

SENATE BILL REPORT

SSB 5358

As Passed Senate, March 6, 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: State Government & Elections: 1/27/23, 2/03/23 [DPS-WM].
Ways & Means: 2/14/23, 2/24/23 [DPS (SGE)].

Floor Activity: Passed Senate: 3/6/23, 48-0.

Brief Summary of First Substitute Bill

- Requires the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs to submit reports to the Legislature to determine the effectiveness of the veterans service officer program, and the veteran peer-to-peer training and support program in meeting veterans' needs.
- States legislative intent to increase appropriations for the programs, prioritizing smaller counties and counties with below-average rates of veterans receiving federal benefits.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON STATE GOVERNMENT & ELECTIONS

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5358 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Hunt, Chair; Valdez, Vice Chair; Wilson, J., Ranking Member; Dozier, Fortunato, Hasegawa and Kuderer.

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.

Staff: Megan Tudor (786-7478)

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5358 as recommended by Committee on State Government & Elections be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass.

Signed by Senators Rolfes, Chair; Robinson, Vice Chair, Operating & Revenue; Mullet, Vice Chair, Capital; Wilson, L., Ranking Member, Operating; Gildon, Assistant Ranking Member, Operating; Schoesler, Ranking Member, Capital; Rivers, Assistant Ranking Member, Capital; Warnick, Assistant Ranking Member, Capital; Billig, Boehnke, Braun, Conway, Dhingra, Hasegawa, Hunt, Keiser, Muzzall, Nguyen, Pedersen, Saldaña, Torres, Van De Wege, Wagoner and Wellman.

Staff: Maria Hovde (786-7474)

Background: Veterans in Washington State. According to the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA), Washington is home to more than 555,000 veterans, 62,000 active duty, 18,000 guard and reserves, and 2 million family members. WDVA administers a number of programs and services for veterans related to behavioral health, education and training, and employment.

Veteran Peer-to-Peer Program. In 2017, the Washington Legislature directed WDVA to offer training and support for volunteers interested in providing peer-to-peer support to other veterans. This legislation directed the Office of Financial Management to work with WDVA, the Department of Enterprise Services, and other stakeholders to develop a program to recruit veterans for state employment opportunities.

Veteran Service Officer Program. The Legislature established the Veterans Service Officer Program, and associated funding in 2019. This program provides funding to underserved counties, with a population of 100,000 or less, to establish and maintain a veterans service officer within the county.

Summary of First Substitute Bill: Veteran Peer-to-Peer Program. The bill updates the due date of the peer-to-peer training and support report to be submitted by WDVA to September 30, 2024. The information required in the report is updated to add an analysis of areas in the state that do not have veteran support services, and WDVA recommendations for the expansion of these services to these areas.

Veteran Service Officer Program. WDVA is directed to evaluate, and provide a report to the Legislature by September 30, 2024, regarding the effectiveness of the veterans service officer program in addressing veterans' needs in the state. The report must include information on the number of veterans receiving services, the location of these services, and an analysis on areas in the state lacking services.

Appropriations and Grants. The Legislature intends to increase state appropriations for veterans service officer and peer mentoring programs and WDVA will provide grants to counties for development and expansion of these programs, subject to availability of appropriations. WDVA must give grant priority to counties with smaller populations and counties below the national average of federal disability or pension compensation of veterans.

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 on Original Bill (State Government & Elections):

The committee recommended a different version of the bill than what was heard. PRO: The state of Washington has an unfulfilled need for providing supports and resources to veterans, particularly in rural communities. Currently 25 Washington counties are below the national average of veterans receiving disability benefits. This bill has a positive impact on both veterans and their communities. As a veteran, finding support can be a challenge. The peer-to-peer and veterans service officer programs are helpful for veterans making the transition from active service to civilian life. The cost of employing a veteran service officer is between \$65,000-\$105,000 annually. Increasing veterans resources, especially in parts of the state where resources may be scarce, has significant benefits for those departing service. This bill is a step towards reducing barriers service members experience when navigating the benefit systems during this life transition.

Persons Testifying (State Government & Elections): PRO: Senator Chris Gildon, Prime Sponsor; Juliana Roe, Washington State Association of Counties; Anthony Varela, Veterans Legislative Coalition; Erin Cooper; James Cook, American Legion; Joshua Wheeldon.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (State Government & Elections): No one.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony on First Substitute (Ways & Means): PRO: There are 550,000 veterans in Washington State. Access to care is a continual issue for veterans, but particularly in rural areas. Additional funding will expand veterans' services and programs to increase outreach and provide underserved veterans with more resources, including connecting them to benefits they have earned.

Persons Testifying (Ways & Means): PRO: Senator Chris Gildon, Prime Sponsor; Anthony Varela, Veteran Legislative Coalition; Randy Johnson, Clallam Co. Board of Commissioners.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Ways & Means): No one.