

DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS

25. Military and Veterans' Affairs/ Veterans' Services

Operating Budget (CCS SSHB 39)

It is the intent of this legislature that the Department of Military and Veteran's Affairs analyze all Veteran Service Officer (VSO) positions and their effectiveness. By January 15, 2020 the department shall provide to the legislature a review of VSO's with information that breaks down VSO positions by region, identified impacts, identification of problem areas, ideas for improvement and the amount of funding they bring to the state of Alaska. It is the expectation of the legislature that by June 30, 2020 the department will present a new system of metrics for measuring the effectiveness and impact of VSO's.

The following report, per CC SSHB 39 covers a period July 1, 2019 to December 31, 2019 and contains the following areas as required:

1. VSO IMPACT BY REGION:

- a) **There are 17 Veteran Service Officers (VSO) distributed in:** Anchorage Borough, Fairbanks (North Star Borough), Juneau, Kenai Peninsula Borough, Kodiak Island Borough, Palmer, and Wasilla (Matanuska-Susitna Borough).
- b) **Outreach to the following locations:** Anchor Point, Chugiak, Clear, Craig, Delta Junction, Fairbanks, Fort Greely, Glennallen, Homer, Juneau, Kenai, Kenny Lake, Ketchikan, Klawock, Kodiak, Kotzebue, Nikiski, Ninilchik, Palmer, Seward, Sitka, Soldotna, Talkeetna, Valdez.

2. VSO IDENTIFIABLE PROBLEM AREAS:

- a) **Training:** Issues in the area of training occur due to a lack of standardization amongst the organizations. Our solution is to ensure all VSOs are trained to the same level by inviting the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers (NACVSO) to train, educate and provide accreditation for our VSOs. They are not represented in Alaska at this time and we are currently working on a training schedule.
- b) **Outreach:**
 - i. Based on the above outreach locations (1b), travel to Alaska's major hubs are reasonably priced, however travel to the smaller villages requires travel via the marine highway, a single engine, or twin-engine transport, and these methods can be very expensive. Many of our trips are canceled due to inclement weather and aircraft/ship maintenance delays.
 - ii. VSOs are required to announce all outreach locations to ensure veterans are afforded the opportunity to receive assistance attaining VA benefits. The further the village is from the hub city the more challenging it is to obtain lodging and a meeting area. Tribal Veteran Representatives are a conduit between the visiting VSO and the village and many times this works well for our VSOs.

3. HIGH VSO TURNOVER/VACANCIES:

- a) **Stagnation of funding:** The last increase to the VSO Joint Venture Agreement was in 2013, at \$62,250 per VSO. That amount covers salary, travel, insurance, supplies, and sundries. There are no retirement, Healthcare, or Dental benefits which makes it difficult to retain VSOs. It takes six months to train and accredit a VSO.
- b) **Turnover:** VSOs turnover every 3-5 years. VSOs have a high burn out rate and this is directly related to the nature of the work. It is not easy and not for everyone. We do have a few VSOs that work as if the position is a calling. This VSO lasts longer than the normal length of time and are few amongst our VSOs.

4. VSO IDENTIFIED IMPACTS:

- a) **Outreach:**
 - i. VSOs announce travel to locations with the assistance of the Office of Veterans Affairs Veteran Information System (VIS). The VIS program identifies veterans in the Alaska PFD, Alaska DMV, and the DOD Discharge Information System. The VIS can reach out to veterans in specific locations and announce events or programs in their area. VSOs using the VIS program observed a larger local veteran impact versus utilizing the standard visit announcement via radio and printed media.
 - ii. VSOs have a great relationship with the state Job Centers and these centers are where most of the outreach events are held. For the smaller villages, Native Corporations, Churches and medical clinics have been very accommodating for VSO events. Most allow the VSO to access Wi-Fi to assist with claims and allows for a virtual private network (VPN) connection to the Alaskan VA benefits office.
 - iii. State OVA and federal VA coordinate outreach efforts across Alaska to assure higher ensuring key players serve veterans where they live.
 - iv. 8,460 Veterans served by our granted VSOs during the performance period set under CC SSHB 39.

5. AMOUNT OF FUNDING VSOS BRING TO THE STATE:

- a) One-time payments received by veterans, family members, and survivors for the first half of FY20 is **\$28,624,742.00**.

By June 30, 2020, the metrics currently used to measure the success of the VSO's will be adjusted to reflect new requirements.

Legislative Fiscal Analyst Comment: Full compliance can be determined by June 30, 2020 when the report on updated metrics is due. The department has indicated that ideas for improvement will be presented with those metrics.