

# House and Social Services Budget Committee

Testimony

By

Ralph Snyder, Assistant Adjutant  
The American Legion Department of Kansas  
Tuesday, January 24, 2012

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, on behalf of The American Legion Department of Kansas I wish to express our organization's sincere appreciation for granting The American Legion an opportunity to address you regarding the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs Budget; more specifically that portion of the KCVA budget pertaining to the Veterans Claims Assistance Program. A portion of my testimony today will reference a letter our State Commander Dale Allen wrote to our American Legion Family. Commander Allen cannot be here today but I have his permission to include his letter in my testimony. Likewise our Adjutant Charles Yunker is attending to a personal matter that could not be rescheduled.

I would like to begin with Commander Allen's letter which was mailed to every American Legion Post, American Legion Auxiliary Unit, and Sons of The American Legion Squadron, and emailed to every American Legion Rider Chapter in Kansas. It was also published on the front page of our September-October issue of our state newspaper which is mailed to our members.

*Dear American Legion Family:*

*The American Legion Kansas Department has a problem and I am asking each of you for your help and consideration. I along with Adjutant Yunker, Finance Officer Jeff Bond, Service Officer Damon Christensen, Veterans Affairs Chairman Lee Stolfus, and Finance Committeeman Dan Roberson attended the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs (KCVA) monthly meeting on August 17. Our purpose was to request an increase in the grant we rely upon to conduct our statewide Veterans Affairs program and to operate our offices at Kansas' three VA Medical Centers. Our similar office at Ft. Riley is not a part of the grant program.*

*The legislature cut the amount of our grant well below the initial 2006 level but provided the KCVA the authority to shift their funds from one program to another, including the Veterans Claims Assistance Program (VCAP) which oversees our annual grant. Our testimony pointed out during the last two years we have had to dip into our reserves for approximately \$60,000; we also pointed out with pride that during the same time period the Kansas American Legion Riders and other Legion Family members donated over \$148,000 in cash and gifts to the Kansas Veterans Home and Soldiers Home in Winfield and Ft. Dodge.*

*Because we are on track for another \$89,000 dip into our reserves next year due to shortfalls in the grant funding we asked the Commissioners to at least return our grant to the original 2006 level. Our justification was that the KCVA as a whole is not operating below 2006 funding, so why should the grant be singled out.*

*We also pointed out since 2006 our offices in the VA Medical Centers have more than doubled the number of clients served (19, 461 in 2006 vs. 45, 568 in 2011); and they have more than tripled the awards paid to veterans (\$52, 070,591 in 2006 vs. \$168,097,042 in 2011). That's not counting our office at Ft. Riley where we serve approximately 200 veterans per month (about 110 who are Kansans) with PTSD and TBI, the most intense and time consuming claims to file, along with other injuries.*

*Unfortunately our appeals fell on deaf ears. In fact we were lectured about having to do more with less and we needed to do more testifying before the legislature if we wanted more money to continue serving all Kansas veterans. The fact is we annually testify and lobby the legislature for the entire KCVA budget while not one Commissioner has ever testified. Only Commissioner Jim Buterbaugh took our side as the rest ignored even the KCVA staff's appeal on our behalf.*

*They even ignored us when it was mentioned that unless they restored our grant to at least the 2006 level we had no choice but to turn our largest fund raising group, The American Legion Riders for assistance which would most likely hurt donations made to the Soldiers Home and Veterans Home.*

*For the record we were asking for roughly \$16,000 for ourselves and the VFW was asking for the same amount because they are also in the grant program and we must be treated equally by KCVA. We've already taken every cost cutting step we can without laying personnel off, including suspending this year's ALVA Tour. More and more veterans are requesting help*

*in filing for their VA benefits and that trend will continue long after the war on terrorism ends.*

As Commander Allen's letter points out our appeal to the KCVA Commissioners fell on deaf ears and we were lectured about having to do more with less and we needed to testify more before the legislature if we wanted more money the VCAP. The only thing The American Legion and VFW came away from that KCVA meeting was a dismissive remark by the Chairman of the Committee that the Commission may re-visit the issue later in the fiscal year. Ladies and gentlemen, The American Legion can not plan or operate our Veterans Affairs program based on whether or not the Commissioners will consider VCAP funding much less if they will shift surplus funds to the program. That is why I am here today, to ask you to recommend at least the 2006 level of funding specifically designated for the VCAP program. Actually we ask that you consider the 2007 which was slightly higher so we do not have to rely even more on our diminishing reserves.

For the second time in three years we were unable to give our Veterans Service Representatives a cost of living raise. Later this month we will lose one of our better Service Representatives to the DAV because we can not match their wage scale. The American Legion spent thousands of dollars training that person, and the State of Kansas is also out of the money it spent training him.

Our Department Adjutant Chuck Yunker asks your committee to keep in mind the return rate the American Legion and VFW are able to generate directly into pocket of disabled veterans and ultimately into the Kansas economy. Last year the VFW was able to generate a return of \$205.00 for every VCAP dollar received; the American Legion return rate was even greater at \$256.00 per VCAP dollar received.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I'll be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Testimony Before the House Social Services Budget Committee  
By Darrell Bencken, Kansas Veterans of Foreign Wars

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my name is Darrell Bencken, I represent the Kansas VFW on the Veterans Claims Assistance Advisory Committee.

I appreciate very much the opportunity to testify today in support of the KCVA budget. Of particular interest to the VFW of course is the VCAP portion of that budget.

As you know the KCVA is requesting a supplement of \$33,000.00 to bring the grant program back to the \$500,000.00 we originally received for the grand program when it started in 2006.

Our budget was reduced to \$488,000.00 in 2011. The KCVA restored the budget to \$500,000.00 from their funds, but even with that increase to \$250,000.00 for the VFW portion, we had to spend an additional \$16,500.00 to maintain the services required. We would have spent more, but a Service Officer resigned and we didn't have the funds to replace her, so we finished the last quarter of 2011 short one Service Officer and as we stand today we will be unable to replace the Service Officer in 2012.

Our budget for 2012 for the VFW is \$233,600.00, which is \$16,400.00 short of our 2011 budget, add the additional \$16,500.00 VFW had to spend and we are \$32,900.00 short of our 2011 budget of \$250,000.00.

The KCVA refused our request to use their funds to increase this years budget to \$250,000.00.

State statute requires us to spend more VFW money each year than we did the previous year. At the start of the grant program in 2006, we had spent approximately \$30,000.00 the previous year of 2005. Then in the six (6) years of the grant program our matching funds have risen to about \$65,000.00 today and that amount is totally unsustainable.

To be totally truthful the Kansas VFW will be unable to continue as a partner in the grant program if current levels of state funding are not increased and relief given on the matching funds portion of the law.

We have partnered with the State for about 65 years to provide these services to Kansas Veterans and we certainly want to continue the partnership.

Last year the VFW successfully filed claims for Kansas Veterans resulting in those veterans receiving \$81,126,000.00, at a cost to the State of \$250,000.00 for a return of \$325.00 for every state dollar spent.

I doubt that any other agency in the state has that great of a performance record.

Need for our combined services is only going to increase as our troops return from the current wars.

To conclude, I respectfully request that this committee recommend granting the \$33,000.00 supplement requested by the KVA for 2012 and the budget increase of \$108,000.00 for 2013.

I thank you for the time allowed me today and welcome any questions you may have.

January 31, 2012