



DATE: January 26, 2021
TO: House Committee on Veterans and Emergency Management
FROM: Jennifer Donovan, Legislative Director, Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs
SUBJECT: HB 2139 – Rural Veterans Healthcare Transportation Grant

Chair Evans and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for providing this opportunity to discuss the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs Rural Veterans Healthcare Transportation Grant (RVHT) and supporting legislation. This program provides much needed access for veterans living in rural areas of our state that struggle to access reliable transportation to physical and mental health service appointments. We urge you to support access to care for our rural veterans by supporting HB 2139.

BILL SUMMARY

HB 2139 provides transportation to veterans living in rural parts of Oregon for physical and mental healthcare services. The services need not be related to services provided by U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) programs or benefits. ODVA may enter into agreements with state or local entities to administer the program. Oregon's nine federally recognized Indian tribes are explicitly eligible for the grants.

BACKGROUND

In 2019 ODVA created this program via POP 103. In the ODVA 2019-2021 Legislatively Adopted Budget the program was provided \$500,000 in one-time funding. In the 2020 2nd Special Session this program did not see a reduction in funding. In March 2020 ODVA entered into an Interagency Agreement with ODOT for ODOT to administer the grant program and funding. ODVA and ODOT plan to continue the agreement if the RVHT grant is continued in the next biennium. ODOT has published rules for this program. (ORS 732-020-0050).

Two rounds of funding were held in 2020. In total 10 applicants were funded for total awards of \$401,377, and a recommendation to provide incentive-based supplements up to \$15,000 based on program success in the first and second quarters of each project.

DISCUSSION

ODVA has administered the USDVA Highly Rural Healthcare Transportation grant to 10 Oregon counties for 7 years, and this bill would establish a state program that provides a much-needed supplement. Veterans who live in rural areas that do not meet the federal definition of highly rural have issues securing travel to physical and mental healthcare appointments. Additionally, the Highly Rural Healthcare Transportation grant does not provide for

transportation to health care service appointments that are not authorized by USDVA. These limitations put veterans at risk of not having access to necessary care. ODOT has aligned the program with its Special Transportation Fund agencies, which serve areas larger than the designated rural census tracts, providing a larger coverage area to serve veterans. Veterans can use these services for any type of mental or physical health appointment. The RVHT grant is currently only provided for in the ODVA 2019-2021 LAB. Statutory language and legislative policy committee review will provide increased clarity and stability to the program.

ODVA will work with ODOT to determine if there are procedures which could be put into place to collect demographic data about program use. Oregon's nine federally recognized tribes are explicitly included in the proposed statute. The tribes are currently eligible under ODOT rules, and are included in the statutory language to ensure the Tribes are eligible regardless of program administration changes. By design this legislation will provide support to rural veterans experiencing transportation challenges.

Thank you for your consideration, and your continued support of veterans.