



JERRY PETROWSKI

WISCONSIN STATE SENATOR

Senate Bill 418: Veterans Nonprofit Grant Program

January 14, 2016

Good morning, members of the committee, and thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on Senate Bill 418. This bill was authored in consultation with the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs. Representatives from the department are available today should you have any questions.

Last session, the Legislature passed 2013 Act 190, which created a new program at WDVA that offered grant funding to nonprofit organizations that serve veterans and their families. The bill authorized WDVA to provide up to \$250,000 in grants, with a maximum limit of \$25,000 per grant recipient.

Rather than using general purpose revenue, that bill relied upon funding from the existing VetEd appropriation at WDVA, which provides supplemental reimbursement for higher education tuition and fees. Due to the continued success of the Wisconsin G.I. bill, however, only a portion of the VetEd funds are used each year. The bill helped ensure that these underutilized funds would actually be used to provide support to veterans.

In the interest of fiscal responsibility, a sunset was applied to the bill and WDVA was given the authority to audit grant recipients, in order to ensure that the money was being used effectively and responsibly. Over 20 organizations received funding through the program, including groups addressing veteran homelessness, job assistance, treatment courts, and PTSD, among many others.

To build upon this success, this bill recreates that grant program for nonprofit organizations serving veterans using existing, underutilized funds in the VetEd appropriation in the amount of \$250,000, with a maximum limit of \$25,000 per grant recipient in each biennium.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak on this bill. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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Chairperson Petrowski and Honorable Members of the Senate Committee on Transportation and Veterans;

I am Jason Johns, Legislative Committee Member for the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Department of Wisconsin. Joining me is Joseph Hines, our State Adjutant. We are here today to express the VFW's support for SB 418.

I wish to share with comments that our Department Service Officer Dan Driscoll sent to me regarding SB 418:

"The Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs grants awarded to nonprofits can compliment our unmet needs programs and service office programs. We owe it to veterans that any public money goes to organizations that truly provide services and resources for those at-risk. Funds need to go to the correct homeless programs, job training, vocational rehab, and legal services to fill the gaps of the federal VA and WDVA programs. We should be demanding **greater oversight of non-profits claiming to assist Veterans**. The grants for veteran programs must be given with a purpose, and not simply doled out for the sake of appearance."

Department Service Officer Driscoll goes on to say: "What needs to be fixed? Based on my daily interactions with veterans in need, the numbers of homeless veterans is grossly underestimated due to flawed definitions of homelessness. Also, we need to challenge unemployment figures of younger veterans, as 'under-employment' of younger veterans is the hidden problem. In Greater Milwaukee, the American Legion is taking the lead to set up a collaborative network called VetsNet to help at-risk veterans. The state should be onboard with this effort and programs like it that exist throughout the state. This would be a very visible sign to our younger veterans who are looking to improve their communities. Can the state join the Legion, the VFW, and other veteran service organizations to champion these efforts? I hope that the legislature seizes the opportunity that SB 418 provides to work with veterans groups throughout the state to integrate an even larger outreach plan."

The Veterans of Foreign Wars, Department of Wisconsin thanks the bi-partisan authors of SB 418, Senators Petrowski, Carpenter, Darling, Harsdorf, Marklein, Moulton, Ringhand, Taylor, Vinehout and Wirch for bringing this bill forward. We also thank all the members of this Committee for your time today and hope you will join us in supporting this valuable legislation that serves our state's veterans.

Scott Walker, Governor
John A. Scocos, Secretary



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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

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Senate Committee on Transportation and Veterans Affairs

Chairman Petrowski, Senator Carpenter and Members of the Committee,

I write in support of Senate Bills 339, 418 and 419. Senate Bill 339 will serve to bring more military veterans into State of Wisconsin permanent employee positions. The value that our military veterans bring to the workforce will assist in enhancing the quality and dedication of all our state employees and show our veteran community we value their service and experience.

SB 418 would authorize WDVA to annually provide grant funding to Wisconsin nonprofits which provide financial assistance or other services to veterans and their families.

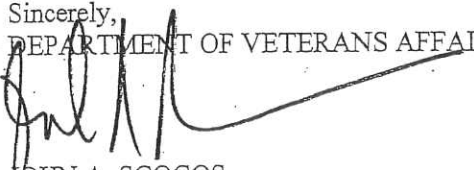
Grants awarded in 2014 supported services including UW-Milwaukee and UW-Superior veteran student programs designed to assist in the retention of returning student veterans from Active Duty (AC) and overseas deployments. Additionally, the grant money provided therapy to veterans suffering from PTS and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), along with supporting veterans struggling to furnish their new found homes or fill their food pantries. SB 418 will allow WDVA to continue supporting such private nonprofits which continue to have a significant and positive impact on our Wisconsin veteran community.

Finally, SB 419 would eliminate the current veteran employment grant program and replace it with a more effective veterans employment and entrepreneurship grant program. The program requirements under current law present a barrier to effective use of the employment grant. The changes proposed in SB 419 will enable the DVA to more effectively incentivize the hiring of disabled veterans. The bill also adds an entrepreneurial aspect to the program that will help veterans build their own small business. Under current law, the grant program restrictions which were tied to unemployment (UI), disqualified most veterans from qualifying for the program.

The DWD currently has 51 veterans in Job Ready status rated at 50% Service-Connected Disability (SCD), and 557 veterans in training programs that are also rated at 50% SCD. None of these veterans are eligible with this program the way it is currently worded. SB 419 would change that status.

I respectfully request your support of SB 339, SB 418 and SB 419.

Sincerely,
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS


JOHN A. SCOCOS
Secretary