



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Improvements Are Needed to Better Support Veterans' Access to Services**

DENVER— The Colorado Office of the State Auditor (OSA) has issued a performance audit of veterans services administered by the Division of Veterans Affairs (Division) within the Colorado Department of Military and Veterans Affairs. Overall, auditors found that the Division and the Colorado Board of Veterans Affairs (Board) do not sufficiently plan for, supervise, and support veterans services, which are largely provided by county veterans service officers (VSOs). As of September 2021, there were an estimated 388,000 veterans living in Colorado. The Division offers assistance to veterans through county- and state-employed VSOs who help veterans obtain federal Veterans Administration (VA) benefits, such as pensions, disability compensation, medical care, and education assistance, as well as other state benefits and resources. The Division also has veteran-related grant programs and operates a veterans cemetery and resource center, both in Grand Junction.

Auditors found that the Division lacks an adequate training and certification program to ensure that VSOs have the necessary skills to provide quality assistance to veterans. About one-third of VSOs responding to auditors' survey questions reported that their initial training was too complex, provided too late, or had gaps in the content. "Ensuring effective training for VSOs is one of the best ways the State can support our veterans, since veterans and their families rely on VSO expertise to help them understand which benefits they qualify for and to properly handle their claims," said Dana Berry, Legislative Performance Auditor.

Auditors found indicators that access to veterans services is also not uniform across the state, as intended by state law. VSOs in one area reported that veterans often have to wait for more than 2 weeks before the VSO can begin discussing available assistance for the veteran or begin a claim for

benefits, whereas veterans in other areas had no wait times. The ratio of veterans to state and county VSOs varies widely across the state, from 10,000:1 in the Denver Metro region to less than 3,000:1 in all other regions. The Division also distributes semiannual payments to support county VSOs. However, in a sample of payments made to nine counties, auditors found that 80 percent of the \$69,000 the Division approved for payment was not fully supported by county reports requesting the payments. Auditors also found that the Division's method of calculating the payments leads to significant differences in the effective hourly rates that counties receive for their VSOs, with rates ranging from \$8.65 to \$55.38 per hour.

Auditors also found that sensitive veteran data may not be fully protected, highlighting concerns about inadequate security policies in place for the Division's case management system and compliance with Colorado Information Security Policies. For example, the Division does not regularly monitor access to the system, and some user accounts belonging to current state or county staff had not been logged into for between 3 months and 7 years.

Finally, auditors found that the Division and the Board needed to improve their strategic planning and processes to guide their operations. Situations that may have been addressed more quickly through better planning processes included an unfulfilled 2009 statutory directive to create a clearinghouse of veterans service information and fulfilling resource needs for the Veterans Memorial Cemetery of Western Colorado.

The audit makes eight recommendations for improvements. The full audit report is available online at [www.colorado.gov/auditor](http://www.colorado.gov/auditor).

### **About the Office of the State Auditor**

Under the direction of the State Auditor, the OSA's nonpartisan, professional staff promote government accountability by conducting independent performance, financial, and IT audits and evaluations of state agencies, departments, and institutions of higher education; conducting independent evaluations of the State's tax expenditures (e.g., credits, exemptions, deductions); tracking about 4,000 Colorado local governments for compliance with the Local Government Audit Law; and operating a statewide fraud reporting hotline.

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