



State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee

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57th Montana Legislature

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LOIS O'CONNOR, SECRETARY

September 4, 2001

TO: SJR 5 Working Group and Key Parties
(See Distribution List below)

FROM: Sheri Heffelfinger, Research Analyst

RE: Survey for Potential Legislative Action on Veterans' Issues

The Montana Legislature's Subcommittee on Veterans' Affairs, Chaired by Senator Glenn Roush, approved the organization of a working group to develop recommendations to the Subcommittee on the veterans issues identified in Senate Joint Resolution No. 5 and House Joint Resolution No. 1 (please see copy of SJR 5 and HJR 1 enclosed). Most of the veteran service organizations have officially designated members to serve on this SJR 5 working group. Others of you are included in the distribution of this memorandum because of your position, experience, or interest. Copies of this correspondence are being furnished as indicated below.

Instead of trying to bring all of you to the table in Helena or contacting each of you personally, I am sending this correspondence to begin "brainstorming" how to address the issues underlying SJR 5. This will be the beginning of a process that will continue throughout the interim and hopefully lead to recommendations for specific actions by the Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs.

Therefore, please find the enclosed "SJR 5 Issues and Options Survey". I am asking you to please work through this checklist/survey and to **return it to me by September 21.**

If you know of others who should be involved in this survey process, please let me know or feel free to copy and forward this correspondence accordingly. I will not be quantifying the number of responses on certain issues and options. I am simply trying to identify issues and options that should be seriously considered by the working group.

I will be reporting our progress to the Subcommittee on Veterans' Affairs at its September 26-27 meeting. You are certainly welcomed to attend that meeting. It will be held in Glendive and Miles City. I will send a complete meeting agenda as soon as it is approved by Sen. Roush. There will be a public hearing scheduled so that any of you may personally, but briefly, present your own comments to the Subcommittee.

Thank you for your participation in this important process and for your time and thoughtful consideration of these issues. Please contact me if you have any questions.

I can be reached at (406) 444-3596 or sheffelfinger@mt.gov or by FAX at (406) 444-3036.
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Encl:

SJR 5
HJR 1
Issues and Options Survey

Distribution List:

Officially Designated SJR 5 Representatives of Chartered Veterans' Organizations

Mike Hampson, VVA
Mike Secrease, VVA
Ray Reed, American Legion
Dan Antonniette, VFW
Robert Schwegel, VFW
James Bertrand, VFW
Wayne Mooney, DAV
Jim Heffernan, Marine Corps League

Key Interested Public Officials and Officers

Senator Dale Mahlum
Representative Butch Waddill
Representative Dick Haines
Commissioner Karolin Loendorf, Lewis & Clark County

Board of Veterans Affairs

Thaddeus Mayer
Ruben McKinney
Johnny Buck
Karen Furu
George Hageman

Commanders, Veteran Service Organizations

Bob Payne, DAV
Erich Maki, VFW
Ken Peeples, Military Order of COOTIES
Ed Sperry, American Legion
Art Ellison, 40 & 8
Emil Eschenburg, Military Order of the Purple Heart
Beverly Stewart, VVA
Bill Woon, 1st Special Forces
Ed Mosier, Ex-POWs
Gale Rand, Marine Corps League
Jacki Scott, VFW Axillary
Jean Kraemer, DAV Axillary
Gay Matter, American Legion Axillary

Mike Hankins, Association of VVA

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Other Primary Stakeholders/Service Providers

General Prendergast, Director, DMA

Jim Jacobsen, MVAD

Jim Nolan, DPHHS

Bob Thornton, Job Service

Bonnie Adee, Mental Health Ombudsman

Greg Burham, Missoula Vet Center

Bob Phillips, Billings Vet Center

Carroll Jenkins, Counseling Consortium, Contracted Provider

Darren Nealis, Director, Golden Triangle Community Mental Health Center

Maria Nyberg, God's Love Homeless Shelter

John Solheim, Administrator, St. Peter's Hospital

Bob Olson, Montana Hospital Association

Keith Heavy Runner, Tribal Veteran Affairs Officer

Accredited Veteran Service Officers

Ruddy Reilly

Pat Crowley

Sherry Stewart

Bonnie Curran

Art Tyler

Len Leibinger

Bill Hutton

Cheryl Heald

Wales Davis

Dorothy Jarosz

Val Martin

Herbie Woslager

Don Lougee

Carol Code

Mike Secrease

Robert Schwegel

Active Interested Persons

Robert Perry, Operation Dust Off

Joe Walsh, volunteer advocate

Rick Salyer, former Stand Down coordinator

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cf:

Governor Judy Martz
Dr. Terrence Batliner, VISN 19
Joe Underkofler, VA Montana Health Care System
Andrea Merrill, Senator Baucus' Missoula Field Office
Mike Brown, Senator Burns' Great Falls Field Office
Jeff Garrard, Congressman Rehberg's Helena Field Office
Subcommittee Members

ISSUES AND OPTIONS SURVEY: WHAT SHOULD BE ON OUR RADAR SCREEN?

Survey of SJR 5 Working Group and Key Parties
September 2001

RETURN SURVEY TO:

Sheri Heffelfinger, Research Analyst
Legislative Services Division
Room 136 State Capitol
Helena, MT 59620

Please note: This paper reflects legislative staff "brainstorming" after hearing comments and suggestions from various interested persons and organizations and very preliminary research. It does not reflect a detailed analysis of the merits or feasibility of any of these ideas. The intent of this survey is to simply initiate a structured discussion and scope out possibilities.

Person filling out this survey: _____

Address: _____

Phone number and/or email address : _____

QUESTION: Which of the following issues should be researched for further consideration? And, for each issue identified for further consideration, which options to address the issues do you think should be discussed by the SJR 5 working group and key parties. *(Please CIRCLE your choices. You may pick as many options as you think should be discussed, but if you choose more than one option under an issue, please identify which option reflects your priority interest. Also, please feel free to provide written comments on your support for or opposition to any of the ideas listed.)*

POTENTIAL STATE ISSUES AND OPTIONS

A **ISSUE:** The role of the Montana Board of Veterans Affairs.

OPTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- (1) Revise Board membership criteria to be more representative of veteran organizations (or specify other criteria to be considered--Board is currently appointed by the Governor, only criteria for membership is members must be state residents from different counties and be

- honorably discharged.)
- (2) Revise members' terms of service (currently, a 5-year term)
 - (3) Clarify in statute the Board's duties and responsibilities (current statute hasn't been updated since 1975 and is unspecific)
 - (4) Convert the Board to an advisory council (Board currently directs the activities of the MVAD, meets 3 or 4 times a year, and would need a different role if the MVAD is established as an independent department under the Governor)
 - (5) Other ideas? please specify:

COMMENTS:

B. ISSUE: The structure and role of the Montana Veterans' Affairs Division (MVAD).

OPTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- (1) Move the MVAD to the Governor's Office and make the Executive Director of the MVAD a cabinet-level official appointed by the Governor (the model several other states have adopted)
- (2) Move the MVAD to the DPHHS (Public Health and Human Services), which already has wide-ranging responsibilities in the health care area. (The MVAD is currently administratively attached to the Department of Military Affairs (DMA).
- (3) Provide for additional state-funded Veteran Service Officers (we currently have 8 offices statewide, for more than 100,000 veterans and 140,000 family members)
- (4) Define in statute the MVAD's duties and responsibilities, which are not statutorily defined at this time
- (5) Consider county-level veteran service officers (several states have various models for staffing and funding county-level veteran service officers whose activities are coordinated through the state veterans' department but who can work at the local level to provide outreach and service coordination to ensure the county's veterans are receiving the VA benefits to which they are entitled so that costs are not shifted to the counties.)

- (6) Other ideas? Please specify

COMMENTS:

C. ISSUE: Homelessness among veterans

OPTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- (1) Establish a state-level coordinator/program for services to homeless veterans (the state of Kentucky has established a program we could examine)
- (2) Explore a grant program that would be administered through a state agency but that would simply provide funding or matching funds for local-level coordinators for homeless veterans
- (3) Require the MVAD or the DMA to coordinate and fund homeless veteran Stand Down events (Stand Downs are two- or three-day events where federal, state, and local service providers come together to provide outreach and services to homeless veterans and their families and provide health care screenings and support for job services, benefit claims, housing, food, etc.)
- (4) Establish a program where the MVAD or DMA would contract with private non-profit groups to support homeless veteran Stand Downs
- (5) Other ideas? Please specify

COMMENTS:

D. ISSUE: Mental health services for veterans

OPTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- (1) Establish a state-funded in-house or contracted out program to assist veterans suffering from mental illnesses by identifying and coordinating required services and helping these veterans navigate the VA claims and health care process by using an intensive case management model; the program could also be authorized to apply for any available federal grants and to accept gifts, grants, or donations and/or to contract for these case-management services. (The state of Washington has a model for this type of program.)
- (2) Add veteran-related duties and responsibilities to the state Mental Health Ombudsman position, which is under the Governor's office and now has about 2 employees.
- (3) Add veteran representation to current DPHHS advisory councils or coordinating councils
- (4) Other ideas? Please specify

COMMENTS

E. ISSUE: Communication and coordination

OPTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- (1) Establish a state-level advisory council consisting of representatives from each Chartered veteran service organization operating in the state. The council would advise state agencies on the needs of veterans and serve as a clearinghouse for distribution and sharing of information.
- (2) Establish a state-level strategic planning council that can interface with various federal, state, and local public and private entities that have a role in providing services to veterans (would likely need federal legislation to require the VA to engage in interagency and intergovernmental coordinating activities)

- (3) Establish some sort of state-administered grant program that supports the formation and operation of locally initiated veteran resource coalitions (i.e., similar to the Veteran Resource Coalition established by General Prendergast in Helena during the 1999-2001 Interim)
- (4) Enhance the role of the Board of Veterans' Affairs to encompass communication and coordination issues, including providing a clearinghouse for information to be shared among veteran service organizations and other federal, state, and local entities
- (5) Enhance the role of the MVAD to encompass communication and coordination issues
- (6) Other ideas? Please specify

COMMENTS:

F. ISSUE: Veteran grievances, legal advise to VSOs, and legal advocacy

OPTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- (1) Enhance the role of the MVAD in providing case management for health care grievances against the VA (such as including in statute a responsibility to provide legal support to veteran service officers who have clients with legal complaints against the VA)
- (2) Continue to have MVAD rely on the state Department of Justice to provide legal support for the MVAD, but specify in statute what legal support must be provided to the MVAD's service officers and their veteran clients
- (3) Work with U.S. Senate and Congressional delegation to establish (or enhance) a grant program to help fund legal advocacy services for veterans who are clients of the state or county veteran service officers.
- (4) Other ideas? Please specify

COMMENTS:

G. ISSUE: State veterans' cemetery program

- (1) Develop legislation to initiate an RFP and site selection process for a new state veterans' cemetery for veterans in Western Montana
- (2) Develop legislation to raise revenue to pay for the property required for a new Western Montana State Veterans' Cemetery
- (3) Develop legislation urging the designation of Fort Missoula as the site for a new Western Montana State Veterans' Cemetery
- (4) Other ideas? Please specify

COMMENTS:

H. ISSUES: Are there other issues and options that should be listed? Please specify.

POTENTIAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FEDERAL ACTIONS

A. Ask the Subcommittee to initiate a letter, joint resolution by the full Legislature, or other communication to Montana's U.S. and Congressional Delegation to:

- (1) Support additional funding for the VA Montana Health Care System for particular services and programs: (specify services, such as a PTSD program or a Drug and Alcohol program, additional health care clinics, contracted services, etc.)

- (2) Support federal actions that would make the VA Montana health care system more accountable to the VISN 19 director (ideas on how to accomplish this?)

- (3) Request an enhancement of the VA's Regional Veteran Service Liaison Office (a recent program being implemented by the VA) so that more than one officer in our 8-state region would be responsible for developing partnerships and establishing open lines of communication with state and local veteran service organizations and with state directors of veterans' affairs.
- (4) Support federal actions for the VA and VISN directors following a strategic needs assessment process whereby needs are assessed, VA services through state systems are tailored to those needs, and a local impact assessment process is followed when fiscal and policy decisions are being made by the VA
- (5) Support a U.S. Senate or Congressional investigation into alleged health care abuses at Fort Harrison or within VISN 19? (Reference the VVA's core document entitled "Caring for our Wounded", presented to the Subcommittee and to the federal VA, VISN, and state and local officials on August 6, 2001.)
- (6) Support a Department of Justice IG investigation into alleged health care abuses at Fort Harrison and VISN 19?
- (7) Other ideas? please specify

COMMENTS:

B. Ask Montana's U.S. Senate and Congressional Delegation to request a Governmental Accounting Office (GAO) report on:

- (1) How the VA contracts for services and examining its network authorization process for non-VA services, including a comparison of whether this process is uniform among the VISN's and state VA health care systems, with special attention to the special needs of rural states and the VA Montana health care system
- (2) How the VA conducts needs assessments and what could be done to improve the process so that priorities are based on identified needs, including a comparison of whether this process is uniform among the VISN's and state VA health care systems, with special attention to the needs of rural states such as Montana

- (3) How the VA's grievance process works and what recourse veterans have if the grievance involves the way their complaint has been handled by the VA, including a comparison of whether this process is uniform among the VISN's and VA health care systems within the states
- (4) How VISN 19 and the VA Montana Health Care System currently interacts with state and local public officials and veteran service organizations to keep state and local officials and organizations informed of their policies, practices, benefit changes, and health care decisions.
- (5) Other ideas? Please specify

COMMENTS:

- C. Are there other issues and options that should be listed as a potential recommendation for federal action?....please specify.**

IDEAS FOR FUNDING SOURCES

What ideas should be discussed for raising revenue to fund recommendations?

- A. Increase license plate fees (now used to fund the state veterans' cemeteries)
- B. Increase the cigarette tax (a portion of which is used to fund the state veterans' nursing homes)
- C. Increase other taxes (please specify)
- D. General fund appropriation from existing revenue streams (no new revenue)
- E. County local option tax for county veteran service officers
- F. Restructure current state-funded programs that service veterans as part of a larger population so that funding can be extracted from those programs and dedicated for veteran services (no new revenue)
- G. Make any contemplated program enhancements contingent on receiving gifts, grants, and donations, designate a lead agency to coordinate fund raising efforts.
- H. Other ideas? please specify

COMMENTS:

THANK YOU!

Please put this completed survey in the envelope provided and mail it back before September 21st

RETURN SURVEY TO:

Sheri Heffelfinger, Research Analyst
Legislative Services Division
Room 136 State Capitol
Helena, MT 59620