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May 6, 2024

The Honorable Anna Caballero
Chairwoman, Senate Appropriations Committee
1021 O Street, Ste. 7620
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: SUPPORT – SB 1124 (Menjivar), Deceptive practices, service members and veterans

Dear Chairwoman Caballero,

On behalf of the Solano County Board of Supervisors, I write in support of SB 1124, which would provide additional protection for veterans in California in connection with fees charged for assistance applying for veterans' benefits and the privacy of their information, and requires individuals to be federally accredited before preparing, presenting, or prosecuting a veteran's claim for benefits under federal law.

Veterans bravely serve and often sacrifice their wellbeing for our country. Those living with the consequences of their selfless service deserve a smooth process in accessing the benefits they have earned. As with other government benefits, applicants may need assistance in applying for these critical benefits. California veterans who need assistance with filing a claim for disability benefits can get help at no charge from their VA-accredited county veteran service office (CVSO) or from nonprofit veteran's service organizations (VSOs) like the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). In addition to CVSOs and nonprofit VSOs, which provide assistance free of charge, the VA also accredits attorneys and claims agents to represent veterans and assist with benefit claims. The VA accreditation program exists to ensure that veterans receive competent and fair representation on their VA benefits claims.

However, the process for veterans to access the benefits they have earned can be daunting and leaves veterans vulnerable to bad actors. Because unaccredited claims representatives are not subject to the VA's rules and oversight, they pose an unacceptable consumer risk to veterans. To address this problem SB 1124 would strengthen several state law protections for veterans. SB 1124 specifically prohibits unaccredited case workers and lawyers from processing VA disability claims, protects veterans from exorbitant fees, and makes it a crime to obtain unauthorized access to the Veterans Affairs claims system using a veterans' login information. Further, prohibiting unaccredited claims agents and lawyers from charging a veteran for help with an initial benefit claim not only protects veterans, but it also ensures that counties continue to play a crucial role in connecting their resident veterans with benefits and services available to them.

County governments often collaborate with federal and state agencies, as well as local nonprofit organizations, to ensure that veterans are aware of and have access to the benefits they are entitled to. By working with veterans and their families, counties can ensure that those who have served their country receive the support and assistance they deserve. Therefore, we must ensure we have accredited advocates working on their case to ensure oversight, accountability, and the proper dispersal of funds. We must protect the personal information, financial interests, and health of the veterans who have sacrificed to protect us.

Honorable Anna Caballero
May 6, 2024

For these reasons, Solano County is pleased to support SB 1124 and respectfully requests your "Aye" vote on this measure.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mitch N. Mashburn". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mitch Mashburn, Chair
Solano County Board of Supervisors

CC:

Members, Senate Appropriations Committee
The Honorable Caroline Menjivar, California State Senator
The Honorable Bill Dodd, California State Senator
The Honorable Lori Wilson, California State Assemblymember
Honorable Solano County Board of Supervisors
Alfred Sims, Veteran Service Officer, Solano County
Paragon Government Relations
Karen Lange, SYASL Partners, Inc.