

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5525

As of February 20, 2017

Title: An act relating to veterans' mental health services at institutions of higher education.

Brief Description: Concerning veterans' mental health services at institutions of higher education.

Sponsors: Senators Wilson, Palumbo, Cleveland, Baumgartner, Zeiger, O'Ban, Lias, Frockt, Schoesler, Hobbs, Kuderer, Conway and Bailey.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Higher Education: 2/02/17, 2/07/17 [DP-WM].
Ways & Means: 2/15/17.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires four-year institutions to hire mental health counselors to work with military personnel, veterans, and their families.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Majority Report: Do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Wilson, Chair; Bailey, Vice Chair; Palumbo, Ranking Minority Member; Frockt.

Staff: Evan Klein (786-7483)

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

Staff: Michele Alishahi (786-7433)

Background: Veteran Supportive Campuses Certificate Program. In 2009, the Governor and state agencies jointly signed a Partners for Veteran Supportive Campuses Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to support veteran-related education goals. On November 21, 2014, the Governor and state agencies signed an updated version of the MOU.

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.

Under the MOU, college campuses, including community and technical colleges, may apply for a Partner for Veteran Supportive Campus Certificate. The certificate acknowledges the schools' commitment to support post-secondary education for veterans.

Mental Health Counselors. A mental health counselor is someone who applies principles of human development, learning theory, psychotherapy, group dynamics and etiology of mental illness and dysfunction behavior to individuals, families, groups or organizations, for the purpose of treatment of mental disorders and promoting optimal mental health functionality. Mental health counselors must have a master's or doctoral level degree in mental health counseling, and have completed state examination requirements and a minimum of 36 months of full-time supervised counseling.

A Health Impact Review of this legislation was requested and can be found at the Washington State Board of Health's website, <http://sboh.wa.gov/OurWork/HealthImpactReviews/index.htm>, as soon as it is available.

Summary of Bill: Subject to appropriation, the six 4-year public institutions of higher education in Washington must employ at least one full-time mental health counselor with experience working with active members of the military or military 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 (Higher Education): PRO: There are over 5000 veterans in Washington. These veterans sacrifice their lives for this state and this country. This bill would help address the unique issues that veterans face when entering back into civilian life. These mental health counselors can assist veterans with crisis interventions and reintegration into campus life. Central Washington has had an 855 percent increase in its veteran population since 2009. This measure is targeted, timely and essential for CWU's veteran community. Having a counselor on campus opens a simple communication line between veterans and a healthcare professional without extensive wait times. Having an accessible person on campus will help veterans get treatment and access resources easily. Universities are currently falling short in helping veterans and their families. Mental health services at the VA can be difficult to arrange, and do not help with accessibility issues for student veterans. Students have to miss class to get assistance through the VA. Putting mental health services for veterans on campuses will reduce missed classes by students and will set students up for success.

Persons Testifying (Higher Education): PRO: Senator Lynda Wilson, Prime Sponsor; Antonio Sanchez Ph.D., Central Washington University; Michael Scott, student; Harper Peterson, citizen; Elizabeth Oestreich, UW Student Veteran; Thomas Haymaker, UW Student; Colleen Rust, The Evergreen State College.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Higher Education): No one.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Ways & Means): PRO: We have nearly 5000 veterans in our colleges in Washington. We must recognize that we need counselors who are specific for veterans' needs. There are services on campus for veterans, but some veterans who went in for counseling had to wait 30 days for an appointment. There are certain things that veterans cannot wait for. The Washington Department of Health included veterans in their summary of high-risk groups for suicide. Counselors will be trained to recognize these issues and be able to help veterans and their families. On the CWU campus, veterans have two options to seek mental health services: (1) outpatient services at the nearest VA center, which is a 45-minute drive one-way, or (2) on-campus mental health counselors who receive PTSD training once a year and no training in TBI and other veteran specific issues. A trained mental health counselor could make the difference between a veteran succeeding in college or dropping out. 25 percent of veterans who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq have experienced mental trauma, including PTSD and TBI. Current mental health counselors are not equipped to address these issues. At UW, veterans make up 5 percent of the total student population, but only 1.5 percent of students seen by mental health services on campus. Wait times at campus services are three weeks. In Seattle, transportation to the VA is an hour and a half one way.

Persons Testifying (Ways & Means): PRO: Senator Lynda Wilson, Prime Sponsor; Michael Scott, Associated Students of Central Washington University; Antonio Sanchez, Central Washington University; Jerry Fugich, Veterans of Foreign Wars Department of Washington; Jewel Rose, University of Washington Office of Student Veteran Life & American Legion Post 40; Lindsay Zike, UW Student Veteran Life/Assistant Director, American Legion Post 40/Commander.

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