

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SSB 5900

As Passed House:
March 5, 2020

Title: An act relating to promoting access to earned benefits and services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer veterans.

Brief Description: Promoting access to earned benefits and services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer veterans.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Ways & Means (originally sponsored by Senators Randall, Wilson, C., Takko, Saldaña, Van De Wege, Salomon, Liias, Das, Pedersen and Nguyen).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Housing, Community Development & Veterans: 2/21/20, 2/25/20 [DP];
Appropriations: 2/29/20 [DP].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 3/5/20, 87-10.

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Creates the position of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Coordinator within the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT & VETERANS

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 7 members: Representatives Ryu, Chair; Morgan, Vice Chair; Gildon, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Frame, Johnson, J., Leavitt and Ramel.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 1 member: Representative Jenkin, Ranking Minority Member.

Staff: Cassie Jones (786-7303).

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

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.

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 29 members: Representatives Ormsby, Chair; Robinson, 1st Vice Chair; Bergquist, 2nd Vice Chair; Stokesbary, Ranking Minority Member; Rude, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Caldier, Chandler, Chopp, Cody, Corry, Dolan, Dye, Fitzgibbon, Hansen, Hoff, Hudgins, Kilduff, Macri, Mosbrucker, Pettigrew, Ryu, Schmick, Senn, Springer, Steele, Sullivan, Tarleton, Tharinger and Ybarra.

Minority Report: Without recommendation. Signed by 1 member: Representative Sutherland.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 1 member: Representative Kraft.

Staff: Linda Merelle (786-7092).

Background:

The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) is a state agency created in 1975. The powers and duties of the DVA include cooperating with local governments and the federal government, particularly regarding participation in federal grants-in-aid programs relating to veterans and veterans affairs. The DVA provides many services to veterans and their families, including medical care, assistance with claims for benefits, estate management, counseling, and financial assistance. The DVA assists veterans with education, training, and employment.

Summary of Bill:

The position of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Coordinator (Coordinator) is created within the DVA. The Coordinator's duties include:

- conducting outreach to, and providing assistance designed for the unique needs of, LGBTQ veterans, and their spouses and dependents;
- assisting LGBTQ veterans in applying for an upgrade to the character of a discharge from service or a change in the narrative reason for a discharge from service;
- assisting LGBTQ veterans, and their spouses and dependents, in applying for benefits; and
- developing and distributing information to LGBTQ veterans, and their spouses and dependents, regarding veterans' benefits and other benefit programs.

The DVA must prepare and submit a report to the Governor, the Joint Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs, and the appropriate legislative standing committees regarding the implementation and status of the coordinator by December 15, 2021. This report must include the number of veterans served, the type of assistance provided, any recommendations for the improvement and expansion of services provided by the coordinator, and any recommendations for legislative changes.

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 (Housing, Community Development & Veterans):

(In support) Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) veterans often feel isolated and stigmatized and there is a concerning rate of suicide among these veterans. They are proud of the time that they have served but they have not felt welcomed by veteran support services. This bill seeks to connect veterans to services they need, deserve, and have earned. A coordinator trained to meet the needs of this population of veterans would help achieve this goal. The coordinator would be able to work on the specific issue of helping LGBTQ veterans with discharge upgrades for those that may have been unfairly discharged under Don't Ask Don't Tell. They would also do outreach and help with benefits, and distribute materials to veteran service providers that would help make sure LGBTQ veterans receive services designed for their unique needs. The stigma felt by LGBTQ veterans is often a barrier to receiving services and the coordinator would help to remove this barrier and help restore the veterans' pride in their service.

(Opposed) None.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Appropriations):

(In support) None.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying (Housing, Community Development & Veterans): Senator Randall, prime sponsor; Heidi Audette, Washington Department of Veterans Affairs; and Carey Morris, Equal Rights Washington.

Persons Testifying (Appropriations): None.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Housing, Community Development & Veterans): None.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Appropriations): None.