



Douglas County Veterans Service Office

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Testimony and Information for Oregon House Veterans Committee

Summary Packet

The Douglas County Veterans Service Office is a County Department directly under the Board of Commissioners. The Douglas County Board of Commissioners believes that helping Veterans is extremely important--they support the office completely.

- Douglas County covers an area of over 5000 square miles, the 5th largest county, largely rural. We provide outreach to Reedsport, Drain, Canyonville and Roseburg VA Medical Center.
- According to VA records we have 13,000 Veterans. Our office records show about 15,000 plus about 4000 surviving spouses.
- Douglas County Veterans Service Office (VSO) staff includes 1 Director, 2 Veterans Service Officers, 1.5 support staff.

VSO most important tasks, prime focus and complexity of work.

VSOs are advocates, similar to attorneys. We work with complex U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs laws: U. S. Code Title 38 and Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Title 38, plus VA rules and regulations based on the laws...and the laws change yearly.

Our primary tasks, 90% of our workload, are VA claims for service-connected Compensation, non-service connected disability Pension for Wartime Veterans, VA funding for long term care, VA benefits for surviving spouses. We also help with VA life Insurance, burial benefits, Home Loan eligibility, education programs because these claims provide direct dollars to Veterans. We refer Veterans for enrollment in VA medical systems, and advise them of other Federal and State Veteran benefits like employment preference, property tax exemption, special disabled veteran entitlements. In short, VSOs guide Veterans through the maze of the VA bureaucracy.

The VA benefits are life-changing!*

**Example of "Life-Changing" happened a few years ago when we submitted a claim for a WWII Veteran that resulted in compensation of \$2500/month. Before this happened, this couple's only income was their meager Social Security. The wife said to me: You don't know what this means to us. It means that now I can go to a grocery store and buy ANYTHING I WANT!"*

VSOs work with sensitive, personal, medical information, and must comply with HIPAA and FOIA/PA releases of information. VSOs also need to know about military records, medical conditions, technicalities of VA claims such as specific wording, and there are time frames and deadlines.

The other 10% of our workload is administrative: reports about what we do, meetings, in-office training. Some Veterans expect help with issues outside of our area of expertise which is VA claims. We have been asked for help with legal issues, income tax, referrals to attorneys, transportation for personal reasons, money, and recently how to renew a green card for a wife. In these cases the best we can and should do is refer them to other services. VSOs can't be "other focused," it takes time away from our primary function, getting VA claims done.

How we do the work. This varies from County to County. Our office has Walk-ins 3 days/week and appointments 4 days/week.

Reporting requirements. We submit reports to ODVA Quarterly. We track the number of clients seen, number of NEW claims and Appeals, outreach efforts, and the dollar amount of the VA benefits that our Veterans receive.

During the first quarter of 2019, January 1 to March 31, we had more than 1000 client visits that's 90 to 100 each week. Our VA New claims totaled over \$2 million. USDVA says that existing Compensation and Pension paid to Douglas County Veterans is \$102 million.

Our current Pass-through funding is \$151,799, County General Fund is \$226,226.

Highlights, new and different approaches and ways of reaching more Veterans.

We hired one full time VSO designated for Outreach, Walk-ins expanded to 3 days, partnered with Roseburg VA Medical Center, to develop procedure and forms for Veterans seeking Aid and Attendance benefits claims which is income for long term care, partnered with DHS after a State mandate required that all DHS clients needed to apply for any VA benefits to which they may be entitled. We created procedure and forms for this program.

Challenges faced by VSO's

Hiring is a challenge. Our preference is to hire accredited VSO. Per USDVA law 38 CFR 14.629, Accreditation is necessary to do VA claims. Per 38 CFR 14.630, it's illegal for anyone who is not accredited to do more than one claim.

Accreditation requires training. It would be doing a disservice to our Veterans if VSOs were not extensively trained and Accredited by USDVA.

It's also a huge challenge for CVSOs when someone leaves their position. Recruitment takes 3 to 5 months:

Get the recruitment out, getting enough qualified candidates (which is difficult in Douglas County). Interviews may take a week; narrow down and choose top candidate; check references; contact the top applicant, discuss salary; send an offer letter; more discussion; accept the candidate who then needs to give adequate notice to their employer. Then background check, drug test, DMV records. Positions remain unfilled for long periods of time, u to 5 months, possibly more. During this time funds are not expended.

This happened in our office in 2018. During the month of February, one VSO left and the receptionist who was in the job for 3 months, gave notice (the work was overwhelming). The receptionist position was vacant positions for 3 months and the VSO for nearly 5 months (due to lack of qualified applicants. We had 2 recruitments).

VSO budgets and ODVA/Legislative Pass-through funding.

Many Counties are struggling and have had to cut where they can.

In Douglas County our Commissioners have supported the Veterans Service Office fully. Douglas County has no Departments of Health, Public Health, or Mental Health and other County departments have had reductions. One Department lost 100 employees. The Douglas County Board of Commissioners knows how important the Veteran Service Office is and what it brings to Veterans in terms of services and income, so they have not asked for any cuts in our office for several years, in fact while other Departments have had reductions in staff, Commissioners have increased staffing in the VSO. The Douglas County VSO appreciates the support they have provided.

Additional Funding

VSOs are very lucky to have Pass-through funding from the State and we thank the Legislature and ODVA for that, but we believe that more is needed.

It would serve Oregon Veterans best if Pass-through Funding would be increased to allow Counties to hire more VSO staff to handle increasing numbers of Veteran claims.

There's a simple formula to obtain more dollars from U S DVA so that many more Oregon Veterans would have income from VA:

1. VA can only provide monetary benefits to Veterans through VA claims.
2. Increasing the number of VSOs to assist Veterans with VA claims means that more Oregon Veterans will get VA income!
3. Oregon Veterans who receive VA dollars, spend their dollars in Oregon.

Additional Pass-through funding to hire more VSOs not only makes good sense, ***it's economic development.***