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June 15, 2015

The Honorable Jerry Brown
Office of the Governor
State Capitol Building
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: BUDGET ITEM # 8955-101-0001

Dear Governor Brown:

On behalf of my client, **the California Association of County Veterans Service Officers**, and on behalf of the 1.8 million veterans in California, we respectfully request that you approve the \$5.6 million General Fund appropriation for county veteran service offices.

This appropriation is a perfect example of "subsidiarity". By funding the county veterans service offices which assist veterans in filing claims for their earned entitlements based upon their federal military service, you are pushing these services down to the local level where the veterans are located.

For the past two fiscal years you have approved this level of funding on a one-time basis. The majority of this increased funding has gone to employees, trained veteran service representatives to file claims and for outreach to veterans. It is time to make this funding permanent.

Unfortunately, veterans' benefits are not automatically awarded like Social Security benefits. Each veteran must apply based upon their individual service. It is estimated that up to 25% or 400,000 California veterans are unaware they are eligible for these benefits.

Since the increased funding began in FY 2013/14, CVSOs have reported to CalVet that CVSOs have brought into the state over \$545 million in new benefits to California veterans. This is a 23% increase over the previous year's total. These CVSO assisted claims totals are only counted once for one year even though these benefits continue for the life time of the veteran. In FY 2013, according to the federal Veterans Administration, California veterans received \$5.3 billion from the federal government in Compensation and Pension benefits. Only Texas, with fewer veterans and more county veterans service officers brought in more funding. With this increased funding, California veterans are catching up.

Even with this increased funding, CVSOs are struggling to keep up with the current workload. Several local CVSO outreach initiatives have resulted in fairly startling results. Many CVSOs have been issuing local Veterans Identification Cards. To date, over 20,000 identification cards have been issued. Of those veterans requesting local ID cards, over 20% of them were unaware they were eligible for veteran benefits and have since filed claims through their local CVSO.

Additionally, on November 1st, the Department of Motor Vehicles will begin taking applications for a California Drivers License with a "Veteran" designation on the license (AB 935, Frazier, 2014). These applications must be accompanied by verification that the applicant is a veteran by a CVSO. The DMV has estimated that approximately 200,000 veterans will apply for the "Veteran" designation each year for several years. Based on the local ID card experience factor, upwards of 40,000 California veterans will be filing new compensation or pension claim each year through their local CVSO.

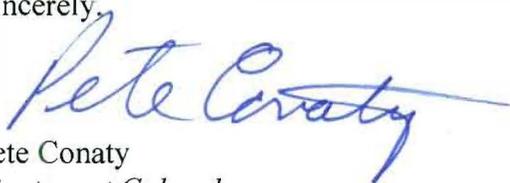
Working with the CalVet Strike Teams which you have funded that are located at the three VA regional offices in California, the CVSOs/Strike Team partnership has enabled many veterans to have their claims filed in a more timely manner resulting in quicker payments and have contributed to reducing the shameful backlog on veterans claims.

The need for this increased permanent funding level is crucial if all California veterans are to receive the federal entitlements they have earned. This can only happen if the veteran knows they are eligible for benefits.

This request for increased funding has widespread legislative support. Recently 78 Assemblymembers voted for this increased funding (AB 171 Irwin) and 25 Senators signed a letter to the Chair of the Joint Conference Committee on the Budget in support of this increased funding request (*attached*).

Based on the forgoing, on behalf of my clients which directly represent over 1 million California veterans, the **American Legion-Department of California**, the **AMVETS-Department of California**, the **California State Commanders Veterans Council** (*an organization of 15 veterans organizations*), the **Military Officers Association of America, California Council of Chapters**, the **VFW-Department of California**, the **Vietnam Veterans of America-California State Council**, and all of California's veterans, we respectfully request you approve this permanent increased funding level of \$5.6 million for California's county veterans service officers.

Sincerely,



Pete Conaty
Lieutenant Colonel
U.S. Army (Retired)

cc: Debbie Endsley, Acting Secretary, California Department of Veterans Affairs
Michael Martinez, Deputy Legislative Secretary, Office of the Governor
Chris Bingham, President, California Association of County Veterans Service Officers