

State Administration and Veterans' Affairs
Interim committee

Sheri S. Scurr, Research Analyst
Montana Legislative Services Division

HJ 23 - VETERAN SERVICE OFFICER PROGRAMS: STRUCTURE & FUNDING IN OTHER STATES

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INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 23

Under the HJ 23 (2019) study resolution, the State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee (SAVA) was asked to:

- (1) gather information about the current organizational structure, funding, number of veterans served, and outreach efforts of the Montana Veterans' Affairs Division (MVAD);
- (2) evaluate other service delivery models, such as county-based models and the service structures used in other states;
- (3) examine options for improving outreach and increasing the number of veterans served, including in Indian country;
- (4) solicit input and recommendations from the Board of Veterans' Affairs, counties, veterans and their families, and all other stakeholders and interested persons about how to maintain and improve the services of the MVAD; and
- (5) develop recommendations as appropriate based on the study's findings.

HOUSE BILL NO. 172

The 2019 Legislature also passed HB 172, which established a four-year grant program administered by the MVAD with state funding to assist counties with county-funded CVSO offices. The bill provided \$30,000 in fiscal year 2020 and \$30,000 for fiscal year 2021, which is to be considered as part of the ongoing base for the 2023 legislative session.

The bill states that the \$30,000 grant amount is to be divided among counties that have established CVSO offices based on the following formula:

"The amount paid to each county or multicounty veterans' service office is calculated by multiplying the total annual appropriation for the grant program by the ratio of the number of veterans residing in a county or counties serviced by a county or multicounty veterans' service office to the total number of veterans residing in all counties participating in the grant program and rounding to the nearest whole dollar amount. The number of veterans residing in a county is determined using the most recent data reported by the U.S. department of veterans affairs."

This is considered a block grant because there is a specified formula for eligibility rather than a competitive bid or proposal evaluation process.

The bill states that "a county or multicounty veterans' service office shall...ensure that all of the grant money received...is spent in support of veterans and their family members and may not be used for any other purpose".

The HB 172 grant program terminates June 30, 2023.

FUNDING AND POLICY QUESTIONS

In the context of HJ 23 study and HB 172 going forward, the funding and policy questions for SAVA and the full legislature could involve discussions around the following tiers of questions:

- 1) Does the state need or desire additional VSO services to reach and assist more veterans?
 - a) If so, should the state provide funding for additional MVAD VSOs?
 - b) If so, should the state help fund county veteran service offices?

- 2) If state funding should be provided to assist counties going forward, how should it be provided:
 - a) If through a block grant program like HB 172, should HB 172 be revised? And if so, how?
 - b) If through a competitive bid process, how should that program be structured?

With these, and perhaps additional funding and policy questions in mind, this HJ 23 report examines other states' models for funding and structuring veteran benefit claims assistance, which may be helpful as the committee evaluates next steps.

STATES SELECTED FOR FURTHER STUDY

At its Oct. 29, 2019, meeting, SAVA reviewed a 50-state matrix showing which states relied primarily on state VSOs, CVSOs, or a combination of both. After discussion, the committee selected the following six states for further examination:

- **Alaska** - VSO services are primarily provided through a state grant to each Veteran Service Organization, with each organization employing VSOs, so there are no county/local government VSOs.

- **Michigan** - VSO services are primarily provided through a state grant to the Michigan Veteran Coalition (a coalition of five veteran service organizations who each provide VSO services), but there is also a grant program to counties.

- **Minnesota** - VSO services are primarily provided through two state regional offices and a grant to the Minnesota Association of CVSOs, which in turn supports county VSO offices.
- **Nebraska** - although there are a few state VSOs, the service model is almost entirely county-based. Counties must have CVSOs and no state funding is provided.
- **South Dakota** - VSO services are primarily county-based. State VSOs who are field officers provide training and assistance to counties. The state funds a portion of CVSO salaries.
- **Washington** - VSO services are provided in three ways: (1) state VSOs working regional offices, (2) contracts with veteran service organizations for VSO services, and (3) a state pilot program providing a competitive incentive grant for counties that choose to have CVSOs.

See the summary table at Appendix A.

METHODOLOGY

SOURCES

The information presented in this paper is primarily compiled from the following sources:

- U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs data.
- Official websites maintained by the organizations referenced in this report.
- Available annual reports, audits, and studies by other entities.
- State statutes.
- Interviews and email correspondence with veteran service offices in each state.

The state maps and veteran population statistics were taken from the VA State Summaries for 2017, which are the most recent VA summaries available.

At the end of each states' section in this report is a list of references used in compiling the state summary.

BY THE NUMBER COMPARISONS

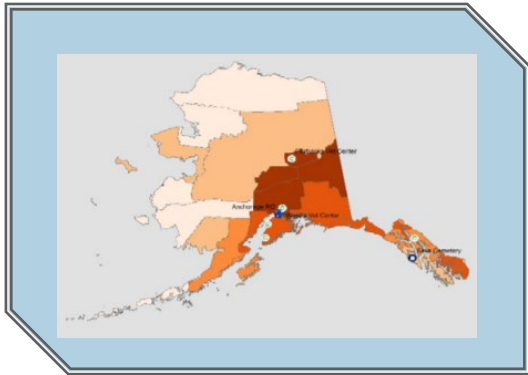
In the "By the Numbers" subsection of each state's summary, the calculation of the number of veterans receiving disability or pension compensation as percentage of the state's total veteran population is offered as one way to measure the effectiveness of the state's VSO program. However, it is only one measurement among other metrics that could be used. And, the latest data available from the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) is for FY 2017.

The following summary table provides a comparison by state to the national average in FY 2017.

FY 2017 Data	Total Vet Pop	Vets receiving disability or pensions	Percent of total veteran pop
Nationally	19,998,799	4,552,819	23%
Alaska	68,719	20,064	29%
Michigan	589,326	114,851	19%
Minnesota	327,629	100,171	30%
Nebraska	130,126	43,465	33%
South Dakota	65,335	17,427	27%
Washington	560,200	136,809	24%
Montana	91,336	22,192	24%

Again, although this type of comparison is used in some national evaluations of state programs, it cannot tell the whole story, especially because many VSOs work as volunteers and may not be accounted for within the state or county programs. Also, veterans may file claims independently of a VSO or directly with a nationally accredited service organization.

ALASKA



BY THE NUMBERS

Area: 663,268 square miles

Total population: 739,786

Total veterans: 68,719 - 13.12% of total

Disability comp. & pensions paid: \$281.7 million

Vets receiving disability or pension comp . :
20,064 = 29% of total

Vets enrolled in VA health care: 33,843 - 49%

Counties: 19 organized boroughs

Total VSOs (under service organizations): 17

BASIC STRUCTURE

- The Office of Veterans' Affairs is governed under the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, which has a veterans' advisory council.
- At the state level, the Office of Veterans Affairs:
 - administers a grant program to four veteran service organizations who employ a total of 17 VSOs among them.
 - American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, the Vietnam Veterans of America, and the Veterans' of Foreign Wars.
 - adopts regulations and forms and uses detailed Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) to execute the grant agreement. The MOU includes performance criteria and the process to be used to obtain reimbursement.
- Each veteran service organization hires, fires, trains, and accredits their own VSOs and must meet all requirements of the MOU.
- The Office of Veterans Affairs reports there are 450 Tribal Veteran Representatives (TVR). A TVR may be a volunteer. They are not certified VSOs but do receive some basic training that helps them do outreach and provide for a "warm hand-off" to certified VSOs.

FUNDING

- The state appropriates general fund money to the Department of Military Affairs' veteran services program. The money is then allocated by grant agreement for each VSO employed by each veteran service organization. The FY 2019 appropriation was sufficient to provide \$62,250 annually for each VSO employed by a veteran service organization. Of that, the state agency administering the program is authorized to use \$2,250 per VSO under each grant to cover the cost of grant contract administration.
- Service organizations must submit monthly claim forms and activity reports and are reimbursed for salary, employer costs, training expenses, and travel expenses. Receipts are required.
- State payments are made primarily by Electronic Funds Transfers after claim forms and documentation is reviewed and approved.
- The total state budget for VSOs in FY 19 was \$1,058,250.

PERFORMANCE CRITERIA - QUALITY CONTROL MEASURES

- The MOU between the state and each service organization includes a detailed outline covering selection, training, and certification criteria for VSOs, operational requirements including the location of offices, office hours, a very detailed list of duties and reporting requirements, the obligations of the state, and funding arrangements.
- Each month, the state office receives a report from each veteran service organization detailing the number of:
 - Veterans served (i.e., direct contacts either personal or by email or phone)
 - New claims filed
 - New Powers of Attorney received
 - Total Powers of Attorney held
 - Transition assistance program briefings provided or supported
 - Appeals initiated
 - Rural site visits - these must comply with locations listed in the MOU.
 - Brief detail must be provided on the impact of the visit (e.g., how many new veterans were signed up) as well as problems encountered (e.g., lack of turnout, high cost lodging, etc.).
 - Needs or suggested improvements are also to be briefly listed.

- Based on these monthly reports and metrics, the director of the Department of Military Affairs and the director of the Office of Veterans Services provide an annual report to the legislature, which is then used to justify continued funding or funding modifications (i.e., increases or decreases) to the grant program.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

The director of the Office of Veterans' Services stated that strengths of the program included:

- The \$60,000 per VSO is less expensive than a state employee, so this is deemed by the legislature as a cost-effective way of supporting VSO services because the state is not having to provide liability insurance or manage personnel issues such as recruitment, retention, and turnover.
- Veteran Service Organizations have strong membership ties to the communities and so reach out and connect with veterans where they live, which are in very remote locations.
- Through the grant agreements and reporting requirements, the state is still able to provide strong contract oversight and performance reports to justify continued funding.

The weaknesses or areas for improvement cited included:

- It is a bit cumbersome to have separate agreements for each veteran service organization and there is some thought about consolidating the grant program into a model with one grant perhaps to a coalition of veteran service organizations.
- Currently, training is being provided by each veteran service organization and the VFW provides the best training. The Office of Veteran Services is discussing whether to bring training "in-house" to be coordinated at the state-level and provided by a national association such as the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers.

STATUTORY LANGUAGE

Summary of statutory approach: Language mentions cost-reimbursement method specifically and specifically lists employment costs, travel expense, and per diem as eligible expenses.

Sec. 26.10.040. Training in rehabilitation and service work.

The Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs may approve expenditures by veterans' organizations and may reimburse them for their expenditures in employing full time service officers, for necessary travel expenses, including

travel by service officers outside of the state not more than once each year for purposes of training in veterans' rehabilitation and service work, and for per diem not exceeding that allowed state employees. The department shall limit payments to veterans' organizations to an amount that will fairly compensate them for salaries and expenses paid to their full time service officers in performing rehabilitation work for veterans, including the prosecution of their claims and solution of their problems arising out of military service. This service and assistance shall be given to all veterans and their dependents and to all beneficiaries of any military claim and shall include but not be limited to those services now given by the service departments of the respective organizations.

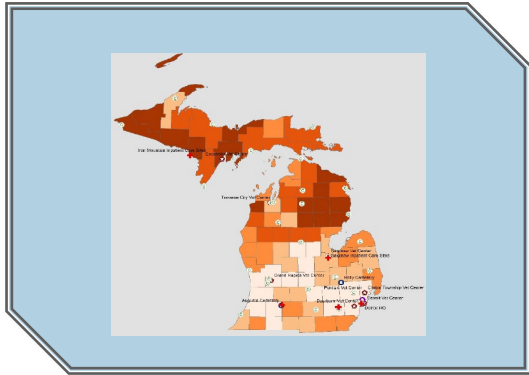
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BY THE NUMBERS

Area: 96,716 square miles

Total population: 9.9 million

Total veterans: 589,326 - 8.2% of total

Disability comp. & pensions paid: \$2,124,528

Vets receiving disability or pension comp.:
114,851 = 19% of total

Vets enrolled in VA health care: 231,960 - 39%

Counties: 83

Total VSOs: 5 state, 142 CVSOs

BASIC STRUCTURE

- The Michigan Veterans' Affairs Agency (MVAA) is the lead agency for the state's veteran service officer program. The governor's 2013 Executive Order No. 2013-2 created the MVAA to serve as "the coordinating office for all agencies of the executive branch of government that are responsible for programs related to services for veterans." The MVAA director is appointed directly by the governor and a member of the governor's cabinet. The agency itself is administratively housed within the Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs.
- The executive order's preamble states that the previous service delivery model was not structured to provide coordinated, high-quality services. Although counties are not mentioned in the order, the Strategy Outreach Director for MVAA stated in an interview for this report that prior to the establishment of the MVAA, veteran benefit claims assistance was provided by a patchwork of service officers working for either the veteran service organizations active in the state or the counties that had established veteran service departments as authorized by statute.
- The executive order specifically states that the MVAA may execute contracts and other instruments to exercise its functions.
- At the state level:
 - The MVAA is a recognized agency with the VA.
 - The agency employs five accredited VSOs.
 - A state benefit claims information technology system is used for processing and tracking claims and serves as infrastructure for claims work done by veteran service organization and county VSOs.

- The MVAA administers several grant/contract programs for VSO services and for outreach and coordination of state and local veteran programs.
- The center piece of the VSO program is the MVAA's contract for services with the Michigan Veterans Coalition. The MVC is a coalition of the following five veteran service organizations who to provide a specified number of hours of direct VSO services to veterans:
 - American Legion
 - Disabled American Veterans
 - Vietnam Veterans of America
 - Military Order of the Purple Heart
 - Veterans of Foreign Wars
- The MVAA also administers two types of grants to counties (see the funding section for further details):
 - Incentive grants for counties who apply for help establishing new offices and/or technology upgrades.
 - A new statutory block grant program that provides each county that has an established VSO office with a base grant of \$25,000 and allocates any additional funds based on each county's veteran population.
- At the county level:
 - State statute authorizes counties to create a veterans' affairs department under a committee appointed by the county board of commissioners. This model pre-dates the establishment of the MVAA in 2013 but continues to provide the basic infrastructure for delivery of benefit claims services for veterans, though counties vary in their levels of service and capability.
 - Michigan has 83 counties; 77 counties have established Departments of Veteran Affairs; and a total of 142 accredited county veteran service officers (called veteran counselors) assist veterans in filing benefit claims.
 - The Michigan Association of County Veterans Counselors is a statewide association that supports the county veteran counselors, but the counselors themselves are county employees and receive training and accreditation through the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers (NACVSO).
 - A veteran working with a county veteran counselor may designate NACVSO or a national veteran service organization, such as the American Legion, as the holder of the veteran's power of attorney.

- The MVAA, the Montana Veterans' Coalition, and the Michigan Association of County Veterans Counselors each have websites that offer a search for veteran counselors by county.
- With respect to coordination and outreach, MVAA operates on three fronts:
 - MVAA contracts with a regional veterans' coordinator in each of Michigan's 10 "prosperity regions". These regional coordinators work with various service providers within the region, including the veteran service officers, to conduct outreach and help veterans navigate the various benefits and services available.
 - Each regional coordinator also works with a Veteran Community Action Team that provides a technology-based "crowd sourced" case management approach to help connect veterans and their families to needed services.
 - Finally, MVAA operates a Veterans' Resource Center program, which is a one-stop information call center that also provides referrals to needed resources.
- The MVAA has earned several excellence and innovation awards for its coordination and outreach programs.

FUNDING

- According to a Michigan budget summary, for FY 2019-20, the MVAA received a \$3.8 million total appropriation for its service contract with the Montana Veterans' Coalition. This has been a relatively stable amount of funding since FY 2006, although there was a significant cut in FY 2010 through FY 2014.
- The MVC, in turn, grants the money to its member veteran service organizations who employ VSOs to assist veterans in filing their claims.
- Under the MVAA's contract with the MVC:
 - All personnel assigned to the program by an MVC member organization are required to perform their duties at specified locations under the 10 prosperity-region model.
 - Each member organization submits expense reports to the MVC and the MVC pays the organizations who then pay their VSOs and the associated expenses. The MVC sends monthly consolidated expense reports and invoices to the MVAA.

- Under the grant agreement, 75% of each grant to a veteran service organization must be spent on direct services (i.e., VSO salaries and benefits) and 25% must be spent for training, travel, and other support services and expenses.
 - The direct services funding is allocated by region according to each region's veteran population. That amount is then converted to VSO hours based on an hourly rate of pay (e.g., \$34/hour). For example, rounding the numbers and simplifying some of the calculations based on other factors, if the total allocated by the legislature was \$4 million, 75% of that would be \$3 million. If region 9 had 10% of the veteran population, it would be eligible for 10% of the grant, or \$300,000. Based on \$34/per hour, the \$300,000 granted to the MVC would be to provide 8,823 hours of direct service work, or 735 hours a month. The member organization, such as the American Legion, would then be able to invoice the MVA for the actual hours American Legion VSOs worked in that region. The MVA would track the hours (with a consolidated report to the state MVAA) for all the VSOs in the region to get to the 8,923 hours and reimburse the organizations their respective amounts, which may total no more than the \$300,000 allocated.
 - The MVC consolidates the hours submitted and sends a consolidated invoice to the state MVAA each month for reimbursement based on the actual hours worked. If the MVC provides 90% or fewer hours than stipulated in the contract, the MVC must submit a corrective action plan to address the shortage.
 - Training and expense reimbursement is provided through a similar but separate process.
- Under a county incentive program that was replaced in FY 2019, the state appropriated money to provide counties that applied (on a competitive basis) with the following types of grants:
 - Up to \$20,000 for new office
 - Up to \$15,000 for a new full-time VSO
 - Up to \$10,000 for a new part-time VSO
 - Up to \$5,000 for technology upgrades

- In 2018, the Michigan Legislature created a new statutory block grant (non-competitive) program to counties that took effect for FY 2019. The enrolled law included the following provisions:
 - It established an account within the state treasury for veteran services. Money appropriated (and any grants or donations deposited in the account) continues to accrue to the fund, including interest earned.
 - The grants paid from the fund provide a base amount of \$50,000 to each county with a veteran service office if the county meets a list of statutory conditions, which includes a minimum amount of county funding.
 - Any additional money remaining in the account may be distributed proportionally based on each county's share of the total veteran population in the state.
 - Under the bill, the grant is provided upfront, so if expense reports show expenditures for ineligible expenses, the county's next grant is reduced accordingly.

PERFORMANCE CRITERIA - QUALITY CONTROL MEASURES

- The MVAA strategic plan outlines specific performance measures and goals. Some of the key goals are as follows:
 - Achieve 85% excellent customer satisfaction ratings for MVAA customers by Oct. 1, 2020. (All customers are asked to voluntarily submit satisfaction surveys.)
 - Increase the percentage of Michigan veterans receiving disability and/or pension compensation to 25% of the total veteran population and VA health care to 48.5% of the total veteran population by Oct. 1, 2027.
 - Provide access to a VSO within 48 hours of a request and access within 50 miles by Oct. 1, 2020.
 - Establish VSO services in Tribal communities by Oct. 1, 2020.
 - Develop an online appointment scheduling tool for veterans to schedule appointments with VSOs by Oct. 1, 2023.
 - Increase VSO access for incarcerated veterans.
 - Reach 50% of Michigan's veteran population with MVAA messaging sustained annually.

- With respect to reporting requirements related to the MVAA grant/contract program with the MVC, the MVC must submit monthly and quarterly activity reports tracking by region and service organization:
 - Number of claims submitted by specific type.
 - Appeal activity by type.
 - Number of supporting activities, such as courtesy calls and personal interviews.
 - A "special populations" report (e.g. number of housebound veterans reached by email, phone call, in person). Special populations include female veterans, incarcerated veterans, housebound veterans, tribal veterans, etc.
 - Number of "recoveries received" (i.e., claims paid).
 - VSO expenses (e.g., travel, lodging, and per diem).

- With respect to actual performance related to the MVAA contract with MVC, several performance criteria are outlined in service agreement, a few of which are:
 - MVC must achieve 77% of the claims submitted as "fully developed claims" with a 55% adjusted rating. What constitutes a fully developed claim is defined.
 - MVC must achieve a 60% or greater excellent or good customer satisfaction rating.
 - Regular participation by service officers in regional coordination and outreach activities and with Veteran Community Action Teams.

- The MVAA's monitoring plan for its contract with MVC includes details on how it will review hours worked, weekly meeting requirements with MVC leadership, and monitoring of the automated claims IT system.

- Regarding the MVAA's grant program for counties, to receive state-funding, each county must:
 - maintain a minimum level of county funding for veteran service operations;
 - establish remote access to the VA computing systems and require county veteran service officers to obtain an access/id card;
 - submit quarterly reports to the MVAA that meet the following requirements:
 - provide no less than 20 hours per week toward veteran service operations;
 - submit financial reports to the MVA on a regular basis; and
 - if the MVAA determines, by audit or otherwise, that a county expended grant funds for purposes other than veteran service operations, the MVAA must reduce the grant disbursement provided to the county in the succeeding fiscal year by an amount equal to the total of all amounts improperly expended.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

- Michigan's veteran services program improved from being ranked 50th in per-capita benefits compensation received from the VA in 2011 to 36th in FY19. Since the MVAA was established, Michigan has also received numerous awards and recognitions and its veteran services program is highlighted in a 2019 study on innovations by state-level veterans' service agencies.
- Challenges or notes for improvement:
 - Audit findings in 2018 were (note this was before the county incentive grant program was replaced by the block grant program to counties):
 - Contract monitoring is complex and additional training was needed to provide adequate oversight.
 - Contract monitoring is time intensive - monthly and quarterly reporting requires time to review and MVAA staff turnover had caused errors.
 - Data and information management systems needed to be upgraded to properly track payments.
- Innovation report findings:
 - State funding is year-by-year and sources include special revenue streams that fluctuate.
 - Again, please note this finding was before the county incentive grant program was replaced by the block grant program to counties that created a special fund within the state treasury and provided for state general fund appropriations.

STATUTORY LANGUAGE

Overview of statutory approach: The statute for the county grant program creates a separate fund/account to allow money, including interest earned, to be retained in the account. The language addresses auditing and administration and provides broad language rather than specifying the types of eligible expenses.

35.623a County veteran service fund; creation; grant program; veteran service operations; eligibility; audit.

Sec. 3a.

- (1) The county veteran service fund is created within the state treasury.
- (2) The state treasurer may receive money or other assets from any source for deposit into the fund. The state treasurer shall direct the investment of the fund. The state treasurer shall credit to the fund interest and earnings from fund investments.

(3) Money in the fund at the close of the fiscal year shall remain in the fund and shall not lapse to the general fund.

(4) The Michigan veterans affairs agency shall be the administrator of the fund for auditing purposes.

(5) The Michigan veterans affairs agency shall create and operate a grant program that provides grants to counties for county veteran service operations. The Michigan veterans affairs agency shall make grants from the fund, upon appropriation, to each county that meets the conditions listed in subsection (7) for the sole use of the county's veteran service operations. The total disbursement for each grant shall be determined by combining the following amounts:

(a) A base amount of \$50,000.00.

(b) A per capita amount according to the number of veterans residing in each county. The amount in this subdivision shall be determined by dividing the amount remaining in the fund after accounting for all disbursements under subdivision (a) by the total number of veterans residing in this state and multiplying the resulting dollar amount by the number of veterans residing in the county receiving the grant. Population figures for veterans residing in this state and in each county of this state shall be obtained from the most recent Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures (GDX) Report published by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.

(6) Both of the following apply to the disbursement of a grant under subsection (5):

(a) The base amount described under subsection (5)(a) shall be provided in a lump sum distribution not later than December 31 of each year. The initial base amount shall be provided not later than January 31, 2019.

(b) If the amount remaining in the fund after accounting for all disbursements under subsection (5)(a) is less than the amount obtained by multiplying \$1,000.00 by the number of counties receiving grants, the Michigan veterans affairs agency shall not perform a calculation under subsection (5)(b) and shall not disburse the portion of grant funds described under that subsection.

(7) To be eligible for receiving a grant under subsection (5), within 1 year of September 24, 2018, and annually after that date, a county must satisfy all of the following as certified in a form and manner prescribed by the Michigan veterans affairs agency:

(a) Maintain a minimum level of county funding for veteran service operations equal to the level of county funding for veteran service operations for the fiscal year preceding September 24, 2018.

(b) Establish remote access to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs computing systems and require county veteran service officers to obtain a PIV card.

(c) Submit quarterly reports to the Michigan veterans affairs agency in accordance with the reporting requirements determined by that agency.

(d) Provide no less than 20 hours per week toward veteran service operations.

(e) Submit financial reports to the Michigan veterans affairs agency on a regular basis, as determined by that agency, demonstrating that the county expended the grant funds received under subsection (5) directly and solely on veteran service operations during the period of the report. If the Michigan veterans affairs agency determines, by audit or otherwise, that a county expended the grant funds received under subsection (5) for purposes other than veteran service operations, the Michigan veterans affairs agency shall reduce the grant disbursement provided to the county in the succeeding fiscal year by an amount equal to the total of all amounts improperly expended.

(8) As used in this section:

(a) "Accredited veteran service officer" means an individual who has met the qualifications for accreditation under 38 USC 5904 and 38 CFR 14.629.

(b) "County veteran service fund" or "fund" means the fund created in subsection (1).

(c) "PIV card" means a personal identity verification card issued by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.

(d) "Veteran service operations" means assistance and programming of any kind to meet the needs of veterans in this state. Veteran service operations include, but are not limited to, providing assistance, programming, and services for the purpose of assisting veterans in this state and providing advice, advocacy, and assistance to veterans, servicemembers, dependents, or survivors by an accredited veteran service officer to obtain United States Department of Veterans Affairs health, financial, or memorial benefits for which they are eligible.

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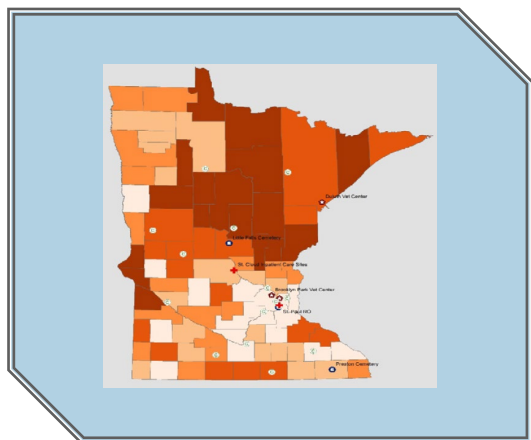
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BY THE NUMBERS

Area: 86,950 square miles

Total population: 5.64 million

Total veterans: 327,629 - 8.28% of total pop.

Disability & pensions paid FY17: \$1,193,130

Vets receiving disability or pension comp.:

100,171 = 30% of total veterans

Vets enrolled in VA health care:

164,375 - 50% of veteran pop.

Counties: 87

Total VSOs: 2 state regional offices; 120 CVSOs

BASIC STRUCTURE

- The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs is required by law to:
 - provide assistance and resources to any county veteran service office that requests support;
 - establish a certification process for CVSOs in consultation with the Minnesota Association of County Veteran Service Officers (MACVSO);
 - administer a grant program to help counties pay for their county veteran services (see the funding section for details); and
 - administer a \$50,000 annual block grant to the MACVSO.

- At the state level, there are two regional offices operated by the Minnesota Department of Veterans' Affairs.

- The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs has also established a Tribal Service Office initiative. There are 6 local TVSO offices that are not state funded and 1 state TVSO.

- By law, each county:
 - must hire a veteran service officer (VSO) and one or more assistant VSOs and provide all necessary administrative support for the office;
 - may form a cooperative agreement with other counties to share veteran service offices and costs; and
 - may impose a special levy (in excess of any caps) to fund their VSO costs.

- The Minnesota Association of County Veteran Service Officers (MACVSO) is the statewide umbrella association for the CVSOs.

- The MACVSO has divided the state into 9 regional districts and each district is represented on the organization's Executive Board.
 - By statute, the MACVSO may use the \$50,000 annual block grant for administrative costs of the association and certification of mandated county veterans service officer training and accreditation, and costs associated with reintegration services.
 - The MACVSO website provides a centralized directory for veterans to find VSO services by county.
 - There are 120 CVSOs statewide. A few counties share CVSOs.
 - The CVSOs are trained by MACVSO (in partnership with the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers) and certified by the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (as statutorily required).
- The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs is accredited with the VA and all CVSO claims are reviewed by state-level VSOs.
 - The department employs about 18 state VSOs, 14 field representatives, and 9 TVSOs whose primary responsibility is to support the CVSOs.

FUNDING

- State law authorizes counties to impose a special mill levy to fund veteran service offices.
- For FY 2019, the legislature appropriated \$1.1 million for the CVSO grant program, which was allocated as follows:
 - \$50,000 grant to the MACVSO
 - Base grants of \$7,500 to 27 counties
 - Additional funding awarded to 60 counties
 - \$130,000 allocated to training and education
- The county grant program is administered as an advanced payment or upfront grant. This is primarily in recognition of cash flow needs, especially in small counties. The statutes governing the grant program specify that the state may recover any money granted that is not spent on eligible expenses.

- The county must still provide documentation for all expenditures and maintain records or all transactions, which must be made available for monitoring and audit purposes.
- The county provides one close-out report, which must be provided no later than 20 days after the end of the fiscal year when the grant terminates. If a county has spent grant money on ineligible expenses, the county is not eligible for another grant until the money is repaid and/or the issues have been resolved to the state's satisfaction. There is an appeal process available to counties if a dispute arises.
- The state statute is very broad, but the grant must be used only for county VSO offices. Eligible expenses include compensation, travel, per diem, and necessary goods and services. The grant agreement states the funding may not be used to supplant county funding but must be used to "enhance" the county VSO office functions.

PERFORMANCE CRITERIA - QUALITY CONTROL MEASURES

Although there are not performance criteria specified in statute or in the grant agreements, quality control is systemic:

- The state provides the training and certification of the CVSOs.
- State VSOs review all CVS0 claims.
- The state VSOs handle the actual hearings and advocacy with the VA, not the CVSOs.
- Field representatives travel to each county to provide ongoing training and support to the CVSOs, especially if they notice a CVS0 may be struggling or not performing well.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs staff identified the following as program strengths:

- The state's relationship with counties and CVSOs is very good because of open and clear lines of communication.
- State VSOs who are the field representatives have the primary duty of traveling to the CVS0 locations to provide training and support.
- The grant process was set up and resources made available so that counties have access to a grant handbook that walks them through the entire process. The upfront grant model helps counties with cashflow and the one close-out report at the end of the fiscal year means the administrative burden for the county and the state is kept minimal.

- The MACVSO greatly assists the state in communications with the CVSOs and offers resources and support to the counties.

When asked about improvements, department staff responded that the challenge was primarily for CVSOs. Some CVSOs are part-time, while others wear more than one hat for the county. Also, it is difficult for some CVSOs to stay up to speed on the federal law changes affecting VA claims, so the state department is working hard to ensure state VSOs continue to train and support the CVSOs.

STATUTORY LANGUAGE

Overview of statutory approach: County VSOs are required by law. Counties are authorized to impose a special mill levy to fund its CVS0 office and my coordinate with other counties. Qualifications and training requirements for CVS0s are outlined in statute.

The Commissioner of the Department of Veterans Affairs is given discretion to identify eligible expenses but must consult with the Minnesota County Veteran Service Officer Association. Maximum grant amounts to counties are listed in statute according to specified range of the county's veteran population. Statutory seems to stipulate that the grant money will be provided upfront and if expense reports and receipts submitted to the state show the grant money is not spent on eligible expenses, the county must repay the money.

197.60 COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS; APPOINTMENT; COMPENSATION.

Subdivision 1. Appointment; administrative support. The county board of any county, or the county boards of any two or more counties acting pursuant to section 197.602, shall appoint a county veterans service officer and may appoint one or more assistant county veterans service officers who are qualified under section 197.601. The county board or boards shall provide necessary clerical help, office space, equipment, and supplies for the officer, and reimbursement for mileage and other traveling expenses necessarily incurred in the performance of duties. Subject to the direction and control of the county veterans service officer, the assistant county veterans service officer may exercise all the powers, and shall perform the duties, of the county veterans service officer, and is subject to all the provisions of sections 197.60 to 197.606 relating to a county veterans service officer. Every county officer and agency shall cooperate with the county veterans service officer and shall provide the officer with information necessary in connection with the performance of duties.

...

Subd. 4. Tax levy. In each county employing a county veterans service officer, the county board may levy a tax annually sufficient to defray the estimated cost of all salaries and expenses necessarily incident to the performance by the county veterans service

officer of duties during the succeeding year, and to make up any deficiency in the fund raised for that purpose during the preceding year. The tax so levied may be levied in excess of and over and above all taxing limitations, including, but not restricted to, limitations based upon population or local tax rates.

...

197.601 QUALIFICATIONS OF COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS.

No person shall be appointed a county veterans service officer or an assistant county veterans service officer under sections 197.60 to 197.606 unless the person is:

- (1) a resident of the state of Minnesota;
- (2) a citizen of the United States; and
- (3) a veteran, as defined in section 197.447.

In addition, a person accepting appointment to the position of county veterans service officer or assistant county veterans service officer or other equivalent assistant position must agree to receive, within six months of the appointment, training and education for the duties of the position, including development of an effective working knowledge of relevant laws, rules, and regulations pertaining to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, as applicable to veterans cases before the department and the administration of those cases.

...

197.602 JOINT ACTION BY TWO OR MORE COUNTIES.

The county boards of two or more contiguous counties may make a written agreement, executed on behalf of the several county boards by the respective chairs and secretaries thereof, whereby the counties may jointly employ a county veterans service officer. The agreement shall specify the compensation to be paid to the county veterans service officer, the amount thereof to be paid by each county, the number of days per month to be worked in each county, the percentage of the total amount of compensation to be paid by each county, the amount of travel and other expenses to be paid by each county, and such other terms and conditions as may be agreed upon by the counties.

197.605 DEPARTMENT AS A RESOURCE TO COUNTIES.

Subdivision 1. Resources available. The commissioner of veterans affairs shall make resources available within the Department of Veterans Affairs to every county that operates a county veterans service office, to assist the county with maintaining efficient and effective services to veterans. To receive available resources from the department, a county must formally request them from the commissioner and invite the commissioner or the commissioner's designee or designees into the county as necessary to provide those resources. The commissioner shall consult with the Association of Minnesota Counties and

the Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers in developing a list of resources available to counties in support of their county veterans service offices.

Subd. 2. Use of agencies to present claims. Every county veterans service officer and assistant county veterans service officer appointed under sections 197.60 to 197.606 shall use the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs or any organization recognized by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, as may be designated by the veteran by power of attorney, in the presentation of claims to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs for the benefits referred to in section 197.603.

Subd. 4. Certification. The commissioner of veterans affairs shall establish a certification process for county veterans service officers. In doing so, the commissioner shall consult with the Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers.

...

197.608 VETERANS SERVICE OFFICE GRANT PROGRAM.

Subdivision 1. Grant program. A veterans service office grant program is established to be administered by the commissioner of veterans affairs consisting of grants to counties to enable them to enhance the effectiveness of their veterans service offices. "Commissioner" as used in this section means the commissioner of veterans affairs.

...

Subd. 3. Eligibility. (a) To be eligible for a grant under subdivision 6, a county must employ a county veterans service officer as authorized by sections 197.60 and 197.606, who is certified to serve in this position by the commissioner.

(b) A county that employs a newly hired county veterans service officer who is serving an initial probationary period and who has not been certified by the commissioner is eligible to receive a grant under subdivision 6 for one year from the date the county veterans service officer is appointed.

(c) A county whose county veterans service officer does not receive certification by the end of the first year of the county veterans service officer's appointment is ineligible for the grant under subdivision 6 until the county veterans service officer receives certification.

Subd. 4. Grant process. (a) The commissioner shall determine the process for awarding grants. A grant may be used only for the purpose of enhancing the operations of the County Veterans Service Office.

(b) The commissioner shall provide a list of qualifying uses for grant expenditures as developed in subdivision 5 and shall approve a grant under subdivision 6 only for a qualifying use and if there are sufficient funds remaining in the grant program to cover the full amount of the grant.

(c) The commissioner is authorized to use any unexpended funding for this program to provide training and education for county veterans service officers.

Subd. 5. Qualifying uses. The commissioner shall consult with the Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers in developing a list of qualifying uses for grants awarded under subdivision 6.

Subd. 6. Grant amount. (a) Each county is eligible to receive an annual grant of \$7,500 for the following purposes:

- (1) to provide outreach to the county's veterans;
- (2) to assist in the reintegration of combat veterans into society;
- (3) to collaborate with other social service agencies, educational institutions, and other community organizations for the purposes of enhancing services offered to veterans;
- (4) to reduce homelessness among veterans; and
- (5) to enhance the operations of the county veterans service office.

(b) In addition to the grant amount in paragraph (a), each county is eligible to receive an additional annual grant under this paragraph. The amount of each additional annual grant must be determined by the commissioner and may not exceed:

- (1) \$0, if the county's veteran population is less than 1,000;
- (2) \$2,500, if the county's veteran population is 1,000 or more but less than 3,000;
- (3) \$5,000, if the county's veteran population is 3,000 or more but less than 4,999;
- (4) \$7,500, if the county's veteran population is 5,000 or more but less than 9,999;
- (5) \$10,000, if the county's veteran population is 10,000 or more but less than 19,999;
- (6) \$15,000, if the county's veteran population is 20,000 or more but less than 29,999; or
- (7) \$20,000, if the county's veteran population is 30,000 or more.

(c) The Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers is eligible to receive an annual grant of \$50,000. The grant shall be used for administrative costs of the association, certification of mandated county veterans service officer training and accreditation, and costs associated with reintegration services.

The veteran population of each county shall be determined by the figure supplied by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, as adopted by the commissioner.

Subd. 7. Recapture. If a county fails to use the grant for the qualified use approved by the commissioner, the commissioner shall seek recovery of the grant from the county and the county must repay the grant amount.

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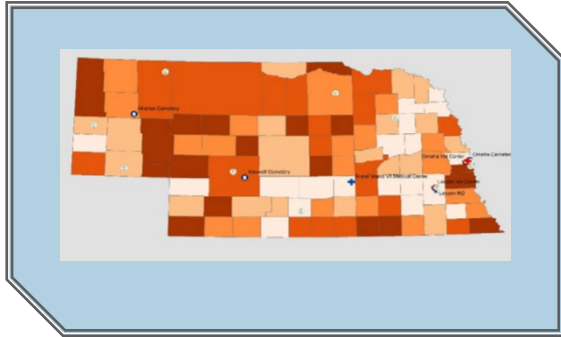
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BY THE NUMBERS

Area: 77,358 square miles
 Total Population: 1,918,000
 Total Veterans: 130,000 - 9.5% of total
 Compensation & Pensions: \$582,542,000
 Vets Receiving Disability: 43,465 - 33%
 Vets Enrolled in VA Health Care: 68,879 - 52%
 Number of Counties: 93
 Number of VSOs: 8 state VSOs, 73 county VSOs

BASIC STRUCTURE

- Department of Veterans' Affairs is the lead state agency for veteran services. The director is appointed by the governor and is a cabinet-level official.
 - State VSOs hired by the division administrator must be approved by the Veterans' Advisory Commission.

- At the state level, the Veterans Service Office:
 - Employs 8 state VSOs with 3 support staff.
 - Is an accredited entity with the VA and 8 veteran service organizations.
 - Trains and certifies CVSOs, but there is no direct state supervision or control of CVSOs.

- At the county level:
 - There are 73 CVSOs serving 93 counties (some counties share offices).
 - Each county board/commission appoints a county Veterans Service Committee of five members, who are veterans nominated by VA recognized veteran service organizations.
 - The Veteran Service Committee appoints CVSOs, subject to confirmation by the county board/commission.
 - The state office also confirms that the appointed CVSOs meet the required training and certification criteria.

FUNDING

- No state funding is provided for CVSOs.
- Counties are authorized to impose a special mill levy to support the CVSΟ offices.

PERFORMANCE CRITERIA - QUALITY CONTROL MEASURES

- The state office offers the CVSOs the option of using the state system to upload claim documents and the state system will provide an electronic review of the CVSΟ claim products.
- The state office tracks the following data for its annual statistical report - statewide:
 - Number of Powers of Attorney held
 - Number of hearings held
 - Number of VA rating determinations received
- There is no statewide tracking of individual CVSΟ productivity or performance.

STATUTORY LANGUAGE

Overview of statutory approach: County VSOs are required and the statute allows for a special county mill levy. County VSO qualifications are addressed in statute, but reporting requirements are not addressed.

80-407. County veterans service committee; duties; appointment of county veterans service officer; member of committee ineligible.

Each county veterans service committee shall cooperate with and assist the Department of Veterans' Affairs in the performance and discharge of its duties and functions. Each such county veterans service committee shall appoint, subject to confirmation by the county board, a county veterans service officer for its county after the applicant has been certified as eligible according to section 80-410 by the Director of Veterans' Affairs. Service officers appointed prior to March 27, 1969, shall also be certified as eligible. The county veterans service committee, in cooperation with the Department of Veterans' Affairs, shall issue a certificate of appointment, and establish a service center for the assistance of veterans, and is authorized to accept, for the purpose of carrying out its program of assistance to veterans, grants of funds from the county, municipalities, veterans, civic, religious, and fraternal organizations and groups, and private citizens. The county boards of the counties involved, after meeting with the affected veterans service committees, are authorized to join two or more counties in the appointment of a county veterans service officer for a given area with the expenses to be shared by the counties involved. The county board and the county veterans service committee shall be authorized to appoint or place any veterans service officer on a part-time basis if such officer's service shall not require forty hours per

week. Members of the county veterans service committee shall be ineligible to serve as county veterans service officers or assistant county veterans service officers.

80-409. County service committee; offices; tax; levy.

The county board of each county in this state shall provide, by special levy or out of the general fund of the county, such amount as is necessary for the use of the county service committee to aid and enable such county service committee to carry out and execute its functions, powers, and duties as defined in sections 80-401 to 80-401.11, 80-403, 80-404, 80-404.04, and 80-406 to 80-410 and to pay its expenses. The county board shall provide offices for the county veterans service officer in a location determined by the board.

80-410. Director; deputy director; Veterans' Advisory Commission; state and county veterans service officers; qualifications.

(1) The Director of Veterans' Affairs, the deputy director, all members of the Veterans' Advisory Commission, and all state service officers shall have served in the armed forces of the United States during the dates set forth in section 80-401.01 and shall have been discharged or otherwise separated with a characterization of honorable from such service. A state service officer shall have been a bona fide resident of the State of Nebraska continuously for at least one year immediately prior to assuming his or her position.

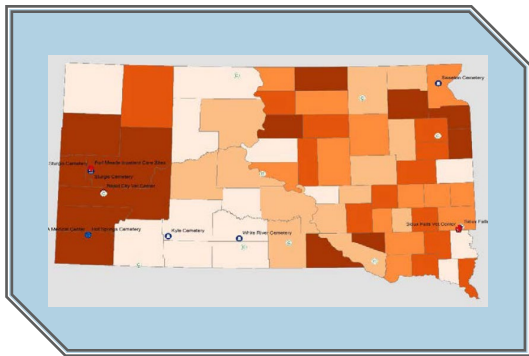
(2) All county veterans service officers shall have served on active duty in the armed forces of the United States, other than active duty for training, shall have been discharged or otherwise separated with a characterization of honorable from the service, and shall have been bona fide residents of the State of Nebraska continuously for at least one year immediately prior to assuming any such position, except that if there is no applicant for county veterans service officer in a county who will have been a bona fide resident of the State of Nebraska continuously for at least one year prior to assuming such position, the one-year residency requirement may be waived.

(3) All members of the county veterans service committees and all personnel, except certain special and clerical help, of the county veterans service offices shall have all of the qualifications described in subsection (2) of this section, except that such persons may have been discharged or otherwise separated with a characterization of general (under honorable conditions).

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Nebraska Department of Veterans' Affairs staff indicated that reporting and the quality of claims at the county level varies greatly. Not all counties use the claims management system used by the state, so the state VSOs do not have a way of "keeping eyes on" claims as they are developed. Nevertheless, the state works hard to provide assistance and support as requested.

SOUTH DAKOTA



BY THE NUMBERS

Area: 77,116 square miles

Total population: 884,659

Total veterans: 65,335 - 10% of total pop.

Disability & pensions paid FY17: \$253,310,000

Vets receiving disability or pension comp.:

17,427 - 27% of total veterans

Vets enrolled in VA health care:

39,364 - 60% of veteran pop.

Counties: 66

Total VSOs: 58 county VSOs, 6 Tribal VSOs

BASIC STRUCTURE

- The South Dakota Department of Veterans' Affairs (SDDVA) became an independent agency by executive order in 2011.
- At the state level, the SDDVA Claims Division employs 2 managers, 6 state VSOs, and 2 claims examiners.
- At the county level, each county is required by law to appoint a full- or part-time CVSOS and provide additional staff as needed. A county may partner with other counties. State law also specifies that:
 - the appointments of CVSOSs must be approved by the SDDVA;
 - a CVSOS is appointed to an initial 2-year term followed by 4-year terms;
 - CVSOSs must be veterans; and
 - CVSOSs must complete annual training approved by the SDDVA.
- Tribes may appoint VSOs who serve under the same conditions as a CVSOS.

FUNDING

- The state provides CVSOS salary assistance to counties that apply. Salary assistance is capped at 25% of the basic salary schedule that is established by law for any fiscal year.
- South Dakota Codified Laws, Section 33A-1-32 The basic salary schedule for CVSOSs established by state law is as follows:

- (1) For counties with population of 50,000 and over, \$18,750 per annum;
- (2) For counties with population of 20,000 to 50,000, \$17,500 per annum;
- (3) For counties with population of 10,000 to 20,000, \$15,000 per annum;
- (4) For counties with population of 5,000 to 10,000, \$11,250 per annum;
- (5) For counties with population up to 5,000, \$7,500 annually.

PERFORMANCE CRITERIA - QUALITY CONTROL MEASURES

State assistance to counties is minimal and the amount each county receives is set in statute without condition. All the county must do is certify that the grant money was spent on CVSO salaries. State statute does require CVSOs meet training and certification standards. The South Dakota director of the state's veteran services office explained that state VSOs and claims examiners review CVSO claims and help ensure claims are well and fully developed.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

The South Dakota director of the state's veteran services office stated that some counties struggle because they are very rural with large geographical areas, so his office works hard to provide outreach and support to assist CVSOs with regular visits and training programs. A strength cited was that having CVSOs helps with outreach to veterans in more rural areas. A challenge cited was the high turnover of CVSOs due to low pay.

STATUTORY LANGUAGE

33A-1-22. County veterans' service officer--Approval by secretary of veterans affairs--Term of office. The board of county commissioners of each county in this state shall employ or join with another county or counties in employing a county veterans' service officer who, before such employment takes effect, is approved by the state secretary of veterans affairs. The county veteran's service officer's first appointment ends on the first Monday in January of the second year subsequent to the year of the appointment. The county veteran's service officer may be reappointed for terms of four years for each term. The appointment is subject to removal by the board or boards of county commissioners upon the recommendation of the state secretary of veterans' affairs or for cause.

33A-1-23. County commissioners to assist service officer. The board or boards of county commissioners shall furnish the county veterans' service officer with such assistance and clerical help as may be necessary, when, in the opinion of the board or boards of county commissioners and the Department of Veterans Affairs such action would be in the public interest.

33A-1-24. Duties of county veterans' service officer--Direction by department. Each county veterans' service officer shall provide, within the county or counties employing the officer, local contact between fieldmen of the Department of Veterans Affairs and persons in the armed service or those discharged from such service, and the dependents of such persons. The county veteran's service officer shall aid or assist volunteer service officers in securing evidence and perfecting claims; advise those in the armed service and veterans or their dependents of benefits available to them; and aid them in completing required forms and complying with regulations. The county veteran's service officer works under the direction of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

33A-1-25. Qualifications of county veterans' officer. Each county veterans' service officer shall be a veteran who has served in the armed forces of the United States and is a citizen of the United States.

33A-1-26. Training program for county veterans service officers--Attendance and testing--Certification of compliance. The Department of Veterans Affairs shall establish a training program for county veterans service officers. Every county veterans service officer employed under the provisions of this chapter shall annually complete the training program established by the department and successfully complete a test administered by the department. The secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs shall certify training compliance to the board of county commissioners. The secretary shall recommend against reappointment of any county veterans service officer not in compliance with the provisions of this section.

33A-1-28. Salary and expenses of county service officer--Office space and equipment. A county veterans' service officer may be employed either part time or full time. The salary and necessary mileage and expense allowance of the officer shall be determined by the board or boards of county commissioners employing the officer. The officer shall be provided with office space, office fixtures, furnishings, and equipment, either in the courthouse or some other central and accessible place.

33A-1-29. Tribal veterans' service officers. Indian tribes, as defined in subdivision 2-14-2(14), may appoint veterans' service officers who shall serve under the same terms and conditions as county veterans' service officers, as provided for in §§ 33A-1-22 to 33A-1-28, inclusive. Such officers shall be known as tribal veterans' service officers.

33A-1-30. Salary reimbursement and services for Indian tribes and service officers--Tribes responsible for financial obligations. Such Indian tribes and veterans' service officers shall receive the same salary reimbursement and services from the Department of Veterans Affairs as those available to county commissioners and county veteran service officers under the provisions of this chapter. Such Indian tribes shall be entirely responsible for all financial obligations accrued by veterans' service officers, appointed pursuant to the terms of § 33A-1-29, except as provided in this section.

33A-1-31. State aid for salaries of county service officers--Maximum

reimbursement. The Department of Veterans Affairs may establish, implement, and maintain a program for providing financial assistance to counties in paying the salaries of county veterans' service officers. Any program established and maintained by the Department of Veterans Affairs shall provide for assistance to applying counties on the basis of one dollar of state funds for each four dollars of county funds provided for payment of the salary of the county veterans' service officer of the applying county. No county may be reimbursed in excess of twenty-five percent of the basic salary schedule outlined in § 33A-1-32 for any fiscal year.

33A-1-32. Basic salary schedule for county service officers. The basic salary schedule for county veterans' service officers, which may be adopted by any board of county commissioners, is:

- (1) For counties with population of 50,000 and over, \$18,750 per annum;
- (2) For counties with population of 20,000 to 50,000, \$17,500 per annum;
- (3) For counties with population of 10,000 to 20,000, \$15,000 per annum;
- (4) For counties with population of 5,000 to 10,000, \$11,250 per annum;
- (5) For counties with population up to 5,000, \$7,500 annually.

33A-1-33. Training of county officer required for state reimbursement. A county may only be reimbursed pursuant to § 33A-1-31 if the county veterans' service officer employed has undergone training pursuant to §§ 33A-1-16 and 33A-1-26.

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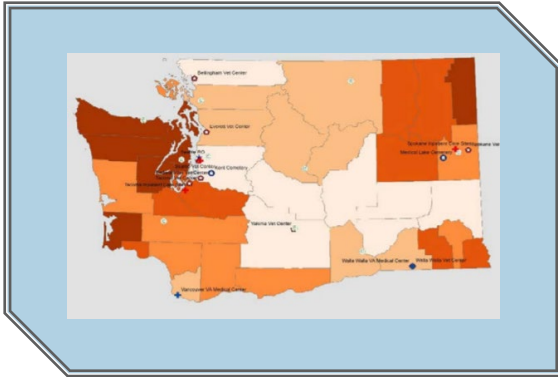
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WASHINGTON



BY THE NUMBERS

Area: 71,362 square miles

Total Population: 7.4 million

Total Veterans: 560,200 - 10.58% of total

Compensation & Pensions: \$2,321,741,000

Vets Receiving Disability: 136,809 - 24%

Vets Enrolled in VA Health Care: 219,229 - 40%

Number of Counties: 39

Number of VSOs: see basic structure section

BASIC STRUCTURE

- The state veteran service office is a division within the Department of Veterans' Affairs.
- The department uses three models for providing VSO services to their veterans:
 - State-level: 4 VSOs working exclusively at veterans' nursing homes (1 VSO at each nursing home).
 - Contracts with Veteran Service Organizations: The state contracts with six veteran service organizations: American Legion, VFW, AMVETS, VVA, African Amer PTSD Assoc., and Nat'l Assoc of Black Veterans.
 - Each organization is responsible for hiring, training, and certification/accreditation of their VSOs. They may also employ more VSOs than the state contract amount and/or have additional volunteer VSOs. Each organization has its own information management system to file claims.
 - Estimate: 25 paid VSOs among the six organizations, 25 more who are volunteers for total of 50.
 - See funding section - contracts are by claims filed, not VSOs employed. Funding depends on service area type: urban, rural, special under-served population of veterans (i.e., African Americans)

- Grant program for counties to hire CVSOs: This is a pilot program just being implemented. The state issued an RFP, 15 counties applied, 3 counties were awarded a grant. The state is in the process of providing training and certification and will provide some administrative support services to the counties.
 - One of the 3 counties receiving the grant will be a regional office serving veterans in the bordering counties as well.

FUNDING

- For State VSO at nursing homes: state has not yet provided this information.
- For contracts with the veteran service organizations: \$1.6 million GF per year.
 - \$1.2 million is allocated between American Legion and VFW. Each organization has an office at each of the state's VA medical centers, which are in urban areas. Each receives an allocation based on a \$200 per claim formula. For example, if the American Legion received \$500,000, that amount is then divided by the number of claims they actually filed. The result must at least equal \$200 per claim. In other words, the organization must have submitted at least 2,500 claims that year to have met the terms of the contract.
 - \$400,000 is split between the other three service organizations:
 - The VVA, which serves a more rural area and conducts outreach across a larger geographical territory, must meet a \$400 per claim threshold.
 - The African-American PTSD Association and the National Association of Black Vets must meet a \$600 per claim threshold.
- For the grant program to counties for CVSOs: The legislature appropriated \$600,000 for the biennium, of which \$150,000 is used to cover state administration costs, the remaining \$450,000 is allocated to the counties based on what they requested in their RFP responses, so each county received a different amount and further details were not provided for this report.

PERFORMANCE CRITERIA - QUALITY CONTROL MEASURES

- State-level program: VSOs submit quarterly reports and their benchmark performance standard is that 80% of claims submitted be granted. If a VSO is not performing at this level, the state examines potential reasons and takes remedial action if necessary.

- Contract program with veteran service organizations: Each service organization submits a quarterly report, which is then rolled into an annual report about how many claims have been filed and how many claims granted. The VSOs are only identified as "VSO 1" or "VSO 2". As specified in the contract, the organization's total claims filed for a year must meet the cost-per-claim threshold set in the contract. They have a 10% margin before their funding is affected (i.e., before a penalty is imposed for lack of performance). Also, each VSO's "batting average" must be at least 80%, but again, they are granted a 10% margin before a monetary penalty is imposed.
- County grant/CVSO pilot program: The performance measures will be similar to the contract program.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

The director of the veterans' service officer program explained there are 12 other counties (in addition to the 3 who were award state grants) that employ CVSOs. These counties do not receive state funding or support, nor do they report statistics or performance to the state. However, he said the counties are very committed to their CVSO programs because they are seeing a big return on their investment in the form of millions of dollars in VA disability and compensation payments being made to veterans in their counties. He said this was the reason the state began its county grant program, because some counties simply did not have the financial ability to support their own CVSOs without state assistance. The state legislature strongly supported the CVSO grant program to counties because of the information they received from the counties that did have CVSOs that showed the great returns on their investments.

The director also said he felt the three different models of VSO services that the state uses is a strength because it makes the outreach to veterans multidimensional and the various types of VSOs allows them to meet veterans where they are at.

STATUTORY LANGUAGE

RCW 43.60A.230

Veterans service officer program.

(1) There is created in the department the veterans service officer program. The purpose of the veterans service officer program is to provide funding to underserved eligible counties to establish and maintain a veterans service officer within the county. "Eligible counties," for the purposes of this section, means counties with a population of one hundred thousand or less.

(2) Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated in the veterans service officer fund under RCW 43.60A.235 for the specific purposes provided in this section, the department must:

(a) Establish a process to educate local governments, veterans, and those still serving in the national guard or armed forces reserve of the veterans service officer program;

(b) Develop partnerships with local governments to assist in establishing and maintaining local veterans service officers in eligible counties who elect to have a veterans service officer; and

(c) Provide funding to support eligible counties in establishing and maintaining local accredited veterans service officers. Funding is provided on a first-come, first-served basis. Funding may only be provided to support the equivalent of one full-time veterans service officer per eligible county.

(3) The application process for the veterans service officer program must be prescribed as to manner and form by the department.