

**MINUTES OF THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS**

**Eighty-first Session
April 14, 2021**

The Senate Committee on Government Affairs was called to order by Chair Marilyn Dondero Loop at 3:54 p.m. on Wednesday, April 14, 2021, Online. [Exhibit A](#) is the Agenda. All exhibits are available and on file in the Research Library of the Legislative Counsel Bureau.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Senator Marilyn Dondero Loop, Chair
Senator James Ohrenschall, Vice Chair
Senator Dina Neal
Senator Pete Goicoechea
Senator Ira Hansen

STAFF MEMBERS PRESENT:

Alysa Keller, Policy Analyst
Heidi Chlarson, Counsel
Suzanne Efford, Committee Secretary

OTHERS PRESENT:

Katherine Miller, Director, Department of Veterans Services
Andrew LePeilbet, Military Order of the Purple Heart; Disabled American Veterans; Chair, United Veterans Legislative Council, Department of Veterans Services
Valerie Friskey

CHAIR DONDERO LOOP:

We will open the hearing on Assembly Bill (A.B.) 22.

ASSEMBLY BILL 22: Requires the establishment and maintenance of a transition assistance program for veterans and servicemen and servicewomen. (BDR 37-283)

KATHERINE MILLER (Director, Department of Veterans Services):
Assembly Bill 22 would require the Department of Veterans Services (DVS), with support from other State agencies, to develop a State of Nevada transition

assistance program (NVTAP) to assist those being discharged or already discharged from the U.S. armed forces and the National Guard and Reserves reintegrate into Nevada communities.

Some returning veterans have difficulty transitioning to civilian life. They experience higher rates of recorded disabilities and associated health concerns than previous generations of veterans. In recent surveys, returning service members indicated their greatest reintegration challenges are finding meaningful employment, affordable housing and affordable health care.

Many programs assist returning service members reintegrate, but they are often unaware of these programs. The U.S. Department of Defense in partnership with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers a federal transition assistance program (TAP) to service members preparing to leave the military. However, this program is not available to members of the National Guard and Reserves in Nevada.

The federal TAP focuses almost exclusively on federal benefits, providing very little information about state and local veterans programs and services. The limited state information offered in the federal TAP is specific to the state in which a veteran is ending his or her service—not the location of his or her intended residence. For example, veterans may learn about the benefits Texas offers if they leave Fort Hood or that Oklahoma offers if they leave Tinker Air Force Base, but they will not learn about Nevada programs and services. These services are essential to their successful transition home to Nevada.

Many recent surveys show that state programs and services are valuable to transitioning service members. At the top of the list are local employment, housing and health care, K-12 enrollment for service members who have children, and all programs offered by state and local governments, nonprofit organizations and private businesses.

The intent of this legislation is to offer in-person, State transition programs in Clark County at Nellis Air Force Base and Creech Air Force Base; in Washoe County for the Nevada National Guard and reservists; and Churchill County at Naval Air Station Fallon. These programs will be supported by specific State agencies using existing resources.

The DVS would also create an online version of the program so service members on installations outside of Nevada can learn about these services before leaving service and returning to Nevada. They would not have to wait until they got to Nevada to find out how to enroll their kids in school, how to get on the Silver State Exchange or learn about some of the benefits associated with housing, such as the Home is Possible For Heroes Program under the Housing Division of the Department of Business and Industry.

The NVTAP would also be valuable for recently separated veterans relocating in Nevada. In-person participation would not be required by agencies supporting the Program. In some cases, the agencies might just be providing information in the form of existing brochures or online links. State agencies participating in the Program include the Department of Business and Industry, the Department of Education, the Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Silver State Exchange and the Nevada System of Higher Education.

SENATOR NEAL:

The bill cites federal statute 10 USC section 1144, which mandates the DVS to work with other entities. How is the DVS working with Nevada workforce programs to make sure veterans are connected? Workforce programs have been going on for a while.

The bill also mentions starting and maintaining small businesses. Programs already exist for that, so I do not understand why veterans are not connected to them or why the DVS is not connected to these programs that have been going on for years.

Ms. MILLER:

If a service member in Fort Polk, Louisiana, is preparing to come to Nevada, he or she might go online to find information about jobs in Nevada. There could be many resources out there; in fact, there are so many resources he or she is not sure where to start. There is no direction to the many programs and systems taking place in Nevada.

There was a case not too long ago about a Navy couple who had relocated to Nevada. They wanted to buy a home, and while standing in line at a grocery store, they talked about how to determine the best price for a home. Someone overheard them and asked if they knew about the special mortgage rates

through the Department of Business and Industry under Home is Possible For Heroes Program. They did not know about it. The NVTAP would create a location both online and in-person to bring everything together for the service member.

You asked about small businesses. A small portion of the federal TAP addresses how to buy a business, open a business or become an entrepreneur. However, it does not define what to do or where to go for help in Nevada.

The DVS works hard to connect veterans to services, but there is still a disconnect. This bill would bring services together online and in person. It is DVS's intention to have quarterly, in-person programs at Nellis Air Force Base, Creech Air Force Base and Naval Air Station Fallon so veterans will be able to access information from agencies on how to access the services they need.

Veterans not in Nevada could go online to a website, find the topic they need, select it and go directly to a link. They would not have to go to 50 different locations. The Information about the resources they need would be in one location.

SENATOR OHRENSCHALL:

If A.B. 22 passes, do you have the staff and resources to implement this program? It sounds like a great idea.

MS. MILLER:

Yes, I do. The State agencies I mentioned have outreach and information offices. It is just a matter of bringing them together. The DVS is already developing the online program.

You are referring to the quarterly, in-person NVTAP that would occur at major military installations in Nevada. The NVTAP program is taken from the California Transition Assistance Program (CalTAP). Several other states adopted the CalTAP as a best practice. After reviewing the requirements of the Program, the DVS could accomplish this with its existing resources.

CHAIR DONDERO LOOP:

You mentioned Nellis Air Force Base, Creech Air Force Base and the Nevada National Guard. Those are not identified in the bill. Would they just naturally be focused on that because those are Nevada bases?

MS. MILLER:

Those would be the major locations in which we would have the in-person programs. There are other active duty service members in Nevada, but those are where we would conduct the larger activities. Bringing many people to Hawthorne for its two service members would not make sense. The online offering would make more sense for those locations.

CHAIR DONDERO LOOP:

Do you have someone to maintain the online information and follow through with this technology?

MS. MILLER:

We do, but it is not just the DVS doing this. The online offering is a portal listing the services and programs linked to the different State agencies. The DVS has worked with all the State agencies listed in the bill. They are excited about it. The DVS already knows who the agencies' points of contact are. It is not just one person. It is State agencies committed to come together to make sure their links are live and the information is correct. The DVS is able to provide the information and needs of transitioning service members to ensure it is packaged in a way that is beneficial to them.

ANDREW LEPEILBET (Military Order of the Purple Heart; Disabled American Veterans; Chair, United Veterans Legislative Council, Department of Veterans Services):

I say ditto to Director Miller's comments. Transition assistance is a key element the federal government has recognized for years. It is time for Nevada to simplify it and make our veterans productive when they come home. Many of the veterans who are coming to Nevada are Nevadans returning home.

The United Veterans Legislative Council supports this bill and hopes you will vote for it.

CHAIR DONDERO LOOP:

We will close the hearing on A.B. 22 and open the hearing on A.B. 77.

ASSEMBLY BILL 77: Revises provisions concerning the Department of Veterans Services and certain advisory public bodies relating to veterans. (BDR 37-285)

MS. MILLER:

Assembly Bill 77 revises provisions concerning the DVS and certain advisory, public bodies involving veterans. This bill would revise provisions concerning the duties of the Director of the DVS to capture significant and essential duties already being accomplished. It would also change the terms of four veteran advisory commissions and committees to standardize the numbers of years for which members are appointed.

The DVS creates, coordinates and supports suicide prevention and homelessness programs with existing staff and resources. These issues have been top concerns for veterans and their families for the past decade. However, they are not listed in the DVS Director's duties section of the *Nevada Revised Statutes* (NRS) 417 even though there is mention of other at-risk and special population veterans such as women veterans, LGBTQ veterans and veterans suffering from military sexual trauma.

Adding these duties to NRS 417 codifies what is already occurring. The duties include connecting veterans experiencing homelessness to housing and organizations that provide support in housing to decrease homelessness; and to create, coordinate and support programs and resources for the prevention of suicide among veterans, including without limitation, programs and resources to increase knowledge of how to recognize the signs of a potentially suicidal veteran and resources to which veterans who are potentially suicidal may be referred.

The next section of the bill addresses commission and committee members' term length. *Nevada Revised Statute* 417 establishes one Nevada Veterans Services Commission (NVSC), two cemetery advisory committees and one Women Veterans Advisory Committee (WVAC).

The NVSC and the cemetery advisory committee members are appointed to two-year terms and the WVAC members are appointed to four-year terms. The NVSC believes that two-year term limits are too short for significant service and result in turnover disrupting continuity of operations. A longer three-year term would develop expertise and awareness among the members. Fifty percent of the NVSC and cemetery advisory committee members turn over annually. According to a BoardSource 2017 report on board practices, ideally boards should turn over no more than 33 percent of the board seats annually. Moving

from a two-year to a three-year term length will keep turnover at the 33 percent goal.

With two-year term limits, Governor Steve Sisolak's staff must appoint or reappoint 10 to 11 members annually, creating not only a significant workload but appointment delays. Adopting a three-year standard term would reduce that workload and the associated vacancies and result in about seven appointments annually.

The WVAC four-year term length allows for continuity of operations and minimizes the appointment process workload. However, the four-year term length is not optimal because it is important to bring in new members regularly to generate fresh ideas and to bring on different members with different cultural viewpoints, skill sets, perspectives and networks. Adopting a standard three-year term would support a culture of inclusion and innovation.

Nevada Revised Statutes 232A, Appointments by the Governor to Public Bodies, establishes a general requirement for appointments "... of 3 years or until their successors have been appointed and have qualified." While NRS 232A does not limit additional requirements imposed on public bodies, after review of the statutory responsibilities of veterans boards in NRS 417, I find no special circumstance suggesting a need to deviate from the general term length requirement in NRS 232A.

SENATOR NEAL:

I have a question on the section about homelessness. Why is the DVS not already a part of the Clark County Continuum of Care? It has money that focuses on veteran homelessness. When federal money comes down specifically for veterans, it may not go toward anything else. I am confused about how the DVS connects with other agencies that are already a part of the work the DVS is trying to be involved in.

MS. MILLER:

The DVS is not only connected in Clark County, where it sits on all of its boards, but with the Northern Nevada Continuum of Care. The DVS has participated in the Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness in Las Vegas, Elko and the Truckee Meadows. Nevada has had more mayors' and governor's challenges to end veteran suicide and homelessness than any other state, according to the VA.

This is not about not connecting. I am comfortable with DVS's ability to connect. It is about codifying in NRS what the DVS is already doing. The bill does not say the DVS must do this because it is already doing it. The DVS is doing a lot of work regarding homelessness, whether it is sending people out to do point-in-time counts or submitting grants and getting money to support our urban and rural communities, and connecting veterans to the resources they need.

Our veterans are eligible for many resources that other people who are homeless do not have access to. We have a tight team with the VA, counties and State resources. This bill does not at all suggest that the DVS needs to do work in this area; it is saying we need to codify the work we are doing to make sure it continues on into the future.

I would be happy to send something to you Senator, that lays out everything we are doing with homelessness. You would be pleased. There has been much progress on the issue of veteran and veteran family member homelessness in Nevada. I wish the resources for veterans were available for every Nevadan.

SENATOR NEAL:

I appreciate that you are trying to codify the duties. That makes sense. I assumed they were a part of the services, and they were regulated. If you need the duties in law to continue to make it happen until 2028, then okay.

MS. MILLER:

Senator Neal, the DVS was in a silo until about a decade ago. It ran cemeteries, it had veteran service officers who handled claims and it ran nursing homes. That was it. As it expanded, and I cannot take credit for this, this was several directors before me, it looked at the broader needs of veterans.

Transitioning veterans do not have an immediate need for cemetery services, nor do they have an immediate need for nursing home services. The immediate need is for housing, health care, education for their children and college for themselves. The DVS was not serving all the needs of our returning members and our veterans. However, it has done some amazing things. I am proud of my team and what they have accomplished over the last decade. What they are doing is not codified in NRS. The NRS only focuses on three core missions, housing, health care and education.

For the last four Sessions, the No. 1 issue addressed by veterans in the Veterans Legislative Symposia of the DVS has been veteran suicide. Nothing in NRS references veteran suicide. The No. 1 of the top 5 issues has always been homelessness among veterans, but that is not mentioned in NRS either. They need to be in NRS just as much as operating cemeteries and nursing homes. That is the reason for asking for the language to be codified in NRS.

SENATOR OHRENSCHALL:

The language on page 4, lines 20 through 22 state, "Connect veterans experiencing homelessness to housing and organizations that provide support in housing and other related areas to decrease homelessness among veterans."

Many veterans experiencing homelessness may not have reliable cellphones or internet access. Does the DVS reach out to homeless shelters or other areas where veterans might be getting services, or does it depend on veterans reaching out to the DVS?

MS. MILLER:

The DVS reaches out. One of our most important missions is being a bridge between the VA and local communities. The VA has many resources and personnel. Veterans can get connected with the VA, and it can help them with all types of assets; so can the local communities. One of the DVS's biggest responsibilities and one of its biggest benefits is that it serves as an intermediary to bring together local, State and federal government assets to address veteran homelessness. Often, agencies will not know about other services available in other areas. For example, the Department of Health and Human Services may be doing incredible things in Elko, but it may not be aware of the Salt Lake City VA financial or mental health resources available for veterans. Much of what the DVS does is to know what is available to veterans experiencing homelessness so it can bring the community together to make sure all assets are being applied.

CHAIR DONDERO LOOP:

Things may be different for homeless veterans or veterans with mental illness. Is information accessible so if they are on the street or are suicidal, they can get help? Is it easy or seamless for them to find this information?

MS. MILLER:

There are barriers to getting information about programs to those who are homeless. However, over the past six years, starting with the Las Vegas Mayors' Challenge for Homelessness which was in conjunction with the VA community-based Safe Haven program, it was declared that all veterans known to be experiencing homelessness were in programs to address that with the exception of those who chose not to participate. The VA has permanent staff members, and our team has staff who do point-in-time counts. Groups in southern Nevada, northern Nevada and eastern Nevada that offer services have discussions to make sure we have wraparound services.

Helping veterans get the information they need is a success story but often means getting out on the streets to get that information to them because you have to find them first.

The DVS's biggest problem in the last couple of years has been vouchers from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH). The HUD VASH gives a certain number of vouchers to each state every year that helps with housing for veterans. The DVS had a problem about three years ago with getting enough HUD VASH vouchers. It is better now, but it is something the DVS keeps an eye on all the time.

It is difficult to ensure that people who are experiencing homelessness have information about the resources they need. The DVS works hard to help bring the community together to get that information out.

MR. LEPEILBET:

I say ditto to Director Miller's comments. We support A.B. 77. We regard standardizing committee members term lengths to three years as necessary, commonsense changes to NRS. Instead of being on multiple committees, two years on this one, one year on that one or four years on this one, it is just commonsense and good management to clean up that part of the NRS.

MS. MILLER:

Nevada Revised Statutes 417 lists the duties of the Director of NDVS. It should be a comprehensive list which includes the most needed and most important duties supporting Nevada veterans who have served us and our Country.

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CHAIR DONDERO LOOP:

I will close the hearing on A.B. 77.

VALERIE FRISKEY:

I am here to encourage you to consider the need of all education employees across the State to have access to quality, affordable health care upon retirement. Our members are facing escalating costs of health care and prescriptions. Please keep in mind that Nevada is a Windfall Elimination Provision and a Government Pension Offset State and many of our retired members will not have access to affordable health care because they do not qualify for social security or Medicare.

I understand that the State is facing serious budgetary restraints this year. However, as my colleagues retire, they face insurance costs from \$800 to \$1,000 and more per month after spending their entire careers as public school employees. We are asking Legislators to fund retiree health care for education employees.

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CHAIR DONDERO LOOP:

Having no further business to come before the Senate Committee on Government Affairs, this meeting is adjourned at 4:36 p.m.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED:

Suzanne Efford,
Committee Secretary

APPROVED BY:

Senator Marilyn Dondero Loop, Chair

DATE: _____

EXHIBIT SUMMARY				
Bill	Exhibit Letter	Begins on Page	Witness / Entity	Description
	A	1		Agenda