

*Coordinating Council
for
Veterans Services*



Fourth Report

October 1, 2018

Introductory Letter

Thomas P. Palladino, Chair

Dear State Leaders,

It is my honor and privilege to submit the final Fourth Report on behalf of the Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services (TCCVS).

TCCVS was established as the result of legislation passed by the 82nd Legislature (2011) in order to: coordinate the activities of state agencies that assist veterans, servicemembers, and their families; coordinate outreach efforts that ensure veterans, servicemembers, and their families are made aware of services; and facilitate collaborative relationships among state, federal, and local agencies and private organizations to identify and address issues affecting veterans, servicemembers, and their families.

This report identifies veteran needs, provides background information and identifies services currently provided by the state, and makes recommendations to address those needs. This report represents countless hours of research, discussion, and ultimately consensus by the members of TCCVS.

Veterans have showed a continued desire to settle or relocate to Texas. Despite the dedicated effort of those working to assist veterans, there remains a persistent need and demand for veteran services. The continued influx of veterans into the state, coupled with the increasing demand of an aging population of WWII, Korea, Vietnam, and Gulf War I era veterans, validate the needs for continued coordination and support.

Texas citizens take pride in recognizing and showing appreciation for the sacrifices military women and men have given to the United States. As Texas continues to lead the nation in support of veterans, state leaders have an opportunity to continue the Texas legacy by boldly addressing the veteran issues and challenges highlighted within this report.

Thank you for giving the members of TCCVS the opportunity to engage in this important work. We also appreciate your serious attention to these issues. Texas is widely recognized for leading the nation on veteran issues, and we look forward to working with you on making these recommendations a reality.

Sincerely,



Thomas P. Palladino, Chair
Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services

Texas

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Executive Summary

The Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services (TCCVS) was created during the 82nd Legislature (2011) by Senate Bill 1796. The Texas Legislature established the Council to accomplish three tasks:

1. Coordinate the activities of state agencies that assist veterans, servicemembers, and their families;
2. Coordinate outreach efforts that ensure that veterans, servicemembers, and their families are made aware of services; and
3. Facilitate collaborative relationships among state, federal, and local agencies and private organizations to identify and address issues affecting veterans, servicemembers, and their families.

The Council, originally comprised of five state agencies, currently consist of the following 22 Texas agencies and departments:

- Texas Veterans Commission
- Texas Veterans Land Board
- Texas Military Department
- Texas Commission on Jail Standards
- State Bar of Texas
- Texas Workforce Investment Council
- Texas Department of Transportation
- Texas Department of Public Safety
- Office of Public Utility Counsel
- Texas Department of Motor Vehicles
- Texas Department of Criminal Justice
- Health and Human Services Commission
- Department of Aging and Disability Services
- Department of State Health Services
- Department of Family and Protective Services
- Office of Acquired Brain Injury
- Texas Workforce Commission
- Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services
- Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs
- Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board
- Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation
- Texas Commission on Law Enforcement

Senate Bill 1796 enabled the TCCVS to establish workgroups to focus on specific policy areas affecting veterans, servicemembers, and their families. For the purposes of this report the Council has established the following nine workgroups:

- Health
- Employment
- Higher Education
- Women Veterans
- Criminal Justice
- Housing
- Transportation
- Communications and Outreach
- Mental Health

Health Workgroup

Unmet Veteran Need #1

The VA's Veteran Choice Program causes billing issues for Veterans and their family members.

Discussion:

Since the Veteran Choice Program was implemented, there have been several revisions to the eligibility requirements. This has created confusion on behalf of veterans and their family members, such as billing issues and delayed and/or inaccurate payments. Veterans are not always notified of the bill and are often turned over to collection agencies, impacting their credit scores and quality of life.

The Veteran Choice program promotes using private sector medical providers. This has frequently complicated these billing issues because their staff were not fully trained to correctly process the charges.

The VA MISSION Act of 2018 consolidates the VCP and private sector care programs into a new Veterans Community Care Program that will help to ensure Veterans use Veterans Health Administration (VHA) benefits. This consolidation will hopefully simplify the appointment and billing process.

Though well-meaning, many community providers are not trained or experienced in treating the unique Veteran patient community. The VHA is offering course material to community health care providers nationwide through the VHA's TRAIN that can familiarize them with these topics.

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission explored the potential with Texas Hospital Association & Texas Medical Association, and Association of Community Clinics to create CME credit courses (or at least increase awareness of Veteran health care requirements and Veterans health care issues in general).

Recommendations:

The Department of Information Resources (DIR) should provide more information the current portal to build a unified Veteran-centered online information system with contacts and Veteran resources statewide.

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission, Texas Hospital Association & Texas Medical Association, and Association of Community Care Clinics should create CME credit courses for VA Choice private healthcare providers to increase their ability to serve veterans.

Unmet Veteran Need #2

Veterans and their families in rural areas do not have adequate access to healthcare and related services.

Discussion:

The majority of VHA Medical Centers (VA Hospitals and VA Outpatient Clinics) are in metropolitan areas. The VHA has established Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC) in smaller cities throughout Texas. Through the VA Choice program, the VHA has provided contracted medical services for those areas not served by the VA medical facilities and to reduce the patient appointment wait time. Therefore, there are many veterans who live in rural areas who find it difficult to access VA medical care.

The VA is improving its telehealth services to provide better access. However, being in rural areas presents specific challenges to implement (connectivity, bandwidth, maintenance, etc.). The VA is addressing these challenges by providing telehealth/telemedicine access to veterans via cellular phone technology.

Rural veterans find it difficult to travel to their appointments because of the long distances. The VHA's Veterans Transportation Service (VTS) has established a network of transportation options for veterans through joint efforts with VHA's Office of Rural Health, Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), community transportation providers, federal, state, and local government transportation agencies, non-profits, and Veterans Transportation Community Living Initiative (VTCLI) grantees. The VTS is currently in place in the El Paso, Dallas, Amarillo, Big Spring, and Harlingen facilities.

Through the VA Highly Rural Transportation Grants, The Texas Veterans Commission Fund for Veterans Assistance (FVA) provides transportation funds for highly rural counties to transport veterans to their medical appointments.

It was reported that both Austin Public Health and Central Health (Travis County Health Care Division) are actively interested in exploring how to best implement and provide VA Telehealth resources within their Medical Access Program (MAP) to increase veteran awareness of VA Telehealth and VHA.

State Agencies, local governments and the Texas Association of Counties should collaborate to increase the outreach to veterans on available healthcare services.

Recommendations:

Direct state agencies and county governments to provide information and resources to veterans in rural areas to increase their access to healthcare and other related veteran supportive services.

Employment Workgroup

Unmet Veteran Need #1

Spouses of 100% Disabled Veterans deemed unemployable by the Veterans Affairs (VA) are unable to use the veteran preference eligibility.

Discussion:

In 2015 Governor Greg Abbott signed the Military Veterans Full Employment Act. This applied the Veteran Preference to state agencies and institutions of higher education. The enactment of this law closely aligned the state's eligibility of veteran's preference with Federal law concerning preference eligibility.

- The Veterans Employment Opportunity Act of 1998 established derived preference for 100% Disabled Veterans deemed unemployable by the Veterans Affairs (VA).
- Under this Derived Veterans Preference rule, a spouse, widow/widower, children or parents of a veteran may be able to claim the preference if the veteran is unable to use it.
- Affording spouses the ability to claim the veteran's eligibility preference should increase the quality of life for the veteran and their family.

Recommendation:

Amend through Legislation the authority for 100% Disabled Veterans deemed unemployable by the Veterans Affairs (VA) to transfer veteran preference eligibility to a spouse.

Unmet Veteran Need #2

Military service members and their spouses who have obtained their professional licenses across state lines are unable to use them in Texas.

Discussion:

Texas has the second largest Veterans population in the nation, combined with Texas military installations, the talent pool in professional occupations continues to grow. While there is a military exemption for professional licensing requirements for the uniformed service member, many spouses accompany the service member on change of duty station orders. Expediting the transfer of professional licensing in targeted professional occupations could attract an experienced and qualified workforce.

The Texas Legislature passed several Bills during previous legislative sessions regarding the licensing and certifications for service members, veterans and spouses:

- 83rd(R) SB242: Relating to the eligibility requirements for certain occupational licenses issued to applicants with military experience,
- 83rd (R) SB162: Relating to the occupational licensing of spouses of members of the military and the eligibility requirements for certain occupational licenses issued to applicants with military experience.
- 83rd (R)HB1960: Relating to reciprocity for emergency medical services personnel certification for certain United States military personnel.

- 83rd (R) HB 2254: Relating to apprenticeship requirements for occupational licenses issued to applicants with military experience.
- 83rd (R) HB2135: Relating to waivers and grants of credit for the requirements to obtain certain private security licenses to individuals who hold security credentials from the United States armed forces.
- 83rd (R)HB2028: Relating to the eligibility requirements for plumbing licenses issued to applicants with military service.
- 83rd (R) HB2029: Relating to the eligibility requirements for electrician licenses issued to applicants with military experience.
- 83rd (R)SB229: Relating to an exception to the domicile requirement for issuance of a commercial driver's license for certain military personnel. SB229 can be used as the precedent for the Texas Legislature to enact further legislation regarding the occupational licensing or certifications of service members, veterans and spouses who meet the eligibility requirements across state lines.

In March 2017 the North Carolina Senate passed SB 8 which provided portability for professional licensing in the state to military members and spouses who had obtained a professional license in another state prior to transitioning to North Carolina.

On June 28, 2018 Department of Labor-Veterans and Employment Training Services announced the launch of the Military Spouse information site which provides military spouses state information on licensing and credentials.

The Texas Workforce Commission launched the Military Family Support Pilot Program in October 2016. The program is designed to provide enhanced employment services to military spouses This program was also was tackling the issue of acceptance of licenses that military spouses had from other states which was a widespread problem identified by the federal military spouse employment programs. The military family support pilot program has been a success, participating Workforce Development Boards have asked for the program to continue. Texas Workforce Commission has allocated 1 million dollars a year for the next three years to fund this program.

Recommendation:

Allow state licensing agencies rule-making authority to issue temporary licenses to military service members, veterans and their spouses who possess out of state professional licenses.

Higher Education Workgroup

Unmet Veteran Need #1

Texas veterans would benefit from the continuation of the Hazlewood Exemption Act.

Discussion:

Texas veterans and their families would continue to benefit from the continuation of the Hazlewood Exemption Act. This is evidenced by the number of veterans and dependents who used the exemption. No recommendations were made for modifying the act in any form until further data collection and analysis can be conducted to support future recommendations which may be provided by stakeholders.

Recommendation:

Continue the Hazlewood Exemption Act in its current form with no modifications.

Unmet Veteran Need #2

Student Veterans from the State of Texas would benefit from the collection and evaluation of additional data on veterans enrolled at institutions of higher education in the state.

Discussion:

Clear and consistent instructions for the collection of veteran data would benefit both the institutions of higher learning and the student veterans of Texas.

Recommendation:

Legislation should be introduced to provide clear and consistent instructions to identify what data should be collected and reported on student veterans.

Criminal Justice Workgroup

Unmet Veteran Need # 1

All law enforcement officers in Texas would benefit from mandatory training in TCOLE 4067, Trauma Affected Veterans. There about 80,000 law enforcement officers in Texas and the overwhelming response to the TCOLE 4067 training has been positive. Increasing law enforcement officer's knowledge of trauma as it affects veterans can increase positive outcomes in police confrontations.

Discussion:

More than 1,000 law enforcement officers have been trained by TVC or local community based MVPN programs as of August 2018: 387 in FY 17, and 460 thus far in FY 18. There are an additional nine trainings scheduled for the remainder of FY 18, and one set for FY 19. Lubbock is in the process of training all their seasoned officers and has added the TCOLE 4067 training to their basic officer course. Midland and Harris County Sherriff offices are training all their officers with TCOLE 4067.

A survey was sent all officers that had taken the course to respond to two questions:

1. Do you think the TCOLE 4067 should be a mandatory course?
2. If yes, should it be added to the basic officers' course or mandatory within two years of obtaining TCOLE certification

Of the respondents to this survey:

91% of those who have taken the TCOLE 4067 training think the TCOLE 4067 training should be mandatory

9% of those who have taken the class do not think it should be mandatory

The results of the second question:

23% think the training should be attached to basic officer training

35% think it should be required within 2 years of becoming a TCOLE certified officer.

Texas has the second largest number of veterans in the country, the largest number of female veterans and about 10% of veterans become incarcerated, with more than 10% having contact with law enforcement. Training law enforcement on the unique challenges that face trauma affected veterans has proven beneficial to our veteran population.

Currently there is no national standard for training law enforcement on veterans' trauma, however there is an obvious need. As we see more veterans returning from the current conflict with post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury and military sexual trauma, our officers want to be informed on the trauma, the symptoms, and accepted de-escalation techniques. Maryland has already taken this legislative step and a comparable training to TCOLE 4067 mandated by HB 1118, which became effective October 2018.

Recommendations:

All law enforcement officers in Texas should be required to take TCOLE 4067, Trauma Affected Veterans.

Housing Workgroup

Unmet Veteran Need #1

Texas Tax Code 11.22(b) which provides a property tax exemption to disabled veterans, has not been revised since 2001 to account for economic inflation, the increase in cost of living and housing costs.

Discussion:

Many Texas veterans, on fixed incomes, cite the swift rise in home values as a cause for concern due to the associated increase in property taxes.

Disabled veterans who are currently living in Texas and have a VA disability rating may meet the eligibility requirements for property tax reduction. Disabled veterans who meet the qualifications outlined in the Texas Tax Code 11.22 may receive an exemption of up to \$12,000 off the value of one piece of property they own for tax purposes. The following schedule, as outlined in Tax Code 11.22(b), is used to determine a disabled veteran's exemption:

\$5,000 of the assessed value	10%	30%
\$7,500	30%	50%
\$10,000	50%	70%
\$12,000	70% and over	

Therefore, a disabled veteran living in Texas who owns a home and is rated by the VA at 60% service-connected disability would be eligible to receive a \$10,000 reduction off the value of their home for property tax purposes. The dollar amounts used in the above schedule were set by HB 2812 (77th Legislature, 2001) and have not been adjusted since then

Currently, Texas Tax Code 11.131 provides full property relief for Texas veterans, who have a 100% VA disability rating due to a service-connected disability.

Recommendation:

Modify Texas Tax Code 11.22 (b) to adjust for inflation.

Unmet Veteran Need #2

Veterans and their families who are experiencing or are at-risk for homelessness would benefit from a statewide risk mitigation collaborative program preventing homelessness.

Discussion:

Risk mitigation funds can be an effective tool for encouraging landlords to rent to tenants they consider to be high-risk, like Veterans transitioning out of homelessness. In 2016, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) conducted a study of successful risk mitigation funds established in four major metropolitan areas. Their findings are available at:

<https://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/engaging-landlords-risk-mitigation-funds-community-profiles>.

A risk mitigation fund will provide housing for tenants with low-income, evictions, poor credit, those experiencing chronic homelessness and criminal records for Texas veterans and their families to have suitable housing.

Within Texas, households spend more than 30% of their income on housing with those earning less than \$50,000 are more likely to be cost burdened. The constricted rental markets create greater competition for individuals and families seeking a limited number of affordable units. This is a greater challenge for those families with low rental capital, homelessness, joblessness, substance abuse and mental illness.

Landlord risk mitigation funds are strategic in providing financial guarantees for landlords who rent to individuals with additional housing barriers. Local governments would work with the Chamber of Commerce to establish and manage the mitigation program and input from local apartment associations. Monitoring would be conducted by a state entity or local agency that provides statewide housing oversight. The methods of funding can be generated through donations, city government, code enforcement revenue, a regional mayors' caucus, private donors, local property management firms; and the county, city and the United Way. A landlord/tenant liaison office would be established to manage landlord, agency, and tenant participation; outreach and claims processing. This landlord/tenant liaison office would be staffed by a local non-profit specialized in homelessness, with logistical support from the city government and financial support from the city and Chamber of Commerce.

Agency participation is established through coordinated intake systems or signed agreements with its landlord liaison staff. The funds would cover deposits and administration fees, property damage (after deposit is applied), unpaid rent, damages for breach of a lease and unit holding fees.

The payouts would assist in covering a half of monthly rent (up to \$600) to hold a unit, an established minimum amount for property damage with minimal verification, with \$2,000 (\pm \$1,000) additional on a case-by-case basis.

These funds would be available to Department of Housing and Urban Development - Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) participants, veterans and their families with barriers to suitable housing.

Recommendation:

The creation of a statewide risk mitigation fund by local governments, similar to those used in other states such as Florida, could be used by private property owners who wish to serve “at-risk” and low-income veterans and their families. Funds would be available to offset financial losses encountered by property owners who participate in the program and serve eligible veterans.

Women Veterans Workgroup

Unmet Veteran Need #1

Homeless and low-income women veterans, especially those with children, would benefit from affordable housing.

Discussion:

In the VA's report, *The Past, Present and Future of Women Veterans*, released February 2017, a GAO study found limited housing for women veterans with children as a barrier when accessing and finding housing. In a recent issue of *Task & Purpose*, it was reported that women veterans face a greater risk of becoming homeless — 2.4% — compared to male veterans and there is an inadequate supply of affordable housing. Also, in a VA report, *Housing Instability Among Women Veterans Accessing Care through the Veterans Health Administration*, released in February 2018, it is documented that “there has been a surge in the number of women Veterans...experiencing housing instability.”

There is a lack of public awareness about homeless women veterans. Two contributing factors to homeless women veterans are the failure of women veterans to 1) self-identify as veteran, and 2) ask for help. Additionally, homeless women are more likely to live with friends or in their vehicles for fear of being in proximity to men (especially if they have suffered some form of sexual trauma), or if they have children, fear of losing them. These women do not get counted in the yearly Point-in-Time count conducted by the Department of Labor. If women do not request housing assistance, it is understandable that there are few shelters or housing for women and women with children. For those women who do step forward, the amount of safe shelter or housing available to them is limited or non-existent.

Access to shelter and housing is hindered by a lack of the unknown: What types of services are available? Where are the services? What is the eligibility criteria? While we openly market the host of services available to veterans from claims counseling to employment, there is not much marketing for shelter or housing.

There are a couple of things that need to happen to truly determine the need for more shelter and housing for women veterans. First, we need to change the dialogue. Instead of asking “Are you a veteran?” we should be asking “Did you serve in the armed forces?” Second, we need to change the current vision of the hopeless-homeless veteran seeking a handout to a resilient-warrior seeking support. A new public awareness campaign about what a veteran looks like, female, fierce, and with children, will not only engage veterans, but the public.

Recommendations:

1. State agencies and public institutions of higher learning that provide services to veterans should be required to change the language used to identify veterans from “Are you a veteran?” to “Did you serve in the armed forces?”
2. State agencies and public institutions of higher learning that provide housing services to veterans should make readily available in an easily accessible format general housing information to veterans and their families.
3. State agencies that provide housing services to veterans should make readily available in an easily accessible format, information and eligibility criteria options to veteran and their families.

Unmet Veteran Need #2

Veterans in Texas would benefit from information on how to obtain affordable and accessible childcare.

Discussion:

In the 2016, TVC Veteran Needs Assessment report prepared by Texas State University, the lack of childcare was cited as an unmet need of women veterans. The nonprofit advocacy group, Child Care Aware of America, reported that Texas has 20 to 29 childcare centers for every 1000 children, ranking among the lowest in the country. In the same report, rural and poorer communities are identified as “childcare deserts.” Veterans, especially low-income, single parent, and millennials—an increasing population among the veteran community—have the greatest need, but have the least access to affordable, quality child care.

The Foundation for Women Warriors, a unique support organization created exclusively for the women veteran community of Southern California, has developed a specific childcare program focused on serving women seeking employment or in school. Identifying this same type of program in Texas has been unsuccessful.

Childcare assistance websites associated with the various workforce solution centers across the state provide eligibility requirements and on-line applications, but some websites are difficult to find, difficult to navigate, and lack consistency in appearance across the state.

The VA piloted a childcare drop-in service for veterans with medical appointments and the Dallas VA, one of the pilot sites, continues to provide this service. Replicating this model in all VA facilities, especially those that have women’s clinics would be beneficial to veterans.

Lack of access to affordable childcare can be self-imposed because a veteran does not ask about childcare. When veterans seek to further their education, or begin to look for work, they take on the challenge of finding childcare on their own, not asking the person filing their benefits claim or helping them with their resume about childcare options. Eligibility criteria is another barrier to access. Veterans who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder/military sexual trauma (PTSD/MST) and may not have a VA diagnosis for a disability rating.

Recommendations:

1. State agencies and public institutions of higher learning that provide services to veterans should make readily available in an easily accessible format childcare information and options to veterans and their families.
2. Establish more childcare facilities for veterans with incentives.

Unmet Veteran Need #3

Equitable access to federal and state veterans' benefits and services is needed for the 177,000 women veterans that live in Texas. Additionally, there is a need to educate and inform women veterans of their benefits and services and advocate on their behalf.

Discussion:

Texas has the largest women veteran population in the country with 177,000 women veterans and growing. Women veterans are the fastest growing segment of the veteran community. In 2015, about 2.1 million (or 11 percent) of the nation's nearly 22 million veterans were women. This number is projected to increase to 2.4 million by 2020. In contrast, the number of male veterans is projected to decrease from 20.1 million to 17.2 million by 2020

The Women Veterans Program was established as an initiative in 2011 and formally established in 2015 by HB 867. TVC has budgeted 1 FTE to the program using internal resources. In 2017, SB 805, further expanded the scope of responsibilities of the Women Veterans Program. No specific appropriations were made in the General Appropriation Act to implement HB 867, nor to support the expansion of duties outlined in SB 805.

Recommendations:

Recommend Legislative support for TVC to fund four additional staff to further the goal of connecting women veterans to federal, state, and local services within four different regions of the state. The TVC has requested additional funding and staff for the Women Veterans Program in their 2020-2021 Legislative Appropriation Request (LAR).

Transportation Workgroup

Unmet Veteran Need #1

Standardize toll road exemptions for veterans statewide.

Discussion:

In 2009 the Texas Legislature passed HB 3139 (81st Regular Session) by Rep. Herrero and Sen. Van de Putte, authorizing toll entities in Texas to establish a discount program for qualified disabled veterans. In late 2012, the Texas Transportation Commission passed Minute Order 113247, establishing the Veteran Toll Waiver Program on Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT) toll roads.

Currently, Transportation Code §372.053 authorizes a toll project entity, including TXDOT, to establish a discount program for electronic toll collection customers that, if established, must include free or discounted use of toll projects by an electronic toll collection customer whose account relates to a vehicle registered (1) under Transportation Code, §504.202 (disabled veterans), (2) under Transportation Code, §504.315(g) (Purple Heart recipients), or (3) by a person who has received the Medal of Honor.

To receive the exemption, a vehicle must be actively registered with the State of Texas and display a disabled veteran, Purple Heart, or Legion of Valor specialty license plate. Veterans can apply for the qualified specialty license plate with the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles (TXDMV). TXDOT's program applies only to TXDOT toll roads.

In central Texas, eligible veterans may drive without charge on TXDOT toll roads:

- Loop 1, State Highway 45 North;
- State Highway 45 Southeast; and
- State Highway 130 (Segments 1-4) from I-35, north of Georgetown to US 183 south of Austin (Central Texas Turnpike System).

TXDOT toll roads in other regions of the state that eligible veterans may travel free of charge are:

- the Camino Colombia toll road, State Highway 255 near Laredo;
- DFW Connector; and
- certain segments of the Grand Parkway near Houston.

Most private toll authorities in Texas did not include provisions to exempt certain veterans from toll fees in their original bond covenants. Article I, Section 16 of the Texas Constitution presents legal barriers for requiring private toll authorities to do so *ex post facto*. While it is possible for private toll authorities to exempt certain veterans from toll charges (ex. North Texas Tollway Authority exemption of Legion of Valor recipients through a partnership with Volvo of Dallas), of the six major toll authorities in Texas, about half still charge disabled veterans. Toll authorities that charge disabled veterans include the North Texas Tollway Authority, the Camino Real Regional Mobility Authority, and the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority (CTRMA) in Austin.

House Bill 894 by Rick Miller (84th Legislature, 2015) attempted to address the current patchwork system by requiring rather than authorizing a toll project entity to establish a waiver program that provides free use of the entity's toll project by an Eligible Veteran. The bill was left pending in the House Committee on Defense and Veterans' Affairs.

Recommendations:

- Recommend reexamining the toll exemption program for veterans to standardize eligibility and consider ways to provide funding to toll entities including but not limited to:
 - Voluntary donation options on toll road billing statements to support exemptions for disabled veterans;
 - Toll entities that do not exempt disabled veterans toll fees should display road markers designating non-exempt toll roads;
 - Toll authorities should provide exemption information to veterans when applying for a tag;
 - State agencies may increase outreach efforts to veterans in order to clarify various exemption programs. These efforts can include easily readable maps and listings of exempt and nonexempt tolls.

Veteran Unmet Need #2

Disabled veterans need reliable transportation options for accessing VA medical services.

Discussion:

There are approximately 23 million veterans in the United States today, and 1.7 million of those veterans call Texas home. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides a comprehensive system of healthcare and other services to veterans to ensure their continued care after departing military service. Today, more than 8 million veterans are enrolled in services involving various kinds of medical care provided by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), one of three administrations within the VA. The VA offers assistance to eligible veterans who are traveling for medical care.

Other reports have identified problems, concerns, and challenges with transportation services now provided to veterans. The kinds of problems that have been observed include the following:

- Veterans report problems accessing VA medical services.
- Rural areas offer special transportation challenges for transportation services serving veterans.
 - Forty percent of Veterans live in rural areas. Younger veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are more likely than other veterans to live in rural areas.
 - Veterans living in rural areas may need to travel extremely long distances to receive medical care and the other services to which they are entitled.
- According to some sources, veterans' transportation services are frequently not coordinated with existing community and public transportation services, the result being that neither the

veterans' transportation services nor existing community transportation services operate as cost-effectively as they might.

- Some volunteer-based services are struggling to obtain or maintain a sufficient number of volunteer drivers to meet the mobility needs of veterans.
- As veterans' transportation services tend to be administered locally, local administrators may not be aware of other travel options or best practices in veterans' transportation services.
- With decentralized decision-making for transportation services for veterans, these services exhibit a lack of uniformity and consistency.

The challenge of effective coordination of veteran's transportation services in Texas is exacerbated by the state's size and by the way that the VA's healthcare network in Texas is deployed. VHA divides the country up into areas covered by Veteran Integrated Service Networks (VISN) which do not necessarily align with state boundaries. Texas is covered by three (3) different VISNs (16, 17, and 18) and within those networks there are seven (7) VA Healthcare Systems, six (6) VA Medical Centers, twenty (20) Outpatient Clinics, and thirty-six (36) Community Based Outpatient Centers.

Higher utilization of technological innovation in the forms of tele-mental health care (counseling) and telemedicine (psychiatry) could greatly reduce or eliminate those barriers to care.

Recommendations:

- The VA and VA medical facilities and regional transit providers should establish formal relationships for communication and coordination to increase access to transportation, promote public/veteran awareness of existing transportation resources available within their community.
- As a component of that effort, encourage public transit providers involved to provide a reduced or free fare to veterans by transit providers throughout the state.
- Address gaps in mental health services to veterans, including rural veterans, through further development and improvement in state telemedicine programs.
- Encourage public transit providers to create more services that include Veterans Health Administration facilities.
- Encourage ride sharing companies to offer discounted fares to disabled veterans who are traveling to medical and employment appointments.

Veteran Unmet Need #3

Local governments, communities, and service organizations that provide transportation services to veterans need access to funding and resources to ensure the sustainability of their programs.

Discussion:

Veterans Transportation Service (VTS) Program

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Healthcare System provides primary care, specialized care, and related medical and social support to serve America's veterans' health and wellness needs. To do this, VHA needs to be a comprehensive, integrated healthcare system providing excellence in health care value, excellence in service as defined by its customers, and excellence in education and research. To enhance the VHA system, the Central Business Office (CBO) is launching a new transportation program for immobilized and remote VA patients to enhance existing programs implemented by local VA Medical Centers (VAMCs). Veterans Transportation Service (VTS) seeks to provide transportation services to include vehicle routing/scheduling software for VA Medical Facilities. The ride scheduling and routing systems will include GPS modules for VTS vehicles.

VA especially recognizes the problems faced by veterans who are visually impaired, elderly, or immobilized due to disease or disability. The VA also recognizes those veterans that are living in remote and rural areas, who are also traveling to access VA health care. The VA is working toward providing these veterans with the most convenient and timely access to transportation services. The VA's vision is to explore the establishment of a network of community transportation service providers, or enhancement of existing network, that could include Veteran Service Organizations (VSO's), community and commercial transportation providers, federal, state and local government transportation services as well as non-profits, such as United We Ride, operating within each VISN or even local facility.

This initiative will not replace current activities but will rather supplement existing benefits and programs to improve access to VA healthcare.

Recommendations:

- Increase awareness of funding options, specifically with local government and community organizations that provide critical transportation services to veterans in order to make these services more sustainable.
- Recommend TVC Fund for Veterans Assistance program provide-grant writing assistance to organizations interested in applying for transportation grants.

Veteran Unmet Need #4

The state should better assess the transportation barriers faced by veterans.

Discussion:

According to a recent study by the Center for a New American Security, Regional transportation shortfalls were listed as an access barrier for veterans seeking health care, benefits, and employment in nearly all interviews and working groups. Compounding these transportation issues are the distances from outlying counties to VA resources – in some cases, VA patients must travel more than 80 miles to VA facilities in Texas.

A recent needs assessment commissioned by the Texas Veterans Commission also indicated that transportation needs are largely unmet and have a large impact on veterans' quality of life.

The Sunset Commission also encouraged the Texas Veterans Commission to create a statewide needs assessment study in order to better prioritize programs and address the evolving needs of veterans in the state.

The Texas Veterans Commission, with support from TXDOT, will include the study of transportation needs of veterans within its larger statewide needs assessment. TXDOT will provide \$50,000 to enable TVC to conduct a statewide needs assessment to include public transportation for Veterans.

Recommendation:

The Texas Veterans Commission and Texas Department of Transportation should partner to conduct a study of the unmet transportation needs of Disabled Veterans.

Veteran Unmet Need #5

The state should standardize public parking exemptions for Disabled Veterans.

Discussion

There is currently a patchwork of municipal programs, which have an inconsistency of exemptions. There is also an inconsistency of eligibility and schedules.

Recommendation:

Standardized statewide guidelines should be developed for exemptions and/or discounted programs to avoid confusion.

Communications and Outreach Workgroup

Veteran Unmet Need #1

Texas Veterans and their families would benefit from a statewide database system that links veteran services and benefits to veterans and their families based upon their needs; additionally, it would assess, evaluate, refer and track the veterans receiving these services.

Discussion:

Currently, there is not a statewide Client Relations Management System (CRMS) to refer veterans to veteran service providers who will address the needs of veterans and their families. Government and local organizations use various systems to serve the veteran community – most use none. Ultimately, there is a need for guidance in choosing a service delivery platform. However, there is no source document that provides an immediate answer about whether and to what extent a given software platform meets the complex needs of regional veteran communities. Furthermore, the publicly available information on competing software packages is of differential quality and quantity. Some software platforms give a comprehensive overview of functionality while others leave it to the end-user to see what the package can do. This complicates any attempt at a simple comparison of features across platforms. Lastly, a limited share of publicly-available information is informed by hands-on experience. There is a considerable gap between second-hand and first-hand understanding of how these systems work.

The Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR) provides statewide leadership and oversight for management of government information and communications technology. Their mission is to provide technology leadership, solutions, and value to Texas state government, education, and local government entities to enable and facilitate the fulfillment of their core missions. One of DIR's responsibilities is to provide agencies with strategic direction and collaboration around effective technology use in Texas state government. Therefore, DIR should determine the information system requirements and various needs of each state agency to recommend a CRMS that is the best fit to assess, track, and evaluate state funded or supported programs and services for Texas Veterans and their families.

Recommendation:

The Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR) should identify the required functionality and attributes of a statewide Client Relations Management System (CRMS) necessary to support the needs of veterans and their families.

Veteran Unmet Need #2

Texas veterans would benefit from coordinated and interconnected efforts to increase public awareness of statewide veteran services available.

Discussion:

The state has made significant investments in the resources listed below and veterans should have greater awareness of their existence. In addition to agency websites, information about services and programs for Texas veterans is available through the following state funded mechanisms:

1. Veterans Call Center: 1-800-252-VETS (8387)
2. 2-1-1: Health and Human Services Commission
3. TexVet: Texas A&M University System Health Science Center
4. The Veterans Portal: Department of Information Resources
5. The Texas Veterans App: Health and Human Services Commission

Lastly, state agencies in Texas strive to maintain a “no wrong door” philosophy to ensure veterans and their family members are efficiently connected to the benefits and services earned through military service. The following information provided discusses the various state funded resources that are listed through the Texas Veterans App and Texas Veterans Portal. Therefore, the App and Portal should serve as the initial point for state resources available to Texas Veterans and their family.

Texas Veterans App (Texas Health and Human Services Commission)

In April of 2014, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) launched a mobile phone app to give Texas veterans quick access to crisis hotlines and provides information about local, state and national resources available to Texas military Veterans and their families.

The App, which can be downloaded from both Google Play Store and the Apple iTunes Store, works on most iPhones and Android mobile phones. By using the application, veterans can:

- Get direct access to the national Veterans Crisis Line, the Hotline for Women Veterans and the Veterans Land Board call center;
- Connect with other veterans in their area; and
- Quickly find services available to military veterans.
- The “Connect with Texas Veterans” connects the caller directly to a 2-1-1 call specialist with 2-1-1Texas 24/7. This feature allows the call specialist to connect the service member/family member to services and benefits within their local community. 2-1-1 call specialists can also give information and referral to Texas Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN), an affiliation of Texas servicemembers, veterans and their families. The network provides veterans with peer support and trusted information about community resources available to them.

All veteran callers who reach 2-1-1, Option 1 via the new “Connect with Texas Veterans” button on the App will be documented within a 2-1-1 TIRN Customer Relationship Management system. The state has made significant investments in the above resources and veterans should have greater awareness of their existence. Additionally, no matter how veterans access information on state services, the information should be consistent, accurate, and current across all resource platforms. Finally, state agencies in Texas should strive to maintain a “no wrong door” philosophy to ensure veterans and their family members are efficiently connected to the benefits and services earned through military service.

Veterans Portal (Department of Information Resources)

Responding to actions by the 78th Texas Legislature, the Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR) created a web portal designed specifically for veterans. The Veterans Portal was located on the TexasOnline portal but has since moved to Texas.gov. The contract expanded services to customers, incorporated the use of new Web 2.0 tools, and significantly increased revenue to the state.

Throughout 2010 and 2011, numerous state partners combined efforts to:

- Provide easy access to relevant resources and information for Texas veterans;
- Identify and define content of the portal; and
- Develop input and feedback mechanisms to ensure the content is accurate and current.

The Veterans Portal is promoted by all state agencies and is featured on the Texas Veterans App, which was discussed in the previous section.

2-1-1 Texas Information and Referral Network (Health and Human Services Commission) The 2-1-1 Texas Information and Referral Network (2-1-1 TIRN) is the single point for statewide health and human services information and referral in Texas. Following its inception in 1997, the Texas Legislature has periodically expanded the scope of 2-1-1. Senate Bill 1058 (80th Session, 2007) required 2-1-1 to provide information and referrals for reintegration services to military service members and their families. Since 2008, 2-1-1 has participated in several initiatives to benefit military members and their families, including “Partners Across Texas” which aims to enhance support for Texas Army and Air National Guard Service and family members.

Currently, the 2-1-1 TIRN is connected to the Texas Veterans App middle button “Connect with Texas Veterans” which allows callers to reach call specialists who can assist in providing information and referral to benefits and/or services within their local community. If the veteran caller has acute needs, the call specialist may offer to conduct follow-up call to ensure the caller’s inquiry or issue was resolved. The program or service information provided by 2-1-1 call specialists is updated annually and may be provided by TexVet and the Office of Veteran Services at HHSC.

TexVet (Texas A&M University System Health Science Center)

TexVet is an online information and referral website that compiles and indexes community organizations, resources, and events pertinent to Texas military members, veterans, and family members. The TexVet Initiative originated as a collaborative effort between the United States Department of Defense, Veterans Health Administration, Texas Military Forces, Texas A&M University System Health Science Center (TAMHSC), and the Texas 2-1-1 Information and Referral Network.

Veterans Call Center: 1-800-252-VETS (8387)

(Texas Veterans Land Board and Texas Veterans Commission)

The Veterans Call Center (1-800-252-VETS (8387)) works closely with the Texas Veterans Commission to provide veterans with benefits information and assistance services through a statewide call service center. The call center is currently promoted by the Veterans Land Board (VLB) and the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) in the media, social media, and on promotional items through the VLB and TVC.

Recommendation:

Direct the TCCVS agencies, to collaboratively use Budget Rider Section 17.04 of the 85th Legislature to provide information to veterans seeking assistance from any state agency that provide veteran specific services. This would include the promotion of the Texas Veterans App and Texas Veterans Portal as initial point state resources with a list of resources available to Texas Veterans and their family.

Mental Health Workgroup

Veterans Unmet Need #1

Access to culturally competent mental health services.

Discussion:

Multiple studies and reports identify the need for culturally-competent, person-centered delivery of mental health services. This is particularly true of special populations, including veterans and their families. Culturally-competent service delivery cuts through the stigma associated with accessing mental health services among all populations, reduces the time needed to establish base-line trust between provider and client, and facilitates a climate of shared goals and objectives of mental health providers and clients. While some mental health providers have a background working with military communities, the vast majority of these providers are not familiar with the unique challenges military personnel and their families experience through military-related traumas.

Recommendations:

- Licensing Boards for mental health and social work professionals should require continuing education in military cultural competency training for all Licensed Mental Health Professionals (LMHPs) in the state who specifically serve veteran clientele,
- Military cultural competency training should be required for grantees of state agencies who offer mental health grants for veteran-serving organizations.

Veteran Unmet Need #2

Although steps have been taken to introduce telemed-delivered mental health services, veterans still experience a gap in services among rural parts of the state.

Discussion:

Both the Texas Veterans Commission and the Texas Health and Human Services Commission make grants with organizations and entities which serve the mental health needs of Texas veterans and their families. Telemed-delivered mental health services offer a unique opportunity to reach veterans who have challenges accessing traditionally delivered, in-person mental health services resulting from geographical and transportation barriers. The Veterans Administration employing telemed-delivered mental health services and continues to seek expansion of these services to meet the needs of rural veterans and veterans with transportation-related barriers to traditional brick-and-mortar clinics.

Recommendations:

- State agencies which offer veteran mental health grant opportunities should continue to focus on prioritizing telemed-delivered services.
- Enhance opportunities for community-based telemed-delivered services.
- Continue and enhance State and Local partnerships with the Veteran Health Administration Suicide Prevention staff to implement the telemed-delivered services.

Veteran Unmet Need #3

Statewide veteran suicide prevention efforts are currently being developed, but immediate steps can be taken, with little cost, to address this issue

Discussion:

As the Statewide Veteran Suicide Prevention Plan is being developed, for long-term implementation, steps need to be taken to engage with, identify, and address the acute need of veterans who may be to the point of distress that they contemplate or act on suicidal thoughts. Low- and no-cost measures, such as the widespread use of the Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale - for which little, if any, training is required to use - provide immediate identification of these individuals for referral to local, state, and federal suicide prevention hotlines and experts. The Veterans Administration has implemented its Clay Hunt Act pilot in both Houston and San Antonio. This Act, which seeks to partner Veterans Administration mental health and suicide prevention staff with local communities to identify and refer at-risk-for-suicide veterans to Veterans Administration treatment facilities, is designed to outreach to the 14 of 20 veterans who die by suicide and are not engaged in Veterans Administration healthcare services.

Recommendations:

- Continue to support the development and implementation of the Statewide Veteran Suicide Prevention Action Plan (SB 578, 85th Legislative Session)
- Training should be provided to all veteran-focused, state-funded programs on the use of the Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale (CSSRS)
- Continue and enhance State and Local partnerships with the Veteran Health Administration Suicide Prevention staff to implement the Clay Hunt Act

Appendix A: Actions Taken from Third Report

Health Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Veteran County Service Officers and other Veteran Service Organizations need training seminars as it relates to health care options available to veterans and their families.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Expand and enhance local and regional collaboration between Veteran County Service Officers (VCSSOs) and state, county, and local agencies that provide social services and benefits.

85th Legislative Session Update

S.B. 544 was signed into law and allows VCSSOs in Texas the flexibility to attend public or private training courses approved by the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC). This change will expand the number of training opportunities VCSSOs may attend to fast track the accreditation process.

Veteran Need #2

Texas veterans would benefit from coordinated efforts to increase public awareness of veteran related services provided by state and federal agencies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should support the development of a public service announcement (PSA), developed in collaboration with the VA to raise awareness of the Choice Program and Community Care efforts to include other veteran benefits.

85th Legislative Session Update

S.B. 591 was signed into law and directs the TVC to conduct a community outreach campaign. The new law allows the TVC to contract with public, private or non-profit agencies to carry out the provisions of the bill which will assist with increasing awareness of veteran specific services and benefits.

Veteran Need #3

Texas veterans would benefit from the increased participation of health care professionals in the VA Choice Program.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should support outreach efforts directed towards the Texas Medical Authority (TMA) and similar organizations of specialty providers to assist the VA with recruiting and placement of health professionals in rural VA facilities and Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs).

85th Legislative Session Update

No action taken.

Employment Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Transitioning veterans need coordinated services and resources that align with civilian career pathways.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should support and advocate for transitioning servicemembers in Texas to receive counseling on Texas specific veteran programs and services that mirror the four DoD Transition Tracks (employment, education, career technical training, and entrepreneurship).

85th Legislative Session Update

H.B. 1973 was left pending in the House Calendars Committee (last action taken) and proposed to establish a program at the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) to expedite the entry of veterans and military servicemembers into the civilian workforce by solidifying partnerships between military transition centers and workforce development boards. This legislation would have also codified the Texas Veterans Leadership Program at the TWC.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans need improved job matching services.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conjunction with TCCVS, the Texas Legislature should support an annual report that identifies the top five military occupational specialty (MOS) codes transitioning out of the military and the top five corresponding civilian occupations.

85th Legislative Session Update

H.B. 257 was signed into law and directs the TWC, in conjunction with TCCVS, to compile a report that identifies the top five MOS codes transitioning from military service to employment in conjunction with five civilian occupations that offer transferable skills for veterans.

Higher Education Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Texas veterans would benefit from sustainment of the Hazlewood Exemption Act.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should act preserve the state's Hazlewood Exemption Act to ensure Texas veterans, their families, and survivors are recognized for their service and sacrifice and allowed the opportunity to further their education.

85th Legislative Session Update

Several pieces of legislation (H.B. 3766 – H.B. 4089 – H.B. 2536) were filed to amend the Hazlewood exemption. Additionally, multiple budget riders were proposed that would have provided additional funds for the Hazlewood Trust Fund to support the Legacy portion of the Hazlewood benefit. However, at the end of the regular session no legislation was signed into law.

Veteran Need #2

Student veterans and the State of Texas would benefit from the collection and evaluation of additional data on veterans enrolled at institutions of higher education in the state.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should provide clear and consistent instructions through legislation identifying what data institutions of higher education shall collect and report on students utilizing veteran benefits.

85th Legislative Session Update

H.B. 3766 was left pending in committee and proposed to move the administration of the Hazlewood program from TVC to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans need post-secondary credit for military training.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Texas institutions of higher education should develop articulation agreements with the clearinghouse for College Credit for Heroes (Central Texas College) to enable academic credit to be granted for documented military training. The Texas Legislature should enable and direct the College Credit for Heroes (CC4H) program to annually report the number of credit hours awarded under CC4H that were applied towards a degree or certification program at Texas institutions of higher education.

85th Legislative Session Update

H.B. 493 was signed into law and directs the CC4H program to report the number of college credits awarded through the program that are applied toward a student's degree or certification program at an institution of higher education.

H.B. 1192 was left pending in committee and would have directed the Texas Workforce Commission and the CC4H program to ensure that all community college districts in Texas offer a fast-track education program for veterans who received military training in the field of allied health.

S.B. 1845 was passed by the Senate but left pending in a House committee and not signed into law. The bill would have formalized and codified the efforts of the CC4H program to ensure that college credits earned through the program are transferable among all institutions of higher education in Texas.

Criminal Justice Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Judges should utilize, and the State of Texas should encourage, programs within Community Supervision and Correction Departments (CSCDs) that address the needs of veterans on probation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should provide additional resources to the Community Justice Assistance Division of Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) to support programs specifically designed for veterans.

85th Legislative Session Update

H.B. 865 was signed into law and codifies the Veterans Services Coordinator position at TDCJ. This position will assist with coordinating efforts within TDCJ to assist veterans placed on community service as well as other duties as assigned.

Veteran Need #2

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) should continue to expand the use of information it has about incarcerated veterans.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should consider providing resources for incarcerated veteran support within TDCJ.

85th Legislative Session Update

No specific action taken.

Veteran Need #3

Veteran Treatment Courts (VTCs) should be encouraged to expand training, programming, post-court services and the use of mentors and peer support.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should support the integration of services related to Veteran Treatment Courts including, education for defense attorneys on VTCs, dedication of prosecutors to a VTC, and identification and utilization of non-VA community resources in VTC programs.

85th Legislative Session Update

H.B. 322 [was signed into law and allows trial courts to](#) file and facilitate an expunction for a veteran who successfully completes a Veteran Treatment Court (VTC) program in Texas. This new law requires that the case be dismissed by the court with no fees assessed for the expunction, if the veteran has not received a previous expunction under this section of statute.

H.B. 3069 [was also signed into law and](#) clarifies that VTCs are authorized to function as both pre- and post-adjudication programs. Further, subject to the provisions of this bill, a veteran that successfully completes a VTC program in Texas is entitled to file for a petition of non-disclosure with the court of original jurisdiction.

Veteran Need #4

Explore ways the State of Texas can coordinate with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to assist incarcerated veterans in receiving Compensation & Pension (C&P) exams from VA funded doctors.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Initiate a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the VA to allow for VA funded doctors to complete C&P exams in facilities operated by TDCJ. Create an MOU with the VA to allow for VA funded doctors to complete C&P exams via telemedicine in facilities operated by TDCJ.

85th Legislative Session Update

No action taken

Housing Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Veterans need greater access to safe and affordable housing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should increase the commitment to the Housing4TexasHeroes (H4TXH) program through additional funding to the Housing Trust Fund and study the feasibility of funding and implementing a state-wide risk mitigation fund that would reduce the liability for property owners who offer housing to at-risk veterans.

85th Legislative Session Update

Funding for the H4TXH program was sustained through FY2019 via S.B. 1.

H.B. 2836 was passed by the Texas House of Representatives, but not heard in the Senate. The bill would have tasked the Comptroller of Public Accounts to conduct a study to evaluate the feasibility, methods, and costs of establishing and implementing a program to provide financial insurance to property owners who offer housing to veterans at risk of homelessness.

Veteran Need #2

Homeless and low-income veterans, especially those with children, need access to affordable housing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should find ways to offer tax relief incentives to non-profit organizations attempting to provide housing to veterans with children.

85th Legislative Session Update

H.B. 2585 was referred to and left pending in committee and would have allowed a municipal or county housing authority of any size to borrow money, accept grants and exercise necessary powers to provide safe and sanitary housing communities for veterans. Currently, the Local Government Code limits this authority to counties and municipalities with a population greater than 500,000.

Veteran Need #3

Disabled veterans in Texas would benefit from revisions to the disabled veteran tax exemption schedule.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should consider amending the tax exemption for disabled veterans living in Texas by transitioning the current exemption schedule from a fixed dollar amount exemption to a percentage of the home's assessed value.

85th Legislative Session Update

Several bills (H.B. 1696 – H.B. 2877 – H.B. 2887 – H.B. 3002) were introduced and referred to committee that would have altered the current framework of property tax relief for disabled veterans in Texas. However, no legislation was signed into law.

Woman Veterans Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Homeless and low-income veterans, especially those with children, would benefit from affordable housing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should find ways to offer tax relief incentives to non-profit organizations attempting to provide housing to veterans with children.

85th Legislative Session Update

H.B. 2312 was referred to committee and would have prevented property owners from refusing to sell or rent a dwelling due to a person's military status. While not a common occurrence, instances of discrimination based on military/veteran status have been reported and are detrimental to those most in need of housing.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans in Texas would benefit from a program that recognizes child care training and licensing from military installations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) should explore ways to support veterans who wish to become day care providers.

85th Legislative Session Update

No action taken.

Veteran Need #3

Women veterans would benefit from additional medical providers, especially those who have military competency and familiarity with Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and mental health services for veterans.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should promote outreach efforts to the Texas Medical Association (TMA) to encourage VA CHOICE program education and military competency training, with the goal of encouraging additional fee-based female medical providers to participate in the VA CHOICE program.

85th Legislative Session Update

S.B. 27 was signed into law and authorizes the Mental Health Program for Veterans to place mental health professionals at multiple Local Mental Health Authority facilities throughout Texas, including rural areas. These additional providers will have the ability to address the mental health needs of veterans in their community and refer to additional services as needed.

The Texas Veterans + Family Alliance Grant Program (TV+FA) was sustained and fully funded through FY2019 via S.B. 1. This program aims to improve the quality of life of Texas veterans and their families by empowering local Texas communities across the state to expand the availability of, increase access to, and enhance delivery of mental health treatment and services.

Veteran Need #4

Veterans who have acute financial needs would benefit from local programs that provides short-term assistance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should consider developing a specific grant fund and/or a reimbursement framework to support Veteran County Service Offices.

85th Legislative Session Update

S.B. 1679 was signed into law and sets aside five percent of all funds in the Fund for Veterans Assistance at the Texas Veterans Commission to fund grants for Veteran County Service Officers (VCSOs). According to the provisions of the bill, VCSOs still must apply for grants in the same manner as other eligible applicants, but until the five percent is exhausted, VCSOs will only compete amongst themselves and not the broader applicant pool.

Additional Information:

S.B. 805 was signed into law and requires the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) to compile a report every other year that details information and assistance records regarding women veterans in Texas. Additionally, the bill requires the TVC to conduct a community outreach campaign targeted towards women veterans in Texas. Also, S.B. 805 requires that any state agency that provides a benefit or service to women in the state must include in the application for that benefit or service a space to ascertain if applicant is a woman veteran. Lastly, the bill sets June 12th as Women Veterans Day in Texas to recognize the role of women in the military forces and commemorate the sacrifices of and valor displayed by Texas women veterans.

Transportation Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Disabled veterans need equitable relief from toll road fees across the state.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should reexamine the toll exemption program for veterans and consider ways to provide funding to toll entities.

85th Legislative Session Update

Several bills (H.B. 1276 – H.B. 1309 – H.B. 1929 – H.B. 4204) were referred to committee and would have amended the administration of toll road discounts and exemptions for certain Texas Veterans. However, these measures were not passed by either chamber.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans, specifically disabled veterans, need reliable transportation options for accessing VA medical services.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Encourage public transit providers to provide a minimum "benefits package" to disabled veterans. Address gaps in mental health services to veterans, including rural veterans, through further development and improvement in state telemedicine programs. (*Cross workgroups – Mental Health*)

85th Legislative Session Update

No action taken.

Veteran Need #3

Local governments, communities, and service organizations that provide transportation services to veterans need access to funding and resources to ensure the sustainability of their programs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Increase awareness of funding options, specifically with local government and community organizations that provide critical transportation services to veterans

85th Legislative Session Update

No action taken.

Communications and Outreach Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Texas veterans would benefit from coordinated efforts to increase public awareness of veteran related services provided by the state.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should grant state agencies that provide direct services to veterans the statutory authority to contract for marketing and outreach services. State agencies and programs that have veteran services should develop, formalize, and support a cohesive and consistent strategy to outreach and inform veterans, their families, and survivors.

85th Legislative Session Update

S.B. 591 was signed into law and authorizes the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) to conduct a comprehensive community outreach campaign. Provisions of the bill allow the TVC to contract with public, private and non-profit entities to expand awareness of all veteran services offered by the State.

Veteran Need #2

Veteran services and initiatives provided by state agencies should be uniformly highlighted and structured to provide Texas veterans and their local communities a consistent message and easier access to their benefits.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should encourage the development of informational material for community veteran advocates, specifically the faith-based leadership, to assist them in connecting veterans to services.

85th Legislative Session Update

See note above regarding S.B. 591.

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Mental Health Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Veterans need local mental health resources to assess and treat behavioral health issues prior to the onset of a crisis.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should continue to support existing programs that provide training and certification for Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) and Military Cultural Competency.

85th Legislative Session Update

Funding for the Mental Health Program for Veterans at the Texas Veterans Commission which provides the above training was sustained and continued through FY 2019.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans need communities in which they live to provide and promote opportunities for peer engagement to prevent the onset of a crisis and/or prevent crisis escalation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should continue supporting mental health programs for veterans including the Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN).

85th Legislative Session Update

S.B. 27 was signed into law and authorizes the Mental Health Program for Veterans to place mental health professionals at multiple Local Mental Health Authority facilities throughout Texas, including rural areas. These additional providers will have the ability to address the mental health needs of veterans in their community and refer to additional services as needed. Additionally, funding for the MVPN was continued through FY 2019.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans would benefit from the expanded availability of telemedicine services.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should address gaps in mental health services to veterans, including rural veterans, through further development and improvement in state telemedicine programs.

85th Legislative Session Update

No action taken.

Appendix B: TCCVS Agency Information and Services

Texas Veterans Commission

The Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) provides claims representation and counseling for Veterans, their dependents and survivors, employment services to Texas Veterans and helps employers find qualified Veteran job applicants, assists Veterans in utilizing their higher education benefits, and offers grants to eligible charitable organizations, local government agencies, and Veterans Service Organizations that provide direct services to Texas Veterans and their families.

www.tvc.texas.gov

Texas Veterans Land Board

Since 1946, the Texas Veterans Land Board (VLB) has provided benefits and services for Texas Veterans, military members and their families. Today, they include: low interest land, home, and home improvement loans; long term skilled nursing home care in eight state Veterans homes; burial and interment services in four state Veterans cemeteries; Voices of Veterans Oral History Program; and Veterans benefit information and assistance services through the joint VLB/ TVC, and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Statewide Veterans Call Service Center.

www.glo.texas.gov/vlb

Texas Military Department

The Texas Military Department (TMD) is the executive portion of the Texas Military and consists of all staff directorates and component headquarters exercising control of military forces, facilities, installations, activities and functions under the supervision of The Adjutant General. The Adjutant General is the governing officer, policy maker, head of the department and Commander of the Texas Military Forces. TMD is the state agency charged with administrative activities in support of the Texas Military Forces.

The Texas Military Forces consist of the Texas Army National Guard, Texas Air National Guard, the Texas State Guard, the Domestic Operations Task Force, and any other military force organized under state law.

Through the Family Support Services Office, the TMD has a number of programs and partnerships with services available to Texas Service Members, Veterans, and families such as: Family Assistance, Transition Assistance, Mental Health & Counseling Services, Employment and Financial Assistance, Retirement Services, and TRICARE Services.

tmd.texas.gov/

Health and Human Services Commission

The Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) mission is to maintain and improve the health and human services system in Texas and to administer its programs in accordance with the highest standards of customer service and accountability for the effective use of funds. HHSC oversees the operations of the health and human services system, provides administrative oversight of Texas health and human services programs, and provides direct administration of some programs.

HHSC's Veterans Service Division initiative is responsible for reviewing programs and benefits available for Veterans and recommends ways to improve and better coordinate those services. The initiative will work with staff at all five health and human services agencies as well as other state agencies and community-based organizations that serve Veterans.

hhsc.state.tx.us

The Health and Human Services Commission, **Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs)** are a key point of access for person-centered long-term services and supports (LTSS) specialized information, referral, and assistance. ADRCs promote linkages to existing military and veteran services programs and benefits, as well as other local and state level LTSS. Programs and services available vary by region and may include: transportation, benefits and system navigation assistance, care coordination, benefits application assistance, and veteran-directed home and community-based services. The local ADRC may be contacted by calling 855-YES-ADRC (855-937-2372). For more information, visit: hhs.texas.gov/services/health/clinics-health-organizations-and-resource-centers/aging-and-disability-resource-center

Department of State Health Services

Programs implemented by the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) are based on recommendations included in the 2008 DSHS report Behavioral Health Services for Returning Veterans and Their Families: Service Gaps and Recommendations and a 2011 update. The programs use funds appropriated by the Legislature. The primary objective is to provide Peer-to-Peer support for servicemembers, Veterans, and family members by organizing activities to identify individuals who can benefit from support services provided by trained Veterans. The activities include one-on-one mentoring, and support group discussions. The aim is to develop trust relationships built on shared life experiences in developing skills and access to resources useful in adapting to post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries.

<http://www.dshs.state.tx.us>

Department of Aging and Disability Services

The Department of Aging and Disability Services, Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs) are a key point of access for person-centered long-term services and supports (LTSS) specialized information, referral, and assistance. ADRCs promote linkages to existing military and veteran services programs and benefits, as well as other local and state level LTSS. Programs and services available vary by region and may include: transportation, benefits and system navigation assistance, care coordination, benefits application assistance, and veteran-directed home and community-based services. The local ADRC may be contacted by calling 855-YES-ADRC (855-937-2372). For more information, visit:

<http://www.dads.state.tx.us/>

Department of Family and Protective Services

The Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) works with communities to protect children, the elderly, and people with disabilities from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. It also works to protect the health and safety of children in daycare, foster care and other types of 24-hour care. We do this through investigations, services and referrals, regulation, and prevention programs. <http://www.dfps.state.tx.us>

State Bar of Texas

The State Bar of Texas administers the Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans program to develop and assist pro bono legal clinics throughout the state for military Veterans who otherwise cannot afford or do not have access to the legal services they need. <http://www.texasbar.com>

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board provides leadership and coordination for the Texas higher education system. Since being created by the Texas Legislature in 1965, the Board has worked to achieve excellence for the college education of Texas students. The Board meets four times a year. Meetings occur in Austin but are usually also broadcast on the Web. <http://www.theccb.state.tx.us/>

Texas Workforce Commission

Although the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) provides employment assistance as well as education and training to the public who are seeking employment. Along with specific federal and state statute to provide priority of service to Veterans, TWC has a long tradition of supporting Texas Veterans because we believe Veterans are equipped with the technical skills, education, professionalism, and leadership experience sought by Texas employers. The TWC Veterans program includes: <http://www.twc.state.tx.us>

- The Texas Workforce Commission’s Vocational Rehabilitation Division is engaged in a memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs- Veterans Rehabilitation and Employment (VA-VRE) to expand employment and rehabilitation services to Veterans with disabilities statewide and beyond the reach of VA-VRE. TWC – VR counselors work directly with the veterans to address potential barriers that prevent successful employment due to their disability in each of our 6 regions. In collaboration with our local business services units, TWC’s VR cultivates business partnerships with major employers to create employment opportunities for Veterans with disabilities.

College Credit for Heroes:

- Texas Veterans Leadership Program
- Red, White, and You Veteran Job Fair
- Veterans Workforce Outreach Initiative
- Apprenticeship for Veterans
- Texas Operation Welcome Home
- Skills for Transition Program
- We Hire Vets
- Military Family Support Program

Texas Workforce Investment Council

The Texas Workforce Investment Council assists the Governor and the legislature with strategic planning for and evaluation of the Texas workforce system, which is comprised of eight state agencies, their local program providers, and over 20 diverse and dynamic programs. The Council assists with the coordination of determining employer workforce needs and satisfaction with programs and services. The Council’s partner agencies, including TVC, gather data from employer customers at appropriate intervals to determine employer needs and satisfaction.

TVC’s efforts to determine and respond to employer needs, thereby enhancing employment opportunities for Veterans, was initiated under the previous system strategic plan and continues under the recently approved *Texas Workforce System Strategic Plan FY 2016–FY 2023*. TVC’s work to gather information and data by surveying employer continues, and results demonstrate a high response rate and a very high satisfaction level among employers who used the agency’s employment services. <http://governor.state.tx.us/twic>

Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation

The Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation (TDLR) is committed to providing expedited services to Veterans and military spouses and is proud to be a member of the Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services. <http://www.tdlr.texas.gov>

- TDLR provides expedited licensing for military spouses and veterans transitioning to civilian occupations regulated by TDLR.
- Veterans are allowed to credit verified military experience, training, or education toward fulfilling licensing requirements. Currently, six TDLR programs have a corresponding MOS allowing for this credit.
- TDLR license application fees are waived for veterans if the applicant's military service, training, or education substantially meets all of the requirements of the license.

Commission on Jail Standards

The Texas Commission on Jail Standards is the regulatory agency over Texas county jails. While the agency does not provide direct services to Veterans, the agency actively engages with sheriffs, county officials, and jail administrators about available resources for justice-involved Veterans.

Our activities include disseminating technical assistance memos to counties about Veterans' services found at the local, state, and federal level, writing articles on Veterans' resources in our agency newsletter, and inviting Veterans groups to speak during our agency presentations at training conferences.

As part of its regulatory requirements, the Commission mandates county jails utilize the Department of Veteran Affairs' Veteran Reentry Search Service (VRSS) to identify veterans. The VRSS provides real-time identification of veterans to county corrections officers. After justice-involved Veterans are identified, our goal is that counties can link Veterans to available services and resources. <http://www.tcjs.state.tx.us>

Texas Department of Public Safety

The Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) proactively protects the citizens of Texas in an ever-changing threat environment while always remaining faithful to the U.S. and State Constitution. DPS offers a designation of "VETERAN" on driver's licenses issued to Texas Veterans so they can easily prove their eligibility when applying for various benefits in addition to free and discounted licenses. <http://www.txdps.state.tx.us>

Texas Commission on Law Enforcement

The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement has been committed for several years now to assist and expedite the ability of Veterans to re-enter the Texas workplace in the field of law enforcement. We have had in place since 2009 a process through which Veterans with military law enforcement experience can become Texas peace officers without having to participate in redundant training. <http://www.tcole.texas.gov/>

Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs

The Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA) is the state agency responsible for promoting and preserving affordable home ownership, financing the development of affordable rental housing, ensuring long-term stability and habitability of housing for low-income households, supporting community and energy assistance programs, and providing housing activities in the colonies. TDHCA is also responsible for the regulation of the state's manufactured housing industry. <http://www.tdhca.state.tx.us>

Texas Department of Transportation

The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) is organized by administration, districts, divisions and offices. Four regional support centers provide operational and project delivery support for the agency's 24 geographical districts. TxDOT's workforce is made up of engineers, administrators, financial experts, designers, architects, sign makers, accountants, purchasers, maintenance workers, travel counselors and many other professions. All of our employees work together to realize the TxDOT mission: providing safe and reliable transportation solutions for Texas.

TxDOT provides funding and assistance for transportation services and programs that can be used to serve and support Veterans. <http://www.txdot.gov>

Department of Motor Vehicles

The Texas Department of Motor Vehicles (TxDMV) offers a number of license plates specifically for military Veterans and military medal honorees at no fee and/or reduced fee. There are three categories of military license plates: Meritorious Service, Recognition Award, and Military Service.

Meritorious Service category license plates are issued at no fee (plate or registration) for the first set. Recognition Award category license plates require the payment of a \$3 plate fee; however, there is no requirement for the payment of annual registration fees. Military Service category license plates require the payment of the annual registration fee; however, there no plate fee. This applies to first and additional sets. <http://www.txdmv.gov>

Texas Department of Criminal Justice

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) manages offenders in state prisons, state jails and private correctional facilities that contract with TDCJ. TDCJ honors and supports Veterans by granting them employment preferences, and fully recognizes, honors, and enforces the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, a law which protects the civilian job rights and benefits of United States military service personnel.

TDCJ has a history of successful recruiting at military bases and continues to actively recruit personnel who are about to be honorably discharged. Military Veterans and staff have a great number of skills and quality training, along with experience handling a variety of responsibilities.

<http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us>

Office of Public Utility Counsel

The Office of Public Utility Counsel (OPUC) was created in 1983 in response to legislative and consumer groups concerns that residential and small commercial utility consumers were not adequately represented in utility proceedings. OPUC is charged with representing

residential and small commercial consumers, as a class, in proceedings affecting utility rates and services. OPUC represents consumers' interests before the Public Utility Commission (PUC), the Texas Reliability Entity, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT), and state and federal courts.

The agency also provides information to servicemembers, veterans and their families and provides presentations, upon request, to military groups and organizations representing servicemembers and their families

<http://www.opuc.texas.gov>

Texas Veterans Mobile App

The Texas Veterans Mobile App gives Texas Veterans quick access to the Veterans Crisis Line, the Hotline for Women Veterans, the Military Veteran Peer Network, and the Texas Veterans Portal. The app, which can be downloaded from both Google Play and the App Store, works on most iPhones and Android mobile phones.

Texas Online: Texas Veterans Portal

The Texas Veterans Portal provides information from federal and state agencies in a comprehensive collection of links about Veteran's benefit information. The website contains information to assist you and your family in buying a home or land, receiving education benefits, finding a job, health care resources and more.

veterans.portal.texas.gov

Veteran Treatment Court Programs in Texas

County	Judicial Circuit	State, City Zip
Bell	County Court at Law #3	Belton, Texas 76513
Bexar	437 th District Court	San Antonio, Texas 78205
Bexar	County Court #6	San Antonio, Texas 78205
Brazoria	149 th District Court	Angleton, TX 77515
Cameron	444th District Court of Cameron County	Brownsville, Texas 78521
Collin	296 th District Court	McKinney, Texas 75071
Comal	County Court at Law #2	New Braunfels, Texas 78130
Dallas	Criminal District Court #4(K)	Dallas, Texas 75207
Denton	Denton County Criminal Court #3	Denton, Texas 76209
El Paso	County Court at Law #1	El Paso, Texas 79901
El Paso	346th Judicial District	El Paso, Texas 79901
Fannin	296th District Court	Bonham, Texas 75418
Ft. Bend	County Court at Law #2	Richmond, Texas 77469
Galveston	Galveston County	Galveston, Texas 77550
Grayson	296th District Court	Sherman, Texas 75090
Guadalupe	County Court at Law	Seguin, Texas 78155
Harris	228th District Court	Houston, Texas 77002
Harris	County Criminal Court at Law No. 2	Houston, Texas 77002
Hays	County Court at Law #2	San Marcos, Texas 78666
Hidalgo	430th District Court	Edinburg, Texas 78539
Jefferson	58 th District Court	Beaumont, Texas 77701
Kaufman	296th District Court	Kaufman, Texas 75142
Midland	County Court #2	Midland, TX 79701
Montgomery	359th District Court	Conroe, Texas 77301
Nueces	148th District Court	Corpus Christi, Texas 78401
Rockwall	296th District Court	Rockwall, Texas 75087
Smith	County Court at Law #2	Tyler, Texas 75702
Starr	229th and 381 st District Court	Rio Grande City, Texas 78582

County	Judicial Circuit	State, City Zip
Tarrant	Tarrant County Criminal Court #9	Fort Worth, Texas 76196
Travis	County Court at Law #4	Austin, Texas 78701
Webb	406 th and 341st District Court	Laredo, Texas 78040
Williamson	County Court at Law #2	Georgetown, Texas 78626
Zapata	49 th District Court	Zapata, TX 78076
Starr Webb Zapata	South Texas Regional Veterans Court	Varying Locations
Fannin Collin Grayson Rockwall Kaufman	North Texas Regional Veterans Court	Varying Locations