



# KEN SKOWRONSKI

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Dear Members of the Veterans and Military Affairs Committee,

Thank you for taking time today to discuss Assembly Bill 821.

AB 821 and the substitute amendment to this bill contains a number of technical provisions for the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs.

This bill has received quite a bit of attention over the previous weeks due one certain provision dealing with changes to the County Veteran Service Officers. This was only a small section of the bill which was removed due to the concern of the effect it might have on the CVSO programs throughout the state.

I want to assure you, County Veteran Service Officers are still required for all 72 counties in Wisconsin. We still believe that it is important to have a conversation regarding how rural counties across Wisconsin can best utilize their resources to serve the veteran community in the future. The substitute amendment to AB 821 calls for the creation of a task force on planning for future statewide delivery of programs, benefits and services to Wisconsin Veterans.

Regarding provisions that are in the bill, current law provides certain state agencies the authority to solicit for funds, AB 821 would extend that authority to WDVA. This would enable the WDVA to harness additional funds for capital projects, thereby helping to reduce the burden on the Veterans Trust Fund created by bonding and the corresponding debt service.

This bill also makes numerous changes to the WDVA's appropriations by renaming and renumbering the outdated appropriations to reflect the operations performed within them. The bill also consolidates all the County grant alpha-appropriations to Program 2, where all the WDVA grant programs are administered. Alpha-appropriations that are no longer used for their designated purpose are repealed.

In an attempt to meet the initial legislative intent it clarifies language from 2013 Act 20 which removed some residency criteria for admission to the WDVA Veterans Homes by creating an admission priority system wherein Wisconsin residents would be given first priority for admission to the homes and out-of-state veterans would be eligible as a third priority if room was available.

The bill also reorganizes and clarifies the subchapter related to operation of the Veterans Homes in order to ensure the provisions related to management of the homes are within that section of statutes.

This bill allows a state public official who is an officer or employee of DVA to solicit, receive, and retain on behalf of the state anything of value for the purpose of supporting veteran's homes and members and veterans programs, benefits, and services.

The bill directs DVA to provide annually \$42,000 to the town of Dover to reimburse the town for the costs of municipal services provided to the Wisconsin Veterans Home at Union Grove. The bill also creates a full-time position within DVA to act as facilities manager at the Wisconsin Veterans Home at Union Grove.

It is my hope that by passing this bill, which clarifies much of Act 20 of 2013 while also making various changes to DVA technical provisions we can better serve Wisconsin's veterans.

Thank you for your time today,

State Representative Ken Skowronski

82<sup>nd</sup> Assembly District



# Van H. Wanggaard

Wisconsin State Senator

## TESTIMONY ON ASSEMBLY BILL 821

Thank you Mr. Chairman and committee members for this hearing today on Assembly Bill 821, which makes various changes relating to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

As amended by Substitute Amendment 1, Assembly Bill 821 streamlines the Department of Veterans Affairs, allowing for more effective and more efficient delivery of services to our veterans.

The first change continues the process of making the Department of Veteran's Affairs a cabinet agency. While retaining the Board of Veterans Affairs in an important advisory capacity, it provides many of the Board's duties to the Secretary. The result of this change will be similar to the Natural Resources Board and the Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection Board. This will streamline decision making and the Department.

The next change increases the ability of the Department to fundraise on behalf of the three veteran homes and the state's veterans programs. This change will allow the Department to access the many private companies and individuals who are ready, willing and able to contribute to our veterans and veterans home. Creating a long-term public-private partnership to support our veterans and the homes will benefit everyone should be a goal we can all support.

Finally, this bill creates an inclusive task force to study the future delivery of benefits, programs and services to veterans. As we know, the County Veterans Services Officers are on the front line of that delivery. Their continued service to our state is desperately needed. As the number of veterans needing services continues to evolve, we need to be sure that they are receiving the best and most efficient services.

This task force will be comprised of legislative members, the Wisconsin Counties Association, the Department and Board of Veterans Affairs, and representatives of seven different veterans groups. The task force will have to study, review and make recommendations to the Governor and Legislature after six months. This time frame will allow for ample time for the task force's conclusions to be reviewed and considered for inclusion in the next budget.

This bill positions the Department of Veterans Affairs to continue to deliver effective services for the next 20-30 years. I appreciate your time, and ask for your support.

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February 4, 2016

Assembly Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs

Chairman Skowronski and Members of the Committee,

I write in support of Assembly Bill 821. The bill makes various changes to the laws governing the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs. A significant change will enable the WDVA to engage in fund development, authority currently possessed by the Wisconsin Department of Tourism.

Assembly Bill 821 further implements changes made by 2011 Act 36 which made the WDVA a cabinet agency, transferring powers away from the Board of Veterans Affairs to the Secretary of the Department. Changes in AB 821 clarify the policy changes made by Act 36.

Assembly Bill 821 also makes technical changes to laws governing the WDVA, by repealing obsolete or outdated appropriations. These changes will streamline the financial coding of the department and provide improved appropriation descriptions.

Finally, AB 821 establishes a task force to study and report on factors that will impact future operations of veterans benefits, services and program over the next twenty years. Senator Van Wanggaard proposed the establishment of this task force to work in partnership with the Wisconsin legislature, various veteran service organizations, county representatives, the Wisconsin Board of Veterans Affairs, and the WDVA. The WDVA supports creation of this task force and looks to provide full support and transparency to the process.

I respectfully request your support of AB 821.

Sincerely,  
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John A. Scocos". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

JOHN A. SCOCOS  
Secretary



# *Military Order of the Purple Heart*

*Department of Wisconsin*



**To:** Assembly Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs

**From:** Jason Johns, State Legislative Officer-Military Order of the Purple Heart

**Re:** Support for Substitute Amendment to AB 821

**Date:** February 4, 2016

## **Chairman Skowronski and Members of the Committee:**

The Military Order of the Purple Heart is exclusively comprised of members who have been wounded in combat with the enemies of the United States. As such, we, more than anyone, appreciate what our County Veterans Service Officers in the state do for our veterans in their local communities. But we also understand that the new generations of warfighters that return home have different needs, and in fact a different mindset on how they wish to have their benefits available to them. This does not mean that our CVSOs do not still fill a valuable and needed role in our communities, it just means that perhaps its time to take a good look at how we are providing these services and identifying if there are perhaps improvements and modernization that can be made.

When AB 821 was originally introduced it no doubt raised some serious concerns among not only the MOPH, but many veterans in the state. It should come as no surprise that you on this committee, as well as the WDVA heard loud and clear from the veterans' community. We are grateful to the authors Representative Skowronski and Senator Wanggaard that they heard these concerns and found the happy medium by removing the sudden and vast changes to the powers and role of the CVSO, and called for a Task Force of stakeholders to review the delivery of veterans' benefits in the state. The MOPH looks forward to participating in the Task Force and to the recommendations that it brings forth. Although the CVSO system has worked well for the last 80 plus years, it does not mean that potential improvements cannot be identified, and access increased, especially in rural areas. But in order to conduct this process in the best interests of the veteran, they must be at the table. This Task Force is a great step in the right direction and we ask for this committee's support of the Substitute Amendment to AB 821.

Thank you,

Jason E. Johns  
MOPH-State Legislative Officer





**FULFILLING OUR PROMISES**  
TO THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO SERVED

## **Department of Wisconsin**

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**  
**AL LABELLE**  
**DAV WISCONSIN LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR**  
**BEFORE THE**  
**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AND MILITARY AFFAIRS**  
**WISCONSIN STATE ASSEMBLY**  
**FEBRUARY 4, 2016**

**Chairman Skowronski, Vice Chairwoman VanderMeer, Ranking Member Hesselbein, and distinguished Members of the Committee,**

**Thank you for allowing Disabled American Veterans (DAV) this opportunity to present our views on Assembly Bill 821 (AB 821) *Relating to: powers of officers and employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs, powers of the Board of Veterans Affairs, employment of veterans regional coordinators and claims officers, and making appropriations and on Assembly Substitute Amendment 1.***

**The purpose of this statement is to give the Committee some background on DAV and our involvement as benefit specialists. We will also present our views on the Bill and Amendment.**

**DAV is the largest veterans service organization of wartime service-disabled veterans. Nationwide, we have nearly 1.3 million members. In Wisconsin, DAV has well over 15,000 members.**

**We are dedicated to a single purpose: empowering veterans to lead high quality lives with respect and dignity. DAV does this through Service and Advocacy.**

**One of the way, DAV extends our mission of Service is through a network of National Service Offices which are located in each of our 50 states and Puerto Rico. These Offices are staffed by National Service Officers or NSOs who are similar to County Veterans Service Officers.**

**They offer free, professional assistance to veterans and their families in obtaining VA and other government benefits. Our National Service Officers are wounded or injured wartime veterans who are also attorneys-in-fact.**

**Nationwide, DAV represents over 300,000 veterans. In Wisconsin, DAV's National Service Office is located at the VA Regional Office in Milwaukee and represents approximately 12,000 veterans.**

**Last year, the Milwaukee Office did:**

- 3,500 interviews
- Filed 3,100 claims
- Reviewed 6,000 files
- Obtained 6,000 awards
- And 1,500 new Power-of-Attorneys.

Also the Milwaukee Office is a Pension Management Center which encompasses 12 states. Last year 12,000 Pension awards were obtained.

As part of our outreach activities, DAV has a Mobile Service Office (MSO) that goes directly into the veteran's community. Our NSOs literally go on the road assisting veterans where they live in Wisconsin.

As of September 30, 2014, slightly over 300,000 veterans resided in Wisconsin of which nearly 62,000 are disabled. These sheer numbers overwhelm DAV and other veterans groups who offer similar benefit services, hence the need for local veterans benefit specialists.

Regarding AB 821 and its predecessor LRB 4524/1, we had concerns with the County Veterans Service Office (CVSO) section and the veterans service consortium section. Our concerns were based not on content, but on process.

DAV feels, both on a national and state level, when major changes to veterans benefits and health care are proposed, the process needs to be thorough and systematic. We use three tenets:

- The first priority is the needs of veterans.
- Input from DAV and other veterans groups must be part of the process.
- The proposed change needs to be evidence-based.

Based on those tenets, DAV feels the Committee may want to consider the adoption of Assembly Substitute Amendment 1. This substitute amendment establishes a task force to study and report on factors that may affect future operations of veterans benefits service organizations. Full disclosure, DAV and other veterans groups are listed as Task Force members.

Finally, as you may guess from my accent, I am not originally from Wisconsin. For the first 45 years of my life, I resided in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. As a Point of Information, the Commonwealth's Chapter 599 Acts of 1946 mandates municipal Department of Veterans Services be located in all City and Town Halls.

Perhaps this can be a possible Agenda Item for the Task Force, if Amendment 1 is adopted.

Thank you for this opportunity. This concludes my statement. I hope the Committee finds it of some help. If the Committee has any questions, we will be glad to answer them at this time.



## JEFFERSON COUNTY VETERANS' SERVICES OFFICE

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016

Contact: Yvonne Duesterhoeft, (920) 674-7240, yvoned@jeffersoncountywi.gov

#### **HASTY LEGISLATIVE CHANGES WILL MAKE ACCESSING FEDERAL AND STATE VETERANS BENEFITS MORE DIFFICULT FOR VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES**

JEFFERSON -- It's hard to keep up with the recent flurry of legislation and swirling amendments currently being discussed in the ever-morphing form of LRB4524 /AB821/ SB668 which began with proposals to, among other things, regionalize the local advocacy network of County Veterans Services Offices through a consortium model and prohibit CVSO's from providing certain services.

It's being sold, in part, as an opportunity for counties to save money -- but appears to be a very short-sighted. For reference, the Jefferson County Veterans Services Office budget is a quarter of one percent (.25%) of the county budget. It would be a safe bet to surmise that even in the smallest counties -- the CVSO budget is a very small fraction that leverages millions of Federal dollars into the local economy. In the end though -- it should not just be about \$\$\$\$ -- it should be about the best interest of Veterans.

Having served several terms as a Jefferson County Board supervisor -- I am aware of the challenges counties face in establishing priorities and balancing budgets with ever decreasing support from the State. Innovation and change can be positive when it is done for the right reasons and with clear understanding of the unintended consequences that may occur.

My Veterans in Jefferson County are not just files on my desk -- they are people . . . and by extension -- families. I thank my lucky stars every day I have the honor of bearing witness to the details of individual lives and experiences, answering questions Veterans don't even know to ask -- and taming bureaucracies to leverage benefits that help Veterans live their best lives. Whether I'm helping a 19 year-old or 95 year-old combat Veteran file a disability claim for the first time, guiding a surviving spouse, homeless Veteran -- or helping the Vietnam Veteran who just lost his job of 30+ years and doesn't have a back-up plan . . . it's personal.

"Support the Troops" is not just a bumper sticker slogan in CVSO offices across the state. Truly -- this is not just a job-- it's a calling. In exchange for our time and passionate advocacy -- we often receive the priceless gift of knowing that we made a difference for a fellow Veteran. Next week--I will start my tenth year on the job. Seems like only two! Whenever I'm having a frustrating day -- I reach into the bulging file of notes and cards in my desk drawer from people who took a moment to tell me that without our office-- they never would have been able to access benefits that have made such a difference to them.

Veterans advocates are all around us: in service organizations, at the VA Hospitals and Clinics, the Vet Centers, in DMA, DWD, VARO and yes -- in WDVA. There are good people everywhere--and CVSO's perform the unique role of smoothing out disconnects that are bound to happen with so many moving parts in the benefits machine.

Quite honestly -- I think legislators are being sold a bill of goods by someone. I was very impressed by the fact that Representatives Skowronski and Hesselbein spent many hours attending the CVSO training conference last October.

It is interesting to note that the first County Veterans Service Office in the country was established in 1932 in Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin, in response to Veterans giving up on getting their due benefits because the bureaucracy was too overwhelming. The local CVSO model has since spread to about 30 states. The opportunity for a Veteran to walk into a local office and get help from a fellow Veteran is the key to success for many. Now is not the time to roll back that local advocacy or limit the services we're allowed to provide.

I choose to have faith that our legislators have the best interest of Veterans at heart -- but as Reagan famously said: TRUST BUT VERIFY!

Respectfully,  
Yvonne Duesterhoeft  
Jefferson County Veterans Service Officer

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