

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1541

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

Title: An act relating to the veterans affairs advisory committee.

Brief Description: Concerning the veterans affairs advisory committee.

Sponsors: Representatives Abell, Donaghy, Morgan, Kloba, Shavers, Zahn, Hill and Simmons;
by request of Department of Veterans Affairs.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Technology, Economic Development, & Veterans: 1/29/25, 2/11/25 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Modifies the membership of the Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee by allowing the Governor to appoint members from state veterans' homes, a federally recognized tribe, a current or former Washington National Guard member, a justice involved or formerly incarcerated individual, and an individual with certain lived experiences.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, & VETERANS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 10 members: Representatives Ryu, Chair; Kloba, Vice Chair; Barnard, Ranking Minority Member; Cortes, Donaghy, Paul, Penner, Shavers, Simmons and Thomas.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 2 members: Representatives Keaton and Volz.

Minority Report: Without recommendation. Signed by 1 member: Representative Waters.

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.

Staff: Martha Wehling (786-7067).

Background:

Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee.

The Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee (VAAC) provides advice and makes recommendations to the Governor and the Director of the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA). The VAAC consists of 17 members appointed by the Governor to serve four-year terms. The VAAC members include:

- one member from the Washington Soldiers' Home and Colony in Orting;
- one member from the Washington Veterans' Home at Retsil;
- three members, one from each of the three congressionally chartered and recognized veterans service organizations with the largest membership in the state;
- 10 members representing the congressionally chartered and recognized veterans service organizations that have at least one active chapter in the state; and
- two members who are veterans at large.

The Governor must ensure that appointments represent all geographical parts of the state, as well as minority and women veteran viewpoints. The VAAC must appoint members to serve as liaisons to the state veterans' homes, unless the home has a representative appointed to the VAAC. Members appointed before 1992 were eligible to serve until the expiration of their terms and were eligible for reappointment.

State Veterans' Homes.

The State Constitution mandates that the Legislature provide a soldiers' home for honorably discharged resident soldiers, sailors, and marines who were disabled in the line of duty. These state veterans' homes are managed by the WDVA. In 1890 the Legislature created the Washington Soldiers' Home in Orting. In 1907 the Legislature established a branch of the Washington Soldiers' Home at Retsil, called the Washington Veterans' Home. In 2001 the Legislature established another branch in Spokane, called the Eastern Washington Veterans' Home. In 2014 the Walla Walla Veterans' Home was established.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

The Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee (VAAC) membership is modified. The Governor may appoint two representatives from the veterans' homes, based on nominations from the homes.

Out of the 10 member appointments not otherwise specified, the Director of the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) will nominate members for the Governor from the following categories: a federally recognized tribal member; a current or former member of the Washington National Guard; a justice involved or formerly incarcerated individual; and individuals with lived experience, such as faced barriers to housing, post-traumatic

stress recovery, and substance use disorder.

Reference to the 1992 member appointments is removed.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill modifies the Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee membership. First, it reinserts some of the original bill language regarding veterans' home membership, removes the reference to two of the veterans' homes, and adds a citation to the statute identifying the veterans' homes. Second, it adds two categories for the 10 member appointments, including a justice involved or formerly incarcerated representative, and a veteran with lived experience. Third, it removes two of the four at-large members, returning to the number of at-large members in the original statute.

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) Revisions to the composition of the Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee (VAAC) will bring it into alignment with current practical realities and create additional flexibility for a veteran from a tribe or the National Guard to be appointed to the VAAC. The members of the VAAC requested these modifications during their 2024 planning meetings. The two veteran home positions have been vacant for a long time because the services at the veterans' home are in-home care. This means that the veterans are unable to travel to VAAC meetings held around the state. The VAAC has adopted a liaison model instead of requiring those veterans to leave the homes. For the past several years, the VAAC has made efforts to connect with more rural veterans by holding town halls, and more are planned for this year.

Native American veterans are underserved and access benefits at a lower rate than other veterans. The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs provides training and has eight memorandum of agreements with Washington tribes. There should be efforts to reach out to all 29 federally recognized tribes. A closer relationship with the National Guard is beneficial because the needs of citizen soldiers are often overlooked. In times of a state or national emergency, these members often have less access to services and programs that are available to their active duty counterparts.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Representative Hunter Abell, prime sponsor; David Puente, WA State Department of Veterans Affairs; Vincent McDonald, Colville Confederated Tribe; and Richard Thomas, Washington Veterans Legislative Coalition.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.