EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Texas Veterans Commission

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As the state’s main advocate for veterans, staff at the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) care deeply for the well-being of veterans and work diligently to fulfill the agency’s many legislative mandates. With 1.6 million veterans, Texas has the second largest veteran population in the nation and proudly provides a wide variety of services and programs to increase veterans’ quality of life. Since the agency’s last Sunset review in 2006, the Legislature has continued to consolidate and add new programs to TVC, leaving little additional benefit from further organizational change. Overall, the agency has successfully absorbed the education and employment programs from the Texas Workforce Commission, significantly expanded its grant program, enhanced coordination with the Veterans’ Land Board and other agencies, and started other new initiatives as directed by the Legislature, such as entrepreneurship and mental health programs.

Most stakeholders seem happy with TVC’s services and programs, and the review found almost nothing in the way of legislative concerns, news coverage, or even general public interest in the agency’s day-to-day operations. However, such sleepiness risks complacency, and the Sunset review focused on pushing the agency out of a business-as-usual mentality and toward one of continuous improvement. The agency and many stakeholders use the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as a benchmark for comparison, making an easy fallback measure of success simply “doing better than the VA.” With a changing veteran population and perpetually limited resources, TVC must take control of its own future and work smarter by setting clear goals and performance targets, collecting the right information to accurately measure impact to veterans, and better planning for future veteran needs across all its programs.

The review paid special attention to TVC’s state-funded claims assistance program, its bread-and-butter program where agency staff counsel veterans through the federal benefit claims process. TVC has not strategically managed placement or targeting of its claims staff and has not meaningfully measured how well its staff performs to achieve favorable VA decisions for veterans. The agency also has not taken basic steps to modernize customer service, such as allowing veterans to make appointments. TVC depends heavily on institutional knowledge for administration of its programs but has one of
the highest turnover rates in the state. The agency needs to better document its processes and share best practices, so all employees and decision makers are on the same page. Other recommendations in the report aim to improve the impact of TVC’s well-funded grant program and more cost-effectively target the agency’s training resources to employees and partners that need it most. Sunset staff also recommends continuing the agency for 12 years. The following material summarizes the Sunset staff recommendations on TVC.

Issues and Recommendations

Issue 1

TVC Lacks the Proactive Planning and Necessary Information to Regularly Evaluate and Improve Services to Veterans.

TVC acts as the state’s advocate for Texas veterans by helping navigate the complex service network, monitoring the challenges veterans face, and addressing barriers to accessing services. However, TVC does not comprehensively assess and plan holistically across programs to best address veterans’ challenges and more effectively align services. Importantly, the agency does not collect outcome measures, regularly survey veterans, or comprehensively track complaint data to monitor how well its programs serve veterans. Implementing a formal planning process and collecting the right kind of information would allow TVC to set concrete goals for its programs, link planning directly to the needs of Texas veterans, prioritize staff’s work, and quantify its impact on veterans.

Key Recommendations

- Require TVC to annually evaluate and set priorities for all programs.
- Require TVC to create and track meaningful outcome measures for all programs.

Issue 2

TVC’s Status Quo Approach to Claims Counseling Does Not Maximize State Resources to Best Serve Veterans.

The agency assists veterans filing benefit claims with the VA to compensate for hardships resulting from military service. However, TVC has not strategically managed the state’s significant investment in claims staff, lacking regular workload analyses to target staff and funding to the greatest need. Additionally, TVC does not effectively target the efforts of special teams intended to help veterans get faster claims decisions by addressing VA hotspots. The agency also fails to collect, analyze, and report claims outcome data needed to monitor and improve services to veterans. Additionally, TVC has not taken basic steps to improve the customer service experience for veterans and increase overall efficiency, such as providing comprehensive online information for veterans and allowing veterans to make appointments for claims counseling. Finally, state law restricts the pool of veteran county service officers available to file claims by requiring rather than preferring prior military service. The following recommendations would help TVC better use state resources to assist veterans with claims and modernize customer service for veterans.
Key Recommendations

• Require TVC to track, evaluate, and strategically adjust claims staffing and special teams.

• Require TVC to better track and analyze claims outcome data to guide program success.

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

Issue 3

TVC’s Grant Program Needs Improvements to Promote Overall Effectiveness and Transparency.

TVC awards grant funding to nonprofit organizations and units of local government to deliver direct services to veterans. Sunset staff found that the length of the grant cycle was too short to effectively evaluate grantee performance and provide technical assistance to grantees. In addition, TVC lacks policies and appropriate training for grant advisory committee members and TVC commissioners to better prepare them for a successful grant process. Further, TVC does not measure grantee outcomes, a best practice in any grant program. Extending the grant cycle and applying best practices to the agency’s grant program will help ensure that the agency awards grants fairly, tracks performance over time, and meets program goals for veteran services.

Key Recommendations

• Direct TVC to extend the length of its grant cycle from one to two years.

• Direct the agency to formalize the roles and training of the commission and the grants advisory committee to improve quality and transparency in the evaluation process.

• Direct TVC to develop and track enhanced grantee performance measures to better evaluate the benefit of its grant funding to veterans.

Issue 4

TVC Prioritizes a Costly Annual Conference Over Training Targeted to Better Meet Veterans’ Needs.

The agency provides training for its staff and key partners who serve veterans throughout the state but relies heavily on one staff-wide annual conference to train staff and partners. Due to the emphasis on the annual conference, TVC cannot meet other training needs. Despite the high cost and extensive staff time to plan the conference, TVC does not track detailed conference and training costs. TVC also does not effectively target state training resources provided to veteran county service officers, county staff who assist veterans with claims and referrals. Streamlining the fall conference to use training resources more efficiently would help TVC maximize year-round and on-demand training opportunities to help staff and partners serve veterans effectively.
Key Recommendations

- Direct TVC to restructure and streamline the scope and expense of its annual conference.
- Direct TVC to track and analyze detailed training costs to identify potential savings and improvements.
- Direct TVC to prioritize online training and other cost-effective tools to facilitate regular collaboration among staff and partners.

Issue 5

Texas Has a Continuing Need for the Texas Veterans Commission.

Texas benefits from and has an ongoing need for TVC to help the state’s 1.6 million veterans access federal benefits and navigate state services. In addition, the federal government primarily funds the veteran employment and education programs, and the state needs an agency to provide those services. Overall, Sunset staff concluded Texas has effectively consolidated most veteran services under TVC, offering little benefit from further organizational change.

Key Recommendation

- Continue the Texas Veterans Commission for 12 years.

Fiscal Implication Summary

Overall, the recommendations in this report would not have a fiscal impact to the state and can be achieved with existing agency resources. Many recommendations are designed to improve internal operations and efficiency at the agency, but their exact impact would depend on implementation.