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- Minnesota Commanders' Task Force

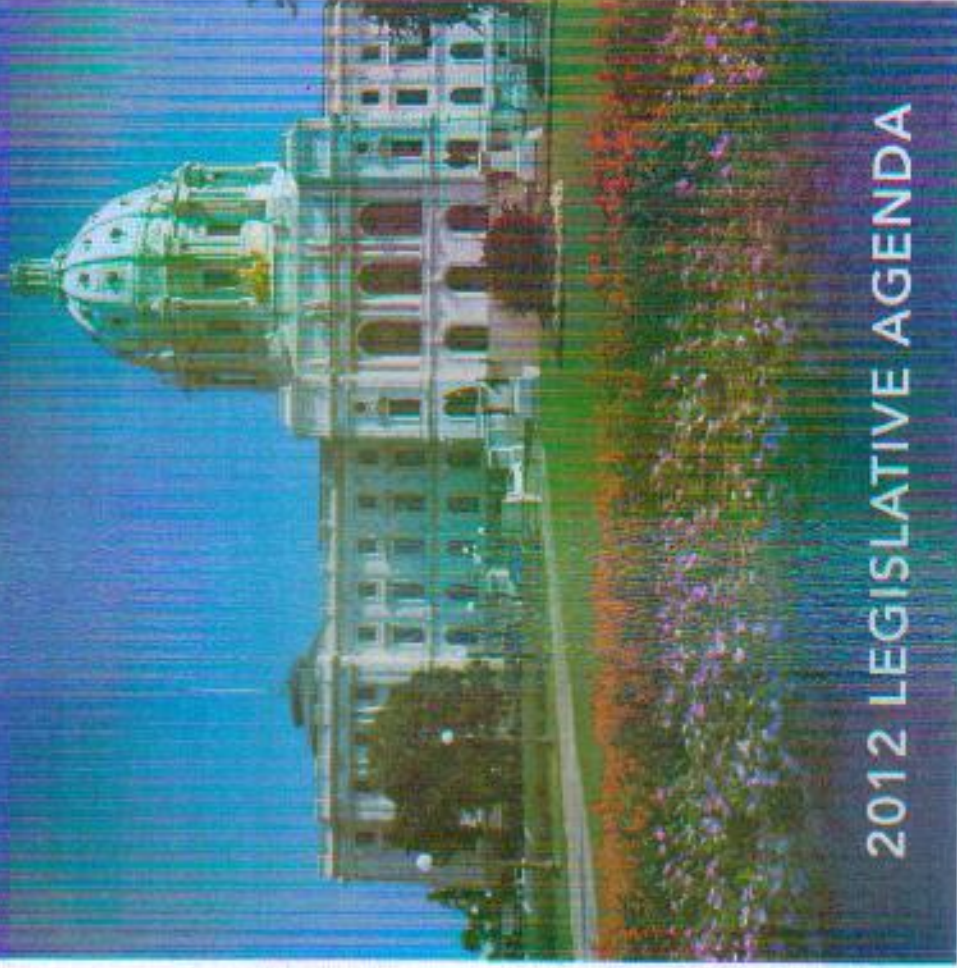
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THE VOICE OF 381,000 MINNESOTA VETERANS

# MINNESOTA COMMANDERS' TASK FORCE



2012 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

## Member Organizations



American Ex-Prisoners of War



American Legion



AMVETS



Disabled American Veterans



Jewish War Veterans



Marine Corps League



Military Order of the Purple Heart



Veterans of Foreign Wars



Vietnam Veterans of America

# About the Minnesota Commanders' Task Force

The Minnesota Commanders' Task Force (CTF) was created in 1988 and is comprised of elected commanders and appointed adjutants of nine congressionally-chartered Veterans service organizations in the state of Minnesota. Key functions of this group include:

- Developing a united Veterans legislative agenda and actively advocating for it before state and elected officials.
- Serving as a non-partisan advisory group to the commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA); the Governor and Legislators on Veterans' issues in the state.
- Working to seek and form Veterans service organization partnerships in program development (for example, the state's Veterans Day program).

## SUPPORT OUR TROOPS (SOT) ACCOUNT

The CTF urges the Legislature to refrain from mandating the SOT Special Revenue Fund as an appropriation source for specific Veterans programs or services. The SOT plate funds are derived from contributions from private sources through the purchase of Support Our Troops license plates. MDVA has identified four uses for the funds; namely, grants to Veterans service organizations; outreach to underserved Veterans; services and programs for Veterans and their families; and, Gold Star license plates. The distribution of SOT plate funds was intended to be at the discretion of MDVA based on the changing needs of the Department's programs and services. Therefore, the use of the SOT Special Revenue Fund should be determined by the Commissioner of Veterans Affairs.

## VETERANS HOMES CAPITAL INVESTMENT

The CTF strongly urges the Legislature to fully fund ongoing construction projects and asset preservation at the Veterans Homes. The Homes strive to provide high-quality care to every Resident in a therapeutic, highly adaptive and dignified environment.

Currently at the Veterans Homes several projects are underway and in various stages. Previous bonding dollars were allocated for necessary updates to bring the Veterans Homes up to standard to meet Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) regulations while improving the quality of life of the Residents, decrease maintenance costs and improve staff efficiencies. As it presently stands, these projects require additional capital investments to reach the required goals. Associated construction costs are typically shared by the state and federal government.

## MINNESOTA ASSISTANCE COUNCIL FOR VETERANS

The CTF urges the Legislature to appropriate additional funding to the non-profit Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (MACV). This organization assists Veterans and their families affected by homelessness in securing safe and drug-free supportive housing, transitional homes for use during extended medical care, finding permanent housing, job skills training, assistance finding resources for food, mortgage assistance, health care, chemical dependency treatment and sobriety aftercare, and counseling and legal assistance.

MACV is the leading program in preventing and aiding homeless Veterans.

in the state. VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, under authority of President Barack Obama, has stated a goal of ending homelessness among Veterans by 2015. In the 2011 legislative session MACV was granted a one-time appropriation of \$100,000 for FY 2012 from the Support Our Troops (SOT) license plates Special Revenue Fund.

The CTF believes the MACV funding level is insufficient to achieve the stated goal of ending Veteran homelessness by 2015. Because of that, the CTF strongly urges the state Legislature to properly fund MACV at an increased rate of \$250,000 annually in order to appropriately deal with and prevent Veteran homelessness in the state.

Again, the CTF urges the Legislature to avoid earmarking funds for this valuable program from the Support Our Troops (SOT) license plates Special Revenue Fund.

### **FUNERAL HONOR GUARDS**

The CTF strongly urges the Legislature to provide sustained funding for Funeral Honor Guards. These dollars provide stipends to Veterans service organizations that provide honor guard details at funerals of deceased Veterans. Currently, World War II and Korean Veterans are passing rapidly as that generation ages into their 70's and beyond. Last year the Department of Human Services (DHS) reported that nearly 10,000 Veterans were buried throughout the state. This very well-received program was adopted as part of the 2008-2009, appropriations at a rate of \$100,000 per year. In 2010 a onetime supplemental authorization was granted for \$100,000. Additional funds would allow the program to continue uninterrupted.

### **COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICER (CVSO) GRANTS**

The CTF supports the combination and expansion of the CVSO Competitive Enhancement Grants and Operational Grants Programs. Currently, there are two programs under which MDVA provides grants to counties to help fund programs and services for Veterans. The first is the "CVSO Enhancement Grant," which is a competitive grant that gives priority to proposals that meet programmatic goals established by the MDVA Commissioner. Chapter 45 of the 2007 legislative session directed that funding for the program be added to MDVA's base budget through FY 2011. That program sunset on June 30, 2011 and was not renewed in the 2012-2013 biennial budget. The second program outlined in Minn. Stat. 197.608, is the "Veterans Service Office Grant Program." The grants

under Minn. Stat. 197.608 are awarded on a three-year rotating cycle and determined by a county's Veteran population.

Because of the discontinuation of the CVSO Enhancement Grants, CVSO's outreach and Veteran service capabilities have been and will continue to deteriorate thus causing a disservice to Veterans. This is unacceptable!

The CTF supports the amending of Minn. Stat. 197.608 to combine the two grants with an ongoing funding level of \$1.1 million annually, and seeks to provide more flexibility in the use of funds as established by the Commissioner.

### **30% DISABLED VETERANS DIRECT APPOINTMENTS**

The CTF supports amendments to state and local government hiring procedures for Veterans with a 30% service-connected disability who meet all prerequisites. This proposal would amend state and local government hiring practices and allow for direct appointments to state employment in the event the Veteran is 30% or more disabled and otherwise qualified for the position to which the appointment is made. Currently, if an applicant for state employment is a Veteran and meets the prerequisites and qualifications, the top five recently separated (Post 9-11) Veteran applicants must receive an interview.

### **MN GI BILL EXPANSION**

The CTF supports the expansion of the MN GI Bill. Current economic conditions suggest that Veterans in Minnesota have a higher unemployment rate than their civilian counterparts. Expanding state Veterans educational benefits will reach a wider array of Veterans in need of additional skills or credentials and address unemployment among Veterans. Currently, the MN GI Bill (Minn. Stat. 197.791) is only applicable to Post 9-11 Veterans and surviving spouses or children of a totally disabled Veteran. This is a "last dollar in" program in that if no other funds for financial aid are available to those stated above then this financial aid can be used.

### **VETERANS BONUS PROGRAM**

The CTF supports a Post 9-11 Veterans Bonus Program. Currently, Minn. Stat. 197.79, cites the Veterans Bonus Program as originally intended to provide a bonus to post-Gulf War Era Veterans and serve as a mechanism

to identify Veterans within the state. The program had an open application period for three years and appropriated funds were paid out until the Commissioner exhausted all applications. Total appropriations for the program were \$18,575,000 and administrative costs were \$605,000. The CTF urges the opening of a Post 9-11 bonus at a rate of \$5,250,000 per FY2012, 2013 and 2014 for both bonus and administrative costs. It is estimated that the cost of this program may pay for itself through reduced unemployment receipts issued to some Post 9-11 Veterans as well as increase MDVAs ability to leverage federal dollars to Minnesota (which are many times higher than the cost of the program) through federally earned Veterans benefits.

### **EQUITABLE COST OF HUNTING AND FISHING LICENSES**

The CTF supports the equitable cost of Hunting and Fishing Licenses. Currently, several states have reduced or no cost for resident hunting and fishing licenses. The CTF proposes that the Legislature adopt the equitable cost amendment. This would require that Veterans with a service-connected disability rating receive that same disability percentage as a reduction to the cost of those licenses. For example, if the Veteran is 10% disabled then he/she receives a 10% discount on the cost of the license.

### **GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION (GSA) PURCHASE AUTHORITY**

The CTF supports GSA Schedule purchasing authority. GSA Schedule is a contract that a company has with the United States General Services Administration (GSA). The contract contains negotiated pricing that enables a company to sell their products or services to any government agency.

Minn. Stat. 16C Subdivision 8 states, "The Commissioner is authorized to issue policies, procedures and standards applicable to all acquisition activities by and for agencies...ensuring optimal use of strategic sourcing techniques." Strategic sourcing alludes to best economic value. Under projected state budget deficits it is calculated that Minnesota's Veterans Homes can become more replete and efficient at acquisitions by receiving authorization to purchase goods from the GSA Schedule because in many cases the GSA pricing is lower than the state level. Due to the unique position of the state Veterans Homes' mandate to comply with VA

regulations this will likely reduce costs associated with the Homes while enhancing services provided to the Residents.

### **MINNESOTA PERMISSIVE VETERANS PREFERENCE**

The CTF supports specific state law authorizing the private sector to give Veterans Preference when hiring new employees if they choose to do so. This is not intended to be mandatory and will not be subject to protections of public employment protection rights for Veterans.

Minnesota public employers are required under Minnesota Statutes to grant limited Veterans Preference to qualified Veterans that apply for public employment. However, currently there is no preference applicable to private sector employment. Currently, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, amended 1991, at 42 U.S.C. Section 2000e et seq., prohibits voluntary Veterans preference in employment as unlawfully discriminatory under Title VII.

Veterans' preference statutes have a purpose of rewarding Veterans who have served their country and to recognize military experience which enhances the potential employee's qualifications. This authorization in state law would ease the reintegration of Veterans into the civilian job market.

### **VETERANS PREFERENCE REFORM ACT**

The CTF supports reforms to Veterans Preference currently in state law to ensure Veterans who are considered for dismissal for cause from public sector jobs is done so in a timely fashion. Currently, Minn. Stat. 197.46 has no time requirement for final hearing parties to be selected when conducting a Veterans Preference hearing. This flaw in the statute can cause an unending delay in dismissal proceedings and cost public government entities money while the process is delayed. Under current law, the Veteran employee will continue to collect pay until the proceedings are completed.

This can have stalling effects because other agencies or state subordinate levels of government may realize this error in law and be skeptical in hiring Veterans. The CTF supports mandating a deadline for a Veteran to select his or her hearing board member and inform the employer within 60 days from the date the employer notified the Veteran of the intent to discharge.