

SENATE BILL REPORT

2SHB 1448

As Reported by Senate Committee On:
State Government, Tribal Relations & Elections, March 29, 2019

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

Brief Description: Creating the veterans service officer program.

Sponsors: House Committee on Appropriations (originally sponsored by Representatives Maycumber, Chapman, Lovick, Gildon, Reeves, Volz, Steele, Kilduff, Mosbrucker, Pettigrew, Boehnke, McCaslin, Macri, Irwin, Corry, Klippert, MacEwen, Riccelli, Eslick, Leavitt, Dye, Ryu, Smith, Stokesbary, Chambers, DeBolt, Slatter, Jenkin, Barkis, Cody, Schmick, Kretz, Tharinger, Van Werven, Orwall, Sells, Sutherland, Stanford, Ormsby and Jinkins).

Brief History: Passed House: 3/04/19, 96-0.

Committee Activity: State Government, Tribal Relations & Elections: 3/27/19, 3/29/19 [DP-WM, w/oRec].

Brief Summary of Bill

- Creates the Veterans Service Officer Program for underserved counties with populations under 100,000 to establish veterans service officers.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON STATE GOVERNMENT, TRIBAL RELATIONS & ELECTIONS

Majority Report: Do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Hunt, Chair; Kuderer, Vice Chair; Zeiger, Ranking Member; Takko.

Minority Report: That it be referred without recommendation.

Signed by Senator Hasegawa.

Staff: Samuel Brown (786-7470)

Background: Veterans service officers (VSOs) assist veterans and their families with claims for federal veterans benefits. VSOs may work for the state, a county, a tribal government, or a private organization. In some counties, VSOs are funded through local veterans assistance

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programs, which are established to provide relief and assistance to indigent veterans. County veterans assistance programs receive funding through a portion of the county's regular property tax levy.

A VSO must undergo a formal application and training process and be accredited by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs to represent a veteran in their benefits claims. The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) facilitates the accreditation process for VSOs and currently assists local governments and organizations funding their own VSOs.

Summary of Bill: Veteran Service Officers Program Established. The Veterans Service Officer Program (Program) is created within the WDVA to provide funding for underserved counties with populations of 100,000 or less to establish and maintain a VSO.

Washington Department of Veteran Affairs Duties. Subject to the availability of appropriated funds, the WDVA must:

- educate local governments, veterans, and members of the National Guard or armed forces reserves about the Program;
- develop partnerships with and provide funding to counties establishing and maintaining local accredited VSOs; and
- develop an application process for the Program.

The WDVA may provide funding for no more than one full-time equivalent VSO per eligible county.

Veterans Service Officers Fund Created. The Veterans Service Officer Fund (Fund) is created in the custody of the State Treasurer. Funds are awarded to counties on a first-come, first-served basis for establishing VSOs. Revenues to the Fund may consist of appropriations by the Legislature, private contributions, and other deposits.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: Rural counties spend veterans' assistance dollars to help veterans with immediate needs, such as food and clothing. We have a lot of volunteers that will help filling out paperwork, but it is important that we have certified VSOs because they can access documents from the federal government. VSOs are a huge asset to our communities. Veterans often turn to Medicaid and state benefits when they actually qualify for more generous federal benefits, so this will reduce state expenses. Skagit County's VSO has returned over \$1 million in federal funds in two years. We would like all counties to have a VSO funded in the budget.

OTHER: This would allow our agency to assist rural counties with a resource to process claims. Veterans' emotional, financial, and physical wellness is improved when they are connected to their benefits.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Sen. Shelly Short; Ted Wicorek, Veterans Legislative Coalition; Wes McCart, Stevens County Commissioner; Juliana Roe, Washington State Association of Counties.

OTHER: Alfie Alvarado, Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.