

2007 Report of Board of Veterans Affairs

VETERANS TRUST FUND

The Veterans Trust Fund created in CRS 28-5-709 continued to provide grants to veterans service organizations, State Veterans Nursing Homes, and to provide operating funds for the Division of Veterans Affairs. The VTF received an allocation of \$873,913 for FY 06-07. Of that amount a total of \$625,304 was appropriated for administration and grant expenditures. Of the available amount, \$29,000 went to the Division of Veterans Affairs, \$540,354 was allocated to the grant program, and \$31,263 for grant administration. Of the \$625,304 appropriated, \$547,827 was expended and \$77,477 was returned to the fund.

Grants were provided to American Legion Posts, Veterans of Foreign Wars Posts, Disabled Veterans Chapters, and the Regional Office of the Disabled Veterans of America, the Retired Enlisted Association, and the State Veterans Nursing Home at Homelake and Walsenberg.

Veterans in twelve (12) rural communities were assisted with transportation, employment assistance and homeless programs that provided a means for veterans and dependents to meet medical appointments, find jobs and other needed services. The VTF assisted in the operations of five (5) major homeless/incarcerated veteran projects in the metropolitan areas of Denver, El Paso, Weld, Jefferson, and Pueblo Counties. The Trust Fund also provided funds for the purchase of four (4) vehicles to accommodate transportation programs and nursing home residents. Funds were also provided for a veterans employment services in Alamosa, Aurora, Grand Junction, Loveland and Mancos. Grants for vehicles will provide for the continuance of programs or ongoing service to the veteran community for many years to come. A total of 11,058 veterans were reported to have received either a direct or indirect service, through grantees, from the Veterans Trust Fund. The complete report is attachment 1.

LEGISLATIVE ISSUES AND ACTIONS BY COLORADO BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Part of the statutory mission of the Colorado Board of Veterans Affairs (CBVA) is to advise the executive and legislative branches of Colorado's state government concerning issues of importance for the well being of veterans throughout the state. The SBVA works closely with the United Veterans Committee of Colorado (UVC) on their legislative agenda. Key legislation that the Board worked on during the past year is summarized here.

STATE VETERANS NURSING HOMES

HB07-1211 created a permanent Board of Commissioners of State Veterans Nursing Homes and HB07-1212 created local advisory boards for each of the State Veteran Nursing Homes. SB07-014 authorizes and encourages the appropriation of State general funds to the operating and capitol needs of the nursing homes. This is subject to the 10% limit of an enterprise under provisions of TABOR. This legislation helped to

secure over \$900,000 in a general fund match for over \$2 million in federal funds for the Homelake Nursing Home.

REFERENDUM E DISABLED VETERANS PROPERTY TAX

HB07-1251 made statutory changes necessary to implement the property tax exemption for qualifying disabled Veterans approved by the voters as Referendum E during the 2006 general election.

FALLEN HERO'S MEMORIAL

SB07-086 created a commission and linked it to the Preservation Trust Committee to recognize the sacrifice of fallen Heroes from all periods of conflict. This assures that whatever memorials result from the bill will support and enhance the existing Veterans Monument.

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES FOR VETERAN FAMILIES

SB07-146 created a 3-year mental health service pilot program for the families of discharged veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. It authorizes the Department of Human Services to purchase mental health services from community mental health centers in the Colorado Springs area for families of recently discharged veterans.

COLORADO BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS SUNSET

SB07-183 continues the CBVA until July 1, 2017.

RESOLUTIONS

The CBVA provided input to various House and Senate resolutions. The most notable were HJR07-1009 urging the U.S. department of Veteran Affairs to build a national veterans cemetery in the Pikes Peak region. HJR07-1010 recognizing the Military and Veterans on Military and Veterans Appreciation Day. HJR07-1034 urged private and public contributions to the Colorado Veterans Monument Preservation Trust Fund.

VETERANS TRUST FUND

SB07-239 (Long bill) would have restored \$1 million of the \$2.28 million taken from the Veterans Trust Fund. This effort did not pass, but laid the groundwork for a similar request for 2008.

Board members Marvin Meyers, Ralph Bozella, Bill Sinclair and George Thomas spent a great deal of their personal time at the state legislature proposing, planning, testifying and working on legislative issues that impact Colorado's veterans. A very cooperative working relationship with the UVC has again lead to a very productive legislative session for the Veterans of the state.

STATE VETERANS NURSING HOME OVERSIGHT COMMISSION

The State and Veterans Nursing Home Commission established in 2005 by HB 05-1336, filed its final report to the Legislative Oversight Committee in June 2006, then assumed

the responsibility of providing oversight to the State and Veteran Nursing Homes for the remainder of its term through June 30, 2007. In that time, the Commission continued to study the operations of the homes and provided guidance to the Division bringing about positive change ensuring highest quality care and fiscal responsibility.

The Commission has seen positive developments over the course of its existence. It is believed that many of the changes will have beneficial impact on the veterans, their spouses and other family members, and all others who reside in the state and veterans nursing homes.

Three bills originating with the Commission were submitted to the 2007 session of the General Assembly and were enacted into law:

The first was the passage of H.B. 07-1211 to create a new, permanent Board of Commissioners of State and Veterans Nursing Homes. This bill was signed by the Governor on April 9, 2007, with an effective date of July 1, 2007. The Board of Veterans Affairs welcomes the establishment of the new Commission.

The second bill enacted this year was H.B. 07-1212 concerning the creation of the local advisory boards for each of the homes allowing the existing boards to become more effective as they are reestablished under the rule making authority of the Department of Human Services.

The third bill recommended by the Commission was S.B. 07-14 concerning the appropriation of funds to the central fund (the "505 fund") for the state and veterans nursing homes. The importance of this legislation is that it places in the statutes a specific provision that the General Assembly may appropriate an amount up to ten percent of the total gross revenue accrued by the central fund (the "505 fund") for the preceding year without changing the enterprise status of these facilities. The appropriated funds may be for operational and capital improvement needs.

The Commission is pleased with the capital construction appropriation of \$917,000 that the Department of Human Services received for improvements at Homelake, allowing for a 65% match by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

The Commission is pleased with the reorganization in the Department of Human Services that elevated the status of the nursing homes to an Office of State and Veterans Nursing Homes in the department. This administrative change means that the director of the office is a member of the executive director's chief advisors.

The Commission followed closely personnel problems encountered at the nursing homes, particularly at Fitzsimons. We recommend that the new Commission also keep informed of progress and problems encountered as these facilities move forward. We are pleased with the progress in resolving some of the critical personnel issues but we are also aware of still unsettled difficulties in the personnel area.

All of the state and veterans nursing homes have received or are in the process of receiving Medicare certification with the favorable result that the nursing home can provide these residents with more services and financial benefits to the homes.

The Commission strongly supports the continuation of a strong public private partnership with the on-going consulting contract to offer an independent, outside view of clinical care and fiscal operations in the homes. Pinon Management continues to do an excellent job as the private consulting contractor to the Division. One of Pinon's measures was to establish a dashboard system of performance indicators in each home to rate clinical, financial, census development and culture change.

The former commission ended its term with a Summary Report and a Transition Process. Even though a new Commission has been established and is in the process of organizing, electing officers, and making plans to visit the homes, former Commission officers and members are actively working to provide effective communications to bring about a smooth transition.

The Board of Veterans Affairs is pleased with the work of the former Commission and supports the transition process, expecting continued success of the new Commission.

OPERATION RECOGNITION

In 2001, the Board initiated a program for World War II veterans who dropped out of high school to serve our nation during war to receive postponed diplomas. This successful program, Operation Recognition, received the support and cooperation of the Colorado Department of Education and many school boards throughout the state. Senate Bill 03-100 statutorily authorized local school boards to issue high school diplomas to veterans who left high school to join the armed forces during a time of war, to include WW II, Korea, and Vietnam. With the inclusion in legislation that recipients must be at least 60 years old to be eligible, the Board believes that this belated recognition serves to spotlight veterans' contributions and, at the same time, does not encourage our students to drop out of school. More than 400 veterans have received their high school diplomas since the spring of 2001. We have accounted for 20 veteran graduates from various high schools for the 2006-2007 school year, and there have been more, but not all are reported. The Board wishes to recognize Brandt Erickson, a volunteer staff member who currently coordinates Operation Recognition.

DIVISION OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

The Division of Veterans Affairs served 723 walk in customers from the Denver area during the year. Of note is the nearly \$21 Million in benefits (either pensions or medical) that were generated from the individual veterans cases that they advocated. Many of these benefit claims are from previous years claims. The present processing time for a benefit claim with the US Department of Veterans Affairs runs anywhere from 5 months to 18 months depending on the complexity of the case. The Division report is attachment 2.

VETERANS MEMORIAL CEMETERY OF WESTERN COLORADO

The Veterans Memorial Cemetery of Western Colorado, located in Grand Junction, continued to provide outstanding service to veterans. That service includes the cemetery upkeep and dignified interments befitting our veterans. There are now 1170 veterans and spouse or dependents interred at the cemetery, 202 of those this year. The operation is funded largely by the Colorado Income Tax Check-Off, and the \$300 burial fee received from the US Department of Veterans Affairs for eligible veterans. The General Fund portion of the annual operating budget is only \$124,000. The operation continues to receive high praise from the families and the Grand Junction community at large. The Cemetery is the focal point for ceremonies on memorial Day and Veterans Day.

COLORADO VETERANS MONUMENT

C.R.S. 24-80-1401 (2) requires that one member of the Colorado Board of Veterans Affairs be a member or the Preservation Trust Committee for the Colorado Veterans Monument located off Broadway just west of the Capitol. George D. Thomas is filling that position for a term of three years. The Preservation Trust Fund currently has a balance of approximately \$22,000. Tim Drago, founder and member of the Committee, has estimated that the Trust Fund needs to have \$200,000 in order to be self-sufficient. The monument requires about \$5,000 per year for operations and general upkeep. Tim Drago has worked this year with Bennie Milner (Senator Ken Salazar's Staff), Bill Hollen (Congressman Ed Perlmutter's Staff), Wil Alston (Governor Bill Ritter's Staff) House Representatives Joe Rice, David Balmer, Spenser Swalm, Frank McNulty, and Stella Garza Hicks. This working group has looked at ways to raise money for the Trust Fund. A joint effort will be made during the coming year to generate funds for the Trust. How this will be done has not be finalized at this Time. Joint Resolution 1034 was passed encouraging donations to the Trust. Representatives Jim Reisberg and Paul Weissmann were able to find \$5,000 in funds to do "tuck pointing" of the Monument to mitigate water damage to the Memorial. The Board continues to be concerned about the upkeep of the Monument. Proper upkeep should reflect the State of Colorado's pride in those men and women who have served their nation and State.

DEPARTMENT OF REVENUE VETERANS LICENSE PLATES

There are nineteen distinctive license plates available to veterans. Several of these such as the Medal of honor an, medal of Valor, Purple Heart and Disabled Veterans are issued with a waiver of specific ownership fees. As of 1 January 2007 there were 100,630 veterans' plates issued in the State. Of these, 16,630 are no-fee plates. The complete report from DOR is attachment 3.

DEPARTMENT OF LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT

The Colorado Department of labor and Employment, using federal grant funds, provides employment assistance to qualified veterans. The demand for employment services increased by 3% in 2007. The largest growth was in the categories of less than 30% disabled and females. Local Veteran Employment Specialists (LVERS) have become

more active in conducting workshops at military bases as part of the 3-day Transition Assistance Programs for the roughly 2,000 service members transitioning back to civilian life. Over 80 courses were conducted at Ft. Carson and at Schreiver and Buckley AF Bases. The LVERS also continued employer outreach that contributed about 15% of the total outreach effort from the Department. Total job postings were 121,000 for 14,000 employers. Disabled Veterans Outreach Program specialists provide Intensive Employment Services to veterans in the most need of assistance. The program is designed to provide comprehensive employment plans to assure necessary training and support services. In FY 07, they served 1298 disabled, homeless, recently separated or ex-offender veterans. The complete report is attachment 4.

DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

The Division of Wildlife issued 548 free disabled veterans small game and fishing licenses and allowed all active duty personnel to fish for free while on home leave. The Division of Colorado State Parks continues to provide free daily admission to vehicles displaying the disabled veterans license plate. Five active duty personnel took advantage of the leftover license preference and 56 received reinstatement of preference points. The more detailed summary is attachment 5.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

C.R.S. 28-5-703 requires that “the Board shall study periodically the problems of veterans and based on such studies shall propose such programs or statutory changes as it may deem advisable or necessary for veteran’s assistance by the State of Colorado or political subdivisions thereof.”

The Board continued its work on developing a Strategic Plan for veterans needs for the next 5 years. Three surveys were developed, a County Veteran Officer survey, a Veterans Officer survey, and an individual Veterans survey. These surveys were conducted during the spring and summer. A study of the demographics was done. A study of all 50 states was done to determine what veteran programs each state offered and how those compared to Colorado.

The Board met four additional times in addition to regular monthly board meetings. These meeting were used to review the work in progress and to set up goals, objectives, and performance measures for the Board. Walter Paul, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs conducted the four workshops. Geoff Withers, temporary employed to support this effort, worked with Walter to design, conduct the surveys and gather the state and demographic information.

The final draft was compiled in November and “The Strategic Plan 2008-2013” will be published and released during January 2008. This Plan, coupled with the knowledge of veteran’s needs by the Board members, and the use of the Veterans Trust Fund, allow the Board to guide the State in better meeting veteran’s needs for the next 5 years.

Attachments:

1. Report of Veterans Trust Fund
2. Division of Veterans Affairs
3. Department of Revenue
4. Department of Labor and Employment
5. Department of Natural Resources