

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1925

As Reported by House Committee On:

Innovation, Community & Economic Development, & Veterans

Title: An act relating to expanding the veterans service officer program to increase veteran support statewide.

Brief Description: Expanding the veterans service officer program to increase veteran support statewide.

Sponsors: Representatives Shavers, Leavitt, Ramel, Reed, Simmons, Timmons, Donaghy, Reeves, Riccelli, Davis and Paul.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Innovation, Community & Economic Development, & Veterans: 1/10/24, 1/16/24 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Requires the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) to provide information to recently discharged veterans about veterans benefits and services, and information about resources available to veterans in each county.
- Expands county eligibility for the WDVA's Veterans Service Officer Program, and prioritizes funding for those counties where the number of veterans receiving benefits is below the national average and for counties that do not have a veterans service officer.
- Requires the WDVA to provide reports every two years that include, by county, the number of resident veterans and the services available to veterans.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON INNOVATION, COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC

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

DEVELOPMENT, & VETERANS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 15 members: Representatives Ryu, Chair; Donaghy, Vice Chair; Rule, Vice Chair; Volz, Ranking Minority Member; Barnard, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Caldier, Chambers, Christian, Cortes, Paul, Senn, Shavers, Street, Waters and Wilcox.

Staff: Martha Wehling (786-7067).

Background:

Veterans Service Officers.

Veterans service officers assist veterans and their families with claims for federal benefits. Veterans service officers may work for the state, a county, a tribal government, or a private organization. To provide services through veterans service officers, the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) has contracts with six nonprofit veterans service organizations in 11 counties. The WDVA also employs four veterans service officers focused on four underserved counties.

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs accredits three types of representatives: veterans service organization representatives, attorneys, and agents. When a veteran is filing a claim for benefits, only an accredited attorney, agent, veterans service organization, federal regional office representative, or a permitted individual may represent the veteran. The percentage of veterans in Washington counties receiving benefits ranges from 15 to 44 percent.

The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Service Officer Program.

The WDVA operates a Veterans Service Officer Program which funds veterans service officers in certain counties. Counties that are eligible for a veterans service officer under the program must have a population of 100,000 or less. The WDVA provides funding on a first-come, first-served basis to establish and maintain one local accredited veterans service officer per county. Since its creation in 2019, the Veterans Service Officer Program has provided funding for six veterans service officers serving eight counties.

The Veterans Service Officer Account may be used for the Veterans Service Officer Program. The WDVA also provides grants to counties to develop or expand veterans service officer and peer-to-peer support programs, and other services and programs where needed. The WDVA prioritizes counties with smaller populations and those counties that are below the national average in the percentage of veterans receiving federal disability or pension compensation. The United States Department of Veterans Affairs' Annual Benefits Report for fiscal year 2022 identified 5.9 million veterans receiving federal disability and 299,709 veterans receiving pension compensation.

County Veterans' Assistance Programs.

In some counties, veterans service officers are funded through local veterans' assistance programs, which are established to provide relief and assistance through a portion of the county's regular property tax levy. Each county's legislative authority approves a veterans' assistance program to address the needs of local indigent veterans and their families. The county may authorize other entities to administer the program through grants, contracts, or interlocal agreements. When a noncounty entity administers the program, a local branch of a nationally recognized veterans service organization should be the initial point of contact for a veteran seeking assistance. Veterans' assistance programs are fully or partially funded by the Veterans' Assistance Fund account in each county.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

Information about Services Available to Veterans.

The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) must support veterans by providing information about services available to veterans. The WDVA must: (1) contact veterans after discharge and provide information about benefits and services available to veterans; and (2) identify services and resources by county on the WDVA website.

After receiving a discharge notice from the Department of Defense, the WDVA must contact the discharged veteran and provide information about benefits and services. The WDVA must use information provided by county veterans' assistance programs and local branches of nationally recognized veterans service organizations to provide county-specific information on the WDVA website.

Expansion of Counties Eligible For and Prioritization of Officers in the Veterans Service Officer Program.

The counties eligible to apply for a veterans service officer through the WDVA's Veterans Service Officer Program are expanded to those counties with a resident veteran population of 50,000 or less. The WDVA is required to prioritize funding for local accredited veterans service officers to those counties where the percentage of the veteran population receiving federal disability or pension compensation is below the national average, and to counties that do not have a veterans service officer. "Veterans service officer" is defined to mean an accredited veterans service officer funded by the Veterans Service Officer Account.

The WDVA may adopt rules and must require that any county participating in the Veterans Service Officer Program allow veterans residing in an adjacent county access to the officer funded by the program.

The WDVA may use the Veterans Service Officer Account to provide information about services available to veterans or to prepare the report on veterans services.

Reporting.

Beginning in December 2025, the WDVA must report on services available to veterans to the Governor and Legislature and provide information on the number of veterans, available services, entities providing services, benefits received, and counties that do not provide access to a veterans service officer or where the veteran population receiving benefits is below the national average. The reports should include:

- the number of veterans residing in each county;
- the number and type of services available to veterans in each county;
- the number of veterans served during the reporting period by:
 - the WDVA;
 - the Veterans Service Officer Program; and
 - counties contracting with the WDVA to provide services to veterans;
- the number of veterans served in a county who reside in an adjacent county;
- the number of claims filed by veterans service organizations contracting with the WDVA;
- the percentage of veterans served who received service-related disability and non-service-connected veterans pension;
- identification of each county where the percentage of the veteran population receiving service-related disability and non-service-connected veterans pension is below the national average; and
- identification of each county that does not provide access to a veterans service officer through:
 - a county's veterans' assistance program;
 - a contract with the WDVA;
 - the Veterans Service Officer Program; or
 - directly through the WDVA.

The WDVA must provide this report every two years.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The information required in the report to the Governor and Legislature is amended to clarify the type of federal benefits subject to reporting. The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) is required to report on the percentage of veterans served who received service-related disability and non-service-connected veterans pension, rather than federal disability or pension compensation. The WDVA is required to identify each county where the percentage of the veteran population receiving service-related disability and non-service-connected veterans pension is below the national average, rather than federal disability or pension compensation.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) A veteran's transition to civilian life has many unknowns. Veterans service officers are professionals who serve those who serve. They serve a role in ensuring that veterans understand and access their benefits on a range of crucial services ranging from housing and educational assistance to health care and retirement. They also let the veterans know they are supported and cared for, and support the dependents and spouses of veterans by helping them navigate the process. The veterans service officers are a vital link to programs and entitlements, such as vocational, educational, home loans, and information on the continually changing policies around veterans programs, which can be complicated. Expanding the Veterans Service Officer Program to allow every veteran in every county access to a veterans service officer will help veterans receive the benefits they deserve and have earned, and honors and recognizes the contributions and sacrifices that veterans have made.

The return on investment for assisting veterans with benefits is significant. Disability benefits include \$1.3 billion and health care services, education, and vocation benefits are worth \$2.2 billion. In Clallam County, one veterans service officer submitted 428 claims in 2023, resulting in \$2.1 million paid to veterans. There is more demand for veterans service officer services than current veterans service officers can provide. It would be better to report on the number of claims filed instead of the number of veterans served.

(Opposed) None.

(Other) Veterans service officers provide a positive difference in the lives of veterans and families. Investments in the county Veterans Service Officer Program results in additional income for veterans each month. That is income that is not coming from other state programs, and prevents extreme hardships for those veterans. In Washington, veterans receive \$3.4 billion in disability and compensation. Thousands more veterans are eligible, and additional veterans service officers will help serve those veterans. It will take resources to implement the requirements. The Washington Department of Veterans' Affairs' (WDVA) current efforts to connect with each veteran who has recently been separated from service will be bolstered, and communication will be tailored to the community where veterans live. The WDVA will expand its process to train and accredit veterans service officers, so that when benefits change at the federal level, a veterans service officer can provide assistance. Focusing on rural and underserved communities, and veterans with a lower percentage of benefits, is aligned with the agency's goals.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Clyde Shavers, prime sponsor; Anthony Varela, Association of the United States Army; and Juliana Roe, Washington State Association of Counties.

(Other) David Puente, Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.