

February 12, 2015

Representative John Lively, Chair
House Committee and Veterans and Emergency Preparedness
Oregon State Capitol
900 Court Street NE,
Salem, Oregon 97301

Subject: Testimony in Support of HB 2230

Dear Chair Lively and Member of the Committee,

As a Multnomah County Commissioner, and as Chair of the Veterans Committee of the Association of Oregon Counties, I am testifying today in strong support of HB 2230. I would like to thank Representative Nathanson for her ongoing leadership on veterans issues and for drafting HB 2230 for your consideration.

HB 2230 would help Oregon's veterans and their families access important federal VA benefits they have earned and deserve by connecting veterans to a statewide network of County Veterans Service Officers or "CVSO's". Nearly 60 CVSO's across Oregon are the critical front line staff that can actually help individuals successfully navigate and overcome a too often burdensome and complex VA bureaucracy to access disability, housing, education, healthcare, and other benefits.

HB 2230 will facilitate information sharing between OHA and ODVA to give CVSO a critical tool that often simply don't have, i.e. basic contact information (name and address/last residence) so they can inform veterans of the services they provide. HB 2230 is crafted so that this contact information is only collected and only shared when the veteran wants them to be.

An Example of Challenge and Opportunity: Accessing VA Healthcare Benefits

As you may know, many veterans in our state have been able to access health care through the Federal Veterans Administration (VA), but this is only part of the story.

- According to 2013 data from the VA, 96,190 of Oregon's 322,355 veterans accessed health care from the VA in 2012 (about 30% of our total veterans population).
- Unfortunately however, according to a study by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, also done in 2013, Oregon had the 3rd highest (worst) rate of uninsured veterans in the United States (14.3%). 33 states had rates lower than 12% and 8 states had rates lower than 7%.
- The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation also estimated that there were approximately 27,000 uninsured veterans (ages 18-64) in Oregon and 18,000 uninsured family members of veterans in Oregon in 2010.

- Of this total group of 45,000 uninsured Oregonians, it is estimated that about 40% of these uninsured will qualify for the Oregon Health Plan (OHP); many of these veterans would also qualify for VA healthcare, if they knew how to apply for benefits through a CVSO.

Next Steps

While there are many partners working collaboratively at the federal, state and county levels to increase the numbers of veterans who can access VA healthcare, this ongoing effort still hasn't achieved our goal of ensuring that every veteran and his/her family members have healthcare coverage. HB 2230 will help with this work.

HB 2230 is an important step to help serve our veterans and their families and I urge you to support this legislation.

Diane McKeel