

March 24, 2015

Senator Brian Boquist, Chair
Senator Laurie Monnes Anderson, Vice-Chair
Senate Veterans and Emergency Preparedness Committee
Oregon State Capitol
900 Court Street NE
Salem, Oregon 97301

Dear Chair Boquist, Vice-Chair Monnes Anderson and Members of the Committee,

We are testifying today to testify in support of SB 638 with the -1 Amendments.

We want to thank the sponsors of the bill for bringing forward a concept that will help mobilize creative approaches at the local level to better serve veterans and their families. It is crucial that we find ways to expand and leverage the capacity of our local citizen volunteers as a tool to help more veterans access the benefits and services they have earned and deserve.

We are joining Commissioner McKeel, who testified on March 10 during the original public hearing on SB 638, in support of the measure because we have seen firsthand the incredible impact of volunteers stepping forward in our counties. For example, in 2014 Wasco County had a volunteer force of 22 individuals who provided approximately 300 hours of service each month. This approach allowed their CVSO's to focus on their claims work because volunteers were at the front desk of the local office arranging appointments and handling other clerical duties. Other Wasco County volunteers started a support group for military widows and another support group for female veterans and their families. In addition, Wasco County hosts a Veterans' Ad Hoc Group that meets monthly to raise public awareness about veterans service related issues and works to help fund a local vets emergency assistance program.

SB 638 is even a stronger bill with the addition of the -1 amendments and we want to highlight a few of the key additions contained in the -1's.

First, the language change in the bill from "ombudsman" to "volunteer veteran guides" would more clearly define the actual role we envision these individuals will play in our communities. While an ombudsman's role is commonly to investigate and then work to resolve complaints and problems that have already occurred, a volunteer veteran guide's role would be to prevent problems before they ever happen. The vision we have for these volunteers is that they will work in synergy with our current CVSO based model.

Second, the amendment would help assure that we have the proper safeguards, confidentiality, and quality requirements for these new "volunteer veterans guides." Under the proposed changes, the

county would be required to conduct criminal records check because the volunteer veteran guide may have access to protected documents and information about a veteran. The volunteer veteran guide would also be required to sign an oath of confidentiality. Finally, to help ensure these privacy practices and to promote quality of services and outcomes, the amendment states that ODVA may provide training and other opportunities for sharing “best practices” for the use of volunteers..

Lastly, we believe the amendment would improve the bill by providing both counties and the state with the flexibility to tailor and customize specific approaches at the local level by doing a number of things:

- places the volunteer veteran guide within the county CVSO office (or ODVA) where it can best augment and support the efforts of the CVSO;
- allows the county (or ODVA) to reimburse for expenses; for example, if the volunteer helped set up and staff a booth at a stand down, the county/ODVA could reimburse for mileage;
- expands possible duties of volunteer veteran guide that align with the current model successfully used in Wasco County; and
- allows ODVA to appoint a volunteer veteran guide (in addition to the authority for the counties).

Thank you opportunity to testify on SB 638. We are proud to partner with you and with ODVA to serve our veterans and their families.

Sincerely,

Diane McKeel, Multnomah County Commissioner
Co-Chair, AOC Veterans Steering Committee

Rod Runyon, Wasco County Commissioner
Co-Chair, AOC Veterans Steering Committee

Pat Farr, Lane County Commissioner
Vice Chair, AOC Veterans Steering Committee