



**Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States  
Department of Montana**

*P.O. Box 4789  
1956 Mt Majo Street  
Ft. Harrison, MT 59636  
(406)324-3992*

30 September, 2014

Sheri Scurr, SAVA Staff Member  
Legislative Services Division  
PO Box 201706  
Helena, MT 59620-1706

Re: Community Outreach and Statewide Technical Assistance

Ms. Scurr,

I would like to thank the SAVA Committee for giving the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, Department of Montana the opportunity to give our view on the legislative wish list and provide comments on issues that concern the veterans in our state.

First of all our biggest concern is to provide enough Veteran Service Officers statewide to assist veterans and their dependents in applying for and receiving Federal, State and local benefits to include medical care, compensation and pension benefits, burial benefits, education, vocational rehabilitation and employment services. Represent veterans and dependents before the Department of Veteran Affairs Regional Office and the Board of Veterans Appeals as their advocate in presenting claims and/or appeals for compensation and pension, medical care, medical expenses and over payments. Conduct veteran outreach activities to brief attendees on benefits available and changes in VA policy and procedures.

With the ever increasing workload on the Montana Veterans Affairs Division the most urgent need is to increase the quantity of Veteran Service Offices and Service Officers. Montana's veterans could benefit greatly from a new Veteran Service Office in Glasgow. This would reduce the Miles City and Havre service areas and increase accessibility to the veterans in that part of the state. Providing additional staff in the Billings, Missoula, Helena, Great Falls and Kalispell VSO's would expand outreach capability and decrease claims processing times. This in turn would bring more federal money into the state through the claims that are awarded to Montana's veterans.

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This would benefit more of Montana's veterans than creating a new organization or hiring bureaucrats to do what is already being done by others and, by the way, being done very effectively. Creating a new organization would just add more confusion to the veterans trying to get service.

In an effort to provide better accessibility to Montana's veterans, the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, Department of Montana has entrusted its veterans service program to MVAD, with a resultant addition of 4000 clients to the state service officers' workload.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, Department of Montana opposes any legislation that would establish a policy framework in statute for this community-based effort and statewide technical assistance and further opposes creating a position for a statewide coordinator. This would hinder veteran's ability to get timely care, benefits claims processing.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our point of view.

Sincerely



ARTHUR J. WIDHALM  
State Commander

Cc: Governor Steve Bullock

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## Scurr, Sheri

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**From:** Keely, Brandy <bkeely@carroll.edu>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, October 01, 2014 8:28 AM  
**To:** Scurr, Sheri  
**Cc:** Luchau, Ryan  
**Subject:** Wish List for SAVA  
**Attachments:** SAVA Wish List.docx

Greetings Ms. Scurr,

My name is Brandy Keely and I currently represent the Lewis and Clark County Joining Community Forces (JCF) Coalition as the Co-Chair. I have been involved in these grass root efforts since last November and while it has been a challenge, we have finally gained some momentum that we hope to build upon. The foundation for our infrastructure is currently in place, however, as you know it takes lots of time and manpower to keep the initiative moving forward and because those of us that are involved with the JCF in a leadership capacity also have other responsibilities to our veterans, it is imperative that we dedicate resources specifically for this cause. Therefore, please find attached my written support for a Veterans Statewide Coordinator position. I hope you will be able to use this information to draft some legislation for this position, as it is clearly needed in our state. If you have any questions regarding any of this information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Best,

*Brandy Keely*  
*Veteran Service Coordinator*  
*Office of Academic Affairs*  
*Carroll College*  
*(406) 447-4550, (406) 447-5503 fax*  
*Toll free (800) 992-3648*  
*[www.carroll.edu/veteran](http://www.carroll.edu/veteran)*  
*Carroll College: Non scholae sed vita - not for school but for life.*



## SAVA Framework for Statewide Coordinator

### Goal/Mission:

The goal of creating and allocating funds for a statewide coordinator position is to strengthen Montana communities through a statewide continuum of organizational support offered to service members, veterans and their families (SMVF).

### Purpose:

As the drawdown continues, it is anticipated that Montana will receive an influx of returning service members that will need immediate access to support programs. Because of federal funding limitations, several programs that once existed to assist our men and women in uniform are becoming extinct, thus leaving this responsibility up to our communities. Additionally, it is clear that the VA system is strained and unable to meet all of these needs. Therefore, it is recognized that the responsibility to care for our service members, veterans and their families (SMVF) now lies at the community level. Through nationwide initiatives such as the Joining Community Forces (JCF) Coalition, communities can take a proactive stance and develop a sustainable action plan that will, and can, address the unique needs our service members, veterans and their families. Through the efforts of regional JCF's we can strengthen our infrastructure and provide an environment that fosters personal and family growth.

### Proposed Position Functions/Responsibilities:

Allocating funding to create a position solely dedicated to providing outreach and serving as a central hub of support for all services across the state would ensure transparency, consistency and oversight of the following activities:

- Serving as a consultant to facilitate the creation and mobilization of JCF's throughout all 56 counties across 10 regions.
- Developing a comprehensive support model for crisis response exclusively focused on veteran suicide (ex. peer mentoring groups, daily and weekly follow-up communications, etc...)
- Organizing and planning outreach events, for example (resource fairs/celebrations, outreach at retail outlets, Community Symposiums etc...)
- Organizing and facilitating meetings in an effort to procure the communities systematic commitment to veteran causes.
- Maintaining the veteran resource database and serving as a clearinghouse for statewide resource.
- Maintaining Social Media sites such as the Lewis and Clark County Joining Community Forces Facebook page, JCF Newsletter and website.
- Developing and maintaining outreach materials.
- Serving as a liaison between community business leaders and federal, state and county resources to ensure efficiency, effectiveness and develop relationships that promote the health and well-being of SMVF's.
- Develop and maintain the governing documents for the Lewis and Clark County JCF Coalition.

## SAVA Framework for Statewide Coordinator

There are many existing services and programs that exist to assist SMVF's in fact, there are so many that navigating the system can prove to be overwhelming and cumbersome leading many to give up in their quest to access them. Therefore, by delegating a central point of contact, such as a statewide coordinator, it will be easier not only for SMVF's to access these services and resources, but also easier for those who are in direct contact with SMVF's to provide the appropriate referrals.

States such as Michigan have already begun to implement these kinds of positions and because Montana ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> only to Alaska in veterans per capita nationwide, it is critical that our communities begin to solicit the support and vested interests of key community stakeholders, so that we are ready and prepared to embrace our current and returning SMVF. By creating a statewide coordinator position, we can facilitate this process and begin to recognize, celebrate and embrace the positive impact SMVF's can have in their communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

## Scurr, Sheri

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**From:** Kelly McCarthy <kelly@bigskytech.net>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, October 01, 2014 8:38 AM  
**To:** Scurr, Sheri  
**Subject:** RE: Reminder - Veteran Outreach Ideas

Hey Sheri,

Thank you for resending this. I think I missed its importance on the first send.

My biggest hope is that we can create more veterans' courts across the state. Many of our men and women who have braved combat return home broken in body, mind and spirit. When faced with the challenge of trying to readapt to a "normal" life while carrying around the burdens of their experiences, they often make choices that put them in conflict with the law. These folks don't need to be in jail. More often they need understanding and assistance as they work through their traumas.

Veterans' courts have proven effective, cost saving, and a much more dignified way to treat our returning service men and women.

Thanx,

Kelly McCarthy, HD-51

**From:** Scurr, Sheri [<mailto:sscurr@mt.gov>]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, September 30, 2014 9:22 AM  
**To:** [kelly@bigskytech.net](mailto:kelly@bigskytech.net)  
**Subject:** Reminder - Veteran Outreach Ideas

**TO:** State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interested Persons and Members

This is a reminder that tomorrow, October 1, is our target date/deadline for you to send me your ideas to pass on to the full SAVA for legislation concerning how to improve outreach to veterans. Below is a copy of the message that I sent out earlier and that also was sent to veteran organizations. If you need a few extra days, that is OK, but please send in your ideas as soon as possible. Thanks!

All Veterans Affairs Interested Persons –

I am sending this email on behalf of the State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee (SAVA) of the State Legislature. On Aug. 15, SAVA instructed me, as the committee's staff, to contact stakeholders and any interested persons concerned with providing outreach, services, or benefit claims help to veterans and their families in order to solicit a "wish list" of ideas for state legislation to promote two things:

1. community outreach to help veterans and their families learn about and navigate the range of services and benefits available and to connect them to what they may need (housing,

Home Team – Montana: A Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot

CFDA 64.038

September 19, 2013

**Executive Summary**

GRANT APPLICATION By DPHHS  
(still pending approval)

**Administrative Information**

1. Applicant's Legal Name: Montana Dept. of Public Health & Human Services
2. Other Names under Which Applicant Does Business: Montana DPHHS
3. Applicant's Proposed Program Name: "Home Team - Montana"
4. Employer Identification Number (EIN) that Corresponds to the Applicant's Tax Exempt Status under the IRS Code of 1986: xxxxxxxxxx
5. Business Address: PO Box 202905, Helena, MT 59620-2905
6. Mailing Address: (same as above)
7. Contact person Name, Title and Contact Information: Deb Matteucci, Chief of Mental Health Services Bureau, DPHHS. Address same as above. Email: [dmatteucci@mt.gov](mailto:dmatteucci@mt.gov)  
PH: 406-444-9657. Mob: 406-439-1754

**Applicant Eligibility**

1. The applicant is a:  
 Private Non-profit Organization  
 Private for-profit Service Organization  
 State Government Entity  
 Tribal Government Entity  
 Local Government Entity
2. Does applicant have overdue or unsatisfactory obligation to the Federal government in arrears?  
 Yes (If yes, describe)  
 No
3. Does applicant have overdue or unsatisfactory response to an audit by a Federal, State, or local agency?  
 Yes (If yes, describe)  
 No
4. Is the applicant in default by failing the requirements of any previous Federal or State assistance?  
 Yes (If yes, describe)  
 No

# Home Team – Montana: A Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot

## CFDA 64.038

## September 19, 2013

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### **Overview**

Montana, with its vast and rugged landscape, is often referred to as a small town with long streets. There is no other place in the country that is better suited to launch a Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot than in the small towns of Montana. Eighty percent (80%) of the state's 92 million acres of land mass is designated as Rural by the U.S. Census Bureau. Over 100,000 veterans, many of them married with children, live in small, isolated communities across the state. Information from the MT National Guard reports that of the 553 families impacted by deployment since January 2012, nearly fifty percent (47.9%) have not reconciled. Outreach to these rural veterans and families requires a significant investment in a robust communications strategy with media, networking, and boots on the ground. The call to develop community based action teams, mindful of the unique needs of military families, has never been greater. The state ranks second in the nation in the percentage of veterans compared to overall adult population, and many of our veterans are of American Indian decent. Seven sovereign tribal nations call Montana home and have reservation lands that span thousands of acres and multiple county lines. Fifty two of fifty six (52 of 56) counties have been designated as medically underserved areas/populations (MUA/P) by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and in nearly one third of Montana counties, the Mental Health healthcare professional shortage area (HPSA) is county wide. The remaining two thirds of counties have at least a portion of the county designated as Mental Health HPSA. It is reported that Montana has the highest uninsurance rate of any state in the nation for veterans. According to a 2012 study, more than seventeen percent (17.3%) of Montana veterans lack health insurance, and fourteen percent (14%) of their families are uninsured.<sup>1</sup> To say that the coordination of health care and benefits for Montana's rural veterans is challenging is a drastic understatement.

However, Montana DPHHS has a solid foundation upon which to build this Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot program. Significant investments have been made in telemedicine infrastructure and health information technology, identification of resources and programs to serve veterans and military families, development of community driven leadership in the areas of mental health and crisis intervention, and an aggressive campaign to reduce incidents of veteran suicide through media, education and outreach. Established and positive relationships are in place with VA Montana, the National Guard and the state Dept of Military Affairs. These collaborative partnerships have a proven record of program implementation, management and sustainability borne of hard work, commitment to success and vision for the future. Montana DPHHS stands at the ready to deploy the necessary internal and external resources to implement and complete this Home Team – Montana Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot program.

**Amount of RVCP Grant funds requested**                      \$2,000,000.00

### **Applicant's Related Experience**

Montana DPHHS recently completed a 3 year grant project funded by the federal Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). This Rural Veterans Health Access Program was entitled "Increasing Service to Montana's Veterans through Training, Team Building and Technology" and included curricula development and training for health care professionals and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412577-Uninsured-Veterans-and-Family-Members.pdf> - page 7



# Home Team – Montana: A Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot

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first responders, including law enforcement, on combat related illness, injury and criminal justice diversion. It created and launched a statewide, online resource guide with information on health care providers, mental health and crisis services, housing, employment, benefit enrollment, education and more. This project invested in telemedicine infrastructure and equipment in each and every one of the association's rural critical access hospitals to facilitate increased access to healthcare in rural Montana.

In September 2012, Montana's Governor appointed a team of diverse partners to participate in the SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) Policy Academy on Veterans, Service Member and their Families. The team included the Governor's Deputy Chief of Staff, Director of the Office of Community Services, and Governor's Mental Disabilities Board of Visitors exec (oversight board) as well as delegates from DPHHS, VA Montana, the MT National Guard, Dept of Labor & Industry Veterans Employment, Dept of Military Affairs, Mental Health America (advocacy), and the Blackfeet Tribe. The team worked collaboratively to draft a strategic plan to achieve these key objectives: to increase coordination between state agencies serving veterans, service members and their families through development and sustainment of the Policy Team; to develop a comprehensive inventory and mapping of state agency programs and services for veterans, service members and their families; to create a multi-faceted outreach and communications strategy; and to collect, evaluate and share program data and outcomes of service delivery. To provide for sustainability of this partnership and the strategic planning efforts, this informal Policy Team approached the statutorily recognized Board of Veterans Affairs<sup>2</sup> and asked that our work be adopted as a special workgroup of the Board. On February 20, 2013 a letter was sent to Governor Steve Bullock designating the policy team as a "Special Committee" as allowed under Board By-Laws, Montana Board of Veterans Affairs, Article VII – Committees. The Strategic Plan developed by the Policy Team has served as a foundation for the development of this RVCP proposal.

**Applicant's Legal Structure.** Montana DPHHS is an agency of state government. No potential conflicts of interest have been identified.

### **Program Description.**

This proposal for the "*Home Team – Montana*" coordination pilot program meets and exceeds the identified goals and objectives of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). This Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot program (RVCP) seeks to serve the 102,246 veterans and their families living across Montana. Veterans, and their families, from all demographic groups, periods of service and familial status will be eligible for the program. Montana will develop community action teams in each of ten (10) regions. Each action team will be staffed with a Veteran Team Leader who will serve as care coordinator for the veterans and family members in their service area. Key elements of this 2 year program include personalized care coordination and referral to services and programs, facilitation of community based support groups for veterans and family members, development of community based social events and programming that fosters strong relationships, connections to home and family, and improves transition outcomes. The project will include outreach and communication to veterans and families using a

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<sup>2</sup> MCA 2-15-1205

# Home Team – Montana: A Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot

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variety of media channels, increased access to and quality of health care through technology, eligibility determination and enrollment in state and federal benefit programs and an annual Yellow Ribbon Summit to honor our military families, raise awareness of community resources, provide networking opportunities, learn from the veterans themselves, and foster a sense of community. Each element of this program is leveraged, enhanced and sustained throughout the two year pilot and beyond.

The timetable for implementation is aggressive. 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter Objectives: recruit Project Director & Veteran Team Leaders, develop Handbook and media campaign elements, interview stakeholders, and program for data collection. 2<sup>nd</sup> Q: Staff hired & trained, direct care coordination, community meetings, provider education, media campaign, data collection & reporting. 3<sup>rd</sup> Q: All of above plus referral networks established including telemedicine, and Summit planning. 4<sup>th</sup>Q: all above plus Annual Summit. 5Q – 7Q: Ongoing program initiatives. 8Q: All above plus closing interviews, final report, Annual Summit

### **Use of RVCP Grant Funds.**

If selected for a coordination pilot site, Montana DPHHS will utilize this \$2,000,000 grant award to support all initiatives under the program. It is not anticipated that this program will generate revenue. Other federal grant funds secured to support telehealth expansion (\$900,000) and state/federal funding for personnel, adult mental health services, crisis intervention, consumer involvement, supported employment, and community based mental health programs (\$72 million apx) will be leveraged to maximize the impact of these RVCP grant funds.

### **Relevant issues that could impact the success of the proposed program.**

Montana's work in the area of veteran's health care is building momentum. The opportunity for an investment in our state to conduct this Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot program has never been better. Partners in other state and federal agencies, policy makers and leadership throughout the state understand the unique challenges facing Montana's veterans, family members and communities at large resulting from the multiple and lengthy deployments seen by our service members. We have a solid foundation upon which to build and sustain this project for years to come.

In contrast, we are also facing challenges of record proportion. Montana failed to pass Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act and has the highest reported percentage of uninsured veterans and veteran family members. Unemployment rates are improving; the statewide unemployment rate (non seasonally adjusted) for July 2013 was 4.8%. However, in northwestern Montana where veterans represent 20% or more of the adult population, unemployment rates are double and even triple the state average. Suicide continues to be one of the leading causes of death, substance abuse is pervasive and budgets for mental health care are often underfunded. As deployments decline, it is presumed that resources for Department of Defense and National Guard reintegration programs will also decline. Family Assistance Centers have provided a vital support to rural military families in Montana and reductions are anticipated. The success of this proposed program relies heavily upon immediate action and implementation. The age old expression to "strike while the iron is hot" has never been more applicable. We thank you for your consideration and look forward to the opportunity to serve Montana Veterans and families under this innovative program.

## Scurr, Sheri

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**From:** Andrea Olsen <andreaolsenhd100@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, September 30, 2014 9:43 AM  
**To:** Scurr, Sheri  
**Subject:** Re: Reminder - Veteran Outreach Ideas

Dear Sheri,

Thank you for your email. I will like to see some state consumer protection effort - maybe provide funding for consumer protection education, technical assistance and representation (which is often the most effective) in the cases which violate the new federal laws and FTC regulations. I am sorry I missed your first email and don't have to outline more specifics but would be happy to discuss further and do so before your next deadline if this is something you are interested in pursuing.

Sincerely,

*Andrea Olsen for HD100*  
[AndreaOlsenHD100@gmail.com](mailto:AndreaOlsenHD100@gmail.com)  
622 Rollins Street  
Missoula, MT 59801  
(406) 543-2666

*Carolyn Squires, Treasurer*

On Tue, Sep 30, 2014 at 9:21 AM, Scurr, Sheri <[sscurr@mt.gov](mailto:sscurr@mt.gov)> wrote:

**TO: State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interested Persons and Members**

This is a reminder that tomorrow, October 1, is our target date/deadline for you to send me your ideas to pass on to the full SAVA for legislation concerning how to improve outreach to veterans. Below is a copy of the message that I sent out earlier and that also was sent to veteran organizations. If you need a few extra days, that is OK, but please send in your ideas as soon as possible. Thanks!

**All Veterans Affairs Interested Persons –**

I am sending this email on behalf of the State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee (SAVA) of the State Legislature. On Aug. 15, SAVA instructed me, as the committee's staff, to contact stakeholders and any interested persons concerned with providing outreach, services, or benefit claims help to veterans and their families in order to solicit a "wish list" of ideas for state legislation to promote two things:

1. community outreach to help veterans and their families learn about and navigate the range of services and benefits available and to connect them to what they may need (housing, employment, mental health treatment, benefit claims help, etc.); and
2. statewide technical assistance for this community-based effort.

## State Administration and Veteran's Affairs Interim Committee (SAVA)

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of the committee hearing to discuss community outreach to Veteran's and their families. It is vital we reach out to servicemen and women who have given so much for our freedom.

1. Although currently the Montana State Ombudsman program only provides Ombudsman services to residents in long term care facilities there are states that have expanded their services to cover Home and Community Based Services recipients. I will discuss aspects of long term care provision I feel would be beneficial to incorporate into a plan for community outreach for Veteran's but will start with information directed toward the community based efforts.
2. An Ombudsman is a strong advocate. Strong advocacy is an essential component of any outreach program. The Ombudsman is educated about all facets of services for which they are assisting an individual. They encourage self-sufficiency and self-determination. Enabling and insuring that the individual has choice and that their voice is heard. Advocacy wording should be woven into any request for community outreach. The community based effort needs to be provided with dignity and respect honoring the Veteran's rights and wishes.
3. There should be wording to coordinate community outreach with established Veterans services in the State.
4. The Montana Ombudsman program has a State Long-Term Care Ombudsman, an Assistant State Long-Term Care Ombudsman, Regional Ombudsman and Local Ombudsman. The program is housed within the Department of Public Health and Human Services, Senior and Long Term Care, aging services. Administration on Aging and Administration on Community Living have staff members designated as Long-Term Care Ombudsman program staff at the Federal level. The Older Americans Act addressed the need for technical support for the ombudsman program. The National Ombudsman Resource Center provides that support. Aspects of the ombudsman program structure and wording for ombudsman service provision could be of value for ideas related to Veteran's community outreach.
5. This may not be a consideration at this juncture in your community outreach for Veterans but I believe the State of Montana would benefit from Veterans supported living and assisted living facilities. Providing the service as well as the information can be vitally important. Especially in locations where services are limited. Montana being rural and a large geographic state can present challenges in finding service providers. Comprehensive care should be a focus of any community outreach service provision plan.

Again thank you for this opportunity to provide information that may assist our Veteran's. I look forward to coordinating and collaborating in any way you feel will further your cause. I am optimistic that aging services will be a great asset to your community-based effort and statewide technical assistance.

We support your community outreach efforts and will coordinate services wherever possible. We work on an ongoing basis with community based aging services and look forward to integrating a

more focused Veteran outreach program. As you continue to work toward your Veteran outreach services feel free to contact me if I can be of any assistance.

The Montana Long-Term Care Ombudsman program continues to advocate for Veteran's in Montana's long-term care facilities. If you would like any other information about the Montana Long-Term Care Ombudsman program please don't hesitate to call.

Sincerely,

Connie LaSalle  
Montana State Ombudsman

To: Sheri Scurr, SAVA Staff Member

From: Dr. Luke Petriccione, Director, Montana Center for Veterans Education & Training

Subject: Community Outreach and Statewide Technical Assistance

I would like to thank the SAVA committee to comment on state legislation and “wish list” ideas for services benefitting our state veterans. I would like to preface my suggestions noting that I have 41 years of professional, career experience in my capacity in Veterans Affairs with a focus on outreach, recruitment and veterans’ education. In this context I would like to offer my views and suggestions to the state legislature.

1. There already exists a state-wide office (Montana Office of Veterans Affairs) dedicated to the “community outreach aspect”. While the emphasis of this department is focused on benefits claims processing, it has been my experience of 21 years in Montana, as director of a state-wide educational program (The Veterans Upward Bound Program), that the staff of these offices are well versed in the community services and do an excellent job of making referrals to veteran services in their communities. Given current restraints on the state budget it seems that augmenting the existing state agency is perhaps the most efficient and cost saving way to accomplish community outreach and supportive veterans’ services. In my experience here is how we can best achieve that:
  - Establish a Montana Veterans Service Office in Glasgow reducing the service area currently encompassing the Miles City base of operation. Another full time office would more effectively provide outreach and veterans services.
  - Provide for additional staff to Montana Veteran Service Offices in Billings, Great Falls, Kalispell and Helena. Not only would these additional staff expedite current claims but would expand the community outreach and support services currently being suggested by our legislators.

While these recommendations may not appear glamorous they are more practical and realistic than establishing a new organization or hiring new staff that lack the experience and training as provided by MTVAO structure. More importantly, a new state bureaucracy is avoided reducing redundancy, competing funding, conflicting information, which would add confusion and frustration for veterans, which legislators are seeking to avoid.

I thank you for the opportunity to provide this brief input.



THE AMERICAN LEGION OF MONTANA ★ P.O. Box 6075 ★ Helena, Montana 59604  
Armed Forces Reserve Center, 1900 Williams St. ★ Helena, Montana 59602 ★ (406) 324-3989/3990  
Fax (406) 324-3991 ★ E-mail: amlegmt29@mtlegion.org ★ *SERVING GOD AND COUNTRY*

October 7, 2014

Legislative Services Division  
Attn: SAVA Interim Committee Chairman Dee Brown  
Rm 110, State Capitol  
PO Box 201706  
Helena, MT 59620-1706

Dear Chairman Brown:

The American Legion of Montana would like to thank you and the committee for giving us the opportunity to provide ideas for the SAVA Committee to address the needs of veterans in the state.

The American Legion is very concerned about the proposal put forward at the last SAVA hearing; the perceived investment in establishing an ombudsman would be a waste of valuable resources. Who would the ombudsman receive their training and certification from? Why would we want to create another level of bureaucracy when there already is a very good program and "chain of command" in place within the Department of Military Affairs and the Montana Veteran Affairs Division.

These resources would be much better spent on increasing FTEs for Service Officers within the MVAD. Our recommendation would be to increase the Division by six Service Officers and placing them in areas of high veteran population; Helena, Great Falls, Billings, Kalispell, Missoula and opening a new office in Glasgow. By adding to the already established offices of the MVAD, Service Officers could increase their outreach in their respective counties and reach more veterans. It is clear to the American Legion of Montana that the best use of our dollars to assist veterans is to invest in Service Officers. Utilizing the MVAD ensures that the state has trained, certified Service Officers providing our veterans with quality service to assist our veterans in navigating the VA labyrinth.

Our next issue is employment services for veterans. The DVOP (Disabled Veteran Outreach Program) staffing (JVSG funding-Jobs for Veterans State Grant) is at 7 FTEs. Some positions are split in half to provide greater coverage at Workforce Centers across Montana. The staffing is at 9 out of 23 workforce offices in Montana. That leaves over half of Montana not served by DVOPs. No Indian Reservation has a DVOP permanently assigned to the reservation. Eastern Montana and the highline, Glendive excepted, is not allocated DVOP assistance. The highest veteran population counties, per capita, in Montana, Lincoln, and Mineral, do not have a DVOP assigned to their offices.

The funding source is through the U.S. Department of Labor/VETS. They are bound by a congressional formula to allocate money to states based on veteran population and unemployment rate. Since Montana is the most rural state in the union (by federal definition)

service delivery expense and the second highest (per capita) veteran population in the U. S. does not count. Montana receives minimal funding of \$550,000.00 to fund the 7 positions.

The DOL has recently allocated some funding for Employment Specialists to attend a class put on by NVTI (National Veteran Training Institute) in Denver, CO. This is where DVOP staff is trained in areas such as case management, local employment services, and other areas to make them more effective in assisting veterans. Indeed, they are some of the best trained workers in Workforce Services. The downside of Employment Specialists and others attending from Workforce Offices is that many offices suffer from downsizing already and cannot afford the time necessary to send staffing to classes in Denver, though paid for by the DOL. Also, all offices are mandated to provide veterans priority of service. This is beneficial, but a poor substitute for the DVOP position due to lack of staffing funds.

The cost of one full time FTE DVOP is about 84k per year.

The state has funded the Veteran Program Coordinator position, who reports to the federal government and monitors the JVSG, out of other program monies. This means they do not use JVSG monies to pay for the DVOP oversight. They have also funded a DVOP position or two (sometimes a half time position) out of other labor program monies to provide more services.

What can be done by the state to increase employment services to our veterans and service members?

1. Provide funds to insure a DVOP is hired to provide services to offices that are not assigned a permanent position. The state can target areas not served or underserved and the DOL will train the state paid workers. They can also receive supervision by the State Veteran Program Coordinator.
2. Consider hiring itinerate DVOP personnel with state monies to insure each workforce office is paid a regular visit. At least one day per week.
3. Hire a person to coordinate job seeking and veteran benefit forums at locations without a DVOP on a periodic schedule. This person would be expected to bring together federal, state, local, and private agencies [there are already 9 Veteran Services Provider Meetings across Montana that represent numerous agency resources] as a team to meet with veterans in their locality and maximize the potential for education [formal, apprenticeship, state and federal job application processes, private industry opportunities, etc.], job seeker training, housing, veteran benefits, counseling, and job placement. This person could work full or part-time, but should be familiar with the process of "connecting the dots," the agencies to be served and be demographically knowledgeable. They would coordinate with the state Workforce Services Division, Veteran Affairs (Department of Military Affairs), the U.S. DOL/VETs, ESGR, tribal leadership, and other entities that would enhance veteran reintegration success. The Veteran Program Coordinator with the Workforce Services Division would be a great partner, but likely will not have the time to perform this task alone. This approach would be our second choice if there is not enough funding allocated for adequate DVOP staffing.



Our last issue is education benefits. The Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014 will require state run colleges and universities to offer users of the Post 9/11 GI Bill and the Montgomery GI Bill in state tuition rates, saving veteran students thousands of dollars in out of pocket costs. Although the change doesn't take effect until the fall of 2015, Montana should join the twenty-eight states that currently offer in state tuition rates to veterans now.

The American Legion of Montana looks forward to working with the SAVA Committee to assist our state's veterans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Gary A. White". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Gary A White  
Department Adjutant

C: Governor Steve Bullock