

CA plans bigger outreach to veterans

By Jim Sanders

State officials in cash-strapped California are trying to find the money to locate hundreds of thousands of military veterans who could be missing out on benefits.

The California Department of Veterans Affairs currently has contact information for only about 20,000 of the state's 2 million veterans. Locating the others and connecting them with veterans benefits could bring hundreds of millions in new federal funds annually to help bolster the economy.

But even supporters concede the outreach could intensify growing strain on county veterans service officers, called CVSOs.

Assemblywoman Alyson Huber, an El Dorado Hills Democrat who is pushing the outreach effort, said the state has an obligation to assist those who have helped protect the nation.

"It's the least we can do – they've sacrificed, their families have sacrificed," she said.

A key problem is that many veterans of Vietnam, Korea or World War II are not aware of eligibility rules for benefits – and California does not track their addresses to contact them, according to Huber.

Antiquated record keeping in decades past is one cause of the problem. Others range from lack of a formal process for tracking address changes to a personal decision by some veterans to sever ties with agencies, officials say.

Richard Melendez, 59, who served in the Vietnam War and

now commands Sacramento's Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 67, said he suspects that he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder but was reluctant to request help.

"I didn't want to seek it because I didn't want to admit I needed it," Melendez said.

State officials want to inform veterans about federal pension and disability payments – averaging \$12,566 annually – for ailments ranging from diabetes to respiratory cancers.

California ranks 33rd in the share of its veterans, 13.7 percent, who receive such federal benefits, said Ted Puntillo of the state Department of Veterans Affairs.

Some state benefits also are available to disabled veterans, including property tax exemptions, college fee waivers, and reduced hunting and fishing fees. The impact of outreach on state revenue is expected to be minimal, however, because the number of veterans declines each year.

Huber helped spearhead a recent interagency pact that will ask applicants for driver's licenses, either new or renewals, whether they are veterans and if they want information about benefits.

The state plans to place veterans' names and addresses in a proposed database. Those who desire would be contacted by a CVSO who could explain eligibility and help file multi-page applications.

The rub? Money.

Altering the driver's license application to identify veterans is expected to be absorbed under existing budgets, but new funds are needed to create the database and to hire more CVSO staff.

Names of veterans from Vietnam and prior wars would surface from the driver's license program at the same time that CVSOs are serving tens of thousands of Iraq and Afghanistan returnees.

To compound problems, counties provide more than 80 percent of funding for veterans service offices and budget crises have forced them to cut 40 of 165 positions the past two years, according to the California Association of County Veterans Service Officers.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, in his May budget plan, proposed \$768,000 from veterans license plate sales for creation of the database. He also proposed increasing state funding for CVSOs from \$2.6 million to \$11 million, an increase of \$8.4 million.



The Legislature's budget conference committee, struggling with a \$19.1 billion budget deficit, supported creation of the database but proposed to slice the CVSO increase to \$1.14 million this year.

Pete Conaty, a lobbyist for the California Association

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