

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SSB 5358

As Passed House:

April 12, 2023

Title: An act relating to expanding veterans' services and programs.

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 History:

Committee Activity:

Innovation, Community & Economic Development, & Veterans: 3/14/23, 3/17/23 [DP];

Appropriations: 3/30/23, 4/1/23 [DP].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 4/12/23, 97-0.

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.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON INNOVATION, COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, & VETERANS

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.

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 15 members: Representatives Ryu, Chair; Donaghy, Vice Chair; Rule, Vice Chair; Volz, Ranking Minority Member; Barnard, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Chambers, Christian, Corry, Cortes, Paul, Senn, Shavers, Street, Waters and Ybarra.

Staff: Emily Poole (786-7106).

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 27 members: Representatives Ormsby, Chair; Bergquist, Vice Chair; Gregerson, Vice Chair; Macri, Vice Chair; Stokesbary, Ranking Minority Member; Berg, Chandler, Chopp, Connors, Couture, Davis, Dye, Fitzgibbon, Hansen, Harris, Lekanoff, Pollet, Riccelli, Rude, Ryu, Sandlin, Schmick, Senn, Simmons, Slatter, Steele and Tharinger.

Staff: Bryan Way (786-7311).

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.

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 programs, 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.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Innovation, Community & Economic Development, & Veterans):

(In support) Veterans service officers assist veterans with obtaining benefits and navigating administrative processes. Veterans service officers are important resources, but they are in short supply. It is important to increase funding for veterans' programs in underserved areas. Many counties in the state are below the national average in obtaining federal benefits for veterans. This bill will ultimately result in savings for Washington, because it will allow veterans to access additional federal benefits. The Peer Program is a critical part of veteran service organizations, and it is another important resource for connecting veterans to benefits. There are not enough people participating in the Peer Program, and

many of the volunteers are retired individuals who will not be participating in the Peer Program for long into the future.

(Opposed) None.

(Other) This will have a fiscal impact on the WDVA. The WDVA currently partners with counties that have veterans service officers, whether they are funded by grants or at the county level. There are 21 counties that have veterans service officers, serving 25 counties in total. The WDVA provides accreditation and training to veterans service officers. The WDVA tracks claims submitted by veterans service officers and provides additional training to veterans service officers with low success rates. This bill would increase the number of counties receiving these services. The Peer Program provides training across the state to individuals who want to volunteer. Training includes cultural engagement, suicide prevention, and the basics of veteran benefits.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Appropriations):

(In support) Current funding for the Veteran Service Officer Program is not consistent and does not cover all necessary counties. The bill aims to extend and maintain the Veteran Service Officer Program's funding. Veterans service officers (VSOs) and peer mentors play a crucial role in connecting veterans to services and benefits. Expanding VSO and peer mentor programs can potentially shift some costs from state and local agencies to the federal government. High percentages of veterans in certain counties highlight the need for the Veteran Service Officer Program. The Veteran Service Officer Program generates a significant return on investment in terms of financial benefits to veterans. The Veteran Service Officer Program helps veterans receive their earned benefits, which also helps them become more financially independent. The Veteran Service Officer Program has a positive impact on rural communities, assisting veterans with various backgrounds and needs. The Veteran Service Officer Program also supports surviving spouses in receiving their benefits.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying (Innovation, Community & Economic Development, & Veterans):

(In support) Senator Chris Gildon, prime sponsor; Juliana Roe, Washington State Association of Counties; and Tom Davis, Veterans Legislative Coalition.

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

Persons Testifying (Appropriations): Juliana Roe, Washington State Association of Counties; Tom Davis, Veterans Legislative Coalition; Randy Johnson, Clallam County; and Wes McCart, Steven County.

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

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