

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 support for SB2025 on behalf of the North Dakota Association of County and Tribal Veterans Service Officers (NDACTVSO).

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 (ND DVA) is actively involved in coordinating mandatory bi-annual training/education to the North Dakota county and tribal veterans' service officers. The training is required for the veterans' service officers (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. Trainings are conducted in state and as you know the past year has been challenging to conduct these trainings in person. The ND DVA has knowledgeable, highly qualified employees who were able to adapt and utilize existing technology and deliver some training virtually. However, this is not ideal nor the most effective way to deliver information on complex issues or for networking and to develop statewide working relationships. For small county offices, the expenses of registration and out of state travel to meet the accreditation and continuing credits requirement can be a significant portion of a small office operating budget.

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 to assist Veterans 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. The staff at ND DVA also assists as a liaison between the Veteran and the VA.

- Many of the state's county and tribal Veterans Service Offices are one person operations situated in rural county seat and work on a part-time basis (1 or 2 days, partial days). They look to the department for daily support and assistance with veteran claims as well as loan and grant assistance applications and other state recourses.
- The department oversees the Highly Rural Transportation Grant (HRTG) program, providing free rides to any medical related appointments, including vision, dental and community clinics. This is a valuable benefit for those Veterans living in highly rural counties and compliments the transportation to the Fargo VA Medical Center provided by the existing DAV van routes across the state.
- They provide support personnel to the Veteran Service Offices for outreach events in communities. These events that were cut back in the previous session, such as homeless Veterans stand-downs, Agent Orange Awareness and Women Veterans Health workshops , have been on hold for a year due to COVID-19 and are important to restore the personal connection and bring awareness of benefits and services to the Veterans and families in their communities.
- 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 relevant, 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 to keep material current, up to date, processing loans and hardship grants, redirecting incoming calls (from Veterans, families, colleges,

funeral directors and other agencies assisting Veterans) 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 our 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 and funds are distributed in a timely manner. Most of the grants are for hardship or emergency situations and delays in the decision and disbursement causes additional stress for the Veteran. 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 hometowns 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 DVA to Veteran Service Offices, like the support the ND Department of Human Services provides to the county social services offices, 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 (refer to the economic impact attachment).

In closing, the North Dakota Association of County and Tribal Veterans Service Officers fully supports this bill as written and originally presented including the optional package. We ask 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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