

# HOUSE BILL REPORT

## HB 2773

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**As Reported by House Committee On:**  
Community Development, Housing & Tribal Affairs

**Title:** An act relating to creating the veterans service officer program.

**Brief Description:** Creating the veterans service officer program.

**Sponsors:** Representatives Maycumber, Chapman, Van Werven, Shea, Steele, Appleton, Young and Reeves.

**Brief History:**

**Committee Activity:**

Community Development, Housing & Tribal Affairs: 1/24/18, 1/25/18 [DP].

**Brief Summary of Bill**

- Creates the Veterans Service Officer Program to provide funding for counties to establish veterans service officers.

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### HOUSE COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, HOUSING & TRIBAL AFFAIRS

**Majority Report:** Do pass. Signed by 6 members: Representatives Ryu, Chair; Macri, Vice Chair; Barkis, Ranking Minority Member; McCabe, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Jenkin and Reeves.

**Staff:** Kirsten Lee (786-7133).

**Background:**

Veterans service officers (VSOs) assist veterans and their families with claims for federal veterans benefits. The VSOs work at both state and county levels, in addition to working for private nonprofit groups that are typically veteran-focused. In some counties, the VSOs are funded through local veterans assistance programs established to help provide relief and assistance to indigent veterans and their families. Counties are authorized to levy special taxes to fund their veterans assistance programs.

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*This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.*

In order for a VSO to represent a veteran in his or her United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) claims, the VSO must undergo a formal application and training process and be accredited by the VA. Lists of accredited VSOs for each state are maintained by the VA. The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) facilitates the accreditation process for local VSOs and currently assists local governments and organizations funding their own VSOs in this process.

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**Summary of Bill:**

The Veterans Service Officer Program (Program) is created within the WDVA to provide funding to underserved counties with populations of 100,000 or less, enabling them to establish local VSOs. Under the Program, subject to amounts appropriated, the WDVA is required to:

- educate certain military members, veterans, and local governments about the Program; and
- develop partnerships with and provide funding to participating eligible counties to help establish local accredited VSOs.

The application process for the Program is prescribed by the WDVA.

A nonappropriated account, the Veterans Service Officer Fund (Fund), is established to receive appropriations from the Legislature and funds from other sources for the Program. The Director of the WDVA or his or her designee is authorized to make expenditures from the Fund. Funding from the WDVA through the Fund is available to eligible counties on a first-come, first-served basis.

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**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Available.

**Effective Date:** The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

**Staff Summary of Public Testimony:**

(In support) The Legislature needs to provide veterans with the services that they need. There are not enough VSOs available to help educate veterans about the services available to them. In many counties, the funds that are available are not sufficient to fund VSOs locally.

(Opposed) None.

(Other) This bill will enable rural counties to have an accredited expert available to provide veterans with access to VA benefits. This type of program works, as demonstrated by the \$144 million that has come to veterans through WDVA-supported veterans service

organizations. Through these decentralized programs, over 10,000 VA claims have been made. The VA payments received by veterans help to provide income to veterans, while also having a positive economic impact on the communities where veterans live. The WDVA has certified county-funded VSOs thus far. In some counties, there is no funding for VSOs or positions have been cut. For instance, Mason County had a caseworker for veterans, but the position has been eliminated.

**Persons Testifying:** (In support) Representative Maycumber, prime sponsor; and Tom Davis, Mason County.

(Other) Mary Forbes and Steven Gill, Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs.

**Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying:** None.