

SENATE BILL REPORT

SSB 5338

As Passed Senate, February 25, 2025

Title: An act relating to the veterans affairs advisory committee.

Brief Description: Concerning the veterans affairs advisory committee.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on State Government, Tribal Affairs & Elections (originally sponsored by Senators Nobles, Boehnke, Conway, Dhingra, Lovick, Salomon, Shewmake, Slatter, Trudeau, Wagoner, Warnick and Wilson, C.; by request of Department of Veterans Affairs).

Brief History:

Committee Activity: State Government, Tribal Affairs & Elections: 1/28/25, 2/07/25 [DPS].

Floor Activity: Passed Senate: 2/25/25, 49-0.

Brief Summary of First Substitute Bill

- Reconfigures the membership of the Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON STATE GOVERNMENT, TRIBAL AFFAIRS & ELECTIONS

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5338 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass.

Signed by Senators Valdez, Chair; Krishnadasan, Vice Chair; Wilson, J., Ranking Member; Fortunato, Hasegawa, Kauffman, McCune, Riccelli and Short.

Staff: William Bridges (786-7312)

Background: The Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee. The Veterans Affairs Advisory

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.

Committee (VAAC) provides advice and makes recommendations to the Governor and the Director of the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA). The VAAC has 17 members appointed by the Governor to serve four-year terms. The VAAC consists of the following:

- one member from the Washington Soldier's Home in Orting;
- one member from the Washington Veterans' Home in Retsil;
- one member from each of the three congressionally chartered and recognized veterans service organizations with the largest memberships in the state;
- ten members to represent the congressionally chartered and recognized veterans service organizations that have at least one active chapter in the state; and
- two members who are veterans at large.

The Governor must ensure that appointments represent all regions of the state and must include minority and women veterans' viewpoints. No organization can have more than one official representative on the committee at any one time.

Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee Liaisons to Veterans' Homes. The WDVA serves four veterans' homes. The VAAC must appoint members to serve as liaisons to each of these homes, and the liaisons must share information about VAAC business with the resident council of each home. The liaisons must also ensure that the issues of the veterans' homes residents are included in regular VAAC meetings.

Summary of First Substitute Bill: Reconfiguring the Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee Membership. The two VAAC positions representing the state veterans' homes in Orting and Retsil are replaced by two at-large positions. Of the ten members representing congressionally chartered and recognized veterans service organizations, one may be a veteran who is a member of a federally recognized Indian tribe, and one may be a current or former member of the Washington National Guard. The four liaison positions to veteran's homes are not changed.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

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: *The committee recommended a different version of the bill than what was heard.* PRO: Veterans in Washington have served with dedication, and their voices must help shape the decisions that affect them. The VAAC has been a vital resource for guiding the Governor and the WDVA, but it needs updates to stay effective and responsive to today's challenges. This bill strengthens the committee by modernizing its membership structure to better serve Washington's veterans.

By replacing two positions designated for state veterans' homes with at-large positions, the bill allows for broader expertise and flexibility. It also creates opportunities for a Native American tribal veteran and a current or former member of the Washington National Guard to join, adding valuable insights. Importantly, the liaison roles to veterans' homes remain intact, ensuring their needs stay front and center. This bill ensures the VAAC can continue to provide strong, informed guidance for meeting the evolving needs of Washington's veterans. Requested by the Department of Veterans Affairs, it represents a thoughtful step forward for this essential advisory body.

Over the past several years, the VAAC has been making a concerted effort to connect with more rural veterans in the state; the goal is to ensure that no matter where a veteran lives they know what is available in their community, who their community veteran providers are, and how to access benefits and services that may be available in other places. Native American veterans are often underserved and access federal veterans' benefits including VA health care, disability, employment, and education benefits at lower rates than other veterans. WDVA trains tribal veteran representatives, who are members of Native American tribes in our state, to serve veterans in their own communities. This work supports tribal veteran representatives and tribal veteran service officers as they work within Native American communities to connect veterans and families to their earned benefits. WDVA has so far signed memorandums of agreement with eight tribes in Washington. The needs of the state's citizen soldiers and their families are often overlooked and often have significantly less access to the programs and systems in place for their active duty counterparts. By ensuring the VAAC has these additional voices in their ranks, we will create better connections for veterans and their families to the benefits and services earned by their military service.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator T'wina Nobles, Prime Sponsor; Miguel Padilla, Veterans Legislative Coalition; David Puente, WA State Department of Veterans Affairs.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.