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California Legislature
Senate Committee
on
Veterans Affairs

STAFF DIRECTOR:
WADE COOPER TEASDALE

COMMITTEE ASSISTANT:
CINDY BALDWIN

STATE CAPITOL
SACRAMENTO, CA 95814-4900
(916) 651-1503

JIM NIELSEN
CHAIRMAN

Annual Report on Oversight Activities for 2016

In 2016, the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs (VA Committee) engaged in the following oversight activities:

STATE VETERANS HOMES

Background: The State of California owns and operates veterans' homes to help provide for the state's aged or disabled veterans to acknowledge the service and tremendous sacrifices California veterans have made on behalf of our nation. CalVet's Veterans Homes Division provides rehabilitative, residential medical care and services in a homelike environment for all veterans (and eligible veteran spouses) residing in the State's eight veterans homes, which are located in Barstow, Chula Vista, Fresno, Lancaster, Redding, Ventura, West Los Angeles, and Yountville. As of mid-March 2016, total 2,158 members resided in the homes

2016 Oversight Activities:

Legislation:

Oversight efforts from previous years helped shape introduction of Senate Bill 980 by Chairman Jim Nielsen (R-Gerber) in February 2016. This measure eventually stalled in the Assembly Appropriations Committee. This bill would have helped reform the system's variegated medical records system in accordance with industry best practices, including requiring standardization with electronic health records. This would have allowed portability between the state veterans homes, local medical facilities, Medicare, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' hospitals and treatment clinics. The bill also would have required the department to codify specified administrative and operational practices in formal regulations through the deliberate, publicly transparent Administrative Practices Act.

After SB 980 stalled, Chairman Nielsen met directly with CalVet Secretary Vito Imbasciani to plan and coordinate future reform efforts, including unilateral administrative and rulemaking actions by CalVet and potential new legislation by Chairman Nielsen.

The Committee also played a decisive role in shaping SB 543, authored by Senator Lois Wolk and enacted (Chapter 424, Statutes of 2016). This bill restructured the morale, welfare and recreation (MWR) funds managed by each individual home. These funds had come under scrutiny after another State Audit report identified mismanagement, unaccountability and lack of standardization. SB 543 addressed the issues.

While working on Senate Bill 543, VA Committee staff participated in multiple video teleconferences with the resident allied councils of all eight veterans home. These were hosted by CalVet in its Sacramento headquarters. These included staff representation from the Governor's Office and the Assembly VA Committee.

Site Visits:

In 2016 VA Committee staff made site visits to the Redding veterans home (January 2016) and, with Senate Office of Research staff, to the Fresno veterans home (October 2016).

The visits were to make quality control assessments, including solicitation of input from residents and employees at all levels. These two newest veterans homes came on-line in 2015 and have been filling to capacity and hiring necessary staff.

STATE VETERANS CEMETERIES

Background: The United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) builds and operates federal veterans cemeteries, including nine locations in California. The State also operates state veterans cemeteries to support areas of the state located an inconvenient distance from a federal cemetery. CalVet operates state veterans cemeteries at two locations (Yountville and Redding), has a third one under construction near Monterey, and is considering a potential fourth cemetery for Orange County.

2016 Oversight Activities:

Site Visits:

In January 2016, VA Committee conducted a site visit to the Northern California State Veterans Cemetery located in the community of Igo (central Shasta County).

VETERANS HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION (VHHP) PROGRAM

Background: The program uses \$600 million of repurposed CalVet home loan moneys. It requires CalHFA, HCD, and CalVet to establish and implement a program that focuses on veterans at risk of homelessness or experiencing temporary or chronic homelessness. This program will fund the acquisition, construction, rehabilitation, and preservation of affordable

multifamily supportive housing, affordable transitional housing, affordable rental housing, or related facilities for veterans and their families to allow veterans to access and maintain housing stability.

2016 Oversight Activities:

Oversight Hearing:

In January 2016, the VA Committee and Transportation & Housing Committee held a joint oversight hearing on the VHHP Program, which was authorized by Proposition 41 (June 2014 statewide ballot).

The committees received testimony from senior program managers from the California Department of Housing and Community Development, CalVet, the California Housing Finance Agency as well as project developers, supportive service providers, and the federal VA.

Topics discussed included examining the first round of grant awards, focusing on identifying successful strategies employed by Round 1 grant awardees, the expected impact of post-Round 1 modifications to program guidelines, and progress during the early application phase of Round 2.

Site visits:

In mid-September, Chairman Nielsen visited Mather Veterans Village in Rancho Cordova. The upcoming expansion of this private non-profit's Phase 2 expansion is expected to be funded in part by a grant award from VHHP Round 2. The senator met with representatives of the City of Rancho Cordova and facility operators (Mercy Housing; Veterans Resource Center of America).

In early October, VA Committee staff and Senate Republican policy and fiscal staff jointly visited Mather Veterans Village and met extensively with operating staff and home residents.

INCARCERATED VETERANS

Background: According to CDCR, California's total in-custody population is approximately 128,000, which includes approximately 6,800 incarcerated veterans (5.3%). Correctional institutions generally permit inmates to form self-help inmate activity groups, which help participating inmates work on self-improvement and contribute to greater stability within the facilities. Veterans groups are among the most common self-help groups, and data suggests that these groups help veterans function more effectively while incarcerated, facilitate reintegration when incarcerated veterans are released from prison, and markedly improve recidivism rates.

2016 Oversight Activities:

Oversight Hearing:

In May 2016, the VA Committee conducted an oversight hearing on how the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) manages and supports veterans incarcerated in the Department's prison system.

The committee members received testimony from CDCR Secretary Scott Kernan, CalVet Secretary Imbasciani, Justice Eileen Moore (California Court of Appeal), correctional officers, the federal VA, county veterans service officers, nonprofit re-transitional housing/reintegration organizations, clinical psychologists, and previously incarcerated veterans.

Topics discussed included veteran self-help groups, in-prison and post-incarceration support from state and federal veterans agencies and nonprofits, an inmate-managed service office within correctional facilities, and pro bono assistance and representation of veterans before the Board of Parole Hearings.

Site Visit:

In December 2016, VA Committee staff visited Mule Creek State Prison (Ione) and met for two hours with approximately 30 incarcerated veterans, who participate regularly in a veterans self-help group. Committee staff also met separately with Warden Joe Lizzaraga, custodial staff, and CDCR staff responsible for overseeing and supporting inmate programing.

VETERANS TREATMENT COURTS

Background: California law authorizes counties to establish collaborative justice courts, including drug and mental health courts. These "problem-solving" justice courts address the cases of nonviolent offenders by combining judicial monitoring with intensive treatment services over approximately 18 months. In 2006, California became the first state to establish a prison diversion program for veterans and military members.

Veterans treatment courts (VTCs) promote sobriety, recovery and stability through a coordinated response that involves cooperation and collaboration with the traditional partners found in drug and mental health courts in addition of the federal VA's health care and benefits' networks, and, in some programs, volunteer veteran mentors and veterans' family support organizations.

2016 Oversight Activities:

Site visits:

Following on the VA Committee's March 2015 oversight hearing, committee staff visited the Sacramento County VTC and observed a collaborative meeting among the various VTC participants (judge, prosecutor, public defender, probation officer, VA justice outreach specialist, etc.) on ways to improve the court's functioning.

In addition, committee staff visited and observed the several-hour process used by the Placer County VTC to interview and screen potential veteran candidates for a the program. Also attended the VTC court proper and was introduced during the court session.

CALIFORNIA MILITARY DEPARTMENT

Background: The CMD operates approximately 99 active armory sites throughout the state. Armories and the more modern readiness centers are the primary sites for unit training and are integral to the readiness and responsiveness of Guard personnel for both federal and state missions and non-Guard personnel for state purposes.

Armories are routinely used to mobilize and house troops when the Guard responds to wildfires, while also serving as emergency operations centers for other first-responder agencies. Armories also are used to shelter displaced civilians, who have been evacuated from their homes due to fires, floods or other state emergencies. Several armories throughout the state serve as homeless shelters in the winter months.

State law permits the CMD to sell obsolete or unserviceable armories and to recycle the sales proceeds toward developing or expanding new armory/readiness center capacity where needed.

2016 Oversight Activities:

Site Visits:

In November 2016, VA Committee staff, accompanied by Senate Appropriations Committee staff, visited two Sacramento-area National Guard (Guard) armories operated by the California Military Department (CMD). One was an old, small armory (Arden), which the CMD is considering selling because they say it is obsolete and no longer adequately serves the CMD's federal and state missions. The other was the Okinawa Readiness Center located on the former Sacramento Army Depot. The Okinawa facility is a state-of-the-art readiness center which is designed to meet contemporary needs for space, multipurpose flexibility, technological integration, and physical security.

DISABLED VETERANS BUSINESS ENTERPRISE (DVBE) PROGRAM

Background: In 1989, the Legislature enacted the DVBE program to address the special needs of disabled veterans seeking rehabilitation and training through private-sector entrepreneurship. The program allows certified DVBE businesses to receive a preference when competing for contracts with state agencies and departments. Existing law requires each state agency, in awarding contracts throughout the year, to take all practical actions necessary to meet or exceed an annual 3% DVBE participation goal.

2016 Oversight Activities:

Meetings:

Chairman Nielsen and VA Committee staff met jointly and separately numerous times with the Director Daniel Kim and Department of General Services (DGS) senior staff regarding the DVBE program, for which DGS serves as state administering agency. The meetings concerned ongoing follow-up from program deficiencies found in State Audit Report 2013-115 (February 2014). Topics discussed including adherence to legislative intent for the program, department-promulgated regulations, standardizing reporting of program goal attainment, the need to involve more certified DVBE firms, and better ways to identify fraud and waste.

In addition, Chairman Nielsen hosted a large meeting with DVBE emergency equipment vendors and DVBE program staff from the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE). Topics included ways to expand participation by more DVBEs and how better to ensure efficiency and integrity in Cal Fire's decentralized, no-bid process in hiring and deploying rented emergency equipment.