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Secretary of Maryland Veterans Department talks mental health, diversity | Q&A



File photo of Ed Rothstein on Wednesday, January 11, 2023.



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Ahead of Veterans Day on Tuesday, Col. Edward C. “Ed” Rothstein, secretary of the Maryland Department of Veterans and Military Families, talked with The Baltimore

Sun about his priorities for his office, challenges facing veterans and his own experience returning to civilian life.

Rothstein was commissioned into the Army in 1986 and went on to serve in the Chemical Corps and Military Intelligence. His assignments included senior intelligence posts at the Pentagon and the National Security Agency, as well as deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Rothstein later commanded Fort George G. Meade, overseeing more than 200,000 personnel. Following his retirement in 2014, he worked in economic development and served two terms as a Carroll County commissioner.

Democratic Gov. Wes Moore appointed him in July to lead the department.

The conversation has been edited for clarity and brevity.

What message do you hope to send this Veterans Day, especially in this volatile political climate?

As a veteran, this day holds deep personal meaning. It's a reminder that service doesn't end when the uniform comes off. I want Maryland's veterans and their families to know they are not alone. In challenging times, our focus remains on unity, service and ensuring that every veteran and military family in Maryland knows we will leave no one behind.

Many veterans struggle to access federal benefits. How is the department helping to simplify that process?

Accessing federal benefits can be overwhelming. Through our Service and Benefits Program, we provide free, personalized assistance to veterans, dependents and survivors seeking benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Defense and the State of Maryland. Our VA-accredited service officers, located in offices across the state, work one-on-one with veterans to file claims and enroll in benefits.

Last year alone, we secured over \$54.4 million in federal VA benefits for more than 6,000 Maryland veterans, dependents and survivors — a 20% increase over the previous year, with a 95 percent VA approval rate.

I encourage every veteran to schedule a benefits checkup today to ensure they're receiving the support they deserve. And I challenge all Marylanders to reach out to someone who has worn the uniform and ask if they've connected with a VA service officer recently. A simple conversation can make a life-changing difference.

What are some of the challenges facing Maryland veterans right now?

One of the greatest challenges veterans face is the loss of mission and purpose that comes when you take off the uniform. For many of us, service gives our lives structure, direction and meaning. When that changes, it can leave a real void. I've been through that transition myself, and I know it takes time to find your next mission.

Another hurdle is translating military experience into civilian employment. Many veterans don't realize how valuable their leadership, teamwork and problem-solving skills are — or how well they fit in today's workforce. That's why we're working closely with employers and state partners to help make those connections and expand opportunities for gainful employment across Maryland.

How is your department addressing mental health and suicide prevention among veterans?

As a veteran, this issue is deeply personal to me. Too many of our brothers and sisters in arms continue to struggle in silence. I did, too. I'm proud to say that today I feel great, and that's because of the care and support I received through the VA.

At the Maryland Department of Veterans and Military Families, we're working every day to address this stigma and strengthen coordination with the VA, the Department of Health's Maryland's Commitment to Veterans and nonprofit partners through the Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families.

This partnership brings together leaders from across Maryland to identify at-risk veterans, improve care transitions and promote connection. We've trained more than 400 partners statewide in military cultural awareness and mental health support — equipping them to better understand and respond to the unique needs of veterans and their families.

We're also working to break the stigma surrounding these invisible wounds, expand access to care and ensure that no one who served ever feels alone in this fight.

What about veterans who might not be connected to traditional support networks?

Partnership is at the heart of how we serve Maryland's veterans. No single agency can meet every need, so we're focused on breaking down silos and building connections across state, local and nonprofit partners. Through initiatives like Maryland Joins Forces, we're bringing together government agencies, county veteran commissions, community organizations and service providers to share information, host outreach events and develop coordinated solutions.

Maryland's veteran population is diverse and includes many service members who are women and part of minority groups. How is the department meeting their needs?

This year, Maryland expanded access to state veterans' benefits through legislation building on the Restoration of Honor Act. The bill broadens the definition of "honorable discharge" to include veterans discharged due to PTSD, traumatic brain injury, military sexual trauma or past discriminatory policies related to sexual orientation or gender identity.

Through our Women Veterans and Inclusion Program, which has been active for several years, we're ensuring every veteran has a seat at the table and sees themselves represented in everything we do.

What role do you see for Maryland's younger generation of veterans?

Maryland's younger veterans, especially those from post-9/11 conflicts, have experienced service, deployment and transition in a rapidly changing world. Their insights are essential to shaping programs that meet the realities veterans face today.

When younger veterans step forward to serve again in their communities, on commissions or through mentorship, they ensure that the future of veterans' services remains strong, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of all who served.

How can Marylanders support veterans and their families?

First and foremost, two words mean the most: Thank you. Always take a moment to thank those who have served — and don't forget their families. When someone thanks me for my service, I say, "Thank you for giving me a reason." That simple exchange says everything about Veterans Day, connection and gratitude.

In today's challenging times, one of the most meaningful and impactful ways Marylanders can make a difference is by contributing to the Maryland Veterans Trust

Fund. The fund is a 501(c)(3) organization that provides financial assistance to Maryland veterans and their families facing temporary hardships. It relies on generous donations from the public to help cover essential expenses such as rent, mortgage and utilities.

What are your top priorities for the department in the coming year?

We'll continue strengthening our Service and Benefits Program so veterans and their families receive the benefits they've earned, while expanding community partnerships that meet needs at the local level. We're also focused on growing the Maryland Veterans Trust Fund, which provides direct support to veterans facing hardship.

Above all, we'll keep listening to our communities and building collaborations that make a real difference. When we work together — state agencies, local partners and nonprofits — we can reach every veteran and family who needs us.

And as always, life is good.