

Good Afternoon:

Senator Johnson

Representative Gomberg

And members of the Transportation and Economic Subcommittee

My name is Byron Whipple I am a Veteran and a Retired Navy Master Chief Petty Officer. I am the Veterans Service Officer for Union County and for the most part I can speak to the issues that the VSO's in Eastern Oregon encounter.

My Veterans are Elderly or Approaching Retirement age. WWII, Korea and Vietnam Veterans are the biggest majority. I do quite a few of Pension Claims. That means my veterans and their widows live below the poverty level. Lack of transportation is a tremendous hurdle that we have to overcome.

We in Union County have a VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC). In that clinic there is no doctor, no Physician's Assistant, no Nurse Practitioner and no Mental Health Provider. We have not had a full time doctor since September 2016. We do get the Assistant Chief of Staff from the Walla Walla VAMC he comes down every other week and see's approximately 10 patients a day on the days he is available. In theory he see's

approximately 100 Veterans a month but if you have watched the weather recently you realize that he has to travel the 90 plus miles over the Blue Mountain Range during winter storm conditions. He doesn't always make it.

This forces my roughly 2400 veterans who are not being served by the VA to utilize Veterans Choice, where a local doctor may not be available to treat them.

Walla Walla Washington is our closest VA Medical Center, however, it is not a true VA Medical Center. It has no inpatient beds, It has very limited specialty care, Optometry, Audiology, and Dental. And just last week it was closed for weather. Our second closest VA Medical Center is Boise Idaho. At 140 miles away it is not close by any means.

With all this mileage that my local Veterans have to travel, Union county has no Disabled Veterans Van and we are not one of the 10 Highly Rural Counties that receive \$50,000.00 a year from the Federal Government to transport veterans to their Health Care Appointments. Those Counties, all in Eastern Oregon are governed by 38 USC 1710 Section 307 Authorized a grant for Transportation for Highly Rural Veterans. Highly Rural is defined as 7 people per square mile or less.

With the restoration of past funding levels and the augmentation of measure 96 funding there may be enough that I can assist in providing transportation to my Veterans and their widows.

Additionally, I have veterans who are frequently in crisis or homeless.

Last week, for example, I had a 75 year old Veteran who was dropped off by the greyhound bus in La Grande due to weather issues. Interstate 84 was closed. This Veteran had dementia and a previous head injury. He was diabetic, had stomach issues and was wearing a cathador these were just the tip of the Iceberg. This Veteran was released from the Portland VA Medical Center psychiatric ward a week or so earlier. The previous two evenings he was in the hospital in The Dalles and then in the hospital in La Grande. Each day he was transported back to the bus depot just to be put on a bus and shuttled on to the next town. He was traveling to Ontario because it was a nice place he remembered from long ago. He was brought to my attention because he was dazed, confused and sick and he was a VETERAN. The local VA clinic phone lines were down and the Walla Walla VA Medical Center was unsure what exactly to do. They needed time. I had to call on my team, my local American Legion, VFW and Community Connections.

We utilized local resources from private citizens to feed and house this Veteran for five days. This bought the much needed time that the Federal VA needed to take care of this Veteran.

He was ultimately taken to the Walla Walla VA Medical Center where they arraigned off campus secure housing. Please remember that our closest VA Medical Center does not have inpatient facilities. Community Connection of NorthEast Oregon funded his transport utilizing much needed STF Funding.

This is not an isolated incident and in Eastern Oregon when the weather turns bad, this is lifesaving. This is just one of the challenges that we as rural county Veterans Service Officers must face every day in providing quality care and services to our Veterans.

We do not have local missions or shelters that certain cities and counties have. We do not have the extra tax dollars to fund these emergencies. Last November we did have hope. We did have over 80% of our voters who voted "in good faith" on Measure 96. They voted to augment the Governor's Budget to historically funded levels with the lottery dollars so maybe there will be some hope and funds to assist Veterans Service Officers in addressing the above issues that confront Veterans

in Eastern Oregon.

Thank you.