

Testimony for the SAVA Interim Committee
Panel: Training and accreditation for veteran service officers (VSOs)
29 October 2019

Roger A. Hagan, American Legion Legislative Committee Chair

Madam Chair and members of the committee, it is an honor to be before you today and to be included with this distinguished panel as we move forward with the study of the Montana Veterans Affairs Division (MVAD). I would like to recognize and thank the sponsor of this study bill, Representative Kimberly Dudik, for her insight and dedication to opening a discussion of how to best support and serve our Montana veterans.

I am here today representing the Montana Department of the American Legion. I serve as the Chairman of the Montana Department Legislative Committee and Vice Chair of the National Legislative Commission, representing Montana. Anecdotally, during the session, I also represent the Officer and Enlisted Associations of the Montana National Guard. I have advocated for military and veteran groups for over 40 years, first coming to this beautiful capitol building in 1979. I am a 38-year veteran of the Air Force and Air National Guard, retiring in 2006.

First, I am compelled to reinforce with this committee, and anyone within the sound of my voice, that there is a clear and distinct authority and responsibility line between the Montana Veteran Affairs Division and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (formerly known as the Veterans Administration). To paraphrase former MVAD Administrator, Jim Jacobsen, in a 2001 SAVA Interim Committee hearing: *We are a state-wide advocate for the Montana Veteran. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Montana Veterans Affairs Division are strikingly similar in name but significantly different in the responsibilities and expectations.*

With Mr. Jacobsen's statement in mind, I cannot state too often that we all must understand who is responsible for what. As an example, I recently had a discussion with a legislator who was disappointed in the service provided for a constituent by the "VA". When I drilled down on the issue at hand, I discovered the legislator's displeasure was with the U.S. Veterans Affairs. However, that is not how the conversation started.

It is imperative that we all keep this understanding in front of us when we work for the betterment of our Montana veterans. Let us all strive to remember that the timeliness can only be affected by the MVAD through the "claims development process" while the timeliness of the "claims processing" can only be affected by the U.S. Veterans Affairs agency.

While I am not accredited or certified as a Veteran Service Officer, and have never been, I come to you today to give a background of how the Montana Department of the American Legion interfaces with the MVAD and how our organization's outreach facilitates and enhances the services provided by the MVAD. This outreach is provided by the 123 Legion Posts in 117 towns, cities, and Native American sovereignties throughout Montana. Today, if I am queried about the intricacies of accreditation or certification and subsequent services provided by the

American Legion affiliated VSO's, I may have to rerefer those questions to the experts sitting beside and behind me.

In the very early years, many Departments of the American Legion across the nation staffed and trained their own Veteran Service Officers (VSO's). As the services were very complex and the number of veterans requiring those services were expected to increase, it became obvious to the Montana American Legion that providing our own VSO's was administratively and financially challenging for our organization. So, in approximately 1920, the Montana Department of the American Legion designated the Montana Veterans Affairs Division as the cross-accreditation recipient to serve our membership of currently over 10,600. This cross-accreditation designation was not made in haste and reflects our organization's trust, then and now, in the staff of the MVAD and our confidence that they can deliver services that our organization determined was not best served by our stand alone American Legion VSO's. Thus, the Montana Department of the American Legion was the first Veteran Service Organization to cross-accredit with the MVAD.

The MVAD, and by extension the individual veteran, benefit from this cross-accreditation as our state and national organizations provide valuable training and support for MVAD VSO's on a bi-annual basis. A State MVAD VSO is designated as the Montana American Legion Department VSO and is provided training at the expense of the National American Legion. It is important to recognize that, although there is one American Legion Department Veteran Service Officer within the MVAD structure, more MVAD VSO's are included in the bi-annual training if state budgets allow or, if the MVAD has more VSO's eligible for the training but cannot fund it, our organization works to support funding for that training.

The quality of this training should not be understated. The National American Legion provides to the Montana Department, and correspondingly the MVAD, timely and accurate guidance on the federal VA's requirements, changes and implementations of existing and new laws or rules that affect benefits for our veterans. Currently the National American Legion has secured the law firm of Bergman and Moore of Minneapolis, MN to not only provide quality and timely training but to review and provide guidance for appeals of a veteran's claim.

So, it is plain to see that the American Legion is a full partner with MVAD in insuring that our Montana Veterans receive the best service and support for all veteran benefits. This concept of cross-accreditation has expanded the support we are able to provide our American Legion members and families, and even Montana Veterans who are not members of our organization.

Madam Chair and members of the committee, I assure you that every veteran in this room, as well as the non-veterans, have one purpose in mind. And that is to get the **best veteran care and services to the most Montana veterans possible.**

It is with that in mind that I will note that the more eyes and ears we can have at the lowest level the better chance we have of finding those veterans who: 1) are not sure of how to request benefits; 2) are not aware that they even have benefits available; or more importantly,

3) are not inclined to request benefits for a variety of reasons. While our Legion Posts have a great ability to engage veterans throughout their community, we are but one opportunity among several. Many veterans may not be inclined to become a member of the Legion, or any veteran organization, or may avoid any relationship with post-military service groups altogether. It is then up to the grassroots, local community friends and family to assist with getting the right folks to those veterans.

We have heard discussion about the value and purpose of County Veteran Service Offices and the Montana Department of the American Legion believes that more counties should be stepping up to establish their own County Veteran Service Offices (CVSO's). However, much like the American Legion recognized 99 years ago that we were limited in the best way to provide support to our veterans, we believe that CVSO's also have limitations. Perhaps the American Legion's concept of cross-accreditation would serve the counties as well as it has served our American Legion family.

Our American Legion has benefited from the standardization of training and services that the MVAD has joined with us to provide. We believe it could also benefit the CVSO's. Our American Legion, and sister veteran organizations, have continued to provide many veteran services such as transportation, provider care connections, suicide prevention programs, advocacy for local support of ancillary veteran's needs, home loan information, veteran burial eligibility, and outreach to get to those veterans who are averse to veteran support. Much the same, we believe that CVSO's can join with our organizations to provide the same opportunities but still defer to the MVAD for the development of veteran claims. The CVSO's can be a force multiplier to help the American Legion and MVAD's goal to reach each and every veteran within these 94 million acres we love to call our home state.

I am certain there will be a future discussion about how the CVSO's fit into the 'best service' model and we request inclusion and remain available for that discussion. The American Legion is just one cog in the wheel of effective and successful veteran support. We have recognized how our cog fits into the overall scheme of providing the best and most effective services to our veterans. We also recognize the value of deferring to those who are much more skilled and professional in engaging the endless maze of processes. We are proud of how the American Legion can contribute to the overall wellbeing of our Montana Veterans.

Madam Chair, in closing, I would like to share a personal story about my father-in-law, a Marine during WWII. He was a teenager and served in the Philippines as the war was winding down. Part of his duty was as a patrolman watching over some storage facilities on base. In the course of this duty he made a bad decision and took 2 cases of eggs from one of the warehouses to use as a gift to a befriended Filipino couple for their wedding. He was court martialed and subsequently discharged in 1947 with a bad conduct discharge. His profession was as a painter and drywaller, however he could never get a federal government contract (which were quite lucrative in Great Falls in the 1950's).

I didn't learn of his dishonorable discharge until several years after I married his stepdaughter. He always spoke fondly of his military service and never indicated his plight. In the 1990's he and I discussed his situation after he had retired, and I was aghast. I immediately contacted Mr. Ruddy Reilly and asked for help. Mr. Reilly was the MVAD Senior Service Officer and American Legion Designated VSO. He provided me several sources of comparable situations in the 1940's and I was able, with Mr. Reilly's help, to submit a request to the Board of Corrections of Naval Records. In approximately 1994 I came home one day to find my father-in-law sitting at our kitchen table with tears in his eyes. I asked him what was wrong, and he slid a large brown envelope over to me. When I opened it, I saw a General Discharge under Honorable Conditions. After nearly 50 years, my father-in-law was eligible for full VA benefits and could proudly speak about his service.

I tell you this today as I am sure there are hundreds, if not thousands, of veterans that are deserving of this type of attention and care. And, I for one, experienced the value of the Montana Veterans Affairs Division.

Madam Chair, Members of the Committee, this concludes my testimony and I remain for questions.