



“Serving Those Who Served”

Veteran Service Officer Program Report



“Serving Those Who Served”



Submitted by:

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Veterans Services Administrator

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STATE OF WASHINGTON
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

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DATE: September 30, 2024
TO: The Honorable Jay Inslee, Governor of Washington
Joint Committee on Veterans' and Military Affairs
FROM: David Puente Jr., Director
SUBJECT: Veteran Service Officer Program Report

Your Washington Department of Veterans Affairs is pleased to submit this report on the implementation and status of the Veterans Service Officer Program.

Veteran service officers serve a critical role in assisting veterans and their families with connecting with a wide range of federal veterans' benefits including but not limited to health care benefits, service-connected disability compensation, nonservice-connected pension, employment benefits, education benefits, housing benefits, burial benefits, and survivors' benefits. Many state and local veterans' benefits are also available to veterans and their families and veterans service officers can also assist with these benefits.

Providing veterans service officer services is a foundational service provided by state veteran agencies nationwide. The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs partners with counties, federally recognized Indian tribes, and nonprofit veteran service organizations to accomplish this important work and ensure that veterans and their families are connected to their earned benefits. These services support the agency's strategic goal of being the leading state for veteran service delivery and outcomes as these benefits can improve the health, financial security, and quality of life for veterans and their families.

We appreciate the significant investments the Legislature and Governor have made to ensure that veterans are able to access and receive the benefits they earned. We look forward the continued support of the Legislature and Governor as the Veterans Service Officer Program expands to serve new veterans and their families in the years ahead.

Executive Summary

Veteran service officers serve a critical role in assisting veterans and their families with applying for a wide range of veterans’ benefits including health care, service-connected disability compensation, nonservice-connected pension, employment benefits, education benefits, housing benefits, and survivors’ benefits provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Providing veterans service officer assistance is a foundational service provided by state veteran agencies nationwide, including the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA), and these benefits improve the economic security, quality of life, and health care outcomes of veterans and their families in many important ways. These veterans’ benefits also reduce reliance on other public assistance programs such as Medicaid and Basic Food.

In 2019 the Washington Legislature passed Substitute House Bill 1448 establishing the veterans service officer program in Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 43.60A.230. This law allows WDVA to provide funds to eligible counties, subject to the availability of amounts appropriated in the veterans service officer fund under RCW 43.60A.235, to support county veteran service officer positions, and we currently provide funds to six eligible counties. We also have veteran service officer partnerships with an additional 17 counties, seven Indian tribes, and five nonprofit veteran service organizations.

WDVA recommends expanding the veterans service officer program to provide funds to all eligible counties, prioritizing counties that are currently lacking veteran service officer services. This would improve access to benefits for veterans and their families in underserved areas. We also recommend expanding the veterans service officer program to include funds for federally recognized Indian tribes that partner with us to employ tribal veteran service officers, in a manner similar to counties.

Background

Veteran service officers serve a critical role in assisting veterans and their families with applying for a wide range of federal veterans’ benefits including health care, service-connected disability compensation, nonservice-connected disability pension, employment benefits, education benefits, housing benefits, and survivors’ benefits provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Many state and local veterans’ benefits are also available to veterans and their families such as tuition waivers, veterans’ preference in civil service employment, reduced state parks fees, reduced hunting and fishing fees, reductions in public transportation fees, and services

provided by county veterans programs funded by RCW 73.08. Veteran service officers can also assist veterans and their family members with applying for these benefits. Veteran service officers will assist veterans and their families at no cost, but veterans and their families are not required to work with a veteran service officer to apply for veterans' benefits. Veterans and their families may apply for these benefits on their own or seek the assistance of attorneys or claims agents that must also be accredited by the VA.

Providing veteran service officer services is a foundational service provided by state veteran agencies nationwide, including the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA). The United States Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) allows the VA to provide professional accreditation to veteran service officers employed by state veteran agencies, federally recognized Indian tribes, and nonprofit veteran service organizations under CFR Title 38, Chapter 1, Parts 14.628 and 14.629. Under these regulations, state veteran agencies may also extend their veteran service officer accreditation to county and tribal veteran service officers that are employees of their respective county or tribal government, and that choose to partner with their state veteran agency.

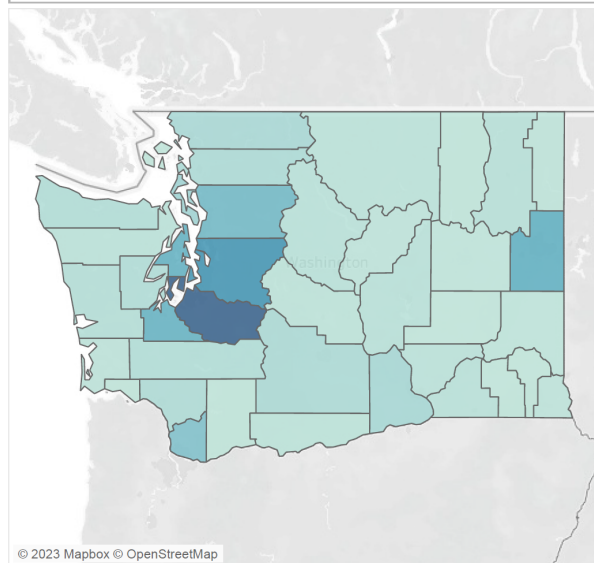
In addition to having several of its own employees working as accredited veteran service officers, WDVA also partners with counties, federally recognized Indian tribes, and nonprofit veteran service organizations to provide these services and ensure that veterans and their families are connected to the benefits they have earned, and which can help improve their economic security, quality of life, and health care outcomes. These benefits result in over \$6.5 billion per year in federal VA expenditures in Washington including over \$3.6 billion in disability payments directly to veterans and their families and over \$2.3 billion in health care services expenditures.¹ Additional federal veterans' benefits are available for veterans and their families including employment, education, housing, and survivors' benefits resulting in an additional \$396 million in federal VA expenditures in Washington each year.

As of January of 2023, approximately 30% of veterans were receiving VA service-connected disability compensation benefits nationwide. The percentage of veterans receiving VA disability compensation benefits in Washington was also approximately 30%. Additionally, approximately 0.65% of veterans in Washington, or 3,500 veterans, were receiving VA nonservice-connected disability pension benefits.² On average, a veteran receiving VA service-connected disability compensation benefits receives over \$1,700 per month in monetary benefits directly. This results in over \$3.6 billion per year in VA disability payments to veterans in Washington.¹

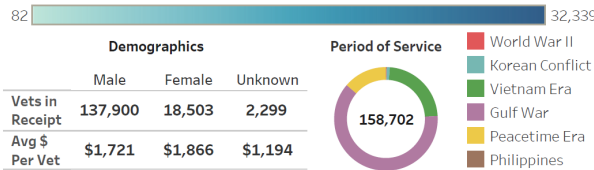
Veterans in Receipt of Benefits

Census data merged with VA data

Month January 2023	State Washington	Map Metric Veterans in Receipt
Total Vets 532,523	Vets in Receipt 158,702	% Vets in Receipt 30%
Avg \$ Per Vet \$1,731		



© 2023 Mapbox © OpenStreetMap



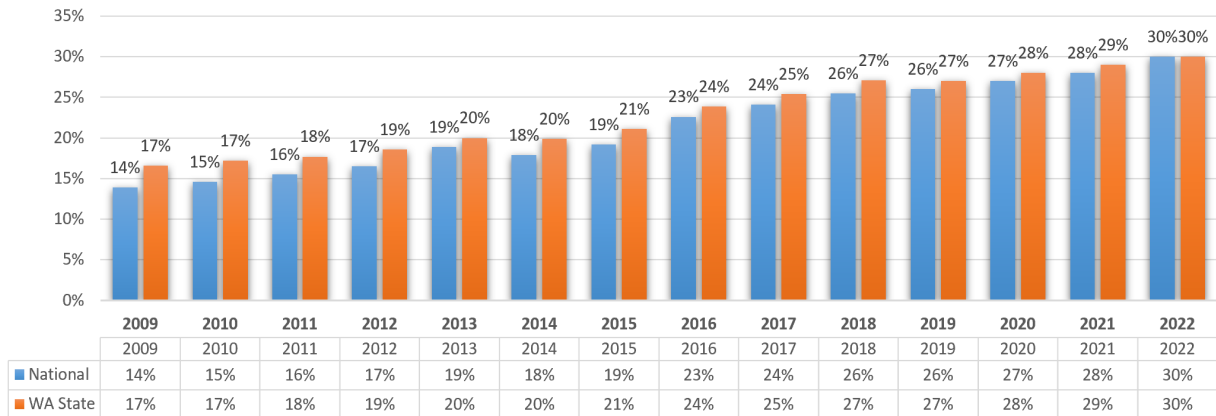
	Total Vets	% Vets In Receipt	Avg \$ Per Vet
ADAMS	554	25%	\$1,642
ASOTIN	1,950	30%	\$1,574
BENTON	12,854	30%	\$1,518
CHELAN	4,927	24%	\$1,665
CLALLAM	8,591	26%	\$1,720
CLARK	35,224	27%	\$1,604
COLUMBIA	354	33%	\$1,633
COWLITZ	8,758	29%	\$1,711
DOUGLAS	2,383	24%	\$1,635
FERRY	670	36%	\$2,069
FRANKLIN	3,264	34%	\$1,604
GARFIELD	201	41%	\$1,882
GRANT	5,129	26%	\$1,563
GRAYS HARBOR	6,340	29%	\$1,881
ISLAND	12,662	37%	\$1,772
JEFFERSON	3,660	25%	\$1,671
KING	104,551	20%	\$1,560
KITSAP	33,978	41%	\$1,598
KITTITAS	2,980	22%	\$1,750
KLICKITAT	1,945	40%	\$1,391
LEWIS	7,144	30%	\$1,872
LINCOLN	1,127	33%	\$1,776
MASON	6,335	37%	\$1,703
OKANOGAN	3,083	31%	\$1,851
PACIFIC	2,436	23%	\$1,697
PEND OREILLE	1,403	31%	\$1,878
PIERCE	88,319	37%	\$1,883
SAN JUAN	1,390	15%	\$1,558
SKAGIT	10,147	28%	\$1,700
SKAMANIA	927	20%	\$1,543
SNOHOMISH	50,885	23%	\$1,605
SPOKANE	42,468	34%	\$1,728
STEVENS	4,310	33%	\$2,057
THURSTON	30,811	44%	\$2,019
WAHIAKIUM	401	32%	\$1,676
WALLA WALLA	3,869	33%	\$1,736
WHATCOM	13,853	25%	\$1,648
WHITMAN	2,183	25%	\$1,629
YAKIMA	10,455	28%	\$1,764

According to data obtained from the VA’s National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, the percentage of veterans receiving VA disability compensation benefits has increased from 17% to 30% nationally between 2009 and 2022. This significant increase is the result of an aging population of Vietnam era veterans, a greater percentage of veterans leaving military service with VA service-connected disability compensation benefits after the Global War on Terrorism, and the expansion of eligibility for these benefits resulting from federal case law such as *Nehmer v. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*,³ and federal legislation such as the 2022 Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act (PACT Act).⁴

To exemplify this increase in the percentage of veterans receiving VA service-connected disability compensation benefits, in the first two fiscal years after the PACT Act passed the number of veterans’ disability claims completed by WDVA’s network of veteran service officers doubled, from 8,619 disability claims submitted in state fiscal

year 2022 to 17,336 disability claims submitted in state fiscal year 2023. Given this significant increase in the number of veterans’ disability claims filed in the past two years, the percentage of veterans receiving VA disability benefits is expected to continue increasing in the years ahead. However, the Nehmer case and the PACT Act have also increased the complexity of filing for VA service-connected disability benefits and have led to an increase in demand for accredited veteran service officer services nationwide.

**Percent of Veterans Receiving VA Disability Compensation
National Average vs. Washington State
2009-2022**



■ National ■ WA State

Rounded to the nearest 1%

Activities and Outcomes

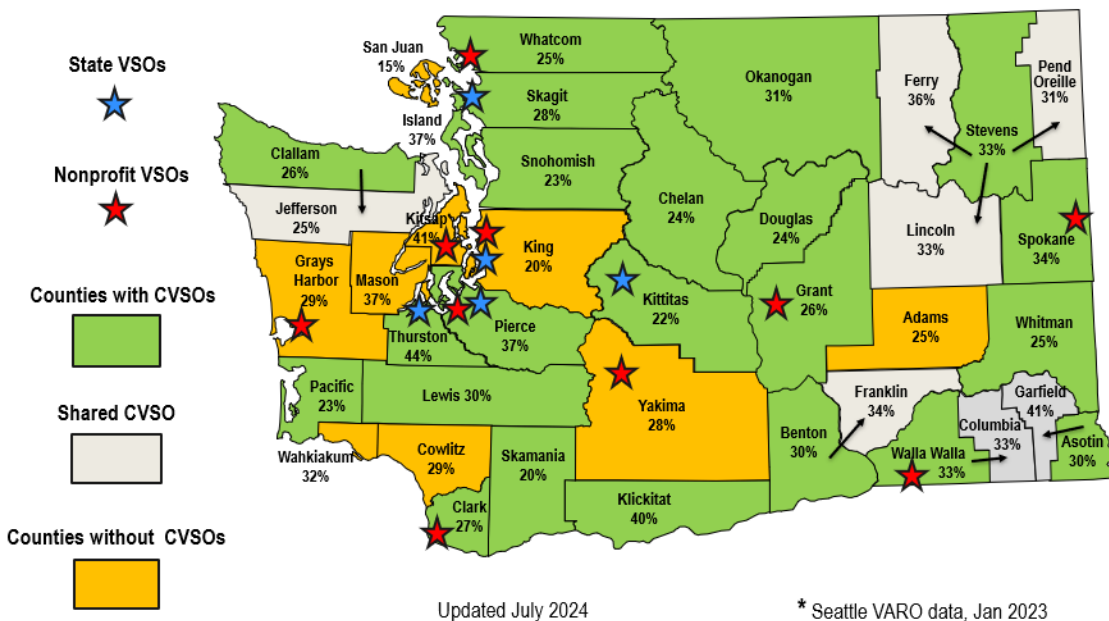
The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs partners with counties, federally recognized Indian tribes, and nonprofit veteran service organizations to provide veteran service officer services. We have several of our own employees accredited to provide these services, referred to as state veteran service officers, while nonprofit veteran service organizations that are accredited by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to provide these services are also eligible to receive funds from the agency under RCWs 43.61.030 and 43.61.070. Counties that wish to employ county veterans service officers to provide this service may be eligible to receiving funding from the agency under RCW 43.60A.230. The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs currently receives sufficient funding from the legislature to provide grants to six eligible counties who employ county veterans service officer under RCW 43.60A.230 including Asotin, Clallam, Island, Skamania, Stevens, and Walla Walla counties.

Additionally, there are 17 other counties that have county veteran service officers funded by local county funds, primarily their veterans’ relief fund under RCW 73.08. These counties maintain memorandums of agreement with WDVA that allow us to provide in-kind support services that are important to ensuring that these county veterans service officer have the training and tools they need to be successful in providing these services. There are also seven federally recognized Indian tribes that maintain similar agreements with WDVA to provide in-kind support for their tribal veterans service officers. However, WDVA is not authorized to providing funding to Indian tribes at the current time as they are outside the scope of RCW 43.60A.230.

WDVA’s network of veteran service officers, including state, county, and nonprofit veterans service officers are indicated by the following map:

VETERAN SERVICE OFFICER LOCATIONS

% VETS IN RECEIPT OF DISABILITY BENEFITS *



Under these veterans service officer agreements with counties and Indian tribes, WDVA is responsible for providing partnering veterans service officer with training, accreditation, access to WDVA’s veterans’ disability claims application system, and tracking and reporting of the veterans’ disability claims submitted by partnering veterans service officers and the financial outcomes of these claims – the veterans’ disability payments made directly to veterans and their families as a result of successful claims. Furthermore, WDVA is responsible for representing the appeals for veterans who wish to appeal their VA rating decisions before the VA Board of Veterans Appeals as WDVA

is considered the veteran's service organization representative, not the individual veteran service officer.

In 2019 the Washington Legislature passed Substitute House Bill 1448 establishing the Veterans Service Officer Program in RCW 43.60A.230. This law allows WDVA to provide grant funds to eligible counties subject to the availability of amounts appropriated in the veterans service officer fund under RCW 43.60A.235. RCW 43.60A.230 defines eligible counties as those with a total population of one hundred thousand or less. There are currently 25 counties with a total population of one hundred thousand or less including Adams, Asotin, Chelan, Clallam, Columbia, Douglas, Ferry, Garfield, Grays Harbor, Island, Jefferson, Kittitas, Klickitat, Lewis, Lincoln, Mason, Okanogan, Pacific, Pend Oreille, San Juan, Skamania, Stevens, Wahkiakum, Walla Walla, and Whitman counties.⁵

Developing veteran service officer grant agreements with counties that are new to the program takes an average of three or four months as significant stakeholder engagement is necessary to help county leaders and their veterans advisory boards understand the role and authority of county veteran service officers and program requirements. For many counties this is a new service, and the county veteran service officer is a new position in their civil service system. Once a new county veteran service office grant agreement is finalized, it can also take counties three or four months to recruit and hire an employee into the position, which must be a county employee under CFR Title 38, Chapter 1, Parts 14.629 (contractors and/or volunteers are not eligible to serve as county veteran service officers), and then it takes an additional month or two for the county veteran service officer to become fully trained by WDVA and accredited by the VA. At this time, and only at this time, may new county veteran service officers begin developing and submitting claims for veterans' benefits on behalf of the veterans and families that they are serving. This means there may be a six-to-eight-month ramp-up time from the initial phases of onboarding a new county into the program before their county veteran service office is able to begin submitting claims for veterans' benefits.

Once a claim for veterans' disability benefits has been submitted to the VA by a veteran service officer, it takes an average of six months (at the time of this report) for the VA to review the claim and notify the veteran of the decision. However, claims involving more complex medical conditions or that may need additional development, such as collecting supporting evidence, take more time to decide. Approximately 80% of veterans' disability claims are approved by the VA and the veteran or family member will only begin receiving monetary benefits once the claim has been approved. Veterans will also receive an initial back payment from the effective date of their claim which is typically the month following the date the claim was filed. However, in some cases the

claim may be back-dated further. Veterans and their family members whose claims are denied by the VA have the right to appeal the decision, although appeal timelines may be a year or longer. When a claim is approved by the VA on an appeal the veteran or family member will still receive back payment from the date of the original claim. This often results in back payments in the tens of thousands of dollars, in addition to the monthly payment going forward.

Based on appropriations for the veteran service officer fund, WDVA began developing county veteran service officer grant agreement and providing funds to eligible counties in fiscal year 2020, beginning with Clallam County and Stevens County. In fiscal year 2023 funds were expanded to include Island County and Walla Walla County, and in fiscal year 2024 funds were expanded further to include Asotin County and Skamania County. These six counties are currently receiving funds under this program and funds will be provided to additional eligible counties based on future appropriations.

Since the beginning of the county veterans service officer program, in fiscal year 2020, the six counties receiving funds from the program have filed 1,279 veterans' disability and survivor's benefits claims resulting in an estimated \$13,439.899 in monetary compensation benefits paid directly to veterans and their families. Once a veteran or family member is granted veterans' disability or survivor's benefits, they typically receive this monthly benefit for the remainder of their lives, although monetary benefits may increase or decrease in some circumstances. These monthly payments also increase with federal cost of living adjustments each year.

The compounding effect of these monthly payments to veterans and their families increases year over year and the following figures are conservative estimates of the direct financial outcomes of the county veterans service officer program. Additionally, veterans and their families who receive veterans' disability monetary benefits are also entitled to expanded veterans' benefits including VA health care benefits, education benefits, and employment benefits that may provide additional payments or allow veterans and their families to save money on health care and long-term care services that are covered by the VA directly. These benefits have a significant positive impact on the lives of veterans and their families and can improve their economic security, quality of life, and health care outcomes over their lifetime. These veterans' benefits also reduce reliance on other public assistance programs such as Medicaid and Basic Food.

Veterans Service Officer Program Outcomes										
	FY-20		FY-21		FY-22		FY-23		FY-24	
	Claims Filed	Annual Disability Payments	Claims Filed	Annual Disability Payments	Claims Filed	Annual Disability Payments	Claims Filed	Annual Disability Payments	Claims Filed	Annual Disability Payments
Clallam County	N/A	N/A	13	N/A	77	\$306,064	323	\$2,696,524	336	\$2,308,907
Stevens County	31	\$7,374	20	\$89,564	13	N/A	88	\$859,498	80	\$365,937
Island County	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	66	\$72,576	75	\$778,625
Walla Walla County	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	N/A	19	\$286,988	79	\$189,813
Asotin County	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	1	N/A	25	\$57,202	31	\$634,660
Skamania County	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	\$0
FY Totals:	31	\$7,374	33	\$89,564	93	\$306,064	521	\$3,972,788	601	\$4,277,942

Total Claims Filed: 1,279
Number of Veterans Served: 1,087
Estimated Cumulative Disability Payments: \$13,439,899

As previously mentioned, of the 25 counties eligible to participate in the veteran service officer program, six of these counties, listed in the table above, are receiving funds through the program. Of the remaining 19 counties, 11 of them are below the state and national average of 30% regarding the percentage of veterans receiving federal VA disability benefits, and nine of these counties are lacking in services as they do not have veterans service officer funded by the program. These nine counties include Adams, Chelan, Douglas, Grays Harbor, Jefferson, Kittitas, Pacific, San Juan, and Whitman counties.

Recommendations

The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs recommends expanding the veterans service officer program to provide funds and support veteran service officer services in all eligible counties prioritizing the counties that are below the state and national average of veterans receiving VA disability benefits. This would improve access to veterans’ benefits for veterans and their families in rural areas where they often lack access to veteran service officers employed by nonprofit veteran service organizations. The estimated costs to expand the veterans service office program is \$160,000 per year for each additional county. This cost includes grant funds directly to counties and WDVA’s costs to provide ongoing training, technical assistance, accreditation, technology, monitoring, and reporting for each additional county veteran service officers.

Furthermore, we respectfully recommend expanding the veterans service officer program to include funds for federally recognized Indian tribes that partner with WDVA to employ tribal veteran service officers. Native Americans serve in the United States’

Armed Forces at a higher rate than another other group⁶ and Native American veterans are more likely to lack health insurance than other veterans, they are more likely to have a VA service-connected disability than other veterans, and they are less likely to access VA benefits and services.⁷

Federal regulations allow state veterans agencies, including WDVA, to provide veteran service officer training and accreditation to tribal veteran service officers, similar to the way they do for county veteran service officers, therefore tribal veteran service officers can assist WDVA in serving veterans by providing culturally appropriate services in Native American communities. The ability to partner with and provide funds to federally recognized Indian tribes would improve equity and access to federal veterans' benefits to Native American veterans, which can ultimately improve the health and financial security of Native American veterans and their families the same way they do for other veterans.

¹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Fiscal Year 2023 Expenditures Data, <https://www.va.gov/vetdata/Expenditures.asp>

² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Benefits Administration Annual Benefits Report Fiscal Year 2023, [Annual Benefits Report - Veterans Benefits Administration Reports \(va.gov\)](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/AnnualBenefitsReports/AnnualBenefitsReport-2023.pdf)

³ National Veterans Legal Service Program, Nehmer vs. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, <https://www.nvlsp.org/what-we-do/class-actions/nehmer-agent-orange-lawsuit>

⁴ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, One year of the PACT Act: A historic expansion of benefits and health care for veterans and their survivors, <https://news.va.gov/press-room/one-year-of-pact-act-a-historic-expansion-of-benefits-and-health-care-for-veterans-and-their-survivors/>

⁵ State of Washington Office of Financial Management, [April 1 official population estimates | Office of Financial Management \(wa.gov\)](https://www.ofm.wa.gov/newsroom/20230401)

⁶ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, American Indian/Alaska Native Veterans Fact Sheet, [https://www.va.gov/HEALTHQUITY/docs/American Indian Heritage Month Fact Sheet.pdf](https://www.va.gov/HEALTHQUITY/docs/American_Indian_Heritage_Month_Fact_Sheet.pdf)

⁷ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans: 2017 (2020), <https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/AIAN.pdf>