

Date of Hearing: April 18, 2023

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

Esmeralda Soria, Chair

AB 684 (Ta) – As Introduced February 13, 2023

SUBJECT: County veterans service officers: additional resources

SUMMARY: Would provide to any county where there is an active United States military installation a stipend, upon appropriation, for the purposes of maintaining a county veterans service officer (CVSO), at least part time, on each active United States military base in the county. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires that upon appropriation by the Legislature, a county that hosts an active United States military base shall receive a stipend for the purposes of maintaining a county veterans service officer (CVSO), at least part time.
- 2) Provides that the location of a CVSO on a United States military installation is subject to approval by the installation's command.
- 3) Forbids a county from receiving the stipend if the county chooses not to maintain a CVSO on a United States military base or the base in a county does not approve of a CVSO being maintained on that base.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Permits the board of supervisors of each county to appoint a "county veterans service officer," who must be a veteran, and whose duty it is to assist veterans in obtaining veterans benefits and to perform any other veteran-related service requested by the board. (Military and Veterans Code (MVC) Section 970.)
- 2) Permits two or more counties to jointly establish a single county veterans service office to shall serve all the counties that agree to the joint establishment of that office. (MVC Section 971.)
- 3) Provides that the compensation and expenses of the CVSO shall be a county charge, but CalVet, out of state moneys made available, shall pay each county a portion of those costs in an amount determined by CalVet. (MVC Section 972)
- 4) Provides for an annual state appropriation for the CVSOs as determined in each year's Budget Act, currently funded at \$11 million. (MVC Section 972.1)
- 5) Requires CalVet to determine and report to the Department of Finance (DOF) on or before October 1 of each year the annualized monetary value of benefits received by veterans and their dependents as a result of the efforts of CVSOs. (MVC Section 972.1)
- 6) Directs DOF to review CalVet's determination in time to use the information in the annual Budget Act with regard to CalVet's budget for the next fiscal year. (MVC Section 972.1)
- 7) Provides that state subvention funds shall be disbursed each fiscal year on a pro rata basis to counties that have established and maintain a CVSO in accordance with the staffing level and

workload of each CVSO under a formula based upon performance, as specified, developed by CalVet. (MVC Section 972.1)

- 8) Requires CalVet to annually prepare a report of the activities of county veterans service officers, and permits CalVet to require each county veterans service officer to submit information required to prepare the report, and requires that the report shall include the following:
- a) The number of veterans and their family members who have contacted or utilized the services of the county veterans service offices during the fiscal year.
 - b) The number of claims filed to achieve benefits such as pension, disability compensation, and health care on behalf of veterans and their dependents.
 - c) The annualized monetary value of benefits received by veterans and their dependents as a result of the efforts of county veterans service offices, broken down by type of benefit.
 - d) A summary of other services provided by county veterans service offices and special events and activities in which county veterans service offices participated, such as veterans outreach events, homeless veteran “Stand Downs,” and job fairs for veterans. (MVC Section 974.)

FISCAL EFFECT: This bill has not been analyzed in a fiscal committee.

COMMENTS: *Purpose.* According to the author:

“AB 684 would provide a stipend to counties who maintain a veteran service officer on each active United States military base in their county. This legislation would resolve the disparity between CVSO accesses across California counties and ensure our newly separating veterans can access their full Federal and California benefits. AB 684 would help bring Federal benefits to California, reduce the strain on California’s healthcare system, and ensure the state is upholding its responsibility to the tens of thousands of service members discharged from active duty each year in California.”

Background.

The California Association of County Veterans Service Officers reports that claims filed through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs with the assistance of a CVSO have a higher rate of approval, demonstrating the value of CVSOs in guiding veterans through a complicated bureaucracy and connecting them to the benefits they deserve. However, many veterans are unaware of the role CVSOs play and the resources they provide. This is an issue in California, with the California Association of County Veterans Service Officers reporting that the state’s ratio of veterans to Veterans Service Representatives (VSR) lags behind other states, resulting in “a limited supply of VSRs available to service the largest veteran population of any state in the nation.” The author estimates that limited access to VSRs results in an estimated 65,000 veterans missing out on their benefits and roughly \$1.1 billion in VA benefits lost annually.

California has taken steps to increase access to CVSOs, including last year raising ongoing annual funding of the County Veterans Service Officer Subvention Program to its statutory

maximum of \$11 million. Individual CVSOs engage in various outreach efforts in an attempt to reach more veterans, including visits to college campuses and correctional institutions, and the operation of mobile office hours. The Solano County CVSO placed a veterans' service representative at Travis Air Force Base.

The author claims that since then the Solano veterans' service officer has served an average of 10 discharging service members per day with nearly \$95 million in VA benefits being awarded, and that Solano County's approach connects veterans to CVSOs by providing discharging service members with a highly visible veterans service officer.

Related legislation.

AB 1566 (Soria, 2023) requires CalVet to develop a new formula for allocation of CVSO subvention funds to encourage innovation and reward outstanding customer service to eligible counties, as specified, and requires the department to report annually on the performance of those CVSOs, as specified. In the Assembly Committee on Appropriations.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

None on file.

Opposition

None on file.

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