

February 2, 2017

**AOC Testimony: House Veterans and Emergency Preparedness Committee
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Basics of Our Work at AOC

- Established in 1906, The Association of Oregon Counties (AOC) is a statewide organization working on behalf of Oregon's 36 counties and 120 locally elected County Commissioners.
- AOC unites counties to help educate and promote collaboration with our key state and federal government partners to deliver the shared services that are vital to our citizens.
- In cooperation with ODVA's training, technical support and appellate advocacy services, AOC employs 70 County Veterans Service Officers across the state; CVSO's are a front-line community asset that can they help individual veterans file successful VA claims. CVSO's are highly trained "MacGyvers" who can unlock byzantine VA systems so veterans can obtain the disability, healthcare, education, housing and other benefits they have earned and deserve.
- CVSO's zealously advocate for veterans by filing and documenting high quality individual claims in VA system; without the help of CVSO's the claims process is routinely confusing, overwhelming, and ultimately, a too often unsuccessful endeavor for veterans.
- CVSO's are highly trained specialists; it normally takes 12+ months on the job to become accredited by the federal government

2017 STATE ISSUES

1. Support full funding of ODVA's 2017-19 Agency Requested Budget for Veterans Services of approximately \$26.2 million. This includes 1.5% of lottery proceeds as directed by BM 96 and maintaining the the 2015-17 level of state general state funds for ODVA. By adopting the will of the voters (83% of voters supported BM 96), this funding can support a significant expansion of funding for additional CVSO's to work on the front lines to increase the number and size of VA benefit claims for more of our state's 320,000+ veterans. Oregon must to Continue to Grow and Maximize Utilization of Federal VA Earned Benefits, including: Compensation and Pension; VA Health Care; and Housing.

2. Passage of a bill promoting the use of "veterans health care navigators" (akin to SB 81, an ODVA bill). This bill's basic concept could be implemented/piloted in a number of ways and informed by how other states have tackled the challenge of improving veterans access to health care, including mental health and addictions services; approximately 100,000 veterans in Oregon receive VA health care, but often struggle with VA care coordination, private sector care coordination, waiting times, rural access/transportation and other quality of care issues.

2017 FEDERAL ISSUES

- 1. Adopt a "First do no harm principle" for the VA budget, to include both the VBA and VHA.** (Current FY 2017 funding level is \$176.9 billion).
- 2. Maintain or expand the level of federal funding for homeless veterans and their families (VASH and SSVF programs).**
- 3. Develop a clear understanding the VA Secretary's (likely Dr. David Shulkin) new strategic plan.** Work in partnership with National Association of Counties (NACo) as well as veterans advocacy organizations to hold the VA accountable for future efforts to improve healthcare services, housing programs and disability claim review processes.
- 4. Monitor any budget reductions/changes to the VA budget that could negatively impact veterans living in rural areas.**

SNAPSHOT OF THE IMPACT OF CVSO's IN HOUSING

- Helping more veterans access their earned VA benefits can play a huge part in Oregon's efforts to address our statewide housing crisis.
- The average compensation and pension earned benefit in Oregon is \$1,594 per month; this is an incredible potential source of income for veterans facing housing affordability and instability challenges; getting more of these federal dollars will allow our limited state housing dollars to serve more Oregonians.
- As part our state's housing strategy, we should intensify efforts to support CVSO's to access disability compensation and pension benefits as well as VASH and SSVF resources.
- Federal dollars coming to Oregon have almost doubled since 2007 (from \$605 million to \$1.3 billion in 2015).
- VA benefits often provide a huge local economic development impact; disability payments are not a just a one time boost; these are predominantly lifelong benefits.
- Who is the "key-master" for accessing federal benefits? CVSO's can decipher VA eligibility criteria and to unlock real dollars for vets, families and our communities.