

Analysis
Department of Veterans' Affairs
Rural Transportation Grant

Analyst: Michelle Deister

Request: Approve the submission of a federal grant application to U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs in the amount of \$300,000 for transporting veterans in highly rural areas to VA Medical Centers.

Recommendation: Approve the request, establish a Federal Funds expenditure limitation in the amount of \$300,000 in a budget reconciliation bill during the 2014 session, with the understanding that the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) will unschedule the expenditure limitation increase until the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs is notified that its application for the grant has been successful.

Analysis: On January 14, the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs (ODVA) notified legislative leadership that it intended to apply for a federal grant to fund access to care for veterans in highly rural areas, in an amount not to exceed \$500,000. At that time, the application deadline was February 3, 2014; the deadline has since been extended to March 3, with an anticipated notice of award by April 17.

The goal of the program is for states to leverage innovative approaches to transport veterans in highly rural areas to VA Medical Centers, using existing local partnerships and resources where feasible. At present, the only organized transportation to a VA Medical Center in many of Oregon's rural counties is the Disabled American Veterans van system or veteran volunteers who transport veterans to appointments. The need for reliable transportation is compounded due to limitations on the number and frequency of medical appointments that can be accommodated within the VA medical system; when veterans are able to obtain an appointment, it is imperative that they attend the appointment, and be on time. Highly rural areas in Oregon are defined as the following counties: Baker, Gilliam, Grant, Harney, Lake, Malheur, Morrow, Sherman, Wallowa, and Wheeler. Outcomes include the number of trips and total veterans served. The grant is for a period of one year. No state or local match is required, and no additional positions are needed to administer the grant. ODVA proposes to budget 45% of the award for operations and personnel, 45% for costs of transportation, and 10% for grant administration and reporting. The Legislative Fiscal Office is recommending expenditure limitation in advance of an actual grant award notice so that counties can receive funds as soon as possible, without needing to wait until the May meeting of the Emergency Board.

Of the aforementioned counties, Wallowa, Harney, Lake, and Malheur Counties have opted not to submit a proposal. The specifics of the ODVA application consist of the remaining counties' proposals, which are summarized as follows:

- Baker County – Purchase of a van, maintenance costs, and personal services expenses to a local transportation provider to fund an additional driver for underserved veterans in the area.

- Gilliam County – Establishing a scheduling service for veterans that informs them of the most available and expeditious times and routes.
- Grant County – Funding additional hours for drivers sufficient to provide regular weekly scheduled routes to VA Medical Centers for veterans, as well as individual trips as needed.
- Morrow County – Challenges include a dwindling number of volunteer drivers and a reticence to travel the passes in winter months. Grant funds will be utilized to consolidate their dispatch and volunteer driver system with Gilliam County, and provide one call center. Outreach to senior centers, care centers, and through local media will also be included.
- Sherman County – Outreach and notification to identify veterans who are eligible but not using Sherman County Community Transit, and make them aware of what services exist. The county will implement a web based scheduling system with other counties in an effort to optimize route planning and cooperate where possible.
- Wheeler County – Identify and incorporate more veterans into extant systems, contributing to a four county partnership (Morrow, Sherman, Gilliam, and Wheeler). Grant funds will pay a driver when volunteers are not available and provide accommodations for drivers when overnight stays are required before a return trip. Training and expanded dispatch hours, mobility equipment for vehicles, and the establishment of a toll free phone line are included in the proposal, along with provisions to allow family member to ride along.

The Legislative Fiscal Office recommends: approval of the request by the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs to submit a grant application in the amount of \$300,000 to U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs for transporting veterans in highly rural areas to VA Medical Centers; establish a Federal Funds expenditure limitation of \$300,000 in a budget reconciliation bill during the 2014 session; with the understanding that the Department of Administrative Services will unschedule the expenditure limitation increase until the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs is notified that its application for the grant has been successful.