

May 13, 2019

The Honorable Eduardo Garcia
California State Assembly
State Capitol, Room 4140
Sacramento CA, 95814

Re: AB 55 (Garcia) Department of Veterans Affairs: veterans' services. – Support

Dear Assemblyman Garcia:

On behalf of the Monterey County Board of Supervisors, I write in support of AB 55, which seeks to increase the local assistance funding for the County Veterans Service Officers (CVSO) from \$5.6 million to \$11 million ongoing.

Currently CVSOs receive \$5.6 million annually in local assistance funding via the state budget. The CVSO's have a long and documented record of success of using this funding to help veterans obtain their federal benefits, which are very complicated to apply for. In FY 2017-18, CVSOs assisted California veterans in receiving \$505.5 million in new federal monies.

Existing law authorizes each county board of supervisors to appoint a CVSO and permits the county to provide the officer with any assistance and facilities that it determines to be necessary. The Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet) is required to disburse funds appropriated for the support of CVSO pursuant to the annual Budget Act on a pro rata basis to counties that have established and maintain a CVSO in accordance with the staffing level and workload formula developed by CalVet.

Monterey County's CVSO assists veterans to obtain their earned federal benefits. Services are provided at no cost to veterans and their families. The type and range of federal benefits available to veterans are complex and the process of applying for benefits can be extremely complicated. Many veterans are unaware of the benefits to which they are entitled and those veterans who pursue claims are often denied their full benefits when they file on their own. Many of California's 1.7 million veterans are eligible for benefits from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Studies have shown that veterans receive more benefits and larger awards by using CVSOs than if they file individually.

Our CVSOs believe that an increase of \$5.4 million from the General Fund can be used effectively to employ nearly 50 new Veterans Service Representatives (VSR). Placing a VSR at any or all of the 27 military installations that discharge veterans, as well as the VA Medical facilities, domiciliary, or outpatient clinics would also dramatically increase the number of veterans that can be reached by the CVSOs.

Assisting veterans in obtaining the federal benefits they earned as a result of their military service reduces the pressures on already impacted local and state social service programs. Also, since these federal veterans benefits are paid directly from the VA to the veteran, these new federal monies are also a boost to local economies as well as to the state. Further, CVSOs reduce state costs by connecting veterans to federal services through involvement in veteran treatment courts and homeless veterans outreach events (Stand Downs).

Beginning in FY 2013-14, state funding was increased from \$2.6 million to \$5.6 million in a one-time augmentation. The following year, the same one-time augmentation was approved. In FY 2015-16, the \$5.6 million state funding was made permanent. In 2009, SB 419, stated that it is an efficient and reasonable use of state funds to increase the annual budget for CVSOs in the amount of \$11 million. It has been 10 years since SB 419 passed and the CVSOs are still in need of the full \$11 million funding. For every year the state does not fund the CVSOs they lose those federal benefits flowing into the state.

In FY 2017-18, CVSOs assisted veterans in filing claims that resulted in \$505.5 million in new federal veteran benefits being awarded; \$333.5 million of which will be annually recurring for the rest of the veterans' lives. For every dollar of State General Fund support provided in FY 2017-18, CVSOs brought in \$90 in new federal benefits.

For these reasons, Monterey County supports AB 55.

Sincerely,

John M. Phillips
Chair, Board of Supervisors

Cc Senator Bill Monning
Senator Anna Caballero
Assemblymember Mark Stone
Assemblymember Robert Rivas
California State Association of Counties