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**HOUSE BILL 1102**

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**State of Washington 69th Legislature 2025 Regular Session**

**By** Representatives Shavers, Ryu, Leavitt, Callan, Simmons, Goodman, Wylie, Nance, Fosse, and Reeves

AN ACT Relating to increasing support and services for veterans; amending RCW 43.60A.230 and 43.60A.235; adding a new section to chapter 43.60A RCW; and creating a new section.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  The legislature finds that veterans are eligible for state and federal benefits, but may be unaware of those benefits or the process to apply for them. Veterans service officers serve a critical role in assisting veterans and their families with identifying and applying for federal benefits, including health care, service-connected disability, nonservice-connected pension, employment, education, housing, burial, and survival benefits. The federal department of veterans affairs provides over $6.5 billion per year in benefits to veterans in Washington. The average veteran receiving service-connected disability compensation benefits receives over $1,700 per month.

The legislature further finds that nationwide, approximately 32 percent of veterans receive federal disability compensation. Washington currently has approximately 530,000 resident veterans, but only 158,000 veterans are receiving federal benefits. Currently, veterans in 15 Washington counties receive benefits at or above the national average, 21 counties are within 10 percent of the national average, and three counties are more than 10 percent below the national average.

Therefore, the legislature intends to expand the veterans service officer program started in 2019 to increase the number of veterans applying for and receiving federal benefits. The program's first veterans service officer assisting veterans in the identification of benefits and filing of claims increased the number of veterans applying for benefits from 13 in the first year to 323 in the third year, and from no annual disability payments to $2,696,524 in federal benefits each year. The Washington state department of veterans affairs' September 30, 2024, veterans service officer program report estimates the cost to expand the program is $160,000 per year for each additional county. The legislature intends to expand the program by one to two veterans service officers per biennium beginning with the counties with the lowest percentage of benefits received, until all counties are at or above the national average.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 43.60A RCW to read as follows:

The department must support veterans by providing information regarding available veterans services. Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated from the veterans service officer fund for the specific purposes provided in this section, the department must:

(1) Contact veterans within 90 days of receipt of a discharge notice from the department of defense and provide information about veterans benefits and services;

(2) Provide county-specific information on the department website identifying services and resources available to veterans using information provided to the department by county veterans assistance programs and local branches of nationally recognized veterans service organizations; and

(3) Beginning December 1, 2026, and every two years thereafter, report to the governor and the appropriate standing committees of the legislature regarding veterans services. The report must include, at a minimum:

(a) The number of veterans residing in each county;

(b) The number and type of veterans services available in each county;

(c) The number of veterans served in the reporting period by the department, veterans service officer program, and counties contracting with the department for veterans services, including the number of veterans served who reside in an adjacent county;

(d) The number of claims filed in the reporting period by veterans service organizations contracting with the department;

(e) The percentage of veterans served in the reporting period who received service-related disability and nonservice-connected veterans' pensions; and

(f) Identification of:

(i) Each county where the percentage of the veteran population receiving service-related disability and nonservice-connected veterans' pensions is below the national average; and

(ii) Each county that does not provide access to a veterans service officer through the veterans' assistance program defined in RCW 73.08.005, through a contract with the department, through the veterans service officer program described in RCW 43.60A.230, or directly through the department.

**Sec.**  RCW 43.60A.230 and 2019 c 223 s 1 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) There is created in the department the veterans service officer program. The purpose of the veterans service officer program is to provide funding to underserved eligible counties to establish and maintain a veterans service officer within the county. "Eligible counties," for the purposes of this section, means counties ((~~with a population of one hundred thousand or less~~)) where the percentage of the veteran population receiving federal disability or pension compensation is below the national average.

(2) Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated in the veterans service officer fund under RCW 43.60A.235 for the specific purposes provided in this section, the department must:

(a) Establish a process to educate local governments, veterans, and those still serving in the national guard or armed forces reserve of the veterans service officer program;

(b) Develop partnerships with local governments to assist in establishing and maintaining local veterans service officers in eligible counties who elect to have a veterans service officer; and

(c) Provide funding to support eligible counties in establishing and maintaining local accredited veterans service officers. ((~~Funding is provided on a first-come, first-served basis. Funding may only be provided to support the equivalent of one full-time veterans service officer per eligible county.~~)) The department shall prioritize additional funding to eligible counties with the lowest percentage of the veteran population receiving federal disability or pension compensation, and then to eligible counties without a veterans service officer.

(3) The application process for the veterans service officer program must be prescribed as to manner and form by the department.

(4) The department may adopt rules necessary to implement this section. The department shall include a requirement that any county that participates in the veterans service officer program must allow any veteran residing in an adjacent county access to the county's veterans service officer.

(5) For purposes of this section, "veterans service officer" means an accredited veterans service officer funded by the veterans service officer fund created in RCW 43.60A.235.

**Sec.**  RCW 43.60A.235 and 2019 c 223 s 2 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) There is created in the custody of the state treasurer an account to be known as the veterans service officer fund. Revenues to the fund consist of appropriations by the legislature, private contributions, and all other sources deposited in the fund.

(2) Expenditures from the fund may only be used for the purposes of the veterans service officer program under RCW 43.60A.230 and section 2 of this act, including administrative expenses. Only the director, or the director's designee, may authorize expenditures. The account is subject to allotment procedures under chapter 43.88 RCW, but an appropriation is not required for expenditures.

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