



STATE OF MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

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April 11, 2019

Rep. Lyndon Carlson, Chair
House Ways & Means Committee

Rep. Pat Garofalo, Republican Lead
House Ways & Means Committee

RE: H.F. 2086, Omnibus Veterans and Military Affairs Bill

Chair Carlson:

Thank you for your consideration of the FY2020-21 budget for the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA), and for demonstrating your commitment to those who have served and sacrificed to secure our freedoms and quality of life – Minnesota's more than 327,000 Veterans. We cannot carry out our mission without your support.

Thank you also to Chair Ecklund and the members of the House Veterans and Military Affairs division. Throughout the course of the past three months, I know they met some amazing people and heard compelling testimony and I have no doubt they, and you, have come to understand even more about the sacrifices our Veterans and their families have made.

MDVA prioritized our funding requests and limited them to those areas of greatest need: an increase in funding to our Programs & Services operations, State Veterans Cemeteries operations and an expansion of the Minnesota Service C.O.R.E. (case management, outreach, referral and education) program funding. H.F. 2086, the Omnibus Veterans and Military Affairs bill, fully addresses the additional funding requests for the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA), satisfying demonstrated needs for increased support.

Programs & Services Operations Adjustment

H.F. 2086 includes additional funding of \$544,000 in the FY2020-21 biennium to maintain the Veterans Programs & Services division's current level of service delivery. This funding represents only a 1.6% increase to the Veterans Programs & Services division's base operating budget and is the equivalent of approximately 5 FTEs.

This operating adjustment will allow MDVA to continue providing statutorily required services including federal VA disability and pension claims development, continued opportunities for engagement with Veterans in challenging geographic or demographic areas and providing higher education support services to Veterans and military members across the state. Non-statutorily required areas of special emphasis will also be sustained, including areas such as Veterans homelessness initiatives, outreach, the Women Veteran program, and Tribal Veterans Service Officers (TVSO).

State Veterans Cemeteries Operations Funding

The Omnibus Veterans and Military Affairs bill provides additional funding of \$775,000 to maintain the operations of the three State Veterans Cemeteries located in Little Falls, Preston and Duluth. The additional appropriation will bring each of the cemeteries' base level general funding up to \$550,000 per year to be dedicated to staff salary and benefit costs. The current general fund appropriation for each of Minnesota's existing State Veterans Cemeteries – a distinct amount at each location – doesn't fully support the staff costs for each cemetery.

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As a result, MDVA has had to use cemetery maintenance and development (CMD) accounts and other program funding to support staff costs.

Continued use of the CMD accounts to support unmet staff costs is not sustainable and jeopardizes the department's ability to cover routine and emergency equipment repairs, equipment replacement, facility repairs, and other non-salary costs to operate the cemeteries safely and provide appropriately solemn burials services to veterans and family members.

Minnesota Service CORE Expansion

Finally, MDVA identified a need for additional funding in the amount of \$250,000 per year for the Minnesota Service C.O.R.E. Program. Current need outpaces the programmatic capacity due to funding shortages. In two of the past three years, the program has far exceeded the original budgeted amount while since 2014, the C.O.R.E. service has seen a 70% increase in enrollment.

Many Veterans and their families experience unique challenges, from reintegration following a deployment or period of service, to managing finances, building a support network, and addressing mental health or substance use concerns. The C.O.R.E. program responds to these challenges by bringing casework, financial counseling, housing stability, and behavioral health (mental health and substance use) services to Veterans and their families in their communities throughout Minnesota.

An increase in annual funding of \$250,000 would allow the program to sustain services and to meet the increase in demand, especially in greater Minnesota. Last year the program served 822 Veterans and their families in 70 of 87 Minnesota counties.

Additional Provisions

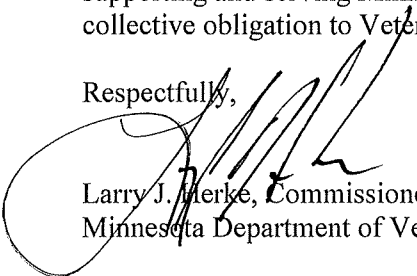
H.F. 2086 includes additional provisions which I would like to express my support for including policy changes requested by the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs as well as a significant advancement in how Minnesota's criminal justice system treats justice-involved Veterans; an effort supported by Governor Tim Walz.

Section 6 of H.F. 2086, titled the 'Military Veteran Offenders Restorative Justice Sentence,' implements state-wide presentence supervision procedures and treatment options. Under this new language, where a court determines that a defendant charged with certain criminal offenses is eligible for sentencing under the section, they shall place the defendant on probation subject to reasonable conditions. Eligibility is limited to those defendants who allege that their offenses were committed as a result of experiences stemming from military service.

The significance of placing a defendant on probation is that the court defers proceedings on the entrance of a guilty plea, giving the defendant an opportunity to seek treatment programs and secure support from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and Minnesota's County Veterans Service Officers to seek benefits and services. Even where Veterans treatment courts do not exist, this new language allows a justice-involved Veteran to connect with the assistance they need, while also securing the state's interest in holding criminal defendants accountable for their actions.

In closing, H.F. 2086, the Omnibus Veterans and Military Affairs bill, includes the Governor's recommended level of funding for the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as additional provisions critical to supporting and serving Minnesota's Veterans and their families. Thank you for helping us to deliver on our collective obligation to Veterans.

Respectfully,



Larry J. Merke, Commissioner
Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs

Cc:

Nancy Conley, Committee Administrator, House Ways & Means Committee