

Revised Testimony for Substitute bills: 5276, 5277, 5279, 5280 and HB 5270 5/21/2024

Good afternoon, Chair Conlin, and members of the Committee. I first want to thank you for the opportunity to speak before this Committee, and for all your work, time, and efforts to support our Military and Veterans. I would also like to thank the sponsors of these bills particularly Representative Morse, Representative Bezotte, Representative Brabec and Representative Bruck, and your respective staffs. I hope you would forgive me if I pronounced your name wrong. I will address all the bills at one time. I should also say today I am not only addressing you as the Legislative Chair for the American Legion Department of Michigan I am also passing along information and concerns brought to my attention from the Michigan Veteran's Coalition.

The American Legion has a proud history and long history of supporting efforts to support our Troops and Veterans. In 1921 the American Legion pushed Federal Legislation that became the Veterans Affairs Department in 1930. In 1923 the American Legion wrote the Flag Code and lobbied for 18 more years to Congress to pass what is known as the US Flag Code. In 1934 the Legion got Public Law 141 passed to protect Disabled Veterans from budget cuts because of the Economy Act. In 1940 the Legion testified before Congress about a lack of bed space at the V.A. In 1944 after the then American Legion National Commander wrote the Serviceman's Readjustment Act it was then passed by Congress and became known as the GI bill. The American Legion has been and will continue to be a leader in updating the GI Bill. The American Legion with our brother and sister Veteran Service Organizations have worked together to pass many important legislative issues for Veterans and Military members including the PACT ACT, and our National American Legion Commander is called by Congress each year to testify on American Legion Legislative Priorities.

Today we are in support of efforts to assist Veterans and our Michigan National Guard members that may be suffering from Mental Health issues. Our support

does not stop at the door, so we do encourage expansion of training for anyone who may encounter members that may be suffering from these issues.

As many of you already know the Michigan Veterans Coalition is made up of Veteran Service Organization's from Michigan are the American Legion, VFW, Disabled Veterans of America, and Vietnam Veterans of America, and that some of these Non-profit Veteran Service Organizations groups have been involved with providing Service Officers for over 100 years here in Michigan. These are supported by yearly grants from the State of Michigan and administered by the M.V.A.A. This consists of about 75 Veteran Service Officers spread across Michigan that cover all the Michigan Prosperity Regions. I have attached for each of your review a copy of a brochure that gives you more detail on the Veteran Service Officers program and tells a little about some of the Legion Programs that give out Financial Assistance, Family and Youth Programs and Community Programs.

We do however have some concerns we would like to get into the record:

1. At this time, we do not wish to see these bills become a mandatory requirement for the Coalitions Veteran Service Officers, by legislation or the M.V.A.A. during the grant process.
  - A. If this were to become mandatory for our Veteran Service officers (VSO'S), it could impact their primary function and move our service officers away from the requirement to get Federal VA benefits for Veterans.
  - B. Also, if mandatory this would reduce the funding and medical benefits coming to this State for our Veteran's, because of the additional time restrains placed on the VSO's.
  
2. The Grant process is awarded to the Coalition, however as of recently the M.V.A.A. has been directed to charge an oversight fee. This is a loss of over \$200,000.00 a year to the Coalition VSO program. In the state budget that is a small amount, for the Non-profit Veterans Service Organizations

this is a large amount that must be made up for by cutting other programs these Veteran Service Organizations offer to our Michigan Veterans. The Service Organizations understand that as it has always been a grant that does not pay the full cost of the VSO program so the four Veteran Service Organization make up the difference but of course we are very thankful for what we do get in grant money from the State of Michigan to assist us get our Veterans receive the benefits they have earned based on their service to this country. And your investment has an outstanding return on it as for every one dollar spent by the State on the Coalition Veteran Service Officer program, they bring back over \$103.00 of money for our State Veterans and their families, money that is spent in the State of Michigan in many ways.

3. And we would like you to understand that our Coalition VSO's do not receive the pay or benefits they could get in the private sector or working for the State or the M.V.A.A. Our VSO program officers are often raided to come to work for these other entities including the M.V.A.A., which leads to a higher turnover rate than we would like to see.

I want to make it clear we are very supportive of the concepts in these bills. Michigan Veteran Service Officers are already under a great restraint of their time, efforts, and resources. And while I am not able to speak on behalf of the County Veteran Service Officer or the M.V.A.A.'s own VSO program, I would think that they are also under a great restraint of their time and resources.

The Michigan Veteran Coalition Service Officer Program does work with Veterans who are suffering from a mental Health crisis almost daily. Currently the Coalition Service Officers work closely with the Veteran Navigator program to have them service these veterans in need or to the 988 Lifeline.

Our Coalition Service Program does support more training in these areas, but we would like this committee and the M.V.A.A. to understand that the program and its service officers are under great pressure for their time and resources.

So, in closing I want to make it very clear we support these efforts to help our Military and Veterans. We would hope that this committee, the bill's sponsors and the M.V.A.A. would sit down with our Michigan Veteran Coalition Service Officer director and work on the logistics of how these programs could work with the Coalitions involvement in these programs, and how the Coalition can get additional funding and personal so at some point the Coalition can be involved.

Thank you again for your time and consideration today and again, I wish to thank again all of you on this committee and especially those who have had a hand in this package of legislation that is also landmark legislation. At this point if the Chair wishes I am willing to answer questions.

Respectfully

Tim Poxson

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tim", written over the printed name "Tim Poxson".

American Legion Department of Michigan Legislative Chair