



Clatsop County

Board of Commissioners

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www.co.clatsop.or.us

April 8, 2022

Dear U.S. Senators Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden,

On behalf of Clatsop County, I write in light of recent U.S. House passage of the *Honoring our PACT Act of 2021 (H.R. 3967)*, which included the bipartisan *Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach (CVSO) Act (S.2403)* to provide critical new resources to county veterans service officers (CVSOs.) As Congress work to reach a bipartisan, bicameral agreement on legislation addressing toxic exposure among veterans, Clatsop County's Board of Commissioners urges you to maintain these resources for the County Veterans Service Officers (CVSOs) who will be helping former service members access their new benefits.

Clatsop County is deeply invested in veterans' health and well-being, often serving as a veteran's first point of contact in the community for accessing services. At the local level, CVSOs help veterans access a range of service-connected federal benefits, including VA health care, housing and transition assistance programs. CVSOs are often the first point of contact in the community for veteran's services. Across the country, CVSOs in 29 states and two Native American tribes CVSOs are responsible for helping veterans obtain more than \$80 billion annually in federal health, disability, pension and compensation benefits. The Clatsop County Veteran Services Office provides services to veterans and surviving family members by connecting them to federal and state benefits that in turn contribute an average of over 1.6 million dollars per year back into the community.

Though CVSOs' primary focus is helping veterans navigate the federal benefits system, these offices are currently funded almost entirely by counties, which creates challenges for areas with high demand or counties that serve veterans in rural areas. Our CVSO serves veterans, active-duty service members, and military-connected families residing in both urban and rural settings within Clatsop County. Currently, his caseload totals 1,835 clients. By authorizing \$250 million over five years for states to expand the work of CVSOs or comparable entities, the CVSO Act would play a key role in helping veterans access a range of service-connected federal benefits more quickly and easily.

It is vital to ensure that post 9/11 veterans can access the disability compensation and health coverage they are owed after being exposed to contaminants and environmental hazards in service to their country. However, federal action on toxic exposure underscores the need to pass the CVSO Act. As Congress and the administration work to agree on final legislation expanding benefits for toxic-exposed veterans, Clatsop County will need these new federal resources help us meet our growing caseloads, especially as millions of veterans begin filing claims based on newly established presumptive conditions.

Thank you for your ongoing, bipartisan commitment to our nation's veterans and for acknowledging the urgent need to provide health and disability coverage to veterans suffering from toxic exposure.

Clatsop County looks forward to working with you to ensure any final toxic exposure legislation includes the CVSO Act during the 117th Congressional session.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Mark Kujala". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mark" and last name "Kujala" clearly distinguishable.

Mark Kujala

Chair

Clatsop County Board of Commissioners