

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5900

As of February 17, 2019

Title: An act relating to promoting access to earned benefits and services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer veterans.

Brief Description: Promoting access to earned benefits and services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer veterans.

Sponsors: Senators Randall, Wilson, C., Takko, Saldaña, Van De Wege, Salomon, Lias, Das, Pedersen and Nguyen.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: State Government, Tribal Relations & Elections: 2/15/19.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Creates the position of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer coordinator within the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON STATE GOVERNMENT, TRIBAL RELATIONS & ELECTIONS

Staff: Samuel Brown (786-7470)

Background: The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) is a state agency created in 1975. WDVA's powers and duties include cooperating with local governments and the federal government, particularly regarding participation in federal grants-in-aid programs relating to veterans and veterans affairs. WDVA provides many services to veterans and their families, including medical care, assistance with claims for benefits, estate management, counseling, and financial assistance, and assisting veterans with education, training and employment.

Summary of Bill: The position of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer coordinator (coordinator) is created within WDVA. The coordinator's duties include:

- conducting outreach to, and providing assistance designed for the unique needs of, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer veterans, and their spouses and dependents;

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- assisting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer veterans in applying for an upgrade to the character of a discharge from service or a change in the narrative reason for a discharge from service;
- assisting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer veterans, and their spouses and dependents, in applying for benefits; and
- developing and distributing information to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, and queer veterans, and their spouses and dependents, regarding veterans' benefits and other benefit programs.

WDVA must prepare and submit a report to the Governor, the Joint Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs, and the appropriate legislative standing committees regarding the implementation and status of the coordinator by December 15, 2020. This report must include the number of veterans served, the type of assistance provided, and any recommendations for the improvement and expansion of services provided by the coordinator.

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: PRO: LGBTQ veterans face many obstacles—many received an other than honorable discharge under Don't Ask, Don't Tell because of who they love or because of their identities. This bill has the potential to change those discharges, recognizing their service, and allowing those veterans and their families to access benefits. LGBTQ veterans are in hiding because of the stigma they face from community members, and these veterans deserve respect.

OTHER: LGBTQ veterans are seeking dignity and restoration of benefits. WDVA received a request for upgrade in discharge from a 92-year old female veteran who served in the invasion of Normandy. Oregon has created this position. We are signing in other because this position is not funded in the Governor's budget. There are some WDVA programs and benefits for which veterans with an "other than honorable" discharge are not eligible.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Emily Randall, Prime Sponsor.

OTHER: Alfie Alvarado, Washington Department of Veterans Affairs.

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