

State Legislative Report

February 2019

The Texas Legislature is now in session and we are beginning to have new committee chairs and members getting themselves oriented to the tasks at hand. The Governor and Lt. Governor are intent on giving property tax relief while at the same time they are going to be in dire need of new revenue to take care of funding for public education. In addition, they both want to address Hurricane Harvey relief that will also need a great deal of money. There is also some talk of getting into the “Rainey day” funds to take care of some of this.

The Texas Coalition of Veterans Organizations, of which I am the Chairman and TCC is a member, held its bi-annual meeting on January 26, 2019. The major issue that TCVO will be trying to push will be the changes necessary to current law for disabled veterans with under 100% disability. At present, this is a fixed amount that is entirely dependent on the level of disability of the veteran. What TCVO wants to do is change this to a percentage which would adjust the amount of exemption based up the value of the veteran’s home. This would involve one last constitutional change and should solve the problem of the changing values of homes now and in the future. TCVO’s top priority is property tax reduction for Veterans disabled less than 100%. The financial issues identified above will significantly affect this TCVO priority. Jim Brennan, TCVO Legislative Director, expects that by the end of March or early April the direction of these financial issues will be clearer and will influence the direction that TCVO will take to promote property tax reduction for Veterans disabled less than 100%.

Sam Wilder is pressing for an alternate bill to be passed, which would be only a partial solution for disabled veterans with 80-99% disability. TCC voted some time ago to accept a position paper supporting this legislation. While TCVO and I will lend support to any bill coming before the legislature benefiting veterans, my personal opinion, having dealt with the legislature for many years, is that we should not be looking for an incremental solution, but should be putting our efforts into a full solution for ALL disabled veterans. My fear is that going for a partial solution will generate “veteran’s” fatigue that will make it much harder for us to get a comprehensive bill passed in the end.

Sam (Association of the US Army, and MOAA TX Council of Chapters) discussed House Bill HB 716 which will provide 80% to 99% Disabled Veterans with property tax exemption based on their % of VA disability rating. Considerable discussion followed with alternate options brought to the floor. Wilder is asking VSOs to provide letters of support for HB 716. TCVO will work with legislators to develop the optimal solution that will benefit all veterans disabled less than 100%.

What may be another issue is defense of the Hazlewood Act. Although, at this time, we do not expect any issues coming up this session, Jim Brennan reported the following:

Brennan discussed TCVO defense of the Hazlewood Act (up to 150 hours of free college credit hours for veterans whose home of record at the time that they entered the service as Texas. The hours are currently transferable to spouses and dependents of these qualified Texas Veterans). The Institutes of Higher Education (IHE) were directed during the 85th Texas Legislature to produce a study on the financial impact of Hazlewood on their budgets. The requested study and analysis has not been generated by IHE. If and when there is a challenge to Hazlewood benefits, TCVO is prepared to work with IHE to protect Hazlewood benefits. Rep Chris Turner chairs the Higher Education Committee, knows TCVO, and has worked with TCVO in the past on a number of issues.

In our meeting February 15/16, we will be discussing what to promote at the Advocating on the hill. Obviously, one of our primary issues will be that of disabled veteran exemption. Secondary issues may be those of increasing the number of veteran courts, perhaps having shared county veterans courts, increases support of County Veteran Service Officers, for representation in counties that may not have them or who need more. Also looking at continuing Education for those officers to keep them on top of their jobs.

One of the continuing issues that come up during each session are situations where we may need to have a lot of representation at various committee hearings on short notice! One of our TCVO members, John Spahr, former State of Texas VFW Chairman, has developed an email database referred to as the VFW Team Texas Alerts. There are over 500 names on the Alert email list. The list is for legislative issues only and is designed to garner grassroots support for Veteran related legislation. Spahr has opened the VFW Team Texas Alerts to any VSO that wishes to be added to the alert network. I would ask that at least our MOAA Chapter Presidents and Legislative Chairs share their information with John to be part of this alert system.

We will see you at the meeting.

Jim Cunningham