

Veterans Affairs County Commissions

Research Paper – October 2019

Background

The Legislature established requirements for employing individuals designated as county veterans service officers (VSOs).

The person must be accredited through the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers (NACVSO), work with veterans affairs issues a minimum number of hours, and maintain an office in a location leased or owned by the county.

Each county must have a veterans office in a building owned, operated or leased by the county, and must provide the minimum number of office hours:

- 47 counties have a population of 30,000 or less - 20 hours per week.
- 18 counties have a population of 30,001 to 60,000 - 30 hours per week.
- 34 counties have a population of 60,001 or greater - 40 hours per week.

Lawmakers established a fund to assist county commissioners of veterans affairs to comply with legislative requirements for employing service officers. Each county receives \$10,000 annually, from money appropriated to the Iowa Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA).

To qualify, the county must agree to spend the allocation for the administration and maintenance of the county commission of veterans affairs office. It must also must agree to maintain its current level of spending from the previous fiscal year.

County Allocation Program

The County Commissions of Veterans Affairs Fund was created during the 2008 legislative session. An annual General Fund appropriation of \$990,000 in the Health and Human Services budget provides a \$10,000 allocation to each county, under the control of the IDVA. The grant program aims to improve delivery of services to veterans by the county commissioners of veterans affairs. The money should be used for outreach, and for administration and maintenance of the county office and staff. Unspent money carries forward and is credited to the account. Counties have returned money in previous years for reasons that include services not being offered in a public location, required office hours not being met and money not used for its intended purpose. Under State law, the funds cannot be used to provide direct assistance to veterans.

Reports

Each county must submit a detailed report to the IDVA at the end of each fiscal year that money was allocated. The Department analyzes the information to determine the ways services to Iowa veterans have increased.

Findings

The most beneficial use of the funds has been the opportunities for county service officers to receive training, such as initial accreditation and continuing education. This gives the service officer improved expertise in filing federal benefit claims and appeals. Some travel expenses may be allowed for training, as county travel budgets are limited.

The money has been instrumental in providing outreach to veterans, computer equipment, Internet access, copy machines, paper and postage supplies, and office furniture to conduct individual interviews and file claims for the veterans. Additional authorized expenditures include advertising for office and satellite locations and hours, special information sessions held throughout the county, and announcements of new federal and state benefits and programs.

A review of the annual reports show that the most popular uses of the money are new office furniture, personnel for increased office hours, computers, Veterans Information Management System (VIMS) and

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VetraSpec software, copiers, printers, office supplies, telephones, outreach events, and state and federal training. The average annual amount spent on training schools ranges between \$1,000 and \$5,000, depending on the facility.

Recommendations

IDVA Executive Director Steve Lukan suggested that the 2020 Legislature review the effectiveness of the program, which has been in place for more than a decade. It is difficult for the Department to measure “increased services to veterans” that can be attributed to the county allocation fund, and there are many variations in needs among counties. He said greater flexibility in spending, while maintaining accountability, may be key. Lawmakers could establish legislative intent and outline authorized expenditures, and allow county officials to make decisions appropriate for the veterans they serve.

Recent Legislative Action

In 2019, the Legislature unanimously passed a bill requested by the Iowa State Association of Counties that clarifies provisions regarding the removal from office of a county veterans service officer. Each county commission of veteran affairs must employ an executive director or administrator, recognized as the VSO. [House File 689](#) provides that the VSO can only be removed from office by the county commission of veteran affairs with the approval of the county board of supervisors. This mirrors the process of appointment to the position.

In 2018, the Legislature approved the Iowa Commission of Veterans Affairs recommendation that its membership be increased from nine to 11. The two new members represent the Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Iowa Association of County Commissioners and Veterans Service Officers (IACCVSO). Representatives of both groups regularly attend Commission meetings and contribute ideas and information, but did not have a vote.

The respective organizations submit a list of candidates for consideration by the Governor, who makes the appointments subject to Senate confirmation. This year, the first IACCVSO appointee, Orene Cressler of Pocahontas County, was confirmed for a four-year term.

The Commission includes one public member, and a representative from each of these organizations: Iowa National Guard, American Veterans (AMVETS), Disabled American Veterans, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, Reserve Officers Association and Vietnam Veterans of America.