

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

March 8, 2005 Field Trip

8:30 A.M. Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs

MEMBERS PRESENT: Rep. Donna Nelson, Chair

Rep. Phil Barnhart, Vice-Chair

Rep. Debi Farr, Vice-Chair

Rep. Brian Boquist

Rep. Scott Bruun

Rep. Dave Hunt

MEMBER EXCUSED: Rep. Betty Komp

STAFF PRESENT: Jim Stembridge, Committee Administrator

Erin Seiler, Committee Assistant

MEASURES/ISSUES HEARD:

Tour of Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs – Field Trip

These minutes are in compliance with Senate and House Rules. Only text enclosed in quotation marks reports a speaker's exact words. For complete contents, please refer to the tapes.

Tour of Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs (ODVA)

700 Summer St, NE

Salem, OR 97301

Background

The Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs (ODVA) is located in Salem and is responsible for the maintenance of Oregon Veterans' Homes, administration of veteran's benefits, and retention of military service records. Since the opening of the 73rd Legislative Session, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs has made numerous requests of the ODVA for informational testimony regarding a variety of subjects relating to veterans. The primary source of inquiry has related to Veterans' Benefits, Veterans' Home Loan Program, and the ODVA budget. Therefore, it was thought to be prudent that the Veterans' Affairs Committee take a tour of the ODVA facility in order to see how the Department delivered the variety of services to veterans, their dependents, and survivors.

Prior to the tour of the ODVA, Director Jim Willis gave a brief presentation about the history of the building, the departmental services, and current staffing levels. He explained that the building itself was only twenty-one years old and in addition the ODVA; it also housed the Oregon Employment Department and Health Licensing Offices. However, as the "landlord" the ODVA was responsible for the maintenance of the entire building, surrounding grounds, and the Veterans' memorials. In addition, Director Willis spoke about other Oregon Veterans' facilities in Oregon, in particular the Oregon Veterans' Home that opened in The Dalles in 1997.

During the tour the members of the Veterans' Committee had the opportunity to observe the execution of several of the key services that ODVA provides, including how military records are preserved, Veterans' Benefit counseling, Veterans' Home Loan services, and meeting with the department staff and several veterans seeking assistance. Services offered by the ODVA counselors include benefits assistance, counseling, assistance with claims preparation to obtain education and service-connected and non-service related disability benefits. At present, ODVA has five Veterans' service officers to provide confidential counsel and assistance to veterans and their families. Director Willis explained that current staff levels allow them a seven to eight day turn around on requests for assistance; ultimately the goal is to have a five day turn around. Also, Director Willis spoke in greater detail about the conservatorship services of the ODVA. These services include total estate management for certain veterans, their dependents, and survivors who are legally determined to be "protected persons" under Oregon law. Currently, ODVA has two two-member teams manage the estates of 235 veterans.

Further, the members had the opportunity to speak with Valerie Conley, Administrator of the Veterans' Home Loan program. She explained that due to the lack of utilization, the Veterans' Home Loan program was consolidated and twenty-two jobs were lost. However, she is anticipating a surge in Home Loan requests this spring because of the recent lowering of the interest rate by half a percent.

The field trip to ODVA concluded with a tour and explanation of the numerous war memorials that are on the ODVA grounds.

The Committee's tour lasted from 8:55 a.m. until 10:15 a.m.

