

North Dakota Association of County and Tribal Veterans Service Officers
Legislative Testimony regarding SB2025 Appropriations-ND DVA

Good morning Mr. Chairman and honorable members of the committee, thank you for allowing us the opportunity to provide input on behalf of the North Dakota Association of County and Tribal Veterans Service Officers.

The Association's mission is:

- To cultivate a professional culture within its membership;
- To assist in the establishment, maintenance, and perpetuation of County and Tribal Veterans Service Offices.
- And the continuing education and staffing of these offices as prescribed by law under the Statutes of the State of North Dakota

Membership in this association constitutes 52 of the 53 Counties and all 4 Tribal Nations. The association has been officially recognized by the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers.

The ND Department of Veterans Affairs is actively involved in coordinating mandatory bi-annual training/education to the ND veterans' service officers. The training is required for the VSO to maintain US Department of Veterans Affairs accreditation with the various veterans' organizations. This training enhances the ability of the VSO to provide services to veterans by keeping them current on changes in regulations and resources related to veteran benefits. As you know the past year has been challenging to conduct these trainings in person. The ND DVA has valuable employees who were able to utilize technology and deliver some training virtually. However, this is not the most efficient way to deliver information on complex issues for training or for networking and to develop statewide working relationships.

Contrary to what some think, the ND Department of Veterans Affairs provides unprecedented support to County and Tribal Veterans Service Offices.

- The State Veteran Benefits Specialists are a critical link in assisting county and tribal VSOs in providing access to expertise for Veterans applying for state and VA benefits and appealing claims. The Veteran/family contacts local County and Tribal VSO, who develops the claims and with guidance

from the staff at NDDVA and then submits a complete claim that expedites the receipt of benefits.

- Many of the state's county and tribal Veterans Service Offices are one person operations on a part-time basis, who look to the department for daily support and assistance with veteran claims as well as loan and grant assistance applications.
- The department oversees the Rural Transportation program, providing free rides to a VA Medical Center for many highly-rural veterans.
- They provide support personnel to the Veteran Service Offices for outreach events.
- The department sets-up, maintains, and educates Veteran Service Offices on the client management database used across the state.
- They provide personnel to ensure services are provided to counties whose service officer will be absent for a prolonged period.
- The department also maintains a website that provides Veteran Service Offices the tools and up to date information to ensure our clients receive the best possible service for a favorable US Department of Veterans Affairs decision.

NDDVA supports the county and tribal offices just as that of other state agencies with county offices, such as, ND Department of Human Services, ND Department of Health, State Auditor's office and States Attorney to name a few.

Due to previous budget reductions, many of these tasks, such as maintaining the website and processing loans and grants, redirecting incoming calls (from Veterans, families funeral directors and other agencies requesting information) have become additional duties to the assigned staff. Cutting the loan & grant FTE resulted in a backlog and delay in providing immediate financial support to Veterans in hardship situations.

Our association recognizes this and its members have been directly affected by these previous budget cutbacks. A loan and grant program in any department requires full-time, qualified financial experts to ensure it is properly managed. The assistance these programs provide to our veterans can be compared, albeit on a smaller scale, to Social Service's Economic Assistance Division.

The number of Veterans in North Dakota has been increasing with continuous deployments being asked of our reservists and active-duty personnel that return to their home towns upon discharge. This increase in the workload and the complexity of client claims has also been affected with advances in technology and changes in US Department of Veterans Affairs policies and regulations. Support from the ND Department of Veterans Affairs to Veteran Service Offices, like the support the ND Department of Human Services provides to the counties, delivers the knowledge and opportunity for VSOs to be successful in representing North Dakota's veterans with the potential to bring millions of federal dollars to the state.

In closing, the North Dakota Association of County and Tribal Veterans Service Officers fully supports this bill as written and asks for your support in recommending passage to the full legislature.

Thank you, we are happy to entertain any questions, comments or concerns.

Respectfully submitted

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