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**Technology, Economic Development, &  
Veterans Committee**

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**HB 1102**

**Brief Description:** Increasing support and services for veterans.

**Sponsors:** Representatives Shavers, Ryu, Leavitt, Callan, Simmons, Goodman, Wylie, Nance, Fosse and Reeves.

**Brief Summary of Bill**

- Requires the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) to provide information to recently discharged veterans about veterans benefits, services, and available resources.
- Expands county eligibility for the WDVA's Veterans Service Officer Program (Program) to counties where the percentage of veterans receiving benefits is below the national average.
- Prioritizes counties with the lowest percentage of veterans receiving benefits for the Program.
- Requires the WDVA to provide reports every two years including county-specific information about the number of resident veterans and services available.

**Hearing Date:** 1/15/25

**Staff:** Martha Wehling (786-7067).

**Background:**

Veterans Service Officers.

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

Veterans service officers assist veterans and their families with claims for federal benefits. Veterans service officers may work for the state, a county, a tribal government, or a private organization. To provide services through veterans service officers, the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) has contracts with five nonprofit veterans service organizations. The WDVA also has veterans service officer partnerships with 17 counties and seven Indian tribes.

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs accredits three types of representatives: veterans service organization representatives, attorneys, and agents. When a veteran is filing a claim for benefits, only an accredited attorney, agent, veterans service organization, federal regional office representative, or permitted individual may represent the veteran.

#### The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Service Officer Program.

The WDVA operates a Veterans Service Officer Program (Program) which funds veterans service officers in certain counties. Counties that are eligible for a veterans service officer under the Program must have a population of 100,000 or less. The WDVA provides funding on a first-come, first-served basis to establish and maintain one local accredited veterans service officer per county. Since its creation in 2019, the Program has funded six veterans service officers.

Funds in the Veterans Service Officer Account may be used for the Program. The WDVA also provides grants to counties to develop or expand veterans service officer and peer-to-peer support programs, and other services and programs where needed.

#### Reporting.

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs' Annual Benefits Report (VA Report) for fiscal year 2023 identified 6,159,448 veterans receiving federal disability and 262,932 veterans receiving pension compensation out of 18,250,044 veterans. The national average of veterans receiving benefits in fiscal year 2023 was 35.2 percent. The VA Report identifies 158,510 veterans receiving federal disability and 3,116 veterans receiving pension compensation out of the 525,343 veterans in Washington, resulting in a state average of 30.8 percent.

The WDVA was required by SSB 5358 (2023) to report by September 30, 2024, on the effectiveness of the Program in meeting the needs of veterans in the state. The September 2024 Veterans Service Officer Program Report (VSO Report) recommends expanding the Program to provide funds to all eligible counties, prioritizing counties that are currently lacking veteran service officer services and that are below the state and national average of veterans receiving federal disability benefits. The VSO Report also recommends expanding the Program to include funds for federally recognized Indian tribes that partner with WDVA. The VSO Report identifies 158,702 veterans receiving benefits out of the 532,523 veterans in the state, resulting in an average of 30 percent. Veterans in individual counties range in benefits received from 15 percent to 44 percent. The VSO Report identifies 31 counties where the percentage of veterans receiving benefits is less than the national average of 35 percent.

#### County Veterans' Assistance Programs.

In some counties, veterans service officers are funded through local veterans' assistance programs, which are established to provide relief and assistance through a portion of the county's regular property tax levy. Each county's legislative authority approves a veterans' assistance program to address the needs of local indigent veterans and their families. The county may authorize other entities to administer its veterans' assistance program through grants, contracts, or interlocal agreements. When a noncounty entity administers a veterans' assistance program, a local branch of a nationally recognized veterans service organization should be the initial point of contact for a veteran seeking assistance. Veterans' assistance programs are fully or partially funded by the Veterans' Assistance Fund Account in each county.

### **Summary of Bill:**

#### Information About Services Available to Veterans.

The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) is required to support veterans by providing information about services available to veterans. The WDVA is required to: (1) contact veterans after discharge and provide information about benefits and services available to veterans; and (2) identify services and resources by county on the WDVA website.

After receiving a discharge notice from the Department of Defense, the WDVA is required to contact the discharged veteran and provide information about benefits and services. The WDVA is required to use information provided by county veterans' assistance programs and local branches of nationally recognized veterans service organizations to provide county-specific information on the WDVA website.

The WDVA may use the Veterans Service Officer Account to provide information about services available to veterans or to prepare its report on veterans services.

#### Expansion and Prioritization of Counties Eligible for the Veterans Service Officer Program.

The counties eligible to apply for a veterans service officer through the WDVA's Veterans Service Officer Program are expanded to those counties where the percentage of the veteran population receiving federal disability or pension compensation is below the national average.

The WDVA is required to prioritize veterans service officers for counties where the percentage of the veteran population receiving federal disability or pension compensation is lowest, and then to eligible counties without a veterans service officer. "Veterans service officer" is defined to mean an accredited veterans service officer funded by the Veterans Service Officer Account.

The WDVA may adopt rules and must require that any county participating in the Veterans Service Officer Program allow veterans residing in an adjacent county access to an officer funded by the Program.

#### Reporting.

Beginning in December 2026, the WDVA is required to report on services available to veterans to the Governor and the Legislature and provide information on the number of veterans, available services, entities providing services, benefits received, and counties that do not provide

access to a veterans service officer or where the veteran population receiving benefits is below the national average. The WDVA is required to provide this report every two years.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Requested on January 6, 2025.

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