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Commission Calls for New Approach to Veterans Services

California is leaving hundreds of millions of federal dollars untapped each year that should be going to veteran pension and health benefits. California must do more to identify veterans, educate them about their rights and help them file well-documented claims, especially women veterans.

Texas and Florida, which count fewer veterans in their populations, both bring in more federal pension and health benefit dollars per veteran than California does. These benefits are not a privilege, they are a right, and earned through sacrifice to the nation as a whole. Helping veterans to receive these benefits can immeasurably improve their lives and bring more dollars into the California economy.

In a study released today, "*An Agenda for Veterans: The State's Turn to Serve*," the Little Hoover Commission identified recent improvements at the California Department of Veterans Affairs, or CalVet. However, the commission also noted that many of these improvements were slow to be implemented and will require continued oversight to ensure they fully take hold.

The Governor and Legislature have allocated one-time money to help CalVet reach out to more veterans and assist their efforts to receive federal benefits to which they are entitled. The new money will be used to create three strike teams focused on eliminating a backlog of benefit claims at federal Veterans Administration offices in Los Angeles, San Diego and Oakland. The state also is supplementing aid to counties for their County Veterans Services Offices, one of the main outreach programs for helping veterans.

The Commission challenged CalVet to demonstrate that it can invest this added money in ways that improve the lives of California 1.8 million veterans.

The Little Hoover Commission urged the Governor and the Legislature to take a new look at the ways in which the state allocates resources to serving California veterans.

Leaders at CalVet expect the state to take in 35,000 or more new veterans each year for the next several years as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan conclude. In past conflicts, neither the state nor the federal government has put its best foot forward in serving veterans. The federal government provides the broadest array of services and compensation to veterans, but slow processing, archaic systems and a complex benefit application process have created a system that is difficult to navigate, time consuming and severely backlogged.

The state historically has focused its efforts on a home loan program and on building and operating veterans homes. The department also has operated a Veterans Services Division funded at a fraction of the level of the other programs. It is through this program that the state can serve the greatest number of veterans and help veterans successfully return to civilian life. It will require helping the federal government do its part through assisting veterans to file complete and well-documented claims for benefits. It also means helping County Veterans Services Offices to be more successful in reaching out to veterans. Now that CalVet has been given one-time budget increases to bolster efforts in each of these areas, the department must demonstrate that it can deliver. To do so, it must hold County Veterans Services Offices more accountable for their performance.

“Too many California veterans have earned benefits they are not receiving because of bureaucratic delay, government malaise, and a lack of coordination among a number of government offices and agencies,” Commission Chairman Jonathan Shapiro said. “The best way to honor our veterans isn’t through speeches or proclamations. It’s by ensuring that each veteran gets all the services they deserve in a fair and timely way.”

In its report, the Commission urges the Governor and Legislature to aid the department’s transition by providing funding flexibility and improved oversight of veterans services. The Commission also urges CalVet to improve its outreach efforts, build a strong database of California veterans, monitor county veterans offices’ work more closely to ensure effectiveness, and modernize its approaches to providing solutions to the needs of the youngest generation of California veterans.

Finally, the Commission urged the Legislature and Governor to revisit the state Military and Veterans Code. This outdated code is confusing, contradictory and misaligned with current CalVet practices and veterans’ needs. It warrants updating to reflect current policies and CalVet’s direction.

The Little Hoover Commission is a bipartisan and independent state agency charged with recommending ways to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of state programs. The Commission’s recommendations are submitted to the Governor and the Legislature for their consideration and action. For a copy of the report, visit the Commission’s website: www.lhc.ca.gov.