



Legislative Fiscal Bureau

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Joint Committee on Finance

Paper #972

Establishment of Regional Service Delivery Centers (Veterans Affairs -- General Agency Provisions)

[LFB 2001-03 Budget Summary: Page 696, #6]

CURRENT LAW

Currently, the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) does not operate a statewide system of regional service delivery centers. However, the agency does maintain a unit of its Bureau of Claims at the Zablocki Veterans Administration Medical Center in Milwaukee.

GOVERNOR

Provide \$154,400 SEG in 2001-02 and \$638,500 SEG in 2002-03 and 9.0 SEG positions annually to enable DVA to establish six regional service delivery centers and seven video conferencing systems in the state. Funds would be used for: (1) benefits specialists, clerical staff and associated supplies and services to support the operation of the new centers (\$12,400 SEG in 2001-02 and \$441,000 SEG in 2002-03 and 9.0 SEG positions annually); (2) one-time funding for the purchase of computer equipment, copiers, faxes, office furniture and three motor vehicles for each center's office (\$22,100 SEG in 2001-02 and \$174,800 SEG in 2002-03); (3) one-time funding for the purchase of videoconferencing equipment that would be placed in the Milwaukee claims office and six regional offices (\$97,200 SEG in 2001-02); and (4) on-going funding for videoconferencing equipment (\$22,700 SEG annually). Require the Department to submit report to DOA no later than June 30, 2003, on the performance of the regional delivery centers, including each center's video conferencing system.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. The Department anticipates that the new regional service delivery centers would be operational by the 2002-03 fiscal year. While the regional service delivery centers could be located at the sites of the six current state regional office buildings (Eau Claire, Green Bay, La Crosse, Milwaukee, Waukesha and Wisconsin Rapids), the Department indicates that the ultimate assignment of regional service center staff would most likely be based on such elements as the relative concentration of veterans in the population of an area and the Department's assessment of service need in an area.

2. The Department proposes to reallocate 9.0 FTE existing agency staff, which combined with the 9.0 SEG new positions authorized under the Governor's recommendation, would permit each regional service delivery office to be staffed with 3.0 FTE employees. The typical staffing at one of the regional centers would include two veterans benefits specialists and one clerical support position.

3. The Department's stated rationales for the establishment of the regional service delivery centers are the following:

- The centers would augment the agency's current organizational structure for counseling and applying for federal claims by providing veterans with more accessible one-stop assistance.

- The centers would ideally be located at sites with other federal, state and local services that provide benefits to veterans, thereby enhancing the likelihood that a veteran would receive coordinated assistance. The Department sees these services as being additive to those available through county veterans services offices.

- The centers would allow the veteran to receive more timely claims eligibility advice and claims processing than would be the case if the veteran had to come to Madison or to Milwaukee.

- The presence of state staff at the regional claims centers would ensure the delivery of a uniform level of information on veterans' benefits opportunities. The Department believes that this is an important consideration since local veterans services may not be "sufficiently trained to provide this task and do not maintain the time or staff resources to undertake the specialized training or workload demand."

- Wisconsin has consistently ranked in the bottom tier of states in terms of utilizing federal veterans benefits. The Department believes that inadequate outreach efforts may be part of the cause of this situation. The existence of a regional service delivery network could significantly enhance the agency's overall efforts to qualify state veterans for the federal benefits they are due.

4. The Department also believes that the potential return for Wisconsin veterans as a result of establishing the regional service delivery centers could be substantial. The agency

estimates that if total veterans claims for federal benefits could be increased by only 7% in the state, this would result in an additional \$23 million in federal benefit dollars. If the state could reach the national per capita average for federal benefits, this would equate to an additional \$116 million in federal benefits.

5. As points of comparison, Minnesota has a central veterans affairs department and two regional state office. Each county also has a county veterans service office. In Iowa and Michigan, each state has a central veterans affairs department and no state regional offices. In Michigan, each county is required to have at least a part-time county veterans service office to assist veterans with applications for federal benefits. In Iowa, each county operates a veterans service office with a staff of three to five individuals. The Illinois veterans affairs agency maintains a limited presence at small offices in 50 of the state's 99 counties. In 38 of these county offices, state staff circulate on a limited basis into the counties with no state office. Illinois counties also provide veterans benefits services assistance.

6. In Wisconsin, there are county veterans service officers in each of the state's 72 counties. [These county veterans service officers are fulltime in 70 of the counties and part-time in two counties.] Under current law, county boards are required to provide the county veterans service officer with office space, clerical assistance and any other assistance necessary to complete the following statutory tasks: (a) advising county resident veterans of their potential benefits and providing assistance counseling to such individuals; (b) reporting to their respective county boards; (c) cooperating with federal and state veterans agencies; (d) furnishing information about veterans' burial places within the county; and (e) performing any other duties prescribed by law.

7. Currently, county veterans service offices are partly supported by state DVA grants of \$8,500 to \$13,000 annually, depending on the county's population. The remainder of the costs of the county veterans service offices is supported by the general tax levy. In addition, the Department sponsors at least two annual training sessions for county veterans service officers. Among other things, these sessions review the availability of state and federal veterans benefits.

8. During the Committee's public hearings around the state on the biennial budget, testimony was offered on several occasions opposing the Governor's recommendation to establish six regional service delivery centers. The County Veterans Service Officers Association of Wisconsin has issued a position paper in opposition to the regional office proposal, stating that this funding would be duplicative of the services the members of its Association already provide at the local level.

9. In written testimony submitted to the Committee, the Vietnam Veterans of America, the Disabled American Veterans and the Paralyzed Veterans of America have all stated that they concur with the County Veterans Service Officers Association and view the current proposal as representing a duplication of local services.

10. If the Committee concludes that the regional service delivery office concept would unnecessarily duplicate the services that are currently provided by county veterans service officers

and existing state and federal veterans offices, then it could delete the Governor's recommendation.

11. Alternatively, if the Committee concludes that the regional service delivery office concept would more easily make available to state veterans a consistent level of veterans benefit information and services that may not be available at the local level, then it could approve the Governor's recommendation.

ALTERNATIVES TO BILL

1. Approve the Governor's recommendation to provide \$154,400 SEG in 2001-02 and \$638,500 SEG in 2002-03 and 9.0 SEG positions annually to enable DVA to establish six regional service delivery and videoconferencing centers.

2. Delete the Governor's recommendation.

Alternative 2	SEG
2001-03 FUNDING (Change to Bill)	- \$792,900
2002-03 POSITIONS (Change to Bill)	- 9.00

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