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LEGISLATIVE TASK FORCE ON WOMEN VETERANS' HEALTH CARE

Joint Committee on Tax Credits

HB 2404A

Income Tax Credits for Mental Health Providers who Treat Veterans

Co-Chairs and Members of the Committee:

For the record, my name is Val Conley and I am the Deputy Director of the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs and was a member of the Legislative Task Force on Women Veterans' Health Care. I am here today to support HB 2404A.

HB 2404A comes to you from the Task Force on Women Veterans' Health Care, but is a concept that would benefit all veterans in Oregon.

As we continue the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, one of the so-called "Signature" injuries of these conflicts has been Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. According to studies, about 20 percent of the force is reporting PTSD symptoms when assessed. However, this number may be a bit deceiving in that the assessments require the soldier, sailor, airman or Marine to self-identify their symptoms and we all know that many are not doing so.

The bottom line in Oregon is demand for mental health is outpacing supply. The United States Department of Veterans Affairs has Vet Centers providing PTSD counseling in Portland, Salem, Eugene, Grants Pass and Bend. USDVA also provides mental health counseling at their hospitals and Community Based Outpatient Clinics. However, the Task Force learned during tours to VA medical facilities that VA providers can have patient loads of more than 100 veterans seeking help. Veterans complain they cannot see their VA mental health counselor as often as they need to due to demand.

Further, VA's system, while ever expanding, does not cover the entire state. Veterans in rural and remote Oregon face additional barriers to seeking mental health, including transportation, weather and distance.

HB 2404A is an attempt to address in some small way the veteran demand for mental health treatment. By providing a tax incentive for mental health providers, the Task Force hopes that local providers would be interested in seeing veteran clients in their communities, helping to meet the ever-increasing demand for mental health.

The Task Force looks at HB 2404A as an investment. By providing a tax credit now, the state will be saving money in the long run in social service and criminal justice costs of not treating veterans suffering from various mental and emotional issues. Today, we talk about the cost of Vietnam Veterans in terms of homelessness, law enforcement, social service, and more. The reason is we did not assess and treat these veterans when they came home. Instead, we ignored them resulting in significant costs down the road. That old saying, "You can pay me now or you can pay me later," is true in this case.

HB 2404A will not solve the problem of demand for veterans needing mental health. However, it will be part of the solution, especially in areas where VA cannot provide the service.

Thank you for considering this bill and I would be happy to answer any questions.