



**Department of Veterans' Affairs Testimony to the Program Review and
Investigations Committee
February 29, 2016
H.B. 5347, H.B. 5348, and H.B. 5349**

Good afternoon, Senator Fonfara, Representative Carpino, ranking members, and esteemed members of the Program Review and Investigations Committee:

I am Sean Connolly, Commissioner of the State Department of Veterans' Affairs. I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on H.B. 5347, H.B. 5348, and H.B. 5349 and want to thank you for your service on behalf of Connecticut's citizens, especially our Connecticut Veterans. I also want to thank the Committee and your staff for the continued effort to determine how the State can better deliver services and programs to our Connecticut Veterans at Rocky Hill and Statewide.

Since my appointment as Commissioner, I have worked to update how the DVA conducts business and I appreciate the recommendations in the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee report on the Department's Office of Advocacy and Assistance (OAA). At the Department, we have also identified many of these issues and deficiencies and have begun implementing new and updated programs and procedures through the hard work and dedication of the DVA staff, interns, volunteers and new partnerships with federal, state and local agencies and non-profits.

H.B. 5347, An Act Improving Customer Service to Veterans by the Advocacy and Assistance Unit of the Department of Veterans' Affairs Based on a program Review and Investigations Committee Study

Section 1 of the bill requires the development of a written OAA outreach plan. Currently, OAA engages in more than fifty outreach activities annually, including job fairs, senior fairs, OASIS Center visits at colleges and universities around the state, yellow ribbon events and post-deployment activities, along with Veterans fairs and benefits briefings across the state. Many of these events are generated by community and legislative requests. Often, OAA often does not

receive more than a month or two advanced notice. Going forward, OAA will, on a quarterly basis, review the outreach plan to best reach Connecticut's 200,000-plus Veterans and measure results of these outreach events. Of note, OAA's outreach now includes the use of the Veteran Express (a mobile OAA van), which will rotate monthly through each district with a primary emphasis on the seventeen College OASIS Centers and the Federal VA Community Based Outreach Center's (CBOC.)

With regard to VSOs reporting information from outreach events, the Department is concerned with mandating that VSOs count each person served and every category of services. This could be time consuming and use limited resources, without significant benefit. Instead, it is our recommendation that reporting should be of VSO attendance at events, the type of event, and the number of persons provided with substantive services and referrals.

We welcome the requirement for "health care facilities" to notify the Department of a new Veteran or spouse resident. I respectfully request that the Committee review the use of the term "health care facility" as the current language refers to the definition in C.G.S. 19a-630 which does not include nursing homes and assisted living facilities, but instead includes hospitals, emergency departments, outpatient surgical facilities, etc.

The Department finds the provision to institute a formal system for tracking complaints unnecessary. Currently, OAA has a complaint review system. Complaints received by a district office or by the Department at Rocky Hill are forwarded to the OAA Manager. The Manager is responsible for investigating the complaint and determining a resolution. The complaint and results of the investigation are maintained in the OAA main office and district files. OAA is in the process of establishing a central complaint database for the purpose of tracking complaints and addressing common issues.

H.B. 5348, An Act Strengthening Collaboration and Coordination Among the Department of Veterans' Affairs, Other State Agencies and Municipalities Based on a Program Review and Investigations Committee Study

The Department supports the notification of municipalities of their obligation to have a veterans' advisory committee, paid veterans service officer, or a veterans' service contact person

pursuant to C.G.S 27-135. Earlier this month, in collaboration with the Lt. Governor, the Department sent a letter to the chief elected officials of each Connecticut municipality explaining these statutory requirements. The letter, included with my written testimony, also informed the municipality that the Department has scheduled municipal training sessions for April and September of 2016 and requests contact information for the Veterans service contact person. The training is an unfunded mandate requiring re-allocation of OAA staff from their regular duties of working directly with Veteran clients. I ask that you consider semi-annual rather than quarterly training which would ensure timely training without re-allocation of OAA resources.

The Department has concerns with requiring the establishment of an interagency workgroup. While laudable, requiring another workgroup with reporting requirements would be duplicative of existing efforts and reallocate limited resources without additional benefit. The DVA is actively engaged with the Federal VA, State Veterans Services Organizations, and other state agencies, including the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Housing (DOH), and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) in collaborative efforts and formal partnerships to enhance the delivery of services to Veterans.

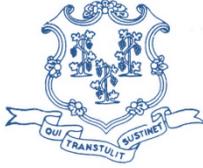
H.B. 5349, An Act Concerning Data Development and Technological Improvements within the Advocacy and Assistance Unit of the Department of Veterans' Affairs Based on a Program Review and Investigations Committee Study:

H.B 5349 requires OAA to develop a comprehensive data development plan and report to address deficiencies in internal data and operations. The Department recognizes these deficiencies and is diligently working to address this issue. We have scheduled professional training on maximizing use of Veterans Information Management system (VIMS) for the middle of April and will conduct annual training updates for all VSOs. Maximizing data entry and extraction from VIMS on a regular basis will allow the agency to better track and assess performance and address areas of concern.

Section 2 would require, the identification and reporting of deficiencies in content and function of the Department's website related to OAA services. The Department is currently working to update the website. We are revamping the current website using best practices

identified by examining other Veterans Affairs and Veteran Home sites across the nation. The goal is to update all information on the DVA website. Additionally, we are positioning the agency to adopt any new State of Connecticut website initiatives to modernize the look and navigational ease of our site with a focus on our core services: long-term chronic disease healthcare, residential and rehabilitative services, and advocacy and assistance for veterans and eligible dependents.

Thank you for your time and interest in supporting Connecticut's Veterans. I am happy to respond to questions.



NANCY WYMAN
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR
STATE OF CONNECTICUT



SEAN M. CONNOLLY
COMMISSIONER
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS

MUNICIPAL LETTER EXEMPLAR

February 11, 2016

Dear Elected Official:

As we begin the New Year, we are continuing our work to ensure that our Veterans and Service Members statewide have access to the support services to which they are entitled. As such, we are writing to the Chief Executive Officials of each Connecticut municipality to confirm the existence of the statutorily required Veterans' Advisory Committee (VAC) in your municipality, or, in lieu thereof, that you have appointed a Veterans' Service Contact Person (VSCP). These requirements took effect on October 1, 2013, pursuant to Public Act No. 13-34, and are now codified in Connecticut General Statutes Section 27-135, which states in pertinent part that:

“(a) Any [municipality] . . . may, by ordinance, establish a local veterans’ advisory committee which shall have the responsibilities of carry out locally the duties and purposes of [C.G.S. Sec. 27-135] . . . (b) Any city or town that (1) has not established a local veterans’ advisory committee pursuant to subsection (a) of this section, and (2) does not otherwise provide funding for veterans’ service officer shall designate a city or town employee to serve as a veterans’ service contact person in such city or town. Any city or town employee designated as a veterans’ service contact person shall carry out the duties described in subsection (a) of this section and may complete an annual training course conducted by the veterans’ advocacy and assistance unit.”

The services a municipal committee, veterans’ service officer or designated municipal employee are to provide include:

“(1) act as the coordinating agency in all matters concerning veterans and their dependents, coordinating the activities of public and private facilities concerned with veteran reemployment, education, rehabilitation and adjustment to peacetime living; (2) cooperate with all national, state and local government and private agencies in securing services and benefits to which a veteran or his dependents may be entitled; (3) use the services and facilities of the veterans organizations so far as possible to carry out the purposes of this section; and (4) encourage and coordinate vocational training services for veterans.”

While there are many private and public entities that provide various veteran and service member support services, the law is intended to ensure that each local municipality has a designated individual familiar with available services at the federal, state and local level.

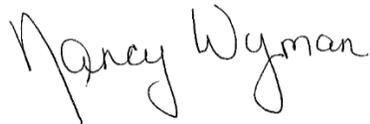
To assist all municipalities in better serving our veterans and service members, the CT Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) will hold training sessions for designated veterans' service contact persons in April and September 2016. The training sessions will be held at the DVA campus in Rocky Hill free of charge and all attendees will receive printed materials that will assist them in serving our veterans and service members.

Please complete the enclosed form so that the DVA may provide the dates and times of training to your veterans' service contact person. If you do not yet have a designated veterans' service contact person, please indicate that the position is currently "vacant." Please return the form to the attention of 'Thomas Stefanko' by email: thomas.stefanko@ct.gov, fax: 860-616-3532, or U.S. mail: CT Dept. of Veterans Affairs, 287 West Street, Rocky Hill, CT 06067.

If you have questions regarding the statutory requirements for appointment of a veterans' service contact, please contact DVA Chief of Staff and General Counsel Thomas J. Saadi at 869-616-3604 or thomas.j.saadi@ct.gov. All questions regarding the enclosed form and training should be directed to Thomas Stefanko at 860-616-3683 or thomas.stefanko@ct.gov.

We look forward to working with you to strengthen state wide resources for our veterans in each city and town across our State.

Sincerely,



Nancy Wyman
Lieutenant Governor



Sean M. Connolly
Commissioner

MUNICIPAL VETERANS' SERVICE CONTACT PERSON INFORMATION

Name of Municipality: _____

Full Name:¹ _____

Mailing Address: _____

City/Town: _____

Zip-code: _____

Phone – Work: _____

Phone – Cell: _____

Phone – Home (optional): _____

Email: _____

Fax: _____

Please return the form to the attention of 'Thomas Stefanko' by email: thomas.stefanko@ct.gov, fax: 860-616-3532, or U.S. mail: CT Dept. of Veterans Affairs, 287 West Street, Rocky Hill, CT 06067.

¹ If the municipality has a local veterans' advisory committee established by ordinance instead of a designated veterans' contact person please provide the ordinance citation and the contact information for the Committee (i.e. Chairperson.)