

Legislative Budget Committee

By Eric Rohleder

Deputy Director, Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs Office

September 23, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to brief this Legislative Budget Committee. I am Eric Rohleder, Deputy Director of the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs Office. Attending with me today is our Director, Gregg Burden and Luke Drury our Chief Fiscal Officer.

The Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs Office (KCVAO) is privileged to support approximately 195,000 veterans in the State of Kansas. Our mission is to serve Kansas veterans, survivors, and their dependents with dignity and compassion. The KCVAO is a principal advocate in ensuring that they receive information, advice, direction, and assistance through the coordination of programs and services on state and federal benefits: medical care, benefits, social support, and lasting memorials in recognition of their service to Kansas and the nation.

The goal of the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs Office is to ensure Kansas veterans and their families receive all the services and benefits they have earned in the most efficient and cost-effective manner possible. These services and benefits include; long-term nursing and assisted living care to eligible veterans and dependents, interment options and maintenance of four state veterans' cemeteries, and coordination with federal agencies to provide financial assistance to Kansas veterans for health care and disability income at the agency's 14 field offices and three mobile offices located throughout the state.

The agency also administers the Veterans' Claims Assistance Program or VCAP. The VCAP is a system by which the eligible residents of Kansas can obtain assistance and advice in procuring benefits from the state and federal government in the area of veterans' and survivor benefits. Today I will give you a quick update regarding the VCAP and the service grants program of the Kansas Commission on Veterans' Affairs Office. The VCAP was established "to improve the coordination of veterans' benefits counseling in Kansas to maximize the effective and efficient use of taxpayer dollars and to ensure that every veteran is served and receives claims counseling and assistance."

There are three major components to the VCAP. The first is to provide service grants to eligible veteran service organizations, which are used to hire service officers through the program. These individuals provide support at the VA hospitals in Leavenworth and Topeka and the VA Regional Office in Wichita.

Each June our agency sends letters to potential grant participants that have a presence at the VA regional office in Wichita. These organizations include American Legion, American Veterans, Disabled American Veterans, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Currently, two chartered veteran service organizations, the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, have elected to participate for this fiscal year's grant. They have been the only two organizations who have participated annually since the grant was developed in 2006.

In order to participate in the grant program, Service Organizations must meet minimum requirements. The major requirements outlined in statute include cross-accrediting of Veteran Service Representatives to provide a one-stop opportunity for veterans needing assistance, utilization of the central veteran's database, as provided by KCVAO, a physical presence in one half of the counties in Kansas, and continuation of the grant participant in the program funding in the form of a match, which can be monetary or in-kind.

The budgeted grant amount for distribution to participants has increased slightly since its inception. From 2006 to 2013 the amount was \$500,000 annually. Beginning in FY 2014 through FY 2019 the amount was increased to \$600,000. This fiscal year each grant participant receives one half of the current total of \$650,000. In the FY 2021 budget, the total dollar amount available for all grant participants was raised to \$700,000.

The second major component of the VCAP was to establish the Veterans Claim Assistance Program Advisory Board to advise the agency in the implementation and administration of the VCAP. The advisory board is comprised of seven individuals, the Deputy Director of the agency is the chair, two members appointed by the Governor, two members appointed by the VCAP participants, and two legislators, one from each house. The Advisory Board meets quarterly to discuss the grant program and other veterans' issues.

The third component was to establish a Quality Assurance Program for the VCAP and for services performed by veteran services organizations receiving grants under this section. The Quality Assurance Program performs a key role in reviewing claims from KCVAO Field Office staff and VCAP participants, ensuring veteran claims meet standards for development and completeness. The Quality Assurance Program staff conduct reviews of all benefit claims paperwork to facilitate a faster response from the VA Regional Office. Data from QA reviews is used to calculate claims completion and accuracy rates, reaffirm production numbers of participating organizations, and evaluate individual veteran services representative quality levels in order to determine future training requirements. Claim denials have decreased dramatically since the implementation of our Quality Assurance program.

The following table shows the requested reimbursements for FY 2020

Item	Combined Requested Amount	Percentage of Grant available
Salaries	\$492,683	75.8%
Fringe Benefits	\$101,359	15.7%
Administration/Travel	\$3,974	.6%
Equipment/Supplies	\$10,808	1.6%
Contractual Services	\$41,176	6.3%
Total	\$650,000	100%

Both participants contribute matching funds that exceed requested amounts.

The following table reflects the total dollars awarded to veterans and family members who were assisted by the grant participants over the previous five years.

Year	Claims Awarded \$ Amount	Claims Submitted
2016	\$156,626,619	6,219
2017	\$121,363,728	5,245
2018	\$106,788,087	6,995
2019	\$113,832,487	4,841
2020	\$121,536,681	6,788
Five-year total	\$620,147,602	30,088

In FY 20, for every dollar provided to our grant participants, \$187 was returned to the state in the form of federal benefits.

Total VCAP Summary since its inception

- Over 100,000 claims approved and awarded
- Over \$1.8 Billion in claims paid to veterans and family members

On behalf of the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs Office, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to brief the committee and for your continued support of veterans and family members in Kansas. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully,

Eric Rohleder