

UVC Members and Friends,

The 2009 session of the 66th General Assembly ended Wednesday, May 6th. It was a productive session for veteran's issues, with several major victories

Victories

In the current fiscal situation facing Colorado's budget the biggest legislative achievement probably was not specific legislation that was passed, but rather it was the cuts to funding for veteran programs that did not happen. Slated to be cut in the multiple budget proposals debated during much of the session were: \$4.5 million from the Veterans Trust Fund, suspension of the 100% disabled veteran property tax exemption, cuts to the State Veterans Nursing Home consulting contract, cuts to Homelake's domiciliary care, cuts to Medicaid reimbursement for SVNH that would have forced rate increases on residents. Due to the tremendous efforts and attention to Colorado's veterans by Democrats and Republicans alike we were able to avoid any of these cuts, quite a commitment given the severity of the budget and cuts made in other areas.

In addition to avoiding budget cuts, several pieces of legislation were passed that will benefit Colorado's veterans. One of UVC's 2009 Priorities and Goals was enacted this session, the Veteran's Information Clearinghouse (HB 1291) was authorized to be created and maintained at the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs. This will allow veterans in need of services easier access to finding programs that may be helpful since all programs, government or charitable, will be at one shop.

Another major victory was the passage of in-state tuition (HB 1039) without a one-year waiting period for honorably discharged veterans and their dependents who choose to make Colorado their permanent residence. Also, a tuition assistance bill (HB 1290) for Colorado National Guard members was passed. And a teacher incentive bill (SB 062) passed that grants education funds to veterans who enter the teaching profession.

The Trinidad State Nursing Home issue that continues to drain moneys from the 505 fund had beneficial legislation passed. The bill (SB 056) allows the state to transfer or sell the nursing home, an option that was not available prior to passage. While this legislation does not stop the financial drain, it was a necessary step to take to achieve that goal.

Other Successes

Other significant legislation impacting veterans that passed include the spending authority from the Veterans Trust Fund being increased (HB 1329), a pilot internet voting bill (HB 1205) that allows military members who are deployed overseas to vote by internet, unemployment insurance eligibility for surviving spouses of military members killed in combat (HB 1054) and an abandoned military remains bill (HB 1058) that allows veterans organizations the ability to identify unclaimed remains of veterans in mortuaries to be provided proper military burials.

A veteran's success involved modifying unwelcome legislation. UVC communicated the concerns of veterans related to a domestic abuse funding bill (SB 068) that initially specified members of the military and veterans would receive funding for services. UVC was concerned that the fee increase being passed under the pretext of helping veterans would not actually be directed to veterans. Also, we were concerned with stigmatizing veterans in Colorado statute as being more like than ordinary citizens to be involved in domestic abuse, when facts show other civilian professions have as high or higher rates of abuse. The bill was amended to remove all reference to military and veterans due to UVC's efforts.

Losses

Losses for veterans this session were limited to our support and concern for the active military and Department of Defense in Colorado. UVC supported the efforts to create a buffer zone (HB 1201) around Buckley AFB that will be necessary in order for the new F-35 detachment to be located there. The measure failed to make it through its first committee hearing.

UVC also supports the US Army's efforts to improve the training of our military members by expanding the Pinon Canyon Maneuver Site in southeastern Colorado. A bill (HB 1317) was introduced and passed that will prohibit the state from selling or transferring state land to the PCMS. While UVC did not take a formal position on the bill during the legislative session the organization recently voted to oppose its enactment by encouraging Governor Ritter to veto the measure.

Wrap Up

All in all, UVC had a very successful legislative session. Thank you to everyone who took time to go to the Capitol to testify for bills or show support for veterans. Your work in your community is widely recognized by legislators. Veterans carry a loud voice when we choose to speak out on issues of public policy. Avoiding the budget cuts was major.

This summer we will continue to work on the veteran service budgetary needs. As the economy remains troubled more and more veterans will be reaching out for services and support. The Veterans Trust Fund will remain a target for legislators in the next session if the economy does not turn around soon. Just because we avoided the budget cuts doesn't mean that Colorado monetarily supports veterans as well as most other states – we simply don't. We must continue to make the case for the needs of Colorado's veteran community, and if warranted we may seek the approval of the legislature to access the VTF rather than watch the state take the fund in 2010 to fund other areas in a strapped budget. Your continued support and volunteer efforts on behalf of Colorado veterans makes the difference when legislators are making important decisions

The full spreadsheet of all legislation tracked and/or worked by UVC this session is attached.