



Keeyawnia "K.C." Hawkins
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Bell County Veterans Service

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Dear Sunset Advisory Committee members,

I would like to first thank you for your service on this committee, as a Disabled Veteran, I appreciate the recommendations made in this report, however; I do have a concern about one of the key recommendation.

Remove military requirements for veteran county service officers to expand the pool of potential accredited claims counselors for Texas veterans.

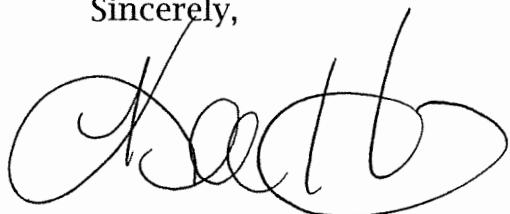
I have been assisting Veterans with issues dealing with the Department of Veterans Affairs in the State of Texas since 2013 and the most common complaint from Veterans were, the person charged with assisting them with their issue was not a Veteran. They all expressed the same concern, which was they felt as though they were not getting fair consideration of the issue at hand. Even though this is merely a perception, it is a perception that many of the Veterans of this great state have and changing the statute may have the opposite effect of what it is intended to do. I understand that 12 counties had County Veteran Service Officers that did not meet the statutory criteria, but that doesn't mean that claims were not submitted from those counties. Most likely, these claims were simply sent to TVC instead of directly to the VA. This is not any different from what some accredited County Veteran Service Officers currently do. This method of claim submittal is even preferred by TVC staff at the RO because these numbers affect "the count" of claims they are able to report, which ultimately plays a role in their funding. Of the 12 counties noted not meeting the criteria how many of them were not certified by TVC? (that information was not included in the report) Since TVC provides training to almost anyone who wants it regardless of statutory criteria, I doubt any of the 12 were not certified.

If the mission is to best service veterans overall, then changing that part of the statute may be counterproductive. The way to best service veterans overall is to fund the state mandate that requires counties to have a county veteran Service Officer. The biggest barrier to Counties providing the best service to Veterans is funding. Bell County may have pushed back on getting a County VSO in the past, but since becoming compliant with statutory criteria, they now have a

better understanding of the importance of County VSOs. They also see the gaps in coverage and services but with limited resources and no state funding for any service provided by County VSOs, in order to maintain fiscal responsibility, the yearly budget balances out almost evenly, leaving no funds to address "hotspots" within the county. A prime example of this for Bell County was when the HOP transit district made changes to the areas in which they provided paratransit services to last September. These changes left many disabled Veterans without transportation who were more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile away from a fixed route. I got calls from so many people, (Veterans, social workers, and even elected officials) looking for a solution to this issue, after all; I was the County Veteran Service Officer. This change happened so fast that no one really had any time to prepare an alternate solution when one was so desperately needed. This issue has not been completely solved but a local chapter of a National Service Organization (VFW Post 3892) has stepped up to help transport Veterans to the VA hospital.

I understand that states resources are not vast and endless, however; not providing Counties with any resources while continuing to increase TVCs budget based on performance numbers that clearly include services provided by the County Veteran Service Offices is truly fundamentally unjust.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Keeyawnia' or similar, written in a cursive style.

Keeyawnia "K.C." Hawkins
County Veteran Service Officer