

National Association of County  
Veterans Service Officers

Testimony of  
Ann G. Knowles, President

before the

United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Veteran Affairs  
109<sup>th</sup> Congress

On

**Legislative Priorities 2006**

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# Testimony of

## **Ann G. Knowles, President**

### National Association of

### County Veterans Service Officers

#### **Introduction**

Chairman Buyer, members of the committee, it is truly my honor to be able to present this testimony before your committee. As President of the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers, I am commenting on:

- Recommendations for the Creation of a New Federal/State/Local Government Partnership. to provide Outreach to Veterans and their Dependents.
- Recommendations for the Development of Standardized Training for County Veterans Service Officers.
- Recommendations for Improvements in Claims Development.

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers is an organization made up of local government employees. Our members are tasked with assisting veterans in developing and processing their claims. We exist to serve veterans and partner with the National Service Organizations and the Department of Veterans Affairs to serve veterans. Our Association focuses on outreach, standardized quality training, and claims development and advocacy. We are extension or arm of government, not unlike the VA itself in service to the nation's veterans and their dependents.

Our workforce represents approximately 2,400 employees available to partner with Department of Veterans Affairs to help speed the process of claims development and transition of our military personnel to civilian life.

Upon discharge, the service man or woman becomes a veteran who returns to a local community. When health issues become apparent and help is needed the most visible and accessible assistance is the County Veterans Service Officer. As we sit here today discussing the needs of the veterans across this great land it soon becomes evident that there are many areas that need attention. Outreach and claims processing improvements are essential if we are to fulfill the obligation proclaimed by Abraham Lincoln "...To

care for him, who shall have borne the battle and for his widows and orphans...". This is our focus and passion.

## **2005**

The 108th Congress brought some much needed changes and additions to veteran's law. The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers (NACVSO) monitored and supported the COLA Bill, Parkinson's Disease Research Pilot, Service Member's Increased Life Insurance to \$400,000, Health Insurance Protection Act of 2005, Veterans Housing and Protection Act of 2005 and the Information Technology Management Improvement Act of 2005.

We commend the House Members and the Committee on Veteran Affairs on your accomplishments of 2005. However there is much more that remains to be done in the arena of unmet needs for veterans.

## **Legislative Priorities**

- **OUTREACH:**

Outreach efforts must be expanded in order to reach those veterans, dependents and survivors that are unaware of their benefits and to bring them into the system. Nearly 2 million poor Veterans or their impoverished widows are likely missing out on as much as \$22 billion a Year in pensions from the U.S. government, but the Department of Veterans Affairs has had only limited success in finding them, according to the North Carolina Charlotte Observer.

According to a recent study performed by the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs the national average of veterans in receipt of Compensation and Pension benefits is just over 11%. We believe this points to veterans being unaware of available benefits.

Widows are hardest hit. According to the VA's own estimate, **only one in seven** of the survivors of the nation's deceased Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines who likely could qualify for the pension actually get the monthly checks. What's more, participation in the program is falling. **Veterans and widows are unaware that the program exists.** They simply don't know about it and the VA knows that many are missing out on the benefit "We obviously are here for any veteran or survivor who qualifies," said a VA Pension official. **"But so many of these people -- we don't know who they are, where they are.** "The VA's own report from late 2004 recommended that the agency "improve its outreach efforts" with public service announcements and other pilot programs. While it made limited efforts to reach veterans or their widows through existing channels, it is difficult to determine whether such efforts have been successful.

Nonetheless, one VA estimate of the program shows the potential pool of poor veterans and widows without the pensions has remained unchanged the past four years. The total number of pension cases fell to 541,000 in fiscal 2005, the sixth straight year of declines. The VA actuary's office predicts that pension participation is likely to drop further, losing between 7,000 and 8,000 enrollees a year and falling below 500,000 participants by 2012, according to a VA actuary report obtained by Knight Ridder. At the same time, the separate 2004 report estimated that an additional 853,000 veterans and 1.1 million survivors -- generally widows -- **could get the pension but don't**. Of all those likely eligible, only 27 percent of veterans and 14 percent of widows receive the money. It is obvious that there is a great need for outreach to into the veteran's community and the local CVSO is the advocate closest to the veterans and widows and with minimal funding could reach the maximum number of eligible veterans and widows. Therefore, NACVSO is supporting HR 4264 and its companion bill S 1990, introduced by Congressman Mike McIntyre and Senator Richard Burr, of North Carolina, that would allow Secretary Nicholson to provide federal – state – local grants and assistance to state and county veteran's service officers to enhance outreach to veterans and their dependents. We are already present in most communities and stand ready to assist the Department of Veterans affairs with this monumental task.

- **STANDARDIZED TRAINING FOR SERVICE OFFICERS:**

**PROBLEM:**

The inconsistencies in hiring, training and accrediting of State and County Veterans' Service Officers (CVSO).

The inability of the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) to determine and track the knowledge and skill level, and the ability of a State or County Veterans Service officer to provide proper assistance to a veteran/claimant in filing for benefits to the DVA.

The veteran/claimant, that is being provided assistance with their claim for benefits, should have some kind of assurance that the person assisting them is knowledgeable of the DVA benefit programs and has been sufficiently trained in the application of those benefits.

**DISCUSSION:**

Across the United States there are approximately 3000 State and County Veteran Service Officers. These service officers are required by State and local laws to assist veterans and their dependents in applying for benefits are spending over \$3 billion per year in local funds. The laws of the states are inconsistent in the requirements for employment of Service Officers, their training requirements and the accreditation process. Some states have a very detailed and strict training program with an accreditation test that must be passed. Moreover, these programs include a continuing education process that must be met each year to maintain accreditation and in some cases employment. This is in contrast to other states that have little or no training and do not have an accreditation

program. One State actually has a law preventing the CVSO's of that State from obtaining accreditation. If one were to take the time to study the various State laws that form the basis of service to veterans in their respective state, one would find a mish-mash of laws and regulations. Because of these inconsistencies, it may be extremely difficult to incorporate a standardization of training, accreditation program and maintenance of that accreditation. Another problem is one that is associated with the laws of the various States. A few State' law read "shall operate a county veterans office" while many others read " may operate a county veterans office". Because of these inconsistencies, in the various State laws there very well could be a big difference in how each county veteran's office is funded and operated. States that operate under a "shall" law tends to place more emphasis on serving veterans and provide better funding mechanisms for their county veteran's office. The states that operate under the "may" law tend to have less emphasis on serving veterans and resulting in their counties have more struggles with the funding and operation of a veterans office. Depending on where in this country one may go, there are great disparities on how the offices are funded, operated and level of staff training. For example, a veteran may go to a large city in the Midwest that operate with several million dollars a year has mandated training for the staff, and requires accreditation. In contrast, another veteran may go to a smaller city in the south where the office operates on less then \$5000.00 a year and has virtually no training or accreditation program. It is a fact, most county veterans offices operate on "bare bones" budgets provided by their respective counties. As a result, There is very little funding in the budgets for travel and training. This is primarily due to tight budgets in the counties, a lack of direction in the laws of the respective State and a lack of importance being placed on service to veterans by the state and the county. To overcome these inconsistencies in the service veterans receive across the nation, a method of standardized training must be established that provides and maintains proper accreditation. In addition, there must be a means to track the current status of accredited service officers. The challenge facing us today is how to fairly and equitably establish the aforementioned training and accreditation process, as well as how to properly fund its operation and attendance.

## **Suggested Solutions:**

There are several possible solutions to consider in the discussion concerning methods to establish a program of standardized training for county veteran service officers. When selecting a solution to implement we must keep in mind that it is extremely important that the CVSO's remain the veterans advocate and do not become agents of the Department of Veterans Affairs. The veteran / claimant must have the confidence that the CVSO is the advocate for them and their claim and not just an extension of the DVA.

Possible training solutions are:

- 1. Creation of traveling training teams.** This would consist of forming two (2) fully funded training teams, which would travel from State to State providing training to the CVSO's. Each team would consist of three (3) trainers who would provide a 32 hour comprehensive course of instruction in the filing claims for

veteran's benefits. The course would conclude with an examination requiring a score of 70% for passing. The successful completion of the course and the passing of the examination would be required for certification to the VA for accreditation. Each team would be required to provide instruction for approximately 20 sessions per year. This would allow the coverage of most of the United States each year. In addition to the six instructors, there would be a Program Manager and a Training Development Specialist. Both would also serve as additional instructors as needed. In addition, an Administrative Assistant would be required to assist with correspondence, schedule training, reserve hotels and flight scheduling. It would be necessary to provide each member of the training team with laptop computers and the proper audio visual equipment needed to conduct the training courses. The program should have a means to help the counties and/or state to off-set the cost of the training program.

- 2. Creation of an in-residence course of instruction.** This would require a school-house approach, which would require a suitable building in which to conduct VA training. In this approach, there would be additional expenditures for maintenance, utilities and other related cost. The school should be in an area of the country accessible by reasonable airfares and other suitable transportation along with reasonable housing cost. This approach may have to create a scholarship type program to pay for the cost of transportation and housing. This could be done by contracting with airlines for transportation and a hotel for housing students. An in-house school would require four (4) instructors along with a Program Manager and Training Development Specialist. Again, these two would serve as back-up instructors. In addition, there would be a need for administrative support. With this program there may be an occasional need to put a traveling team together when it made better use of funds and personnel.
- 3. Combination of in-house course and a traveling training team.** This would combine the best elements of 1 & 2 above. The traveling team could provide the initial certification/accreditation training while all advanced training would take place in house at a training facility.
- 4. Contracting the training programs to a separate entity.** Contracting with an organization that is experienced in the training of county veteran service offices could be the most logical step. The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers (NACVSO) is such an organization. The NACVSO has conducted professional veteran's advocacy training since its first training conference in Springfield, Ohio in 1991. NACVSO currently operates three (3) courses of instruction at its annual training conference. They are (1) a 32 hour accreditation course, (2) a 32 hour continuing education course of more advanced material and (3) an advanced course of instruction that will lead to a certification as a "Certified Veterans Advocate" (CVA). This year, at the annual conference, a new course will be offered to the CVSO and/or staff members who have been on the job for less then 18 months. This course will be called "Introduction to

Veterans Advocacy". This course will concentrate on the basics of veterans claims work along with when, how and why to complete the proper VA forms.

Additionally, NACVSO has developed trainers for the DVA's" Training, Responsibility in Partnership (TRIP)" program required by the DVA before an accredited CVSO is given limited access to the VA's electronic files. NACVSO has been the leader in professional service officer training for the past 15 years. They can also create the flexibility to do any of the above methods of training. If any of the above training solutions are implemented, it will take coordination between the training entity and the DVA to establish an agreeable program of training. The training must have a solid foundation in VA benefits, laws and regulations, while being taught from the prospective of the veterans advocate.

- **CLAIMS DEVELOPMENT:**

NACVSO sees the role of county veteran's service officers (CVSO) as one of advocacy and claims development in concert with the veteran or dependent at the grassroots level. Where the initial claim is prepared and the necessary supporting documentation is gathered, from the veteran or dependent, private medical sources, county or state public records, VA medical centers and reviewed for completeness. This complete package is passed to a state or national service office for review and presentation to the VA regional office of jurisdiction. Any hearings or additional records required would be obtained by this organization in concert with the CVSO of record. We believe this division of responsibility would benefit the veteran and provide a clearer understanding of the process of claims development as it relates to the CVSO.

The majority of CVSO's have the capability of electronic filing. We currently are able to perform many electronic activities with other agencies and institutions. NACVSO believes strongly that similar DVA – CVSO electronic activities would greatly improve the claims process speed the issuance of veteran awards and help eliminate the loss of files as well as enhance DVA's record keeping. Currently the partnership between the DVA and CVSO's has allowed the us access to certain screens on SHARE and MAP-D, the DVA's computerized claims processing and development systems, based upon eligibility criteria that includes training and accreditation. Even so we still must use the Regional Offices phone units to get information on appeals and ratings. Expansion of remote access to include **VACOLS**, the Board of Veterans Appeals electronic appeals tracking system, the Veterans Benefits Administrations electronic rating system included in the **RBA 2000**, **CAPRI**, the Veterans Health Administrations system for electronic transfer of medical records and eventually the **Virtual VA** system, must become a high priority if there is to be the ultimate electronic claims development. All of these would increase productivity and be an additional way to speed the processing of veterans claims.

**CONCLUSION:**

This concludes my comments.

If I commented on any items of interest to the Committee on Veteran Affairs, NACVSO stands ready to expand on our comments or suggestions for improving services to veterans.

Thank you.