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TO: House Veterans and Emergency Preparedness Committee, Senate Veterans and Emergency Preparedness Committee

FROM: Kelly Fitzpatrick, Director
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Implementation of HB 2908 (2017), Establishing the Oregon Veteran Volunteer Program Coordinator and Veterans Volunteer Program

Overview

Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs (ODVA) submits this Report on the implementation and current status of HB 2908. Passed in the 2017 Regular Session, the bill created the position of Oregon Veteran Volunteer Program Coordinator and outlined activities for the Veterans Volunteer Program. The legislation required ODVA to submit a report to the interim and standing committees on veterans' affairs with information on the following:

- 1) The impact of the program on veterans served;
- 2) The type of assistance provided by the coordinator and veteran volunteers;
- 3) Data on volunteer activities and volunteer hours;
- 4) Recommendations for the improvement and expansion of the services provided by the coordinator; and
- 5) Recommendations for legislation.

General Overview

The Volunteer Program was established to assist with current ODVA outreach efforts to identify veterans currently not receiving benefits and connect these veterans with services and resources. There are approximately 300,573 veterans in Oregon. Roughly 73% (nearly 219,500) are not connected to benefits and/or services and over 50% of Oregon's veterans are over the age of 65.

The Veteran Volunteer Program Coordinator is responsible for the following areas:

- **Program development:** Initial and continual development of training, materials and goals for the program.
- **Training:** Training all volunteers according to standards set by ODVA.
- **Ongoing support and mentorship:** Provide ongoing supervision, feedback, and encouragement to volunteers in the performance of their duties, organize large events with multiple volunteers in attendance, and assist volunteers as needed.

ODVA hired a Volunteer Coordinator to spearhead this program in December 2017. In April of 2018, this candidate accepted a position with another agency. ODVA hired a new coordinator in May 2018. The new coordinator came from a similar position with Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Upon hire, the new coordinator immediately began working with County Veteran Service Officers and other community partners to identify ways to connect with veterans who had not explored their benefits. During the initial phase, research and outreach with other state agencies was conducted to help determine what would be needed to start a volunteer program for ODVA. This included, but was not limited to what policies would be needed, how background checks on volunteers would be completed, and what database would be best for the type of program ODVA was going to operate. After researching what would be needed, the coordinator began writing the policies and procedures for the program, which include an intensive 6-8 hour in-person training session accompanied by a 110-page training manual for volunteers. The coordinator also worked with Department of Human Services to complete an interagency agreement for background checks, researched, identified and purchased a volunteer database management program called Better Impact. The volunteer coordinator uses this program to track the volunteers from their initial application, through onboarding and training. Once certified, volunteers enter their activities into the database which allows the volunteer coordinator the ability to track and monitor their activities.

Once all of these tasks were completed, the program was able to move into its pilot project phase. This phase was implemented to test the training materials, goals, and outcomes for continuous improvement prior to phase three. ODVA was in the process of implementing phase three, the statewide plan, when COVID-19 halted all visits to long-term care facilities. During the pandemic, the Coordinator has adapted the volunteer training program enabling volunteers to train remotely. With restrictions in place for long-term care visitations, ODVA is turning to other means to find veterans and their dependents who may need these earned benefits now

more than ever. New strategies include partnering with food delivery organizations such as Meals on Wheels and food banks, in order to distribute informational flyers.

Types of Assistance Provided by The Program

The benefits veterans and their families received because of this program have ranged from first time disability compensation, first time enrollment in VA health care, receiving VA hearing aids, and increased disability ratings, to information on burial benefits, home loans, and pension.

Volunteers are not trained to perform the work of Veteran Service Officer's, such as filing claims. Rather, they are encouraging veterans and family members to seek out earned benefits by referring them to their local veteran service office and other resources.

Impact of The Program on Veterans

One significant impact the program has had is clearing up the misunderstanding of ODVA's role on behalf of Oregon's veterans. Many veterans expressed difficulties in getting assistance regarding their benefits with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA). As expected, many veterans were reluctant to seek assistance from the volunteers until they understood ODVA's role as an advocate for them. In some circumstances it took time and multiple contacts to gain a veteran's trust and for them to allow us to provide assistance to them in seeking help. Without these repeated contacts and exposure from our volunteers, these veterans may never have sought the help they earned.

Another impact that the volunteers have had was educating veterans and helping them to understand their benefits, including significant changes in benefits and claims. The Veterans Claims Assistance Act, Blue Water Navy Act, and addition of presumptive service conditions are just some of the important changes volunteers share with veterans. Veterans who receive information about these new programs, and changes to existing programs, are more likely to submit claims or resubmit claims previously denied by the USDVA.

Volunteers spoke with a number of family members who were trying to understand what earned veteran benefits are available for their elderly parent. Many family members encounter veterans who may not want to talk about their service, making the ability to understand their eligibility more difficult. Family members often

shared their concerns about how confusing the system is, especially if they themselves did not serve. The volunteers were able to provide information about VA benefits and guide them in the appropriate direction for their needs.

Stories from volunteers

A Vietnam Marine veteran was very upset and shared his concerns with a volunteer about his daughter who was raised at Camp Lejeune and later became a Marine veteran herself. The daughter developed multiple cases of cancer later in life, but because the cancer was not related to her own service in the military, the VA would not cover the medical expense for treatment. The volunteer convinced the father to go see his County Veteran Service Officer. The CVSO helped confirm that the veteran had been stationed at Camp Lejeune, and determined that as a result of his daughter being raised on the base with the veteran she met the presumptive requirements for care. Her continuing care was eligible for coverage and the expenses for treatment that the daughter had previously paid out of pocket were recovered.

In another case a veteran's daughter spoke with a volunteer regarding her father, a disabled WWII veteran. He could no longer live at home due to dementia. After talking with the volunteer, she made an appointment with a VSO and was able to get her father's paperwork started to receive a pension and aid and attendance. She also became aware of the burial benefits veterans receive. These earned benefits enabled them to find and pay for a memory care facility closer to their home. As is the case in many of these situations, this family was unaware these earned benefits were available for her father.

Volunteer Coordinator Activities and Data

- Trained and background checked 36 volunteers in the following counties: Deschutes, Marion, Clackamas, Multnomah, Washington, Polk, Yamhill, and Columbia.
- Contact with an additional 231 individuals who have shown interest in becoming a Program volunteer.
- Planned a statewide volunteer training for Crook, Jefferson, and Deschutes counties. This was scheduled for March 25, 2020, at the Redmond VFW but was cancelled due to COVID-19 pandemic.
- Presented to 115 county employees about the Program and aging veteran issues at conferences and events.
 - Presentations educated service providers about the Program in order to help volunteers gain approval for access into facilities.

- Attended over 70 outreach events to provide information on the Program.

Volunteer Activities and Hours Spent on Program

- Veteran Volunteer Pilot Project Total Hours
 - 1635 hours
 - Roughly equivalent to one full time VSO
- Program provided assistance to 1499 individuals
 - 779 veterans served
 - 517 veteran family members served
 - 203 veterans' friends served
- 108 individual visits
- Locations visited
 - 26 long-term care facilities visited
 - 12 senior centers visited
 - 8 foster homes visited

Conclusion

In its pilot project phase the Veterans Volunteer program has proven to be a highly successful outreach tool for ODVA that comes with a relatively modest price tag. We currently have volunteers in 8 of the 36 counties in Oregon. Our statewide expansion effort had just started prior to the COVID-19 shutdown in long-term care facilities. The program was temporarily suspended in order to develop alternate means of identifying veterans and now has resumed engaging counties throughout the state. Materials have been developed specifically for dissemination to veterans and their family members residing in long-term care facilities as well as those who are aging in place and accessing resources with our partner organizations like Meals on Wheels, food banks, and other private Nongovernmental Organizations.

Recommendations for Legislation

No recommendations for additional legislation for the 2021-23 biennium.

Full report: <https://www.oregon.gov/odva/Connect/Pages/Reports.aspx>

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