
OLR Bill Analysis

sSB 634

AN ACT CONCERNING MUNICIPAL VETERANS SERVICES.

SUMMARY

This bill reorganizes the laws requiring municipalities to establish veterans representative programs and makes various changes to them, including allowing municipalities to jointly carry out their program-related duties.

The bill also requires at least two veteran service officers (VSO) in the Department of Veterans Affairs' Office of Advocacy and Assistance to be responsible for overseeing and supporting municipalities' compliance with municipal veterans representative program requirements, in addition to their other duties (see BACKGROUND). It also increases the office's minimum number of VSOs (from six to eight) and total staff members (from 8 to 10).

The bill also makes technical and conforming changes.

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 1, 2023

MUNICIPAL VETERANS REPRESENTATIVE PROGRAM

Designated Entities

Under current law, each municipality must have a municipal veterans representative program and designate an entity to carry out the program's duties. It requires that each municipality do at least one of the following:

1. establish by ordinance a municipal veterans advisory committee, which the municipality may fund,
2. provide funding for a municipal veterans service officer, or
3. designate as a municipal veterans representative a municipal (a)

employee or (b) volunteer who is a veteran or has practical experience handling veterans' issues.

Current law authorizes municipalities to jointly form a shared veterans advisory committee but requires those that do to each have a municipal veterans services officer or representative, as well.

Beginning October 1, 2023, the bill similarly requires municipalities to designate one of these entities to carry out the program's duties except it allows municipalities to (1) appoint a paid director of municipal veterans services (instead of funding a municipal veterans services officer) and (2) jointly satisfy the bill's requirements if they enter into a memorandum of understanding or agreement to do so, which may include terms on sharing expenses. It is unclear if a municipality may jointly share a committee, director, or representative through a memorandum or if each municipality must maintain its own.

The bill requires that a representative be a veteran or have practical experience in veterans affairs issues. (Current law only requires this if the representative is a volunteer.) It also requires any municipal ordinance establishing a veterans advisory committee to include the number of committee members and their terms, how members are selected, and procedures for filling a vacancy.

Under the bill, a municipality that is in compliance with the current law before October 1, 2023, is considered in compliance with these requirements.

Duties and Responsibilities

Current law specifies different responsibilities for advisory committees and representatives (e.g., only volunteer representatives must be available for a minimum number of hours per week, set by the municipality).

The bill generally applies the responsibilities in the current law to all advisory committees, directors, and representatives. Under the bill, they must do the following:

1. help veterans and their dependents get services and benefits, including by cooperating with national, state, local, and private providers;
2. coordinate public and private facilities' activities concerned with veterans' reemployment, education, rehabilitation, and adjustment to peacetime living;
3. encourage and coordinate vocational training services for veterans;
4. coordinate with veterans organizations, as practicable;
5. be available to veterans in person, by phone, or by email for a minimum number of hours per week set by the municipality; and
6. file a monthly report with the municipality that includes the names of those helped, services or referrals provided, and any other information the municipality requires.

Training Requirements

Under existing law, municipal representatives must receive training from the Office of Advocacy and Assistance (OAA) within one year of their designation. It does not require any additional training, but OAA must electronically give them any new or updated training information.

The bill expands this requirement to all committee members and directors in addition to representatives. The bill specifies that these people must complete the OAA training on state and federal services and benefits. (Current law authorizes either this training or a training on helping and serving women veterans.) Those already in compliance under current law are not required to retake this training.

In a conforming change, the bill requires OAA to give printed resources on military discharge upgrades to committees, directors, and representatives.

Annual Notification

Under current law, the veterans affairs commissioner must

electronically notify the municipality's chief executive officer (CEO) each year of the requirement to designate a representative. The CEO, within 30 days of notification, must give OAA the name and email address of the municipal representative. The bill requires the CEO to give the names and email addresses of all committee members, the director, and all municipal representatives, as applicable, to OAA. It also removes the requirement that the commissioner's notification be electronic.

BACKGROUND

Office of Advocacy and Assistance VSOs

Within the DVA, the OAA is generally responsible for helping veterans and their families get veterans benefits under federal, state, and local laws (CGS § 27-102l). Each VSO must be assigned to one of Connecticut's five congressional districts.

COMMITTEE ACTION

Veterans' and Military Affairs Committee

Joint Favorable Change of Reference - APP
Yea 20 Nay 0 (03/07/2023)

Appropriations Committee

Joint Favorable
Yea 52 Nay 0 (04/20/2023)