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TEXAS VETERANS COMMISSION

STATEMENT OF

THE TEXAS VETERANS COMMISSION

BEFORE THE

SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WITH RESPECT TO

STATE OUTREACH FOR LOCAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT (SOLVE) ACT of 2016

WASHINGTON, DC

MAY 23, 2016

State Outreach for Local Veterans Employment (SOLVE) Act 2016

VETERANS EMPLOYMENT

The Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) greatly appreciates the opportunity to submit the following testimony in support of S. 2919, The *State Outreach for Local Veterans Employment (SOLVE) Act*. TVC would like to express our deepest appreciation to Senator Pat Toomey (R-PA), and Senator John Cornyn (R-TX), Majority Whip, for introducing this timely and important legislation. In addition, we would like to thank every member and staff of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for their dedicated commitment to providing veterans the support they deserve.

Currently, the Department of Labor's Veterans Employment and Training Services (DOL-VETS) administers the Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG) program. The federal government, through JVSG, provides states approximately \$173 million to support services to assist veterans find lasting and meaningful employment.

Specifically, under Title 38, the JVSG program provides funding for states to hire Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program Specialists (DVOPS) and Local Veterans' Employment Representatives (LVERs). DVOPS provide intensive services to eligible veterans with significant barriers to employment and LVERs conduct outreach to employers and facilitate employment and training services.

Funding under the current statute is contingent upon the submission of an annual plan by governors identifying the following:

- the number and types of DVOPS or LVERs;
- their specific roles and responsibilities;
- their geographic location; and
- how the above criteria matches the unique needs of the state's Veteran population.

DOL-VETS is required to accept or reject a governor's plan in writing before funds are released to a state. If approved, the common model is for the state's workforce agency to administer the JVSG program by passing federal funds to local workforce boards who provide the approved services to veterans.

Texas adhered to this model prior to 2006. However, out of concern for the under achieving performance of the program in its then current form, Governor Perry and the Texas Legislature took initiative to move the administration of the JVSG program from the workforce agency to the TVC. This move further consolidated critical veteran services and programs under one agency with the sole focus of supporting the over 1.7 million veterans in Texas.

Under the *Texas Model*, the JVSG program constitutes the Veteran's Employment Services department which is part of the umbrella of services the TVC provides to Texas veterans and their families. These services includes claims and benefits assistance, veteran education programs, a peer-to-peer networking and counseling program, women veterans outreach, State Strike Force Teams, and a grants program entitled the Fund for Veterans Assistance.

No other state has a full complement of veteran services centralized within the state's veteran affairs agency. This consolidation is key to the success of the Texas Veterans Commission, allowing the agency to concentrate efforts and resources on veterans with a focus not possible when these programs exist as separate components in larger agencies. Since 2008, TVC's JSVG program has been recognized as one of the best in the nation and received the following awards from Veteran Service Organizations:

- Mark Sanders Award for Exception Service to Disabled Veterans from the National Association of State Workforce Agencies, 2008.
- National Employment Services Office of the Year from the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), 2008.
- National Employment Office of the Year from the American Legion, 2008.
- National DVOP of the Year from the American Legion, and DVOP of the Year from the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), 2008.
- National DVOP of the Year from the DAV, 2009.
- National LVER of the Year, from the DAV, 2009.
- National LVER of the Year, from the DAV, 2013.
- National Employment Office of the Year from the American Legion, 2013.
- National American Legion of the Year from the DAV, 2014.

In the most recent reporting period, Texas' performance led the nation. The Veterans Employment program assisted 55,864 Texas veterans, with 26,283 of those veterans obtaining employment. As a result of these efforts, 171 veterans obtained employment for every one Veteran Employment Representative. While Texas receives 7% of JVSG total funding nationwide, the state accounts for 18% of the nation's veterans receiving services and entering into employment.¹

Despite the success of the *Texas Model*, DOL-VETS routinely denies other governors the flexibility to move JVSG funding from state workforce agencies to state departments of veterans affairs (SDVA). For example, Wisconsin's most recent state budget included a provision to move JVSG-funded programs to the SDVA. However, that request was denied by DOL-VETS without providing clear reasoning for its objection to the Wisconsin plan. Instead, DOL-VETS leadership justified their denial by attempting to discredit the Texas program. Other states have expressed interest in a consolidation of veteran services, but express hesitancy to do so in light of DOL-VETS's arbitrary response to the Wisconsin proposal.

We believe that the JVSG program in its current state is unduly inflexible; a one size fits all approach that limits a state's ability to incorporate best practices into their employment program. A state should be able to tailor the intensive services *they* provide to meet the unique needs of the veterans *they* serve. An inability to do so can ultimately prevent a veteran from overcoming the unique barriers to sustained employment *they* face.

The SOLVE Act provides governors the opportunity to recommend additional Significant Barrier to Employment (SBEs) that hinder a Veteran's ability to find gainful employment in their state. By analyzing local and regional data, states are able to recognize problematic barriers that may not meet the stringent 10 categories currently recognized by DOL-VETS. Allowing a governor to identify a unique barrier to veteran employment may facilitate valuable communication between states and DOL-VETS and help solve the problem of veteran's unemployment at the macro level.

As part of a state's JVSG Plan, any SBEs recommended by a governor would still require DOL-VETS approval. If approved, the SBE could be in addition to or in place of those currently used as part of the national standard. Allowing this flexibility would enable the DVOPs to provide one-on-one job coaching and help the specific population overcome the identified barriers through development of employment plans and providing intensive services. This approach is a better alternative over submitting an additional Special Initiative Modification request, which may require DOL to provide additional funding if approved.

The SOLVE Act also provides DOL the ability to approve and disapprove sections of a state's plan rather than rejecting the entire plan outright. Currently, DOL is required to provide in writing their decision to accept or reject a JVSG plan in full. This legislation provides additional common sense flexibility to ensure accountability and responsiveness.

¹ Source DOL NATIONAL Veterans Report-2013 data

Our veterans are unique. Our states are unique. The method in which we support these deserving heroes should be reflective of their individual situation. TVC understands and supports the need for national standards and program oversight to be centralized within DOL-VETS. They are our partners and we welcome their support and expertise. However, the SOLVE Act provides the necessary level of flexibility to tailor a national program to meet the veteran's needs at the local level.

The Texas Veterans Commission fully supports S. 2919 as does The American Legion, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the National Guard Association of the United States. We remain committed in our efforts to serve those who have sacrificed so much, encourage swift passage of the bills and stand by to address any concerns or questions the committee may have.