

Date of Hearing: May 3, 2023

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Chris Holden, Chair

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

Policy Committee: Military and Veterans Affairs

Vote: 11 - 0

Urgency: No

State Mandated Local Program: No

Reimbursable: No

SUMMARY:

This bill, upon appropriation by the Legislature, provides a stipend to each county with an active United States (U.S.) military base for the purposes of maintaining a county veterans service officer (CVSO), at least part time, on each base in the county. This bill prohibits a county from receiving the stipend if the county chooses not to maintain a CVSO on a military base or if the base does not approve of a CVSO being maintained at the base.

FISCAL EFFECT:

- 1) Indeterminate General Fund (GF) costs, potentially significant, to provide stipends to counties. This bill does not specify the amount of the stipend or whether it is one-time or ongoing. There are 32 active military bases in the state. For illustration, if an ongoing \$75,000 stipend was provided for each base, the annual GF cost would be \$2.4 million. Actual costs would vary depending on the amount of the stipend and the number of participating counties and bases.
- 2) Minor and absorbable costs to CalVet to disburse the stipends.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose.** According to the author:

[This bill] 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. [This bill] 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.

- 2) **Background.** Existing law permits the board of supervisors of each county to appoint a CVSO, 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. The compensation and expenses of the CVSO are the responsibility of the county, but CalVet, through a state budget appropriation, pays each county a portion of those costs. The 2022-23

state budget appropriated \$11 million to CalVet to support CVSOs. CalVet disburses these funds on a pro rata basis to counties that meet certain conditions.

The California Association of County Veterans Service Officers (association) 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. The association asserts, however, that many veterans are unaware of the role CVSOs play and the resources they provide. The association also reports the state's ratio of veterans to veterans' service representatives lags behind other states, resulting in many veterans missing out on the benefits they are entitled to.

Recently, the Solano County CVSO placed a veterans' service representative at Travis Air Force Base. The author claims the Solano veterans' service officer has served an average of 10 discharging service members per day and secured nearly \$95 million in VA benefits. The author wants to replicate Solano County's approach statewide to connect more veterans to CVSOs with the goal of securing more federal benefits for California's veterans.

- 3) **Related Legislation.** AB 1566 (Soria) requires CalVet to develop a new formula for allocation of CVSO subvention funds to eligible counties to encourage innovation and reward outstanding customer service. AB 1566 is pending on the Assembly Floor.

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