

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1448

As Reported by House Committee On:
Housing, Community Development & Veterans
Appropriations

Title: An act relating to creating the veterans service officer program.

Brief Description: Creating the veterans service officer program.

Sponsors: Representatives Maycumber, Chapman, Lovick, Gildon, Reeves, Volz, Steele, Kilduff, Mosbrucker, Pettigrew, Boehnke, McCaslin, Macri, Irwin, Corry, Klippert, MacEwen, Riccelli, Eslick, Leavitt, Dye, Ryu, Smith, Stokesbary, Chambers, DeBolt, Slatter, Jenkin, Barkis, Cody, Schmick, Kretz, Tharinger, Van Werven, Orwall, Sells, Sutherland, Stanford, Ormsby and Jinkins.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Housing, Community Development & Veterans: 1/30/19, 2/5/19 [DPS];
Appropriations: 2/21/19, 2/25/19 [DP2S(w/o sub HOUS)].

Brief Summary of Second Substitute Bill

- Creates the Veterans Service Officer Program to provide funding for counties to establish veterans service officers.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT & VETERANS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 9 members: Representatives Ryu, Chair; Morgan, Vice Chair; Gildon, Ranking Minority Member; Barkis, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Corry, Entenman, Frame, Leavitt and Reeves.

Staff: Serena Dolly (786-7150).

Background:

Veterans service officers (VSOs) assist veterans and their families with claims for federal veterans benefits. Veterans service officers may work for the state, a county, a tribal

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government, or a private organization. In some counties VSOs are funded through local veterans assistance programs, which are established to provide relief and assistance to indigent veterans. County veterans assistance programs receive funding through a portion of the county's regular property tax levy.

In order for a VSO to represent a veteran in his or her benefits claims, the VSO must undergo a formal application and training process and be accredited by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) facilitates the accreditation process for VSOs and currently assists local governments and organizations funding their own VSOs in this process.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

The Veterans Service Officer Program (Program) is created within the WDVA to provide funding for underserved counties to establish and maintain a VSO. Underserved counties are defined as those with populations of 100,000 or less.

Subject to the availability of appropriated funds, the WDVA is required to:

- educate local governments, veterans, and members of the National Guard or Armed Forces Reserves about the Program;
- develop partnerships with and provide funding to counties establishing and maintaining local accredited VSOs; and
- develop an application process for the Program.

The WDVA may provide funding for no more than one full-time equivalent VSO per eligible county.

The Veterans Service Officer Fund (Fund) is created in the custody of the State Treasurer. Revenues to the Fund may consist of appropriations by the Legislature, private contributions, and other deposits. Funds are awarded to counties on a first-come, first-served basis.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill allows the WDVA to provide funding to eligible counties to maintain, in addition to establish, a VSO. The substitute bill allows the WDVA to provide funding for no more than one full-time equivalent VSO per eligible county.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 25, 2019.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) Counties are in crisis mode trying to address the needs of veterans. Veterans are unable to get the services they need and benefits they earned from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. Veterans are lost and asking for help. Counties are providing veterans with necessities, such as socks, blankets, and money, to pay utility bills. Counties have limited funds and do not generate enough revenue to adequately fund veterans assistance programs. The state needs to do more to help veterans. All counties should be able to access state funding to establish VSOs.

(Opposed) None.

(Other) The VSOs model is used every day, and it provides a significant return on investment. The youngest Vietnam veterans are 65 years old and really need help now. Veterans service officers are able to provide assistance where veterans live, work, and go to school.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Maycumber, prime sponsor; Juliana Roe, Washington State Association of Counties; and Shawn Pichette.

(Other) Mary Forbes, Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Majority Report: The second substitute bill be substituted therefor and the second substitute bill do pass and do not pass the substitute bill by Committee on Housing, Community Development & Veterans. Signed by 33 members: Representatives Ormsby, Chair; Bergquist, 2nd Vice Chair; Robinson, 1st Vice Chair; Stokesbary, Ranking Minority Member; MacEwen, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Rude, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Caldier, Chandler, Cody, Dolan, Dye, Fitzgibbon, Hansen, Hoff, Hudgins, Jinkins, Kraft, Macri, Mosbrucker, Pettigrew, Pollet, Ryu, Schmick, Senn, Springer, Stanford, Steele, Sullivan, Sutherland, Tarleton, Tharinger, Volz and Ybarra.

Staff: Linda Merelle (786-7092).

Summary of Recommendation of Committee On Appropriations Compared to Recommendation of Committee On Housing, Community Development & Veterans:

The Appropriations Committee recommended the addition of a null and void clause, providing that if specific funding, referencing this act by bill or chapter number, is not provided by June 30, 2019, in the omnibus appropriations act, the act is null and void.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Second Substitute Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed. However, the bill is null and void unless funded in the budget.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) Completion of the required documentation for benefits from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs must be done by a veterans service officer (VSO). If a VSO is not involved, the work will not be done. The VSOs are huge assets to communities and are in short supply. Veterans seek health care from the state Medicaid program when they can qualify for veteran's benefits that are more generous. Federal programs have no strings attached. Skagit County has had a county VSO for the past two years, and the return on that investment has exceeded \$1 million in benefits for veterans.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Juliana Roe, Washington State Association of Counties; and Jerry Fugich, Veterans Legislative Coalition.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.