

- SUBJECT:** Establishing a health care advocacy program for veterans.
- COMMITTEE:** Defense & Veterans' Affairs — favorable, without amendment
- VOTE:** 6 ayes — S. King, Frank, Aycock, Blanco, Farias, Schaefer
1 nay — Shaheen
- WITNESSES:** For — Maureen Jouett, Kwva Chapter 222 Centex; Fred Lord, Military Order Purple Heart; Olie Pope, Veterans County Service Officers Association of Texas; (*Registered, but did not testify:* Judith Dubose; Romana Harrison; Sheena Harsh; Katharine Ligon, Center for Public Policy Priorities; Eric Woome, Federation of Texas Psychiatry; Monique Rodriguez, Grace After Fire; Bill Kelly, Mental Health America of Greater Houston; Laura Austin and Greg Hansch, National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Texas; Morgan Little, TCVO; Jim Brennan, Texas Coalition of Veterans Organizations; James Cunningham, Texas Coalition of Veterans Organizations and Texas Council of Chapters of the Military Officers Association of America; Lee Johnson, Texas Council of Community Centers; Randall Chapman, Texas Legal Services Center; Michelle Romero, Texas Medical Association; Conrad John, Travis County Commissioners Court; Casey Smith, United Ways of Texas; Olie Pope, Veterans County Service Officers Association of Texas)
- Against — None
- On — Tom Palladino and Victor Polanco, Texas Veterans Commission
- DIGEST:** HB 1762 would require the Texas Veterans Commission by rule to establish and implement a health care advocacy program to assist veterans in gaining access to U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs health care facilities. The program would assist veterans by:
- resolving access issues raised by Texas veterans or referred to the commission through the veterans toll-free hotline operated under the Natural Resources Code;

- coordinating with the federal Veterans Health Administration to support health care advocacy program;
- coordinating with Texas health care providers to expand opportunities to treat veterans through the Department of Veterans Affairs;
- reviewing and researching programs, projects, and initiatives designed to address veterans' health care needs;
- evaluating the effectiveness of the commission's efforts to improve health care services and assistance for veterans;
- making recommendations to the executive director of the commission to improve health care services and assistance for veterans;
- incorporating veterans' health care issues into the commission's strategic plan;
- assisting veterans in securing benefits and services; and
- recommending legislative initiatives and policies at the local, state, and national levels to address veterans' health care issues.

The commission's executive director would appoint a program coordinator, and the commission would provide facilities to support the program as appropriate and to the extent funding was available.

The bill would require the commission to establish the program by January 1, 2016 and to adopt rules to implement it.

HB 1762 would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2015.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

HB 1762 would establish a health care advocacy program for veterans utilizing experienced advocates to serve as liaisons between veterans and health services provided through federal programs. These advocates, who are closely associated with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), would provide much-needed assistance to veterans in resolving access issues related to doctors' appointments, health tests, pharmacy assistance, and attaining outside referrals and fee-basis referrals for health

care services that the VA does not perform. Currently, more than 1 million veterans live in Texas, about 485,000 of whom are enrolled in the VA health care system. HB 1762 could improve the quality of life of many veterans by helping them navigate road blocks that come up when dealing with their health care, relieving a burden that could otherwise lead to depression and stress.

The program provided by HB 1762 is needed. While county resources officers currently provide claims and representation services for veterans, they do not offer on-site, specialty medical care advocacy. The partnership formed within the health care advocacy program for veterans would include experts trained to work within the VA health system and to advocate for veterans in that environment.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

HB 1762 would be redundant and result in an overlap of resources because counties already have resource officers to work with veterans for the types of services covered by the bill. While the LBB's fiscal note shows no significant fiscal implication, the House's proposed budget would spend about \$786,000 on the program in fiscal 2016-17.