



Oregon

COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS' ASSOCIATION

February 23, 2021

Senate Committee on Veterans and Emergency Preparedness
Oregon State Legislature
Salem, OR

RE: Oregon House Bill 2094

Dear Chair Manning, Vice-Chair Thomsen, and Members of the Committee:

The Oregon County Veteran Service Officer's Association (OCVSOA) would like to offer our support for HB 2094 so that the Housing and Community Services Department may define "veteran" by administrative rule for the purposes of their programs.

OCVSOA is an organization of County Veteran Service Officers (CVSO's) throughout the state. CVSO's are county employees who are federally accredited advocates for their community's veterans. Through our day-to-day work with our veterans and their families, CVSO's are in a unique position to understand the needs and issues facing these members of our communities who have given so much of themselves in service to our nation.

As you are likely aware, there is some disparity between the federal definition of "veteran" set forth at 38 USC 101 and Oregon's state definition, set forth at ORS 408.225. There is currently a legislative workgroup chaired by Rep. Wallen working on efforts to bring the state definition in line with the federal definition; however it appears that these efforts won't come to fruition during this legislative session. Accordingly, the OCVSOA supports giving OHCS the ability to define veteran by rule so that the largest number of individuals, who have served our country, are eligible to access their programs.

Currently, the Oregon definition of veteran is founded upon some amount of "active duty" service that ends with an "honorable" discharge. The disparities between the state and federal definitions exists because federal law allows the federal Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) some discretion in administratively determining if an individual's service should be considered "honorable" and also allows the VA to provide benefits for individuals injured while on active duty for training. The state definition however only relies on the type of service, regardless of the impacts therefrom, and only recognizes the military's determination of character of service – thus providing no consideration for changes in law or policy (such as the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" rules) nor a later analysis which finds that the root cause of disciplinary issues were manifestations of service-connected health issues such as TBI or PTSD. The result is that OCVSOA members work with individuals who are found eligible for VA benefits and may even be found totally disabled due to their military service, but who cannot satisfy the state definition of "veteran" and are thus not eligible to access state veteran benefits.

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While this disparity is being addressed through the Rep. Wallen workgroup and impacts individuals across a wide range of socio-economic statuses, we ask that this bill be given favorable consideration because it would allow OHCS to start to provide services to one group who should not be made to wait any longer – the individuals in our community who have been found to have served our nation honorably by the VA or found to be entitled to disability benefits and who are homeless.

The rate of homelessness among veterans is higher than the general population and the rate of homelessness among those who served our country but were discharged under an other than honorable category is higher than for other veterans. This bill would allow OHCS to provide services to these veterans who have gone through VA's administrative character of discharge review process which found there were significant extenuating circumstances in the nature of their service and thus they should be considered as having served honorably, at least for VA benefit purposes.

The veterans of Oregon answered our country's call in our time of need. Can we do any less when their need is so evident? Thank you for your consideration and service to further the interests of the veterans of our state.

Very Respectfully,

Adam Williams
President

Joseph Reiley
Vice-President and Legislative Liaison

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