

Preparing for vets' return

Provisions framed to make Minnesota a "veteran-friendly state"



PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHIED

Members of the St. Paul-based 2nd Battalion, 147th Assault Helicopter Battalion salute as the colors are posted during a departure ceremony April 10. The 287 soldiers have been ordered to active duty in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

BY LEE ANN SCHUTZ

When it comes to advocating for the state's veterans, party affiliation means nothing to Rep. Larry Haws (DFL-St. Cloud) and Rep. Dan Severson (R-Sauk Rapids).

The two became a familiar duo at committee tables this session as the sponsors of bills reflecting Gov. Tim Pawlenty's historic \$74.8 million military and veterans support package. Overall, this translates into a 51 percent increase for the departments of Military Affairs and Veterans Affairs over the previous biennium.

From education aid to tax breaks, the veterans and military initiatives put forth by Haws, Severson and others can be found sprinkled throughout several omnibus finance bills now making their way through the process.

A pairing by design

Severson's interest in veterans affairs is notable. Now serving his third term in the House, he is retired from the U.S. Navy after 25 years of service. He served as vice chairman

of the House Governmental Operations and Veterans Affairs Committee during the last biennium, when he sponsored at least nine bills relating to veterans affairs. He is outspoken about his view that the federal government does not live up to its "recruitment promises of education benefits and health care." He wants the state to help fill in the gap.

This year, with the unprecedented redeployment and scheduled August return of 2,500 Minnesota National Guard members — the greatest number of vets returning en masse in the state's history — veterans issues took on new urgency for Severson. He had a problem, however: his party lost control of the House. He began looking for a DFLer who would have as much passion as he did for "making things right for the veterans, and Minnesota a veteran-friendly state." He found it in Haws.

"He sought me out," Haws said. "We serve neighboring districts, and he knew about me because of my work with veterans when I was

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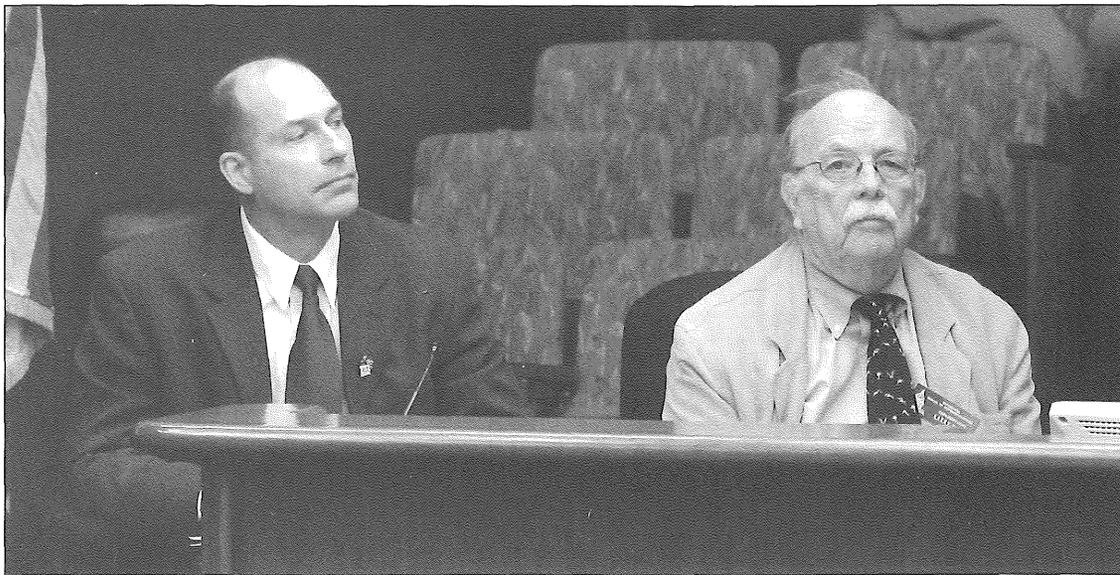


PHOTO BY ANDREW VONBANK

Rep. Dan Severson, left, and Rep. Larry Haws crossed party lines and teamed up to sponsor more veterans and military-related bills than any other representatives so far this session. They could often be found together at the committee table presenting information.

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a Stearns County Commissioner.”

Haws said that over the years, he would visit missions and anywhere else homeless and down-on-their-luck veterans might be, “just to let them know someone cares” and to inform them of programs that might be of assistance.

And thus the team was formed.

So far this session, Haws is chief sponsor of 13 military or veterans-related bills, more than any other representative, and Severson sponsors seven, the second-most. Both have signed onto numerous other bills on the subject.

Vets ideas turn to bills

When a bill was up for discussion, as if warming up committee members for Severson’s more informational, to-the-point approach, Haws would oftentimes rattle off one-liners, grabbing the bill’s essence as well as the audience’s attention. “I loosen the crowd up and Severson comes in with information,” he said.

Haws said ideas for the proposed legislation came from veterans themselves. He characterized the bills picked to be included in Gov. Tim Pawlenty’s proposals “as moving from the grassroots up and from the top of the tree down.” Ideas from the Military Action Group, a consortium of veterans organizations, played a key role in the governor’s initiatives, Severson said.

Reaching out

A good share of the veterans provisions are contained in the omnibus agriculture, rural economies and veterans affairs finance bill, HF2227, which received division approval

March 28 and is on its way to the House floor via the House Ways and Means Committee. Sponsored by Rep. Al Juhnke (DFL-Willmar), it would allot more than \$28.1 million in spending to the Department of Veterans Affairs and \$41.9 million to the Department of Military Affairs over the biennium. The bill’s companion, SF1925, sponsored by Sen. Jim Vickerman (DFL-Tracy), was tabled after being passed by the Senate 66-0 on March 23.

Most of the new programming proposed in the bill is targeted to outreach and helping returning vets get re-established in their communities.

County veteran service offices, considered the local contact points for veterans, would see programs expanded under the bill. While all 87 counties provide the service, it was an unfunded state mandate until 2006, when \$200,000 was budgeted.

More than \$2.8 million would be provided over the biennium to the base for programs and services at the county level.

According to Clark Dyrud, commissioner of veterans affairs, only about 50 percent of the veterans apply for benefits they have coming, and outreach on the local level is necessary to help the veterans reintegrate and learn about available programs.

To help support outreach, \$4 million in each year of the biennium would be available for tribal veterans service offices and a grant to the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans and other outreach programs.

The bill would also provide \$1 million over the biennium for expansion of the higher education veterans assistance programs,

which include informational offices on various campuses of higher education.

In each year of the biennium, \$1 million would be added to the base for the state soldier’s assistance program, which provides cash assistance in the form of shelter payments (rent and mortgage), utilities and personal needs grants to veterans who are unable to work as a result of temporary disability.

The bill would allocate \$80,000 in the first year of the biennium for suicide prevention and psychological support for veterans, along with \$30,000 for a telephone hotline to refer veterans to available psychological counseling services.

A one-time allocation of \$250,000 would be available for grants to assist World War II veterans to attend the dedication of the Minnesota World War II Veterans Memorial on the Capitol Mall on June 9, 2007.

The bill would also provide in each year of the biennium:

- More than \$300,000 for grants to veteran service organizations and for outreach to underserved veterans;
- \$500,000 for health screening exams for depleted uranium in Minnesota veterans;
- \$100,000 for compensation for honor guards at the funeral of veterans; and
- \$26,000 for an educational stipend for eligible spouses and children of deceased veterans.

Tax exemption for veterans

Called the “highlight of the governor’s bill” by Severson, HF300, sponsored by Haws, is being considered for possible inclusion in the omnibus tax bill. The bill expands the income tax subtraction for military service performed in Minnesota to all military pay effective for tax year 2007 and phased in over tax years 2007 to 2010.

“It is not just about rewarding service members for their service; this is about an investment in Minnesota’s future,” Severson said. Other states are exempting military benefits, and Minnesota will lose this pool of future employees as “this state will very quickly be one of the few states that tax veterans’ pensions,” he said.

The bill would also create a new income

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tax exemption for military retirement pay, including survivor's benefits pay. Under the bill, National Guard members would be provided with the same tax exemption for out-of-state training that is currently allowed for members of the military reserves. It also extends to the National Guard the income tax subtraction for

training performed out of state that is currently allowed for members of the military reserves, retroactive to tax year 2005. Sponsored by Vickerman, the companion SF160, was laid over by the Senate Taxes Committee.

A bill (HF162) sponsored by Haws would fund a tuition assistance program at any Minnesota postsecondary institution for up to \$1,000 for veterans and spouses and children

of deceased veterans. This bill awaits action in the House Higher Education and Work Force Development Policy and Finance Division. The companion, SF253, sponsored by Sen. Ann Lynch (DFL-Rochester), passed the Senate 64-2 on March 22 as part of the Senate omnibus higher education bill, (SF1989) sponsored by Sen. Sandy Pappas (DFL-St. Paul). ❧

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on behalf of affordable housing, homelessness and foreclosure prevention would gain a total of \$123 million, one-fifth of the division's proposed biennial spending.

The bill would grant \$7 million the next biennium to the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, an initiative of Clark's that passed in 2005 without appropriation.

Funding for facets of the continuum of care model — shelters, transitional and affordable housing — differ slightly from the governor's in fiscal years 2008-09, with proposed allocations to:

- Bridges, a program that provides rental subsidies for people with serious and persistent mental illness;
- the Housing Trust Fund, which provides rental assistance;
- the Homeownership Assistance Fund, which assists low-income first-time homebuyers;
- the Economic Development and Housing Challenge Fund, which helps rehabilitate and build low-income housing; and
- programs that help prevent foreclosures and long-term homelessness services and prevention.

A bill sponsored by Rep. Carolyn Laine

(DFL-Columbia Heights) — HF595, a home-visiting program for low-income parents — received a second, \$10 million chunk, of TANF funding.

Health

On the issue of health, the bill focuses on studying known environmental toxins and tracking their effects.

It would fully fund HF1621, sponsored by Rep. Julie Bunn (DFL-Lake Elmo), which would establish an environmental tracking system and a biomonitoring program to determine where toxins are concentrating and what affect they're having on people.

Lead abatement, an issue championed by Clark, would also receive an allocation. The language lowers the threshold for public intervention for pregnant women and children who've been poisoned by the metal and would grant funding to CLEARCorps, a program that assesses and cleans contaminated sites. Clark successfully offered an amendment that would force window safety standards into state building codes, originally HF277.

The bill would also provide funding for an initiative of House Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher (DFL-Mpls), HF1206, for improved newborn hearing screening and support.

A multitude of studies on materials believed to be toxic to humans were included in the bill, including research on:

- Lindane, a chemical used in lice and scabies treatment;
- Bisphenol-A, which is used in many consumer products;
- Decabromodiphenyl Ether, a flame retardant; and
- radiation from Monticello and Prairie Island nuclear power plants.

The bill would also expand surveillance programs for birth defects and cancer. Those provisions have been problematic to Republican members, who worried about privacy issues and consent.

"It's important that parents have some control over the data collected on their kids," said Rep. Rob Eastlund (R-Isanti) said of the birth defects registry system.

Boards

Seventeen boards, including those for nursing, pharmacy, dentistry, psychology, social work and emergency medical service would receive funding, under the bill's provisions. The largest allocation — \$90 million — would go to the Veterans Home Board for operational costs, capital investments and compensation adjustments. ❧

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Other inclusions

Other sectors that would receive funding allocations include:

- counties, who would receive a one-time \$40 million increase to help ease a fund-

ing blow from the federal level for case management work;

- people with disabilities, who would see more funding for waiver services, and their Medical Assistance asset limit doubled, at a cost of \$34 million in fiscal years 2008-09; and
- people suffering mental illnesses, with

provisions that included expanded coverage for mental health services in state health plans and grant funding. Both provisions appeared in bills from Rep. Mindy Greiling (DFL-Roseville), HF196, and the governor. ❧

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