

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5171

As Passed Senate, March 2, 2015

Title: An act relating to the definition of veteran for the purposes of the county veterans assistance fund.

Brief Description: Concerning the definition of veteran for the purposes of the county veterans assistance fund.

Sponsors: Senators Bailey, Conway, Hobbs, Hewitt, Angel, Chase and Rolfes.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Government Operations & Security (Note: Senate Resolution 8609 adopted January 27, 2015, renamed the Committee on Government Operations & State Security to Committee on Government Operations & Security): 1/27/15, 2/03/15 [DP].
Passed Senate: 3/02/15, 47-0.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS & SECURITY

Majority Report: Do pass.

Signed by Senators Roach, Chair; Benton, Vice Chair; Pearson, Vice Chair; Liias, Ranking Minority Member; Dansel, Habib and McCoy.

Staff: Samuel Brown (786-7470)

Background: Each county must establish a veterans' assistance fund (VAF). The VAF is funded by a property tax levied against the taxable property of the county in a sum equal to the amount that would be raised by between \$0.01125–\$0.27 per \$1,000.00 of assessed value. Expenditures from the VAF and interest earned on VAF balance may only be used for the following purposes:

- the veterans' assistance programs;
- the burial or cremation of a deceased indigent veteran or a deceased family member of an indigent veteran; or
- the direct and indirect costs incurred in the administration of the fund.

Veterans' assistance programs provide relief for indigent veterans and their families. In each county, a veterans' advisory board determines the needs of local indigent veterans and the available resources and programs that could benefit indigent veterans and their families. The definition of veteran includes active service members who have served in an armed conflict

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and members of the armed forces, reserves, or National Guard who have fulfilled their service obligations and received an honorable or medical discharge. Indigent status is determined by each county, based on one or more of the following factors: public assistance received; income level; and the ability to afford basic needs. The family of a veteran is considered the spouse or domestic partner, surviving spouse or domestic partner, and dependent children of an otherwise qualifying living or deceased veteran.

Summary of Bill: The definition of veteran for purposes of VAFs is modified to include any person who served in the active military, or was a World War II-era civil service crew member and meets any of the following criteria:

- at least 180 days of active service, with an honorable discharge;
- receipt of an honorable or general under honorable characterization of service with a medical reason for separation, regardless of length of service; or
- receipt of an honorable discharge with a federal Veterans Affairs rating for service-connected disability, regardless of length of service.

The definition of veteran is further modified to include the following:

- a current member of the National Guard or armed forces reserve activated by presidential call-up for non-training purposes; and
- a former National Guard or armed forces reserve member who fulfilled the initial service obligation and was released with an honorable characterization of service.

Counties may expand VAF eligibility at the discretion of the county legislative authority, in consultation with the county veterans' advisory board. The definition of the family of a veteran for VAF purposes is expanded to include the family of a service member killed in action, regardless of length of service.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Committee/Commission/Task Force Created: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: It's time to allow changes at the county levels. The goal of the bill is to take three existing statutes and put them in one place, allowing county employees to look only in one place when determining eligibility. Often times a change will be made to other references and the county won't know that changes have been made. The bill will allow counties to streamline the process and meet their county's unique needs. County VAF representatives have weighed in on the definition and have no opposition. King County has two veterans' assistance programs, but some folks aren't eligible for services provided under a voter-approved levy. This bill would make the definition consistent, allowing King County to determine eligibility under the levy and work with previously ineligible veterans.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Bailey, prime sponsor; Heidi Audette, WA State Dept. of Veteran's Affairs; Joel Estey, citizen.