracted with Lamar Billboards to raise awareness to those traveling in and around Grand Traverse County.
 - The office contracted with Sinclair Broadcast Group to air television commercials in high profile spots to get the attention of those while at home watching all local ABD and NBC network channels.
 - Radio advertising was promoted over WCCW 107.5, WTCM 580 AM, WCM 103.5, and KLT 97.5 during strategic times and programs.
- Meijer Vouchers
 - Meijer grocery vouchers for \$2,449.93 were given out to those impacted by COVID-19.

Without the grant, none of these projects would have come to fruition. The impact of the MVAA CVSF grant has helped us reach veterans we might not have impacted without it.

In October, the office was awarded the FY 2021 CVSF grant in the amount of \$58,702.60.

MICHIGAN VETERANS TRUST FUND



In 1946, the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund was created from \$50 million in post-World War II reserve funds. From utility bills to home repairs to medical costs, the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund (MVTF) offers combat-era veterans and their families a way to overcome unexpected expenses and get back on their feet financially.

The Grand Traverse County Department of Veterans Affairs has a Trust Fund Agent that assists veterans in applying for this financial assistance program. *The MVTF provides another avenue of financial assistance to veterans and their families at NO COST to Grand Traverse County taxpayers.*

Applications for assistance are reviewed and decided upon by a committee appointed by the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund Board of Trustees. Appeals and reviews are sent to the board for consideration at their monthly meeting.

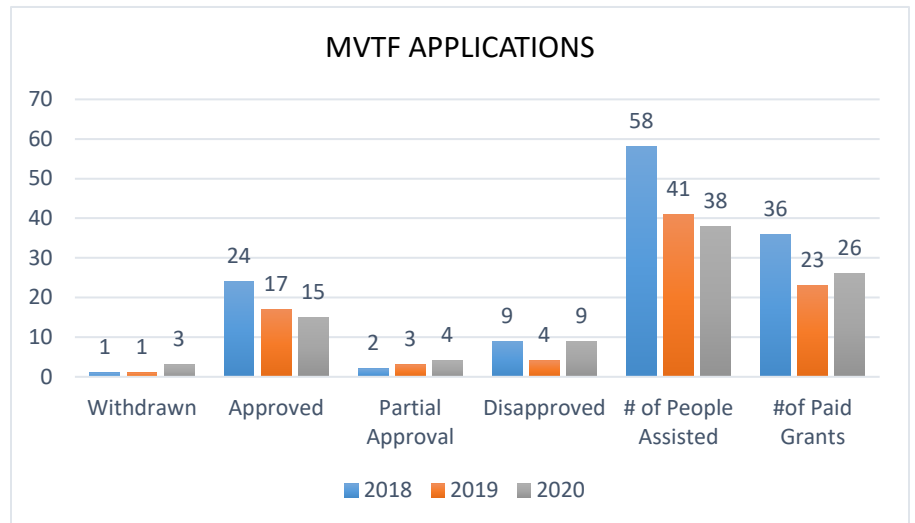
2020 MVTF County Committee Members

John Lefler
Ron Hofmeister
Brad Finkbeiner
John Kuhlman

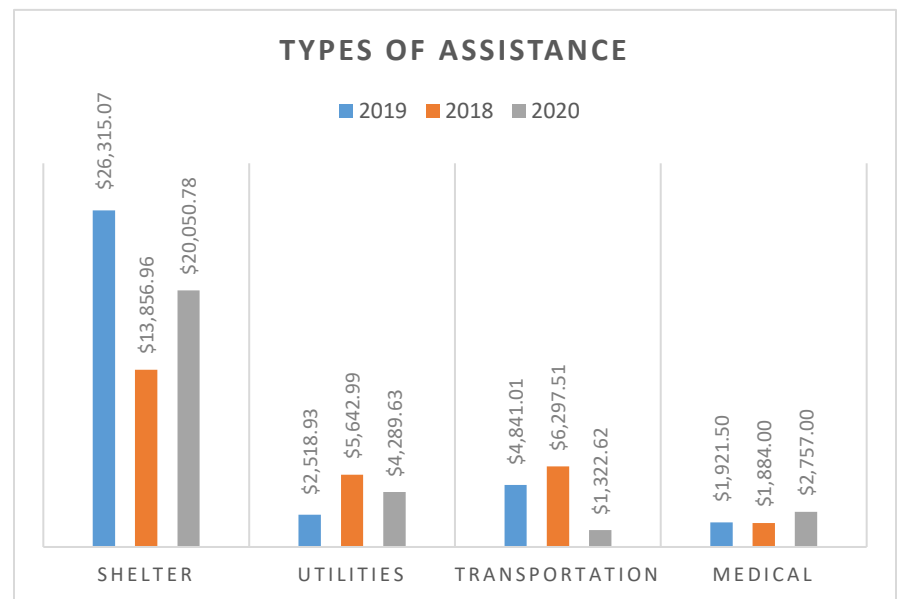
FY 2020 MVTF DETAILS

Grand Traverse County

Withdrawn	3
Approved	15
Partial Approval	4
Disapproved	9
# of People Assisted	38
# of Paid Grants	26
Total # of Apps	31

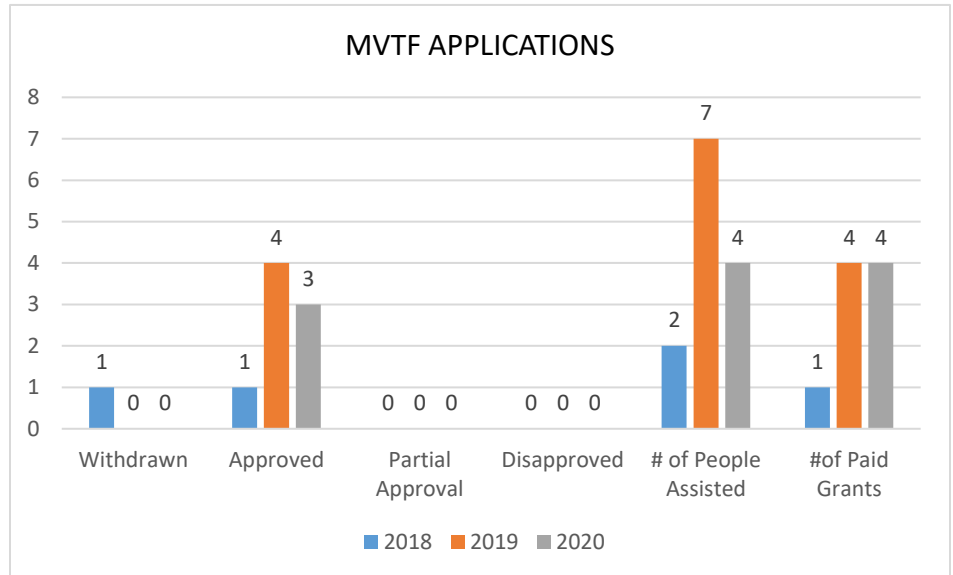


Shelter	\$ 20,050.78
Utilities	\$ 4,289.63
Transportation	\$ 1,322.62
Medical	\$ 2,757.00
Total	\$ 28,420.00

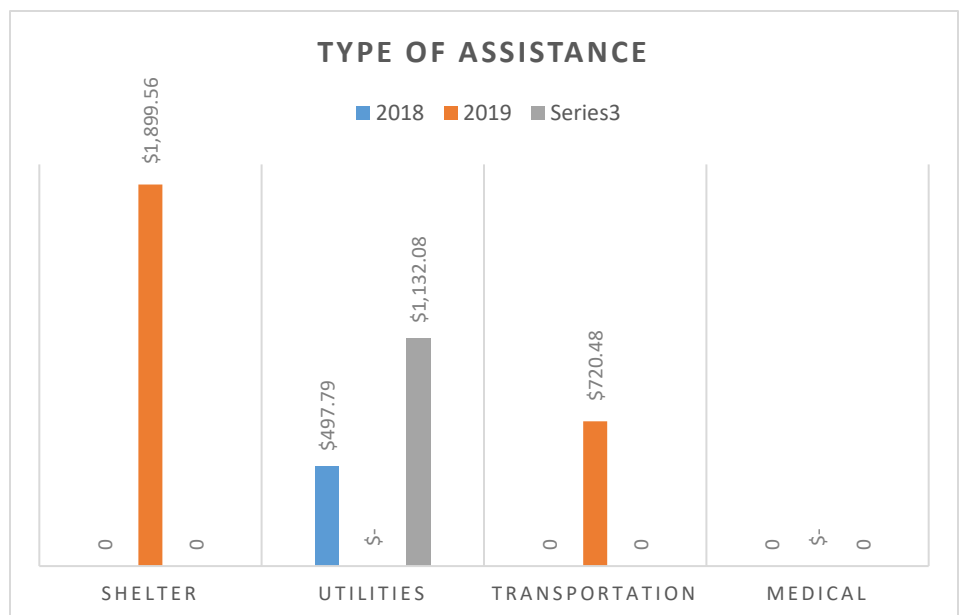


Leelanau County

Withdrawn	0
Approved	3
Partial Approved	0
Disapproved	0
# of People Assisted	4
# of Paid Grants	4
Total # of Apps	3



Shelter	\$1,132.08
Utilities	0
Transportation	0
Medical	0



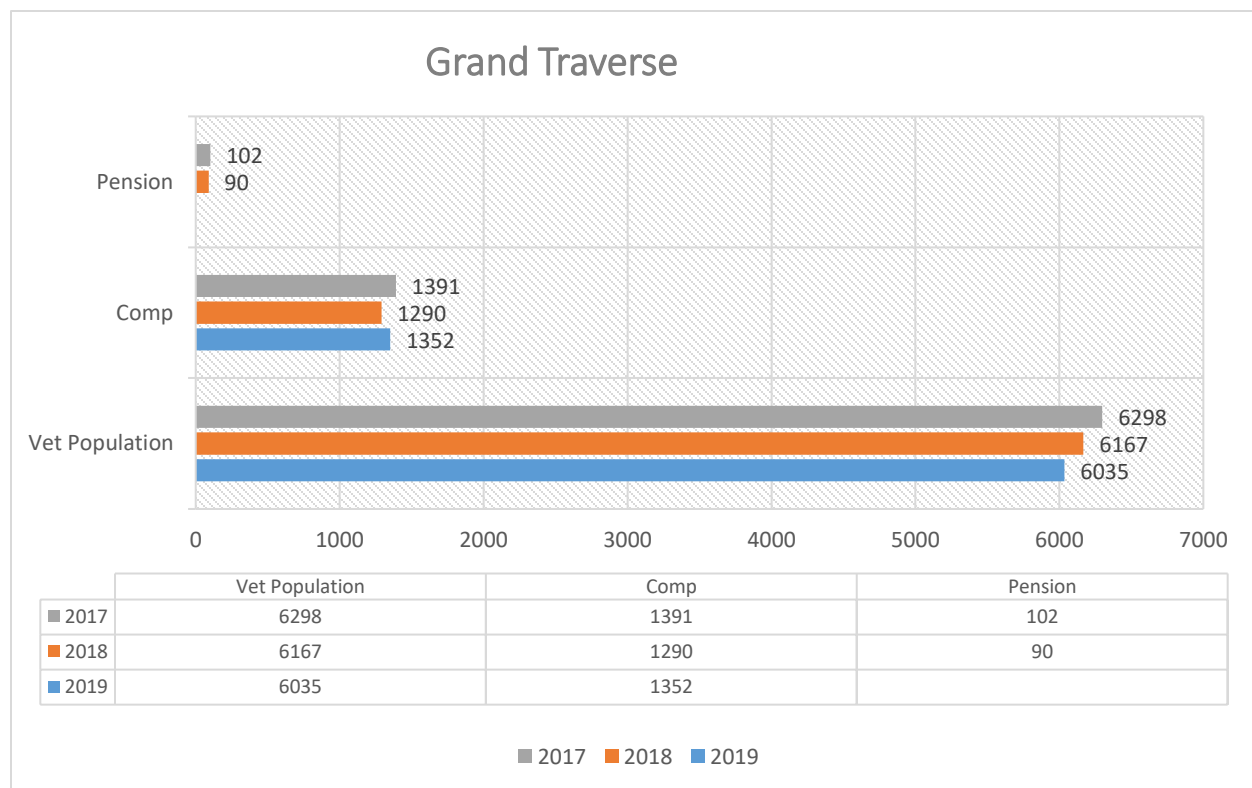
US DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS EXPENDITURES

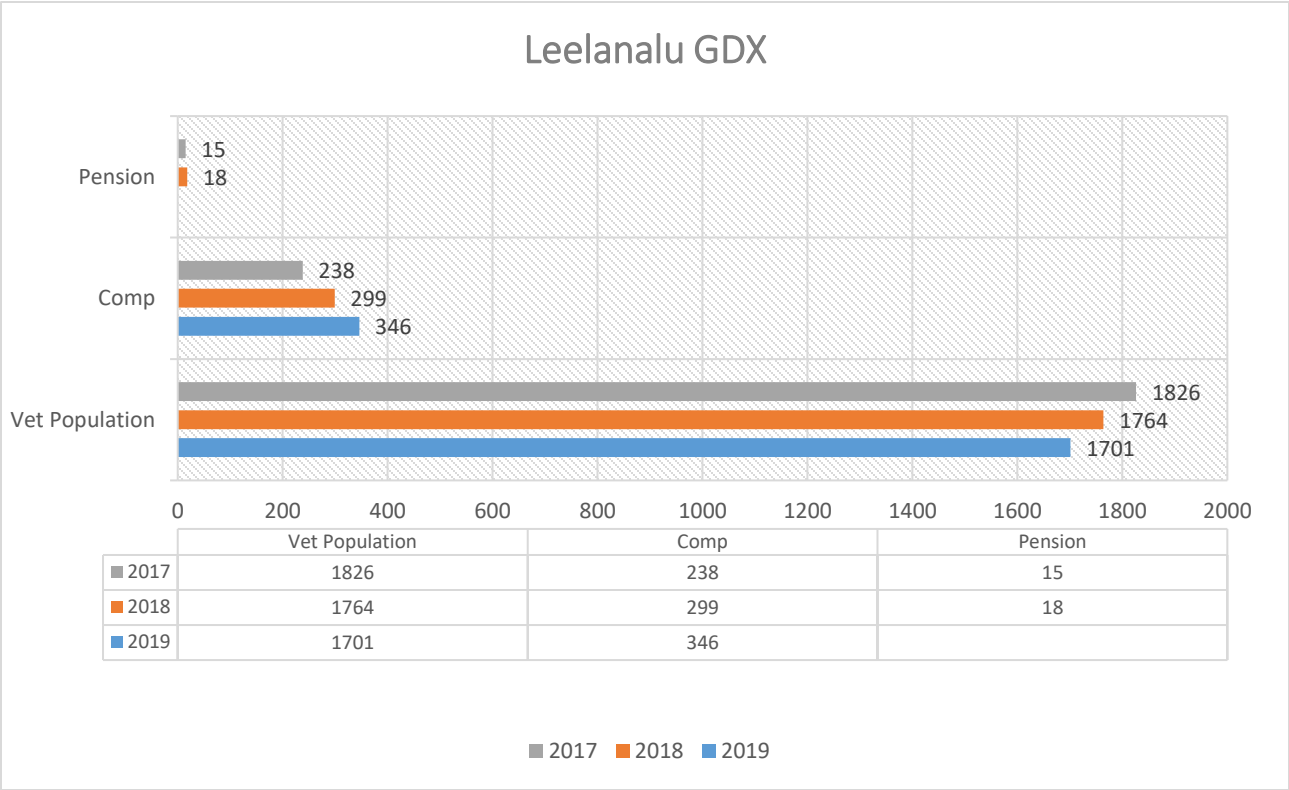
The chart below summarizes the monetary benefits disbursed to Grand Traverse and Leelanau County veterans as well as their dependents for Federal Benefits. The GDX report is always a year behind due to the amount of data necessary to compile these reports, but this gives our office a baseline to start from for reporting purposes.



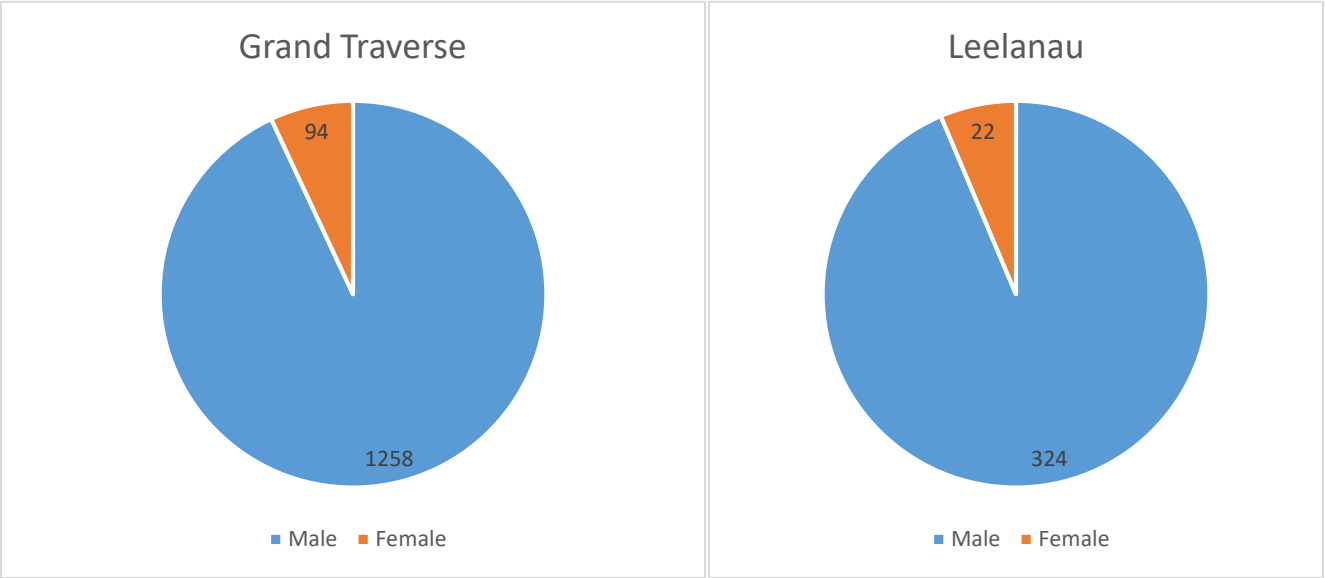
While Grand Traverse County is 25th for the amount of VA dollars spent within the state, we are ranked 41st when it comes to Compensation & Pension per veteran capita.

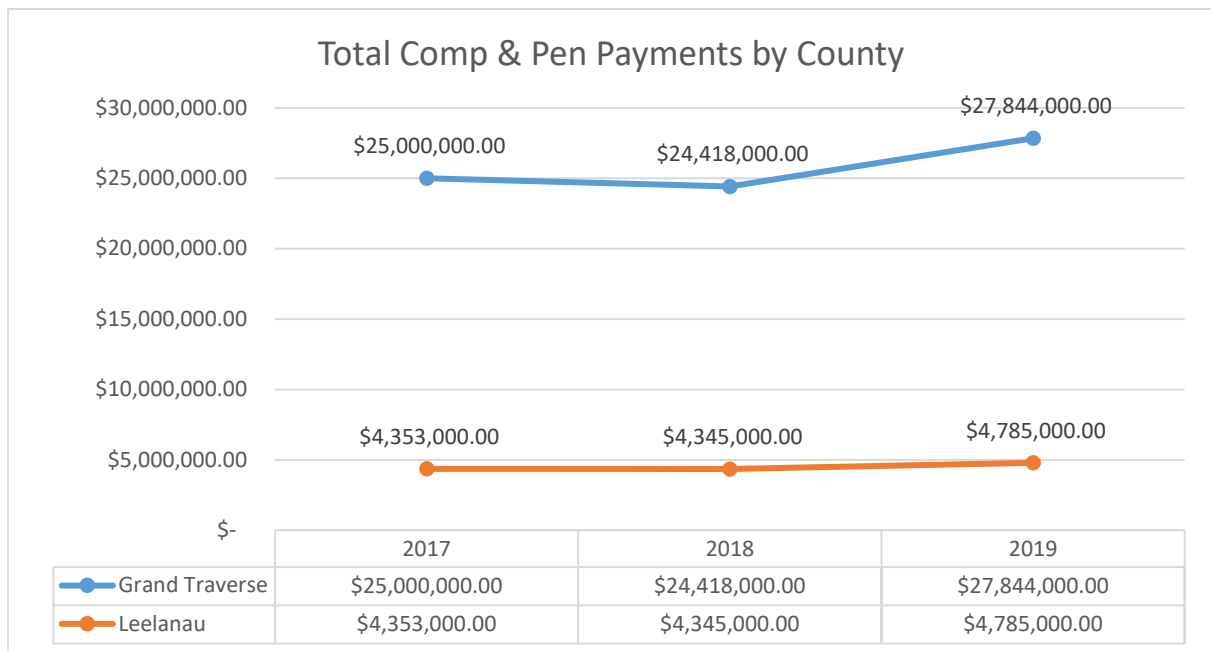
The graphs below help shed light on the veteran demographics for our service areas for the total population of veterans within our county in relation to the number of veterans receiving compensation or pension benefits.



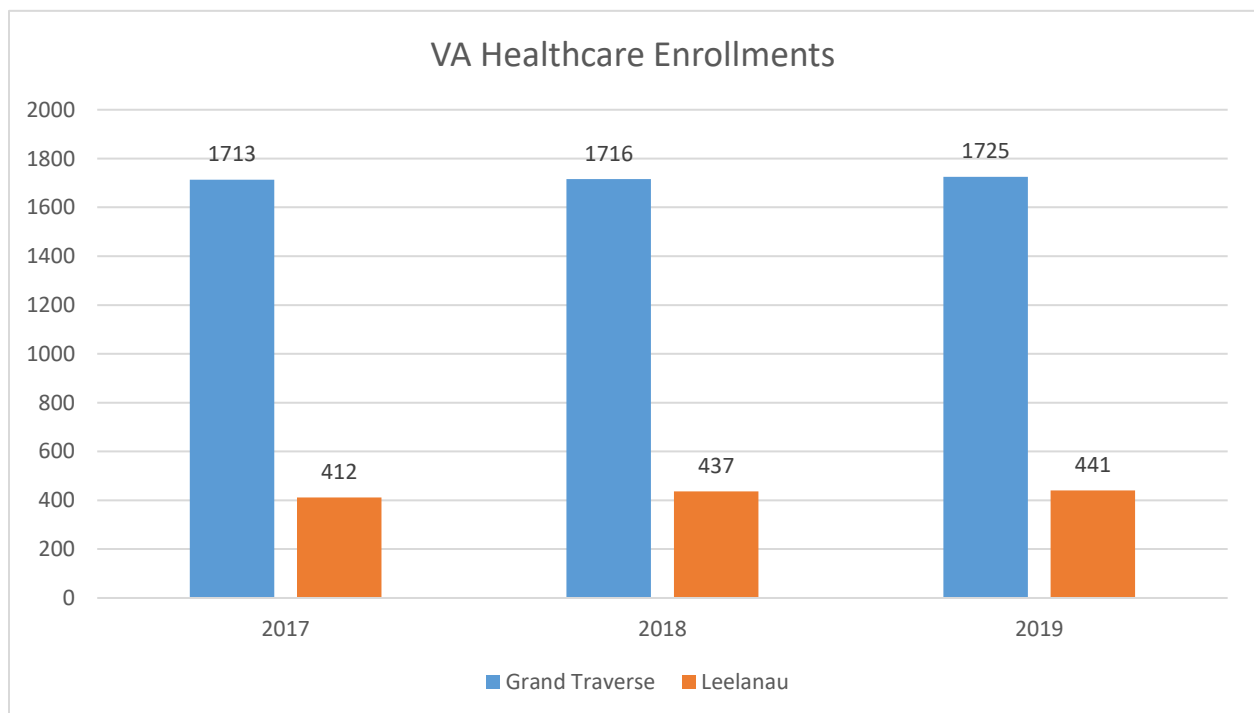


The pie charts below show the gender break down of those receiving VA compensation or pension payments.





The VA strategically places healthcare resources proportionate to the number of veterans enrolled in VA Healthcare. The chart below shows a slight increase in enrolled veterans since 2017.



2020 OVERVIEW

GATHER Veterans Magazine

The Gather Veterans magazine transformed into the Michigan GATHER Veterans magazine. GATHER is no longer strictly focused on Grand Traverse County, but rather on helping veterans throughout Michigan. The office continues to assist with content and building relationships to serve Veterans.

Vet Center

The office has a Veteran Service Officer at the Vet Center every Friday to assist veterans in filing claims. This partnership allows veterans attending counseling to see a VSO in one location.

Veterans Treatment Court

The office will be a part of the VTC for the 86th District Court, in the capacity of Volunteer Veteran Mentor Coordinator. Our role will be to find, train, and connect mentors to justice-involved veterans.

Incarcerated Veterans Outreach

The office has a Veteran Service Officer meet with incarcerated veterans to discuss VA benefits. During COVID, all these meetings were done virtually through Zoom. The office receives daily reports from Grand Traverse and Leelanau jails to update the VSO regarding the veterans housed in their facilities.



2021 GOALS

COVID-19 completely shut down outreach efforts in 2020. Events were cancelled and outreach talks were halted. Some of the strategies posted are from 2020. Since these did not happen, an attempt is underway to reschedule in 2021 will be made.

Increase VA Healthcare applicants

Our office will coordinate multiple events to enroll veterans in VA Healthcare. One of the ways VA measures how they spend money is the number of veterans signed up for VA Healthcare. The more veterans we have signed up, the more beneficial it will be for our county.

Senior Facilities

Establish VA Benefit presentations for veterans and dependents at senior facilities located in Grand Traverse and Leelanau Counties. This is to help educate their residents on the availability of Pension benefits to assist with medical care. This may also include monthly meetings in locations where a VSO can facilitate the claims process.

Peshawbestown Outreach

Our office is looking to provide a better service to Native American residents. We are in the process of building a relationship with Peshawbestown officials. We hope to secure a location to better assist their residents in filing for veterans' benefits within of their community.

Continue Community Health Outreach

As many veterans use private healthcare, there is not always a connection point to veteran services in the area. Our office will explore relationships with local hospitals, healthcare providers, and cancer centers that would refer veterans to our office for assistance.

STAFF

Director

Michael W. Roof

Office Specialist

Michael Redmond

Mickki Smith

Veteran Service Officers

Lucas Clark

Brandon Corbin

Chris Dailey



2020 VA COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Chairman

Robert “Art” Eisner

Vice-Chairman

Ron Hofmeister

Secretary

Bob Johnson

Committee Members

Mollie Sourek

Racheal Sherman

Steven Chowen

Neal Horning