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## SENATORS BALDWIN AND SULLIVAN ANNOUNCE REINTRODUCTION OF BIPARTISAN LEGISLATION TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO VETERANS' SERVICES

*The CVSO Act will expand community-based outreach that will help veterans access services to improve their health and wellness and prevent suicides*

**Washington, D.C.** – Today, Senators Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Dan Sullivan (R-AK) reintroduced the *Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act*, a bipartisan bill to authorize federal funding for county veterans service officers (CVSOs).

Out of the estimated 19 million veterans in the United States, only a small fraction utilize the care and benefits they've earned from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). CVSOs are often the first to inform veterans of their eligibility in these programs and services, particularly in rural areas. CVSOs are local county employees who are nationally accredited by the VA to help veterans process their VA claims. These employees are responsible for successfully processing more than \$42 billion in claims annually for direct compensation and pension benefits for veterans. They also provide assistance to veterans on a range of benefits and services, including compensation benefits, home loans, education benefits and job placement assistance. Unfortunately, there is currently no federal funding support directly available for CVSOs.

“County Veteran Service Officers are often the first point of contact for our veterans to access the benefits and services available to them—particularly in rural communities,” **said Senator Baldwin**. “It is nothing short of our duty to ensure that those who bravely serve our country can better access and utilize their VA benefits with ease. This bipartisan legislation will make federal investments to help connect veterans and their families to the resources and care they’ve earned.”

“Less than half of Alaska’s more than 75,000 veterans are currently enrolled in the VA system, meaning a majority are not accessing the benefits and health care services that they have earned, including those struggling with mental illness. That is unacceptable,” **said Senator Sullivan**. “Alaska’s vast size and sparse population certainly contribute to this challenge, but local partners and veteran service officers present an opportunity to reach these off-the-grid veterans. Senator Baldwin and I are introducing legislation that will reinforce the VA’s mission to expand its reach and ensure veterans who live in rural, frontier states—like Alaska—do not get left behind.”

The bill was also introduced in the House by Representatives Mike Levin (D-CA), Tim Ryan (D-OH), and Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA).

“We have a responsibility to ensure that veterans and their families have easy access to the benefits and services that they have earned,” **said Rep. Levin**. “That is why my colleagues and I are reintroducing this bipartisan legislation to support the work of county veterans service officers who interact directly with our local veterans every day. I’m proud to introduce the bicameral *CVSO Act* and look forward to advancing this legislation through the House with bipartisan support once again.”

“Navigating the VA’s bureaucracy can be a nightmare for those who have served, but our county’s veteran services officers are at the tip of the spear helping our veterans access the benefits they’ve earned,” **said Rep. Ryan**. “The least we can do for the men and women who serve our country is to make sure they have the support they need when they get home. This bill is a step in the right direction to ensure the federal government does more to support our community heroes.”

"I have had too many conversations with veterans in Eastern Washington who tell me they don't have the resources they need to access their benefits. This is heartbreaking, and it should not be the case," **said Rep. Rodgers.** "By funding additional VSOs in communities across the country – especially in rural areas – we are making a commitment to our veterans that we will not let them slip through the cracks. This common sense legislation is overdue, and it will go a long way towards ensuring those who served receive the benefits they've earned."

The *CVSO Act* will authorize \$50 million annually for five years for competitive grants to expand the work of CVSOs or comparable entities. The VA will award grants to states in order to improve outreach to veterans, assist in the development and submittal of claims on behalf of veterans, hire additional CVSOs, and train CVSOs for VA accreditation. To receive funds, a state must submit an application including a detailed plan for the use of these funds, how they will meet underserved veterans' needs, and other relevant information. States must also show that these federal funds do not simply supplant current state or local funding. By increasing the number of CVSOs, states will be better able to leverage their local and federal resources to serve our veterans.

"NACVSO applauds the introduction of the bipartisan *Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act* by Senator Tammy Baldwin," **said Herm Breuer, NACVSO President.** "Federal investment for County, Tribal, and State Veterans Service Officers is an investment in the men and women who served this Country. It is critical to ensure that veterans seeking to utilize their VA benefits have continued and expanded access to advocates right in their communities that can help guide them through the bureaucratic VA systems to secure the services they need."

"As President of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, I would like to express our support for the *Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act* and applaud Senator Tammy Baldwin for reintroducing this legislation," **said Thomas Palladino, President of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs.** "This proposed grant program will definitely assist the State Departments of Veterans Affairs in the efforts to improve outreach and assistance to veterans and their family members. It will directly help with funding and training for State, County, local and Tribal government service officers. After passage, we look forward to working with the VA in the preparation of implementing regulations."

“The Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs supports Senator Tammy Baldwin’s bill to expand financial support to County and Tribal Veteran Services Offices,” **said Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs Mary Kolar**. “This funding will provide additional resources towards increased efforts to reach veterans who have not yet connected to critical services and benefits. Our strong partnerships with Wisconsin’s County and Tribal Veterans Service Officers, Veteran service organizations, and private-sector partners, help meet the needs of veterans and their families, and ensure they are receiving the health care and other benefits and services they have earned by virtue of their military service and personal sacrifice. We thank Senator Baldwin for leadership and her commitment to assisting veterans.”

“I, as both President of the Wisconsin State Association of County Veterans Service Commissions and Committees and Chair of the NACo Veterans & Military Services Committee do hereby state that all of the membership of both organizations are in full support of the CVSO Act,” **said Tom Snider, Vice-Chair Winnebago County Veterans Service Commission, President for WSACVSC, and Chair NACo Veterans and Military Services Committee**. “It is high time we act to provide ‘support and outreach’ to address the fact that we are still losing an average of 22 of our brothers and sisters to suicide on a daily basis. Any and all steps we can take to identify those in urgent need will be appreciated.”

The legislation is currently supported by the National Association of Counties (NACo), the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers (NACVSO), the Wisconsin and Alaska Departments of Veterans Affairs, the Wisconsin State Association of County Veterans Service Commissions and Committees (WSACVSC), the Wisconsin Association of Counties, the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA), and multiple individual CVSOs and local officials in Wisconsin and Alaska.

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