

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB-2212

Committee on Federal and State Affairs

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Good morning Chairman Ostmeyer, members of the committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to come before in support of HB-2212.

As Chairman of the Veterans Claims Advisory Board and Director of Veterans Services for the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs it is my privilege to come before you in support of HB-2212. The changes suggested by HB-2212 are essential in maintaining the involvement of our Veteran Claims Assistance Program (VCAP) partners.

When K.S.A. 73-1234 was initially passed in 2006 all partners involved in its drafting, the American Legion, the VFW and the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs recognized the strength in the VCAP partnership was our sharing of responsibilities and costs. The concept worked with the KCVA contributing funds for staffing and basic equipment and the service organizations making contributions both in cash and in in-kind support. Things like support for appeals, use of facilities, outreach, shared space and the many other benefits of the private public partnership. In order to ensure both parties continued to contribute it was agreed that the first year of the program would be a base line year and that the VSO would not contribute less than they did the previous year. While the intent was clear, because of the way Bill was finalized, unfortunately it created an unintended issue for the service organizations. By requiring them to maintain a level of match funding equal to or greater than the previous year, we continue to set the bar higher for them, and even if the State elects to reduce their support for the program the Service organizations are not able to do so, for them that is not an option. In addition, because of the language if a service organizations increases their contribution to

offset temporary or permanent reductions made by the State or to purchase onetime equipment the bar is raised and the minimum level of match is increased without the VSO or the Agency being able to correct this issue. HB-2212 as written gives the partners the opportunity to work together to correct this problem.

In recent years there have been occasions when it was suggested that the State reduce the appropriation for the grant program, while the funding was restored at times it came after the VSOs had spent match dollars to offset. In addition, there have been increases to the costs of benefits like medical insurance and there have been a number of one time expenditures for equipment upgrades that while not annual expenditures that while only one expenses increased the organizations match. The service organizations rather than make cuts in the program that would harm veterans took funding out of there operating reserves. This increase in match then became the new base line and required the higher level of match each year forward. The KCVA realizes the hardship this created for them. The Commission supported their efforts to get there appropriations level increased to its current level, a level that will insure their continued participation in the program. However, once they made the funding commitment it became the minimum match level and would continue not only to deplete their reserves but at some point would make it impossible for them to continue in the program.

If the service organizations decided not to participate in the program the state would then be given the task of absorbing 100% of the cost of this program to include the costs of services and assets the service organizations provide as match. Things like supporting the veterans claim throughout the appeals process in Washington DC when necessary, providing space at no charge in their posts for outreach and itinerant stops. They also allow the KCVA to be represented at their functions such as district and state meetings, allow KCVA staff to attend their annual training, our lead service officers attend this training then use that knowledge to train other KCVA field staff increasing the quality of our annual service officer training. In addition the service organizations would be forced to divert their support for our cemeteries

and veterans homes the cash and ongoing fundraising events provided through their posts these resources would have to go to funding a weaker service officer program outside the grant program. All of these resources would at some point have to be stopped so funding efforts could be redirected to the organizations day to day operations.

So while this change has no fiscal impact on the way the Grant Program currently operates it is essential in giving the KCVA and the Service organizations the flexibility to set the program match to a level that would ensure continued VSO participation. With legislative and service organizations representation on the VCAP Advisory Board and the Advisory board making the recommendation to the commission who has final approval of match funding levels we ensure all partners maintain a fair level of involvement. We support HB-2212 as written and feel it goes a long way toward strengthening a great partnership that has been in effect for over 67 years.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today I would be happy to stand for any questions.