

*House Bill 3104. Sponsor: Rep. Nancy Nathanson
Improving services and federal reimbursement for veterans services*

Last year the Task Force on Veterans Services hosted meetings around the state, and I attended several in my area. I came away from those with a lot of energy to do one specific thing— to help veterans and at the same time to have a positive impact on our budget and state economy.

Plain and simple: there are tens of thousands of uncounted or unidentified veterans in Oregon. Many of those may need services that we, or the federal government, can provide. And for many who we do provide services for, we are **not** making sure the service is supported by federal aid for veterans. Why? Because we simply don't even know the veterans living in Oregon.

This situation is noted in the Task Force's report as one of the key findings: "Substantial amounts of federal aid are unrealized because only 80,000 of 351,000 Oregon veterans are identified through the Census are in the system." The report goes on to say, "Only 30 percent of Oregon veterans are enrolled in VA health care. Even with these low numbers, Oregon veterans receive \$1.2 billion in federal VA benefits. By not connecting more veterans to their benefits (including education benefits), Oregon is leaving as much as \$4 billion of federal money on the table. The Task Force believes that all state and local agencies should ask if their clients are veterans so that veteran benefits information can be provided." The report goes on to advise that "wherever possible, state agencies should reconfigure data management system to share information that encourages caseworkers to connect veterans to available services."

Here are a couple of real world examples where veterans were unaware of the federal benefits for which they are eligible:

1. At the Union Gospel Mission here in Salem, they ask their residents if they are veterans. They have found a number of veterans who were entitled to VA Pension, but were unaware that they were eligible for this benefit. By taking advantage of these services, the life of the veteran completely changed, moving from homelessness to security.
2. Another example, while out shopping, a Veteran's Service Officer noticed a person with a "Ruptured Duck" lapel pin. The VSO talked to him and discovered that he was a three-war retired U.S. Navy veteran struggling to make ends meet. He was receiving care from the VA, but was unaware of what everything he was eligible for. As a result of the VSO's review, the veteran is now receiving 60% service-connected compensation with combat related special compensation. The veteran said later that for he and his wife, the VSO had "changed their life forever and they wished they could have met earlier."

These are just a couple of examples where a veteran has been unaware of the possible benefits available from the federal system, the veterans may have been doing without help entirely, or the state or local government is potentially providing services on their own dime, and we're losing federal money that should be coming to Oregon and circulating here.

As you know, as a member of Ways and Means, I've been keenly interested in making sure we maximize federal dollars coming into the state. Since early in the 2007 session I've been making noise about how much we leave on the table – untapped – from the federal government - due to failure to come up with matching state funds, or not making sure we're getting federal reimbursements. Consider how hard we work on the demand for funding food banks, emergency and low-cost housing, and health care; some of the people needing those services are veterans who could be receiving federal assistance. In an October 2008 on-the-street survey of homeless people in Portland, 22% were veterans, and only 5% were receiving VA benefits.

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I've also been keenly interested in technology projects, and the need to do a much better job of collaboration between agencies as we upgrade our information systems. We aren't making the best use of data we have, we often uncover redundant efforts to design overlapping systems, and failure to share data from one department, or even one work area, to another.

So here we have a Task Force report – the best thinking by a hard-working and productive group – tipping us off to some low-hanging fruit: We need to make sure that we are doing our best to ask the right questions when we work with Oregonians, then get information where it needs to go -- to provide those services, and to get the federal support.

I know there's some chatter about what the words mean, literally. There's always room to make improvements in a bill, and I welcome those. We have an amendment, -3, but it may still not be the best way to instruct the agencies. I want to focus especially on the outcome we should achieve – ensuring that our veterans receive the help they need and deserve -- and bringing federal resources to Oregon – and make sure that concerns about specific mechanics of how departments do their outreach doesn't take our eye off the ball.

I'd like to tell you in plain language what I'd like to accomplish:

At their first point of contact with someone, departments should be asking whether the person is a veteran or would like information about veterans services;

ODVA should provide help, instructions, examples, templates, sample forms, and so forth to help departments, and will provide that help to counties as well; and

Agencies' websites will have a link to ODVA so with one click veterans can get to a website tailored to their needs.

And knowing the strain on agency staff, agencies shouldn't be asked to drop everything and re-engineer all their intake forms, letters, or intake checklists. They should implement this the next time they are making updates ... so this will roll out over time, not expecting agencies to rocket this request ahead of everything else they've got on their plate.

The directions provided in this bill are largely repeating directions that have recently been put in place by an Executive Order, so agencies are, or will soon be, starting to take care of this – so my bill is putting the Legislative stamp on saying just how important this is, for veterans, and for our budget.

The Utah Department of Veterans Services and the Utah Department of Motor Vehicles undertook a similar effort to identify veterans who were doing business with the DMV and capture the names to send to the Utah Department of Veterans Services. To date, they identified some 70,000 veterans who **were not receiving benefits**. We can do that here, too.

And this bill goes one step farther. Cities and counties have contacts with veterans, too; we will all benefit from the same kind of outreach, and follow-up; our local governments should be able to reap some savings as well from federal reimbursement.

Let's make sure every veteran counts, and make sure we know how to provide services in the best way possible for all Oregonians.