

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1102

As Reported by House Committee On:
Technology, Economic Development, & Veterans

Title: An act relating to increasing support and services for veterans.

Brief Description: Increasing support and services for veterans.

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

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Technology, Economic Development, & Veterans: 1/15/25, 1/21/25 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute 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.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, & VETERANS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass.

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.

Signed by 11 members: Representatives Ryu, Chair; Kloba, Vice Chair; Volz, Ranking Minority Member; Barnard, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Cortes, Donaghy, Keaton, Paul, Penner, Simmons and Waters.

Staff: Martha Wehling (786-7067).

Background:

Veterans Service Officers.

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.

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 Substitute Senate Bill 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 veterans 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 a veterans' assistance fund in each county.

Summary of Substitute 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.

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.

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.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill removes references to the Veterans Service Officer Fund.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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) Veterans service officers serve as a lifeline to veterans during the challenging transition to civilian life and navigating the complexities of the system. Every veteran should be able to access the benefits earned and promised from service, including federal health care, housing, education, and employment benefits. Veterans services are more than resources; they are about living with dignity, fairness, and opportunity.

The state has significant gaps in its coverage of veterans service officers. The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs' (WDVA) recent report identified 10 counties that do not have a veterans service officer, and only eight counties meet or exceed the national average of veterans receiving compensation. There is an urgent need to expand access to a veterans service officer for every veteran. The impact of a veterans service officer was transformative for Island County, where the veterans now have access to critical services that help them rebuild their lives. Counties that most need a veterans service officer are prioritized by identifying the counties with the lowest number of veterans receiving benefits, followed by counties without a veterans service officer. The priority counties include San Juan, Skamania, King, Kittitas, Snohomish, Pacific, Douglas, and Chelan.

No veteran or family member should be left behind in any corner of the state, and we should make Washington a leader in how we care and treat our veterans by honoring those who served and acting on our gratitude for their service.

(Opposed) None.

(Other) Veterans service officers connect veterans and their families with a wide range of federal benefits including burial, survivor, and service-connected disability compensation, in addition to state benefits. The benefits improve health, economic security, and quality of life for veterans and their families. Approximately 162,000 veterans in the State receive federal benefits each month. The average monthly disability payment is \$1,800 a month paid to veterans and their families, which results in \$3.6 billion annually to the local economy. Additional federal benefits include \$2.3 billion in medical benefits and \$380 million in education and employment benefits.

Counties are a valuable partner because federal rules allow counties to collaborate with state agencies to provide services to veterans and their families, which is especially important in rural counties. The WDVA partners with counties, federally recognized Indian tribes, and nonprofit veterans service organizations to ensure veterans and their families are connected to the benefits earned. The existing Veterans Service Officer Program has provided funding to six counties, but there are 25 counties where the veteran population receiving benefits is below the national average.

Veterans who make Washington home will be contacted, and provided with resources and a structure that is more meaningful and tailored to the community each veteran is living in.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Clyde Shavers, prime sponsor; and Jerry Fugich, Veterans Legislative Coalition.

(Other) David Puente, Jr., Director, WA State Department of Veterans Affairs.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.