



## House Committee on Veterans' Services and Emergency Management

### HB 2160 Campus VSO Program

Mr. Chair and Members of the Committee, for the record, my name is Tom Mann and I am with the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs. I am here today to share some background on the Campus Veteran Service Officer program as it pertains to House Bill 2160.

The original concept to place veteran service officers on Oregon campuses came from the Governor's Task Force on Veterans' Services as a recommendation in its 2008 Final Report. The reason was simple: Iraq and Afghanistan veterans were not seeking their benefits from their local county veteran service officers after returning home to Oregon.

The Task Force reasoned that if the veterans were not coming to us, we would have to go to them. And the best place to find them would be on campus.

At that time, Congress was passing the new Post 9/11 GI Bill, which was the best GI Bill since World War II. With the down turn in employment opportunities for returning veterans, the Task Force believed that Oregon's returning veterans would be going to school with this new GI Bill. Putting veteran service officers on campus would ensure we could meet the veteran where they were and provide the services and benefits they had earned. The original concept was to place 18 veteran service officers on campus.

House Bill 2178 passed both chambers unanimously in 2009 creating the Campus VSO program. Due to costs, the program was scaled back to five regional VSOs who would circuit ride between the universities and community colleges in their region.

Of particular note, however, was the Legislature did not actually fund the program. Instead, ODVA agreed that it would fund the program for the first biennium and if the Legislature believed the program was successful, it would continue funding into the future. To start the program, two existing ODVA VSOs were detailed to the program; an existing CVSO was hired for her local region, and two new VSOs were hired to fill the final two slots.

During the 2011 Regular Session, the Campus VSO Program Manager, Dave Cooley, testified before this committee regarding the success of the program. His testimony included the following:

We helped 2,556 student veterans and dependents in obtaining their Montgomery Active Duty and Selected Reserve GI Bill, Post-9/11 GI Bill, Vocational Rehabilitation and Education, Reserve Education Assistance Program and Survivors and Dependents Education Assistance Program. This

includes helping veterans obtain their certificate of eligibility and partnering with the campus certifying official to ensure receipt of the benefit.

As of February 20, 2013, 93 veterans who filed their claims with campus VSOs received \$668,265 in retroactive disability benefits and they continue to receive disability benefits monthly.

We assisted 557 student veterans with obtaining VA health care. All Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are entitled to five years of no-cost VA health care.

Of the 2,556 students we assisted with education benefits, 546 student veterans were eligible for VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Education based on their disabilities. This is a program that pays 100 percent of the cost of school for disabled veterans and provides a living stipend.

Countless veterans were counseled by our veteran service officers regarding adjusting to college life, where to find readjustment and Post Traumatic Stress counseling, and how to reintegrate after their combat deployments.

Further, our veteran service officers engaged the colleges and universities by providing seminars and in-service training to faculty and administration on military and veteran culture. These seminars provide a great forum for learning new cultural competencies for this unique group of students and allow staff to ask questions in a comfortable environment.

At the time, ODVA believed the program was quite successful. Unfortunately, due to budget restrictions, the Legislature was unable to fund HB 2402 during the 2011 session and the program was dismantled on June 30, 2011. Since that time, ODVA has not supplied veteran service officers to the college and university campuses. Only Oregon State University has a veteran representative; the University hired away our Campus program lead worker – Gus Bedwell – to be their veteran coordinator.

Should the Legislature choose to re-establish the Campus VSO program, the only thing ODVA would ask is that the funding be stable. It is simply not feasible to start and stop and then re-start the program again and again. It takes at least six months to train up a qualified Campus VSO if they are not already accredited to do the work. Further, unstable funding puts the lives of those VSOs in limbo, which is not just unfair, but makes it that much more difficult to find qualified people to actually accept the position. If the Campus program is to be re-instated, ODVA believes stable, long-term funding must be secured.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you the history of the Campus Veteran Service Officer Program. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.