

SENATE BILL REPORT

SSB 5900

As Passed Senate, February 12, 2020

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: Senate Committee on Ways & Means (originally sponsored by Senators Randall, Wilson, C., Takko, Saldaña, Van De Wege, Salomon, Liias, Das, Pedersen and Nguyen).

Brief History:

Committee Activity: State Government, Tribal Relations & Elections: 2/15/19, 2/20/19 [DP-WM, w/oRec].

Ways & Means: 2/26/19, 2/04/20 [DPS, w/oRec].

Floor Activity:

Passed Senate: 2/12/20, 43-4.

Brief Summary of First Substitute 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

Majority Report: Do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.
Signed by Senators Hunt, Chair; Kuderer, Vice Chair; Hasegawa and Takko.

Minority Report: That it be referred without recommendation.
Signed by Senators Zeiger, Ranking Member; Bailey and Hawkins.

Staff: Samuel Brown (786-7470)

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

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.

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5900 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass.

Signed by Senators Rolfes, Chair; Frockt, Vice Chair, Operating, Capital Lead; Mullet, Capital Budget Cabinet; Braun, Ranking Member; Brown, Assistant Ranking Member, Operating; Becker, Billig, Carlyle, Conway, Darneille, Dhingra, Hasegawa, Hunt, Keiser, Lias, Muzzall, Pedersen, Van De Wege, Wagoner, Warnick and Wilson, L..

Minority Report: That it be referred without recommendation.

Signed by Senators Honeyford, Assistant Ranking Member, Capital; Schoesler.

Staff: Maria Hovde (786-7474)

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 First Substitute 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;
- 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, 2021. 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 on Original Bill (State Government, Tribal Relations & Elections) (Regular Session 2019): 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 (State Government, Tribal Relations & Elections): PRO: Senator Emily Randall, Prime Sponsor.

OTHER: Alfie Alvarado, Washington Department of Veterans Affairs.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (State Government, Tribal Relations & Elections): No one.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Ways & Means) (Regular Session 2020): No public hearing was held.

Persons Testifying (Ways & Means): N/A

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Ways & Means): N/A