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**Innovation, Community & Economic  
Development, & Veterans Committee**

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**SSB 5358**

**Brief Description:** Expanding veterans' services and programs.

**Sponsors:** Senate Committee on State Government & Elections (originally sponsored by Senators Gildon, Nobles, Conway, Holy, Lovelett, Nguyen, Randall, Torres, Wagoner, Wellman, Wilson, C. and Wilson, L.).

**Brief Summary of Substitute Bill**

- Requires the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) to submit reports to the Legislature regarding the effectiveness of the Veterans Service Officer Program and the Veteran Peer-to-Peer Training and Support Program.
- Requires the WDVA to provide grants to develop or expand veterans service officer programs, peer-to-peer support programs, and other services and programs to assist veterans.

**Hearing Date:** 3/14/23

**Staff:** Emily Poole (786-7106).

**Background:**

The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) provides many services and benefits to veterans and their families, including counseling, employment, education, training, burial, housing, medical care, and relief programs.

Veteran Service Officer Program.

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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 part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.*

Veterans service officers assist veterans and their families with claims for federal veterans benefits. Veterans service officers may work for the state, a county, a tribal government, or a private organization. The Veterans Service Officer Program (VSO Program) within the WDVA provides funding for underserved eligible counties to establish and maintain a veterans service officer. Eligible counties are defined as counties with a population of 100,000 or less.

#### Veteran Peer-to-Peer Program.

In 2017, the Legislature directed the WDVA to offer training and support for volunteers interested in providing peer-to-peer support to other veterans. The WDVA was required to submit a report to the Legislature by December 31, 2018, on the Veteran Peer-to-Peer Training and Support Program (Peer Program) to determine the effectiveness of the Peer Program in meeting the needs of veterans. The report was required to include: the number of veterans receiving peer-to-peer support and the location of such support services; the number of veterans trained through the Peer Program to provide peer-to-peer support; and the types of training and support services provided by the Peer Program. The report was also required to include an analysis of peer-to-peer training and support programs developed by other states, as well as in the private and nonprofit sectors, in order to evaluate best practices for implementing and managing the Peer Program.

#### **Summary of Bill:**

#### Veteran Service Officer Program.

The WDVA is required to submit a report to the Legislature by September 30, 2024, regarding the effectiveness of the VSO Program in meeting the needs of veterans. The report is required to include the number of veterans receiving services from the VSO Program, the location of such services, and an analysis of areas in the state that are lacking such services. The report must also include recommendations for how to phase in an expansion of such services in areas of the state that are lacking services.

#### Peer Program.

The WDVA is required to submit an updated report to the Legislature by September 30, 2024, regarding the effectiveness of the Peer Program. The report is not required to include an analysis of peer-to-peer training and support programs developed by other states, but the report is required to include an analysis of areas of the state that lack peer-to-peer support services, including recommendations for how to phase in an expansion of support services to those areas.

#### Grant Funding.

Subject to amounts appropriated, the WDVA is required to provide grants to counties in order to develop or expand veterans service officer programs, peer-to-peer support program, and other services and programs to assist veterans in areas where such programs and services are needed. The WDVA is required to prioritize counties with smaller populations and counties that are below the national average in the percentage of veterans receiving federal disability or pension compensation.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Available.

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