



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

RIVETS

OFFICE OF VETERANS SERVICES

Daniel J. McKee **Governor**

Kasim J. Yarn **Director**

February 2, 2023

The Honorable Samuel Azzinaro
Chair, House Committee Veterans' Affairs
State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903
via email: Rep-Azzinaro@rilegislature.gov
via email: HouseVeteransAffairs@rilegislature.gov

RE: H-5129 – Relating to Military Affairs and Defense – Veterans' Affairs

Dear Chairman Azzinaro:

I write today regarding H-5129 – Relating to Military Affairs and Defense – Veterans Affairs, which would establish Veterans' service officers (VSO) in each Rhode Island municipality. The Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services recognizes the importance of VSOs to the Veteran and military family community. For this reason, the Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services employs two full-time case managers, both of whom are Veterans and accredited VSOs serving all Rhode Island Veterans, active duty, guard and reserve, and military families needing assistance. In 2022, our two VSOs served 894 unique individuals with 1,257 cases and referrals out of our Veterans Resource Center located in Warwick, RI. The greatest need tends to be assistance with benefits navigation; however, our VSOs take a person-centered counseling approach and are able to make referrals to additional services and providers, if needed.

The model contained in this bill is similar to one implemented in Massachusetts where municipalities are required to have VSOs to serve their local residents per Chapter 115 of MA General Laws. VSOs provide services free-of-charge and help Veterans and their family members write and submit benefits claims to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). VSOs can help gather the information that supports claims, and once the claim is filed, they track the claim through the VA system. VSOs can also help avoid the delays that missing paperwork or improperly completed benefits claims can cause when filing VA claims. Beyond VA services, VSOs are also versed in other benefits such as state property taxes, educational benefits, and more.

Throughout this legislation, our agency is referred to as "Office of Veterans' Affairs" and/or "OVA." The General Assembly approved the agency name change to the "Office of Veterans Services" via 2019 Public Law 088. We respectfully request that the legislation be amended to reflect the correct name of

the agency.

As always, I thank you for your partnership and consideration of this letter. Your leadership and advocacy for Rhode Island's Veterans and their families is appreciated.

Regards,



Kasim J. Yarn
Director

cc: The Honorable Members of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee
The Honorable Camille Vella-Wilkinson
Nicole McCarty, Esq., Chief Legal Counsel to the Speaker of the House