

Approved: February 21, 2011
Date

MINUTES OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS, MILITARY AND HOMELAND
SECURITY

The meeting was called to order by Representative Mario Goico, Chairman, at 9:00 a.m. on February 15, 2011 in Room 546-S of the Capitol.

All members were present except:
Representative Mitch Holmes - excused

Committee staff present:
Julian Efird, Legislative Research
Dennis Hodgins, Legislative Research
Doug Taylor, Revisor
Ann Deitcher, Committee Assistant

Conferees appearing before the Committee:
Michelle Sweeney, Advocacy & Member Services, Assoc. of Comm. Health Ctrs. of Ks
Sky Westerlund, Ks Chapter, National Assoc. of Social Workers
Charles M. Yunker, Adjutant, The American Legion of Kansas
Christopher Tymeson, Chief Legal Counsel, Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks

HB 2210 - establishing a program of mental health care and reintegration for returning veterans.

The Chair introduced Doug Taylor who offered an explanation of **HB 2210**.

Dennis Hodgins then spoke to the Committee regarding the fiscal note for **HB 2210**. (Attachment 1).

The Chair introduced Michelle Sweeney who addressed the Committee regarding the mental health needs of returning veterans and families. (Attachment 2).

Ms Sweeney said that there is a growing concern in our state that our retired and returning veterans are dealing with mental health, substance abuse, traumatic brain injury and other injuries that are not visible but very real. These invisible injuries impact veterans, their families, children, employers and communities. The more mental health professionals who are able to understand and treat veterans, the more beneficial it will be to those veterans and their families.

Ms Sweeney said that **HB 2210** allows the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs to work with Community Mental Health Centers to provide treatment and care by trained clinicians to our veterans and families with mental health, substance abuse, suicide prevention and post traumatic stress disorders. She said her organization believed that it will fill a gap at the local community level in Kansas that has not been filled by either the Department of Defense or the Veterans Administration.

Sky Westerlund appeared next before the Committee in support of **HB 2210**. (Attachment 3), even though the Kansas Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers identified some restrictive language in the bill. She pointed out that the legislation states that the director may “contract with the local community mental health centers” to provide mental health services.

She agreed that community mental health centers were a valuable resource of public mental health but in addition to public mental health, there were many clinicians who owned their own small business and provided mental health care in the communities across Kansas. She felt they should be included in the opportunity to provide care to veterans and their families.

To address this issue, Ms Westerlund requested an amendment that would authorize the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs to contract with providers in the private sector as well as the community mental health centers.

Next to appear before the Committee was Charles Yunker who said that the American Legion had a number of concerns regarding HB 2210. ([Attachment 4](#)).

Mr. Yunker said that the provisions of **HB 2210** would greatly expand the mission of the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs (KCVA), which he described as a “relatively small bare bones agency” that they did not think was equipped or qualified to carry out the intentions of **HB 2210**. He said that while the needs of many veterans were immediate, this bill would take months to implement.

The American Legion believed veterans and their dependants might be better served by providing funding and training for more Veterans Service Representatives who can search out veterans who were in need of assistance not only for the services the bill would provide, but for all other ailments as well.

Saying that the vast majority of veterans and their dependants who would benefit from the provisions of **HB 2210** have been federalized and served on active duty orders, Mr. Yunker pointed out that their care and treatment should be provided by the VA. They are funded in part by Kansas taxpayers and he did not believe that Kansas taxpayers should have to pay twice for services that are the responsibility of the federal government.

For these reasons, the American Legion asks that the Legislature increase the Veterans' Services grant fund to increase the number of available Veterans Service Representatives. The Legion would also recommend funding a 24-hour hot line and other advertising statewide to alert and inform veterans and their families of all the services available to them from the KCVA.

Questions and answers followed.

Steve Dunkin and Marshall Kennedy of the KCVA were in attendance to answer questions.

Mr. Dunkin told the Committee that most people seemed unaware that those veterans being treated were not from recent wars. He said that “post traumatic stress disorder” had been around for a “long time”.

Written only testimony from Representative Tom Sloan who supported the intent of **HB 2210** was distributed. ([Attachment 5](#)).

The hearing on **HB 2210** was closed.

HB 2168 – creating addition benefits for Kansas veterans.

The Chairman then introduced Christopher Tymeson who told the Committee that the Department of Wildlife and Parks opposed the provisions contained in Section 1 of **HB 2168**. (Attachment 6).

Saying that Kansas State Parks are funded with a mixture of State General Fund and Park Fee Funds, which are “user fees”, Mr. Tymeson pointed out that if a “benefit” is provided to a particular group of individuals, that benefit costs other users in the form of increased entrance fees to make up for the budgetary shortfall that would accompany the benefit.

Their Department didn't expect current hunters and anglers to pay for those benefits nor should current park users be expected to pay for a benefit to a select group.

Questions and answers followed.

The hearing on **HB 2168** was closed.

Representative Mah made a motion in regard to **HB 2210** that any action on the bill be tabled at this time. The motion was seconded by Representative Grange and passed unanimously on a show of hands.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:45 a.m. The next meeting is on call of the Chair.