

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5021

As of January 18, 2017

Title: An act relating to pro bono legal services for military service members, veterans, and their families.

Brief Description: Concerning pro bono legal services for military service members, veterans, and their families.

Sponsors: Senators O'Ban, Frockt, Schoesler, Darneille, Nelson, Pearson, Rolfes, Conway, Sheldon, Fortunato, Fain, Hasegawa and Kuderer; by request of Attorney General.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Law & Justice: 1/11/17.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Establishes an office for military and veteran legal assistance within the Attorney General's Office, which may not provide criminal legal assistance.
- Creates a legal assistance program that must recruit and train volunteer attorneys and identify service programs.
- Provides free legal services for military service members, veterans, and their families.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON LAW & JUSTICE

Staff: Tim Ford (786-7423)

Background: State law prohibits the Attorney General's Office from engaging in the private practice of law. The Attorney General's Office cannot represent private citizens in court either to bring an action on behalf of an individual or to defend an individual. Any private citizen needing such representation should consult a private attorney. Veterans, military personnel, and their families may be eligible to receive certain free or low-fee legal services from a variety of regional and statewide non-profits depending upon their means and the resources of the non-profit entities.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Summary of Bill: The bill as referred to committee not considered.

Summary of Bill (Proposed First Substitute): An office of military and veteran legal assistance is created within the Attorney General's Office for the purpose of promoting and facilitating civil legal assistance programs, pro bono services, and self-help services for military service members, veterans, and their family members domiciled or stationed in Washington State. The legal assistance program does not permit the Attorney General's Office to provide criminal legal assistance.

The legal assistance program must recruit and train volunteer attorneys and identify service programs willing to perform pro bono legal services for military members, veterans, and their families. The Attorney General may apply for and receive grants, gifts, or other contributions to support this legal assistance program.

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: Veterans have unique challenges complicated by overseas deployments and their legal needs often are not met. The proposed bill creates a program to provide free legal services to military members, their family, veterans, and surviving spouses. There are state and federal laws providing protection for military members and not all attorneys are aware of these laws. Non-profit entities that provide general legal assistance likely do not have the specialized knowledge to assist veterans. To provide legal service related to VA benefits, an attorney must be certified by the VA. There are about 200 certified attorneys out of approximately 35,000 licensed attorneys in Washington state. The Attorney General's Office will not be providing direct legal representation, but will be administering a program of volunteer attorneys who will provide legal assistance. The Attorney General's Office will be provided guidance by an advisory committee. Nevada has a model program similar to what would be created by this proposed bill.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator O'Ban, prime sponsor; Andrew Logerwell, Attorney General's Office testifying on behalf of Travis Alley, Attorney General's Office; Mark San Souci, Legislative Liaison, Department of Defense; John Tymezyzyxi, Washington State Veterans Bar Association; Shane McKinnie, Washington State Veterans Bar Association; Sarra Marie, Washington State Veterans Bar Association.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: Travis Alley, Attorney General's Office.