



MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Office of the Commissioner

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Honorable Co-chairs Bliss and Xiong:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony as well as remarks in front of the committee in response to HF2444DE2, the Veterans and Military Affairs Finance and Policy bill.

I want to thank you for providing funding to the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs to continue the work of our shared goal of serving Minnesota's Veterans. This committee has a long history of standing with our Veterans. I appreciate the Committee's relatively low budget target and the constraints presented in the current budget forecast. However, this budget may have ramifications for Veterans and their families throughout the state. Funding at these levels will force the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) to absorb cost pressures and make strategic decisions about staffing, or providing benefits and services to those that have unquestionably earned them. I look forward to working with this Committee to find a path forward to continue to provide those benefits and services to our Veterans.

I am particularly concerned about our Healthcare division being funded at 12% less than the Governor's recommendation. It was a legislative priority in 2017 to direct the creation of three new State Veterans Homes to serve Veterans in and around the communities of Bemidji, Montevideo and Preston. MDVA has answered the call by constructing, opening, and - for the past 15 months - operating these new Homes. However, we must continue to ramp up funding so that these homes can be fully staffed and meet the guidelines set within our grant agreement with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Without the proper funding in place, our Homes may face reduced census, long wait lists, and fewer opportunities for other revenue.

For the Programs & Services division, the HF2444DE2 co-chairs' amendment falls short of our needs by 16.5%, or just over \$5 million. Operating adjustments are an essential factor to ensure MDVA can provide services and benefits to Veterans and their families, while retaining staff trained to deliver on the promises made to our former servicemembers. After receiving official declarations of an end to Veterans homelessness in nine of the ten continuums of care in Minnesota, the proposed budget will impact our ability to obtain a statewide declaration.

I am concerned to see there is no language improving the existing Veterans benefits services disclosure law by requiring federal accreditation to provide Veterans benefits and Veterans benefits appeals services in exchange for compensation. Protecting Minnesota Veterans and their families from fraudulent, predatory and illegal activities by unaccredited, for-profit Veterans benefits 'advisors' is not, and should not be, controversial. I look forward to working with your members to strengthen our state's commitment to putting our Veterans best interests first.

I appreciate the inclusion of policy items that we were pursuing this session including the federal alignment of burial eligibility, MAXIS database access for the Veterans Stable Housing Initiative within the Veterans Programs Division and the Gold Star and Blue Star Memorial Plaque in the Court of Honor.

I believe strongly that funding, like the items listed in the Governor's recommendations, is in the best interests of Minnesota's Veterans. I look forward to continuing the work as HF2444DE2 works its way through the legislative process.

Sincerely,

Brad Lindsay
Commissioner

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