



TEXAS VETERANS COMMISSION

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Press Release

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The 83rd Texas Legislature Makes Unprecedented Investment in Texas Veterans

AUSTIN – As Texans head into the Fourth of July weekend, the Texas Veterans Commission acknowledges the Texas Legislature and Gov. Rick Perry for making significant and meaningful commitments to Texas Veterans, their families, and survivors during the 83rd Regular Legislative Session. Both the state budget and bills passed this session benefit programs and services that help Texas Veterans.

“The unprecedented investment in Veterans and their families shows that the State of Texas understands that the sacrifices our Veterans have made to serve do not go unnoticed,” said Thomas P. Palladino, Executive Director of the Texas Veterans Commission. “We thank our state legislators and Gov. Perry for improving the quality of life for those who served.”

Due to the leadership of the state’s principal budget writers, Sen. Tommy Williams, Chair of the Senate Finance Committee, and Rep. Jim Pitts, Chair of the House Appropriations Committee, the state’s new 2014-2015 budget increased funding to some specific programs providing services to Texas Veterans.

One of programs began last summer at the Texas Veterans Commission, when Gov. Perry, Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, and House Speaker Joe Straus committed over \$1.5 million to a one-year State Strike Force and Fully Developed Claims Teams initiative to help address the backlog of federal claims in Texas.

In January 2013, state leaders committed an additional \$500,000 to the effort. The 83rd Legislature continued these initiatives through the 2014-2015 biennium, appropriating an additional \$4 million over the next two years to help address the backlog and file fully developed claims.

The Legislature also continued its commitment to providing funding for non-profit and local government organizations that provide housing services for Veterans by allocating another \$3 million to the Housing4TexasHeroes grant program. Since the program’s

inception, the Texas Veterans Commission has awarded ten Housing4TexasHeroes grants.

The Veteran Entrepreneur Program at the Texas Veterans Commission, a new program to foster and promote Veteran entrepreneurship and business ownership throughout the state, was formally created by the passage of Senate Bill 1476, authored by Sen. Royce West. The legislation was sponsored by Rep. Ralph Sheffield, who successfully secured funding in the state budget for this new program. The program is based upon a highly successful pilot project launched in April 2012. With a single dedicated staff member, the project provided assistance to over 1,000 veterans through a statewide seminar series, moving those Veterans closer toward entrepreneurship.

In the waning hours of the regular session, state leaders passed Senate Bill 1158 and Senate Bill 1159, both authored by Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, Chair of the Senate's Veterans Affairs and Military Installations Committee. Both bills focus on sustaining Texas' commitment to Veterans education by:

- Creating a Permanent Fund Supporting Military and Veterans exemptions to reimburse institutions of higher learning for the cost of the Hazlewood Exemptions;
- Moving administration of the Hazlewood Exemption program to Texas Veterans Commission;
- Establishing a network of Veteran Education Counselors to assist Texas Veterans in maximizing their education benefits;
- Establishing the Veteran Education Excellence Recognition Award to recognize institutions of higher education that meet or exceed standards for providing specific services to Veterans; and
- Directing a study of the sustainability of federal and state Veteran education benefits in Texas.

The Legislature also passed House Bill 633, spearheaded by Rep. Joe Farias and Sen. Wendy Davis, which allows Texans to make donations to the Texas Veterans Commission Fund for Veterans Assistance (FVA) when applying for or renewing a drivers' license. Sen. Davis authored similar legislation during the 82nd Legislature which created an option for Texans to donate to the FVA when registering their vehicle with the Department of Motor Vehicles. Since the passage of that legislation, that revenue source has generated over \$600,000 in donations to the FVA. It is anticipated that the new revenue source created by House Bill 633 will yield similar results.

The Legislature also recognized the need to expand and enhance mental health services available to Texas Veterans. The passage of House Bill 2392, led Rep. Jose Menendez, Chair of the House Defense and Veterans Affairs Committee, and Sen. Van de Putte, formalizes and strengthens the state's Veteran Mental Health Program within the Department of State Health Services. State budget writers allocated an additional \$4 million to the program, in effect doubling its size and capacity throughout the state. Sen. Van de Putte was also able to secure, through emergency appropriation, additional mental health resources for the Texas National Guard.

The Legislature also passed significant legislation affecting a number of critical issues and services for Veterans including mental health services, professional and occupational licenses and certifications, state contracting preferences for service-disabled business

owners, discounts on utility bills for certain disabled veterans and property tax exemptions for surviving spouses of service members killed in action.

For a more complete list of Veteran-related bills passed during the 83rd Legislature, please visit <http://www.tvc.texas.gov/Legislative-Update.aspx>.

Texas Veterans Commission

The mission of the Texas Veterans Commission is to advocate for and provide superior service to Veterans and their families in the areas of disability claims assistance, employment services, education benefits and grant funding. Over 200 skilled counselors in 75 cities provide one-on-one guidance to Veterans and their families to ensure they receive all of the benefits to which they are entitled. For more information about the Texas Veterans Commission services click here: <http://www.tvc.texas.gov/Home.aspx>.

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