

OFFICE OF LEGISLATIVE RESEARCH
PUBLIC ACT SUMMARY



PA 23-34—sSB 634

*Veterans' and Military Affairs Committee
Appropriations Committee*

AN ACT CONCERNING MUNICIPAL VETERANS SERVICES

SUMMARY: Beginning October 1, 2023, this act makes various changes in the laws governing municipal veterans representative programs, including allowing municipalities to completely regionalize their program-related duties and not maintain a municipal-specific office or representative.

The act also requires at least two veteran service officers (VSO) (see BACKGROUND) in the Department of Veterans Affairs' Office of Advocacy and Assistance (OAA) to be responsible for overseeing and supporting municipalities' compliance with municipal veterans representative program requirements in addition to their other duties under existing law. Accordingly, the act increases the office's minimum number of VSOs on staff (from six to eight) and total staff members (from eight to 10).

The act also makes technical and conforming changes.

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 1, 2023

MUNICIPAL VETERANS REPRESENTATIVE PROGRAMS

Program Options

Prior to October 1, 2023. The law required each municipality to designate one of the following municipal veterans representative program options prior to October 1, 2023: either a municipal veterans advisory committee, established by ordinance, or a municipal VSO, either of which the municipality may fund. In the event that the municipality chooses neither, it must appoint a municipal veterans representative, which may be either a municipal employee or a volunteer resident who is a veteran or has practical experience handling veterans' issues. The law also authorized municipalities to jointly form a shared veterans advisory committee but requires those that do to each have a municipal VSO or representative, as well.

Beginning October 1, 2023. The act similarly requires municipalities to designate one of three program options, except it allows municipalities to (1) appoint a paid director of municipal veterans services (instead of funding a municipal VSO) and (2) jointly satisfy the act's requirements regionally if they enter into a memorandum of understanding or agreement to do so, which may include terms on sharing expenses.

The act requires that a municipal veterans representative be a veteran or have practical experience in veterans affairs issues. (Prior to October 1, 2023, the law only required this if the representative is a volunteer.) It also requires any municipal ordinance establishing a veterans advisory committee to include the number of

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committee members and their terms, how members are selected, and procedures for filling a vacancy.

Under the act, a municipality that was in compliance with the law before October 1, 2023, is considered in compliance with the act's requirements.

Duties and Responsibilities

Prior to October 1, 2023. The law specifies different responsibilities for advisory committees and representatives (e.g., only volunteer representatives must be available for a minimum number of hours per week, set by the municipality).

Beginning October 1, 2023. The act generally applies the responsibilities in prior law to all advisory committees, directors, and representatives beginning October 1, 2023. Under the act, they must do the following:

1. help veterans and their dependents get services and benefits they are entitled to, including by cooperating with national, state, local, and private providers;
2. help coordinate public and private facilities' activities for veterans' reemployment, education, rehabilitation, and adjustment to peacetime living;
3. encourage and coordinate vocational training services for veterans;
4. coordinate with veterans organizations as practicable;
5. be available to veterans in person, by phone, or by email for a minimum number of hours per week set by the municipality; and
6. file a monthly report with the municipality that includes the names of those helped, services or referrals provided, and any other information the municipality requires.

Training Requirements

Services and Benefits Training. By law, municipal veterans representatives designated between October 1, 2019, and September 30, 2023, must complete OAA training within one year of their designation on the topics of state and federal services and benefits, municipal veterans services programs requirements, and available OAA staff assistance. Beginning on October 1, 2023, the act expands this training requirement to all committee members and directors in addition to representatives and specifies they must complete the OAA training on state and federal services and benefits. (For training completed prior to October 1, 2023, existing law authorizes either this training or a training on helping and serving women veterans.) By law and unchanged by the act, OAA must electronically provide representatives with all updated training information; however, the act specifies that representatives do not have to undergo training again (1) once they have completed a training course or (2) if they have completed a training course prior to October 1, 2023.

As a conforming change, the act requires OAA to give printed resources on military discharge upgrades to committees, directors, and representatives.

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Annual Notification

Prior to October 1, 2023, the law requires the veterans affairs commissioner to electronically notify a municipality's chief executive officer (CEO) each year of the requirement to designate a representative if the municipality does not have its own local veterans advisory committee and does not fund a VSO. The CEO, within 30 days of notification, must give OAA the name and email address of the municipal representative. The act (1) expands the notice's content to cover all municipal program options and (2) adds the requirement that the CEO give the names and email addresses of all committee members, the director, and all municipal representatives, as applicable, to OAA. It also removes the requirement that the commissioner's notification be electronic on or after October 1, 2023.

BACKGROUND

Office of Advocacy and Assistance VSOs

Within the DVA, the OAA is generally responsible for helping veterans and their families get veterans benefits under federal, state, and local laws (CGS § 27-102I), including through a minimum number of VSOs employed by the office. Each VSO must be assigned to one of Connecticut's five congressional districts.