

Michigan Association of County Veterans Counselors

Michigan House, Military and Veterans Affairs Subcommittee testimony 3/6/13

The Michigan Association of County Counselors (MACVC) consists of 99 Counselors in 67 counties in the state of Michigan. Of those 99 members, 80 are accredited by the VA. Most of those accredited have multiple accreditations through other National Veterans Service Organizations

County counselors initiate, develop and prosecute claims for federal state and local benefits, assist in VA health care enrollment, administer county burial, marker allowance and soldier's relief. Many of our counselors also serve as the Michigan Veteran's Trust Fund agent. We also make referrals to other appropriate programs within the community.

County counselors work closely with the Veterans Service Organizations. I view our relationship as a partnership. The vast majority of claims from county counselors are sent through the VSO's at the VA regional office. In addition VSO field officers support many of our offices in the field. We also work closely with the VA. Our counselors try to ensure that claims that are being submitted are as accurate and complete as possible. We provide supporting documents necessary to enable them to make a quick decision. We also partner with VA voc rehab, vet centers and CBOC's in our communities. In addition, we work closely with the state of Michigan veteran's employment reps. We also have begun emphasizing relationships with colleges in our counties and SVA organizations at those colleges. Being permanently based in our counties, we are aware of veteran and non-veteran resources in our community. Bottom line, our offices should be, as much as possible, a one stop shop for veterans services.

Many of the factors which impact Michigan's low GDX numbers are demographics and are beyond our control. However, we should not use this as an excuse to not devote the resources necessary to improve services to Michigan's veterans. One area that I believe we can control is POA representation. A VA OIG report noted that individuals represented by a POA, received on average, \$6225.00 more per year than those without representation. Thus, our goal should be to ensure that every veteran in the state of Michigan who files a claim has POA representation. And not only POA representation, but quality representation. We can continue to increase the quality of representation from county counselors by ensuring our members receive proper training and accreditation. I also believe that access to a representative is vital. Currently 67 of 83 counties in Michigan have county counselors. At last count, 53 counties had an accredited county counselor available to assist veterans. We would like to see at least a part time accredited county counselor in each county.

In my view, accreditation is vital to ensuring that our county counselors can provide the representation that our veterans deserve. Accreditation with the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers (NACVSO) requires attendance of a training conference followed by successful completion of an examination. Once we receive accreditation, we are required to receive 16 hours of CEUs annually in specific subjects. Accreditation also allows us to receive cross accreditation with the veterans' service organizations. For example, I am accredited with the American Legion, DAV, MOPH, NACVSO, VFW, VVA and Marine Corps League. As an accredited representative, I can obtain VA remote access. This allows me to access VA claims information on my desktop in my office. This is vital in making sure that a claim is being processed properly and to provide information to our veterans and dependents.

I want to offer my thanks for the support which county counselors have received from the Michigan Senate and House. The \$50,000 annual appropriation to assist in county counselor education and training expenses has had a tremendous impact on our organization. It has allowed numerous members to obtain accreditation. We bring in trainers from NACVSO every 5 years or so to provide accreditation training. It also allows all of our members to attend the spring conference and receive the 16 hours of CEUs required to maintain accreditation. It also allows us to purchase reference manuals.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.