

Hearing of the Agriculture, Veterans, Broadband, and Rural Development

S.F.1894

April 2nd, 2025

Presented by

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Chairman Putnam, Ranking Member Westrom members of the committee, I extend my gratitude for the opportunity to address this body on the proposed legislation Senate File 1894.

I currently serve as a County Veterans Service Officer or CVSO for Blue Earth County. In 2017 I was appointed as the National Legislative Director for the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers (NACVSO). If you are unfamiliar with NACVSO it is a unique organization that represents it's VA accredited members who work as State, County, Municipal, Tribal Service Officers who advocate for veterans and their dependents in their local communities.

In the State of Minnesota CVSOs serve as VA accredited representatives. CVSOs work tirelessly to help veterans and their dependents submit the best possible initial claims to VA. CVSOs can also represent veterans a during the various stages of appeals including up to the Board of Veterans Appeals. CVSOs do not represent at the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (CAV-C) because CVSOs usually are not VA accredited attorneys.

I bring this up because there seems to be a misunderstanding, based on some past testimonies on what CVSOs and VSO representatives are qualified to do. Accreditation ensures federal

oversight, a base-line training, continuing education, and ethical representation. CVSOs not only have federal oversight but also state and county too. VA accredited attorneys also have federal oversight as well as state oversight. VA accredited veterans service officers, accredited claims agents, or accredited attorneys are the primary methods for a veteran to receive assistance with their disability claims. Under federal law only accredited claims agents or attorneys can charge the veteran a fee for assistance with claims that VA has already rendered a decision on. They are not allowed to charge a fee for assistance with initial claims, although they could assist a veteran for free with an initial claim if they chose.

The piece of legislation before this body, S.F. 1894, would not prohibit any VA accredited claims agent or attorney from representing a Minnesota veteran where they are legally allowed to do so. Contrary to some earlier testimonies, VA accredited attorneys and CVSOs by in large have a great mutual working and training relationship. The Minnesota Association of CVSOs (MACVSO) and NACVSO have partnered with VA accredited attorneys to be trainers at our annual and continuing education seminars. NACVSO's current Vice-President recently presented at the National Organization for Veterans Advocates (NOVA) conference last Fall. NOVA is the national organization for VA

accredited attorneys and agents. Due to a partnership with the VFW and American Legion the law firm Bergmann & Moore represents their veteran clients at CAV-C and has for several years.

This proposed legislation would seek to crack down on non-accredited VA claims “consultants”. These unaccredited “consultants” charge fees to assist veterans with filing an initial VA disability claim. These companies have grown with the recent rapid expansion of VA disability benefits, such as the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019 and PACT Act of 2022. Unfortunately, prior to this rapid expansion, in 2006 Congress removed VA’s Office of General Counsel’s ability to enforce violations of the law. There has been legislation re-introduced on the federal level to address this, but it has been locked in a stalemate for few years now. It is because of this stalemate and federal inaction that States have been stepping up to protect veterans from being taken advantage of.

This is what S.F. 1894 would do. It would require that anyone who helps a Minnesota veteran with their disability is accredited with the VA and can only charge the veteran when it is federally authorized. It would also prohibit any individual from guaranteeing VA benefits. Protecting veterans against unlawful fees from

unaccredited actors does not reduce a veteran's ability to get representation anymore than the prohibition on loan "sharks" prohibits an individual's ability to secure financing.

As a CVSO and a veteran, I hope that this body can advance this commonsense measure that would help safeguard our state veterans against predatory practices.