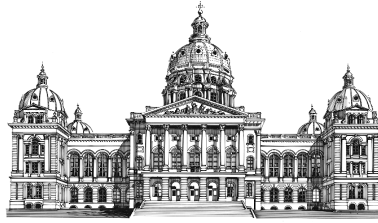

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The FY 1996 Mandates of the Commission of Veterans Affairs

ISSUE

An examination of the mandates in HF 203, Commission of Veterans Affairs Bill, regarding the location of the Office of the Commission on Veterans Affairs, the number and location of meetings, storage of information, training of the executive directors of county commissions of veterans affairs, and reports submitted by the Commission of Veterans Affairs.

AFFECTED AGENCIES

Commission of Veterans Affairs

CODE AUTHORITY

Chapter 1140, 1992 Iowa Acts

House File 203, 1995 Session

BACKGROUND

The 1992 General Assembly created the Commission of Veterans Affairs, combining portions of the Departments of Public Defense and Human Rights. Prior to the 1992 Legislative Session, the Veterans Affairs Division within the Department of Defense was located at Camp Dodge. Chapter 1140, Section 8.3, 1992 Iowa Acts, required the Commission of Veterans Affairs to be relocated to the Iowa Veterans Home. Since the enactment of Chapter 1140, the primary office of the Commission has remained at Camp Dodge, 7700 N.W. Beaver Drive, Johnston, Iowa.

Chapter 1140 specifies the Commission of Veterans Affairs consists of seven persons appointed by the Governor subject to confirmation by the Senate, including five commissioners honorably discharged from the armed forces of the United States and two commissioners of the public. All commissioners must be knowledgeable in the general field of veterans' affairs.

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Specific duties of the Commission include:

- To supervise the Commandant's administration of Commission policy for the operations and conduct of the Iowa Veterans Home.
- To maintain information and data concerning the military service records of Iowa veterans.
- To assist county veterans affairs commissions and provide suggested uniform benefits and administrative procedures for carrying out the functions and duties of the county commissions.
- To maintain permanently the records including certified records of bonus applications for awards paid from the war orphans educational fund.
- To collect and maintain information concerning veterans' affairs.
- To conduct two service schools each year for the Iowa Association of County Commissioners and executive secretaries.
- To assist the United States Veterans Administration, the Iowa Veterans Home, funeral directors, and federally chartered veterans service organizations in providing information concerning veterans' service records and veterans' affairs data.
- To maintain a permanent registry of the graves of all persons who served in the military or naval forces of the United States in time of war and whose mortal remains rest in Iowa.

The Code of Iowa does not mandate a specific number or location of Commission meetings. In the last 31 months, 30 Commission meetings have been held at various locations.

The Commission office currently houses an estimated 1.6 million records containing approximately 3.0 million military documents in hard-copy form. The United States Veterans Administration requires the Commission to maintain the documents in original form, resulting in additional space and lengthy retrieval requirements as compared to computerized records. The Commission estimates that it currently requires an average of nine minutes to retrieve a document using the existing index card system. Requests for certain types of information, such as veterans medals earned or participation in a particular war by county, are either cumbersome or impossible to fulfill. Although there is a halon fire protection system for the records, there is no provision for natural disaster protection or back-up records maintained in a separate location.

CURRENT SITUATION

Location

The Camp Dodge location has been retained as the primary Veterans Affairs Commission Office. The Camp Dodge location is in close proximity to the Veterans Medical Center and the United States Veterans Administration regional office (both requiring daily contact), all service organization offices, and other federal and state offices to which veterans often require referral. Additionally, recruiters and individuals enlisted in the Reserves may be contacted on the premises for record keeping purposes. House File 203 requires the Commission to remain at the Camp Dodge location.

Membership

The current six members of the Commission consist of two members from the community at large, one member from the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), one each from the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the American Legion, and American Veterans (AMVETS). The Governor is presently awaiting the names of two candidates to replace one at large member and one from a service organization as directed by HF 203. House File 203 directs the Commission to address the issue of Commissioner gender balance.

Meetings

An equal number of meetings must be conducted at the Camp Dodge Office and at the Veterans Home under new Subsection 13 as directed in HF 203. Since Commission meetings were initiated in November 1992, 30 meetings have been held at the following locations:

| <u>Meeting Site</u> | <u>Meetings Held</u> | <u>Location</u> |
|------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Iowa Veterans Home | 23 | Marshalltown |
| Commission Office | 2 | Camp Dodge |
| Iowa Statehouse | 2 | Des Moines |
| The University of Iowa | 2 | Des Moines |
| The Iowa Historical Building | 1 | Des Moines |

Records

The 1.6 million records maintained at the Camp Dodge Office include:

| <u>Records in Storage</u> | <u>Type of Record</u> |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| 570,000 | Index Card Records |
| 570,000 | Bonus Files |
| 320,000 | Grave Records |
| 78,000 | Civil War Military Records |
| 75,000 | DD 214 Discharge Records |
| <u>1,613,000</u> | Total |

Required Reports

House File 203 directs the Commission to request formal proposals and make every effort to obtain federal funding for military record storage on microfilm, electronic computer, or data processing equipment, and to deliver a written report on all proposals submitted along with the Commission's recommendations to the General Assembly by January 1, 1996.

The Commission is required by Chapter 35A, Code of Iowa to conduct two service schools annually for the Iowa Association of County Commissioners and executive secretaries. The County Commissioners receive instruction in the correct process for completing forms, the variety of veterans benefits available, and eligibility guidelines for benefits. Currently, county monies pay for expenses of the service schools. House File 203 directs the Commission to study the costs of

training and submit a report of findings and recommendations to the General Assembly by January 1, 1996.

ALTERNATIVES

The alternatives for action will be more clearly defined when it is known if federal funding will be available and the Commission's report has been submitted and reviewed to proceed with electronic filing of information. Computerization should reduce the time to process individual records (estimated to decrease from nine minutes to two minutes to process an average DD214 discharge record) and thus increase the time available to process additional service requests. Electronic retrieval will increase the types of information available given greater sorting and processing capabilities. Alternatives specified for study in HF 203 include microfilm, electronic computer, or data processing equipment. Alternative personnel choices for data entry would include either contracted labor for data entry or additional State FTE positions. The Commission has identified a phased approach to include:

| | <u>Records To Be Computerized</u> |
|---------|--|
| Phase 1 | Veterans of Korea and Vietnam |
| Phase 2 | Veterans of World War II |
| Phase 3 | Veterans of World War I and Others Necessary |

The alternatives for funding of the two annual service schools for county commissioners and staff include the current system which requires payment with county funds, and the possibility of funding the schools with State funds, which is anticipated to have the effect of increased County Commissioner compliance. The Commission is mandated to study these alternatives and report findings to the General Assembly by January 1, 1996.

The General Assembly may wish to consider a bi-partisan and gender balanced provision for the Commission at-large member appointed by the Governor.

BUDGET IMPACT

The fiscal effect of implementing the mandates of HF 203 will include the cost of transferring the hard copy files to an undefined computer system. The Commission estimates the cost will range between \$500,000 and \$600,000 including the purchase of necessary equipment. The efficiencies gained upon completion of the electronic system should result in a more productive Commission providing additional veterans' services.

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