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Testimony to the Little Hoover Commission for April 23, 2013

The VFW Department of California and Auxiliaries has a membership of over 120,000 members. We are a Department of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, and are a congressionally chartered Veterans Service Organization (VSO) with a mission of providing service to veterans, past and present.

The VFW trains State Service Officers to help all veterans, not just VFW members, receive Veterans Administration (VA) benefits and services. Every year, our VFW State Service Officers assist veterans and their families in recovering more than \$80 million dollars in VA entitlements through the filing of new claims. On an ongoing basis active claims filed through the VFW Department of California provide over \$320 million dollars annually to these veterans. This is accomplished by VFW Service Officers filing claims on behalf of eligible veterans and is a service that is provided at no cost to the veteran. Many veterans prefer using a VFW State Service Officer because our staff has the highest possible level of training and no one matches our dedication to do what is right for our fellow veterans.

Veterans from all service eras, including those serving today, rely on our State Service Officers to guide them to the benefits and services they have earned through their military service to our country. We also assist veterans' dependents, surviving spouses, children or parents of deceased veterans.

The VFW Department of California has three Regional Offices (RO) located in San Diego, Los Angeles and Oakland including a satellite office in Sacramento. We are required by our National Veterans Service Office to have no less than one fulltime Department Service (DSO) Officer and one fulltime Administrative Assistant at each RO.

At the San Diego RO we have one DSO, two Assistant Department Service Officers (ADSO) and one Administrative Assistant. At the Los Angeles RO we have one DSO and one Administrative Assistant. At our Oakland RO we have one Claims Representative, one ADSO and one Administrative Assistant. In addition we have one ADSO at Long Beach VA Medical Center (VAMC), one ADSO in Sacramento, one Claims Representative at Mather VAMC, one ADSO and one Administrative Assistant at La Jolla VAMC.

In addition, we have 15 Field Service Officers (FSO's) who volunteer by staffing offices at VA Clinics, Memorial Halls and by traveling to the rural areas in California.

Our Department of California Service Department provides training for Post and District Service Officers in all 23 Districts comprising The VFW Department of California. Once trained these Service Officers receive certification at the VFW Department Level to initiate claims only.

With our work overload and backlog of Veterans' claims and appeals, our DSOs and ADSOs devote a majority of their time adjudicating claims. Numerous phone calls and walk-ins demand precious time. As time permits, our DSOs and ADSOs attend College campuses, Veterans Job Fairs, Stand Downs for the Homeless and numerous local community events.

Our main membership for The VFW Department of California utilizes Public Awareness Programs to reach out to the Veterans for membership in The VFW and to convey the fact that we are here to help Veterans with their benefits and filing claims.

In addition to service work, we provide approximately \$150,000 annually in support of Youth Scholarship Programs, Buddy Poppies for the Disabled Veterans, Law Enforcement/Fire Fighter Recognition Programs, Teacher Award Programs, and our ongoing legislative programs to alert state and national Legislators of the needs of the Veteran.

The VFW works with State and Local Officials. The National Legislative Service Office represents the VFW on various issues before Congress including testifying at Committee Hearings and interacting with Congressional Members. The Action Corps is a grassroots lobbying force that has 20,000 volunteers who call, write and visit lawmakers. The Department of California works with Lobbyist Pete Conaty and Associates, in regards to State and Senate Assembly Bills.

GOING FORWARD

Improvements need to be made regarding Veterans understanding the benefits available. The Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD), a program initiated with the Pentagon and VA which provides service members departing from the military information on what VA entitlements exist. **It would be beneficial to have a BDD State Outreach Program.**

There are many benefits available; home loans, life insurance, service disability insurance and survivor compensation. Many do not know enough about the benefits that exist.

We need help from the State. Currently, the VFW pays 100% of salaries and costs for our Service Department. All of our services are offered free of charge to all Veterans and their families. **We need Grant Programs and Money to help fund our Service Department** in order to provide the services Veterans and their families need.

As our membership and funds decrease it is paramount that the State of California assists Veteran Service Departments financially.

Veterans need the State to focus on Awareness and Outreach of the following issues; Readjustment Counseling, Alcohol and Drug Treatment, Healthcare for Women Veterans, Counseling, Sexual Trauma Counseling and a Suicide Awareness Program.

We need more education and training for Veterans. Veterans face countless challenges and they need the VFW and the State of CA supporting them and continuing to work together to meet their needs.