

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

# **Regional Veterans Affairs Office Study**

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2007 Iowa Acts, House File 817, Section 17

January 1, 2008

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

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**OVERVIEW OF HOUSE FILE 817, SECTION 17.....3**

**REGIONAL OFFICE LOCATIONS AND COSTS.....3**

**REGIONAL OFFICER DUTIES .....9**

**WAIVER FOR FEDERAL GRANT FUNDING.....12**

**COUNTY COMMISSION OF VETERANS AFFAIRS INPUT.....12**

**RECOMMENDED PLAN .....13**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....13**

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## OVERVIEW OF HOUSE FILE 817, SECTION 17

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As part of House File 817, passed by the General Assembly in 2007, the Iowa Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA) was charged by the legislature to study and develop a recommended plan for establishing regional veterans affairs offices. This report and proposed plan has been created in collaboration with Iowa Workforce Development and with input from the Iowa County Commission of Veterans Affairs offices.

The legislation required the plan to include the following provisions:

- Collocate department staff in Workforce Development Regional Offices to provide services to underserved veterans;
- Foster the development of county veterans affairs offices and ensure coverage where it is currently unavailable;
- Evaluate the personnel and financial needs within regions;
- Determine the appropriate use of local, state, and federal resources; and
- Highlight strategies to utilize a federal waiver to increase flexibility in the use of workforce funds to serve veterans and to foster the county veterans offices.

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## REGIONAL OFFICE LOCATIONS AND COSTS

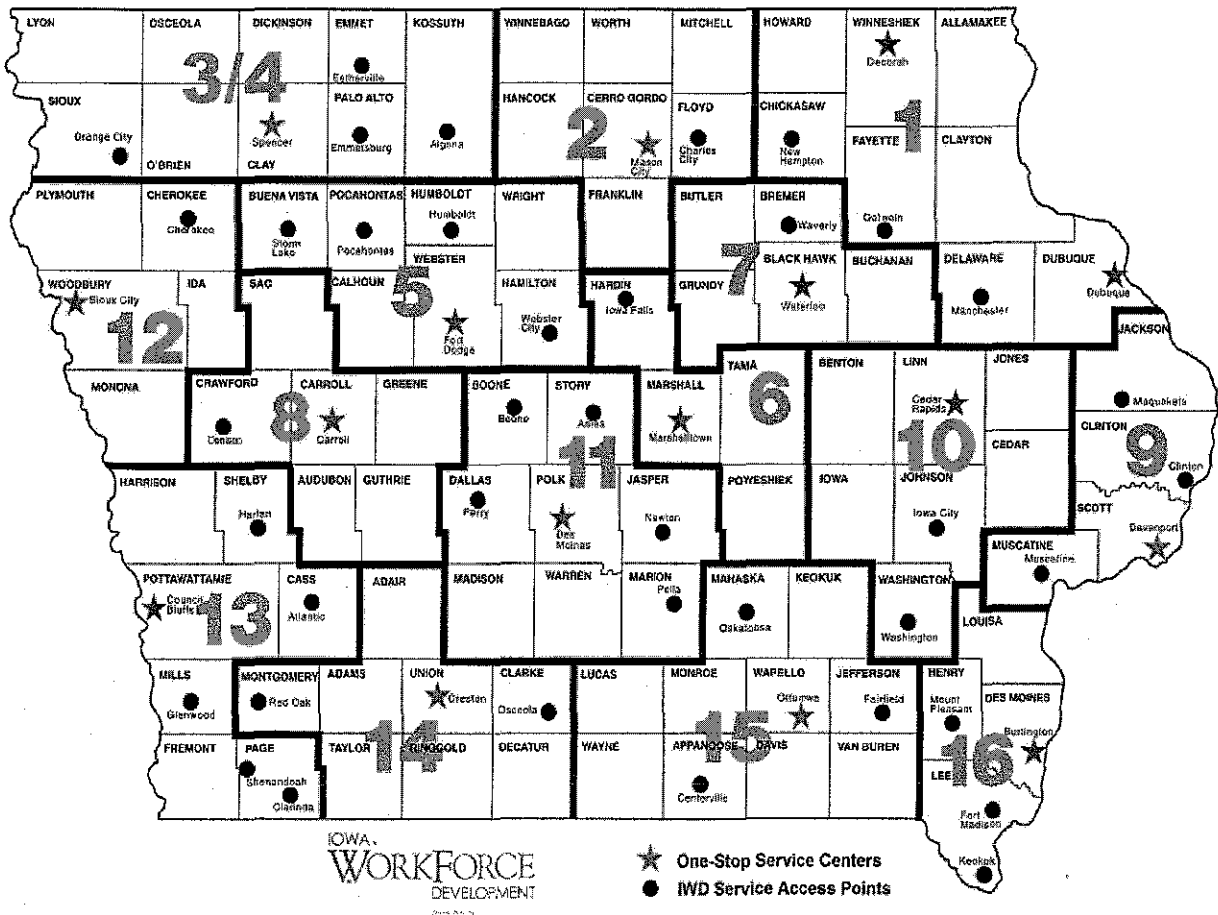
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Currently, Iowa Workforce Development (IWD) operates 16 one-stop locations in 15 regions throughout the state. These locations provide multiple scenarios for IDVA regional office configuration within that system. The following four examples represent a cross section of options for the number of regional offices within the workforce sites. All estimated IDVA costs in the following scenarios are assumed to be state appropriated funds.

### **EXAMPLE 1: FIFTEEN REGIONAL OFFICES**

Locating an office in each of the workforce regions would create 15 offices (excluding the Decorah location). This scenario would provide maximum coverage, minimize travel, and allow the regional officer a concentrated workload for providing optimal service to veterans and County Commissions of Veterans Affairs. The workforce one-stop sites are represented by stars in the map on the following page:

## Iowa Workforce Development Delivery System



Each one-stop office has differing costs related to location, office settings, and the seniority of the employees. These costs are highlighted in the following chart as an average cost for each employee at the specific location, based on data provided by IWD. This average cost includes salary, benefits, rent, office expenses, and approximately \$2,000 for travel reimbursement. IWD has indicated this would be the appropriate cost for an Iowa Department of Veterans Affairs regional officer to be located in their office, assuming an equivalent salary. However, these figures include a salary (with benefits) ranging from a new employee at \$55,500 to an experienced employee at \$74,000.

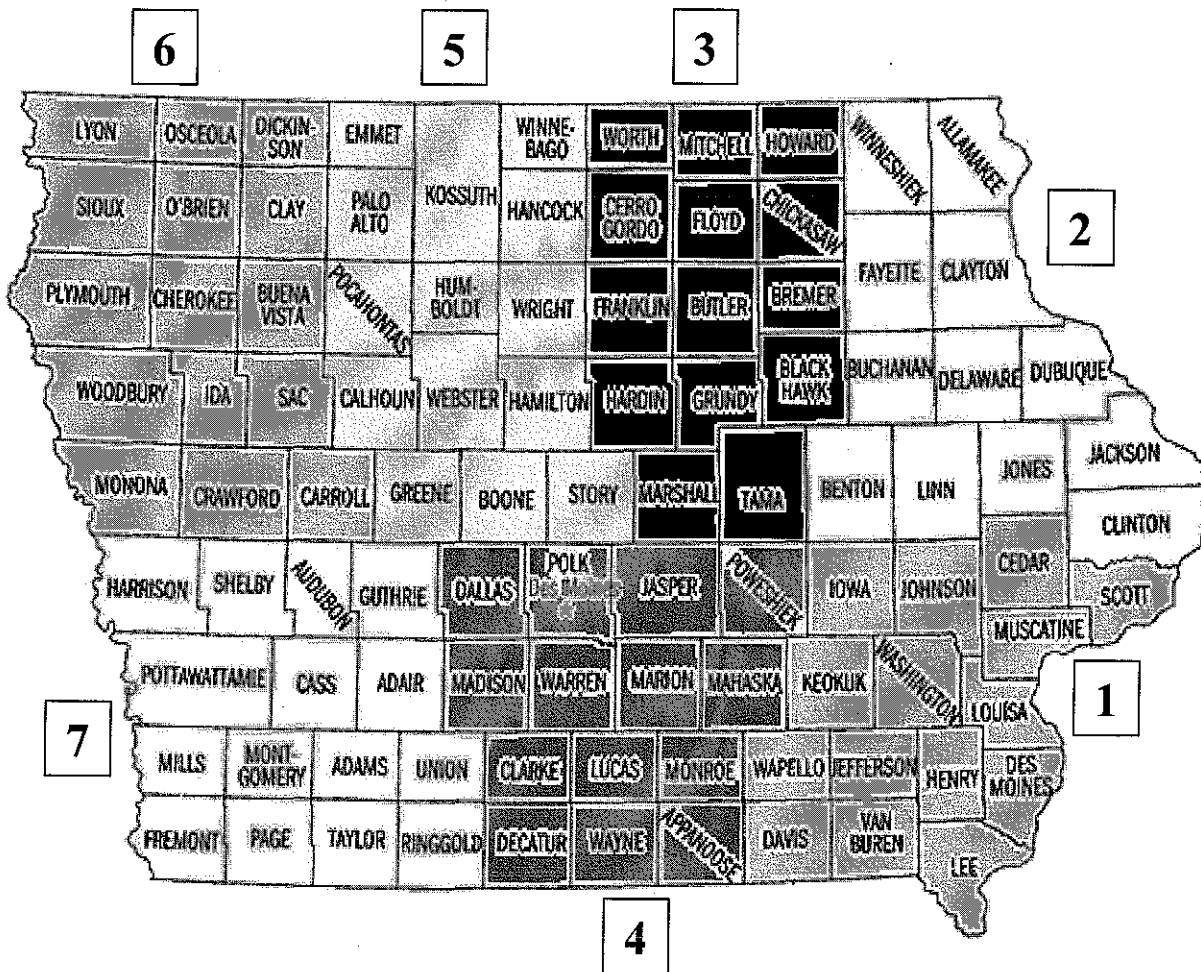
IDVA currently employs two Veterans Benefits Specialists that perform duties similar to what a regional officer would be required to do. The pay grade for these employees is Grade 23, which is a salary range of \$33,280 - \$49,316. IDVA believes the regional officer's pay grade should be in this range and would assume a starting salary package that includes state benefits of approximately \$44,000. Furthermore, additional funding of \$3,000 for travel reimbursement should be included for each officer. This estimated salary and office costs are indicated on the right in the chart below along with the average IWD costs.

Region	Office Location	IWD Average Total Cost Per Advisor	IDVA Estimated Total Cost Per Advisor
1	Dubuque	\$98,322	\$80,572
2	Mason City	\$94,335	\$76,585
3/4	Spencer*	\$89,214	\$71,464
5	Fort Dodge	\$86,764	\$69,014
6	Marshalltown	\$83,758	\$66,008
7	Waterloo	\$84,323	\$66,573
8	Carroll	\$94,557	\$76,807
9	Davenport	\$88,642	\$70,892
10	Cedar Rapids	\$87,525	\$69,775
11	Des Moines	\$99,681	\$81,931
12	Sioux City*	\$88,021	\$70,271
13	Council Bluffs	\$88,780	\$71,030
14	Creston	\$88,536	\$70,786
15	Ottumwa	\$87,277	\$69,527
16	Burlington	\$88,207	\$70,457
<b>Totals</b>		<b>\$1,347,942</b>	<b>\$1,081,692</b>

*\* The workforce one-stops are subject to space limitations and requirements for employee space based on Department of Administrative Services' guidelines. The Sioux City and Spencer locations have indicated that they do not have sufficient space available to provide IDVA an office for a regional officer.*

**EXAMPLE 2: SEVEN REGIONAL OFFICES**

This scenario represents a regional system with a much smaller number of offices, with regions that are fairly uniform in the number of counties and in distance between boundaries. Currently, the Iowa County Commissions of Veterans Affairs is separated into seven districts. These districts have elected officers and, when possible, hold meetings throughout the year. This scenario utilizes the districts already established by the county association. The districts are as follows:



Again, IWD has provided their average cost based on location. IDVA has modified this average to include the lower salary and an additional \$5,000 for travel reimbursement based on the increased travel required to cover the region. The average IWD and IDVA estimated costs for suggested offices are as follows:

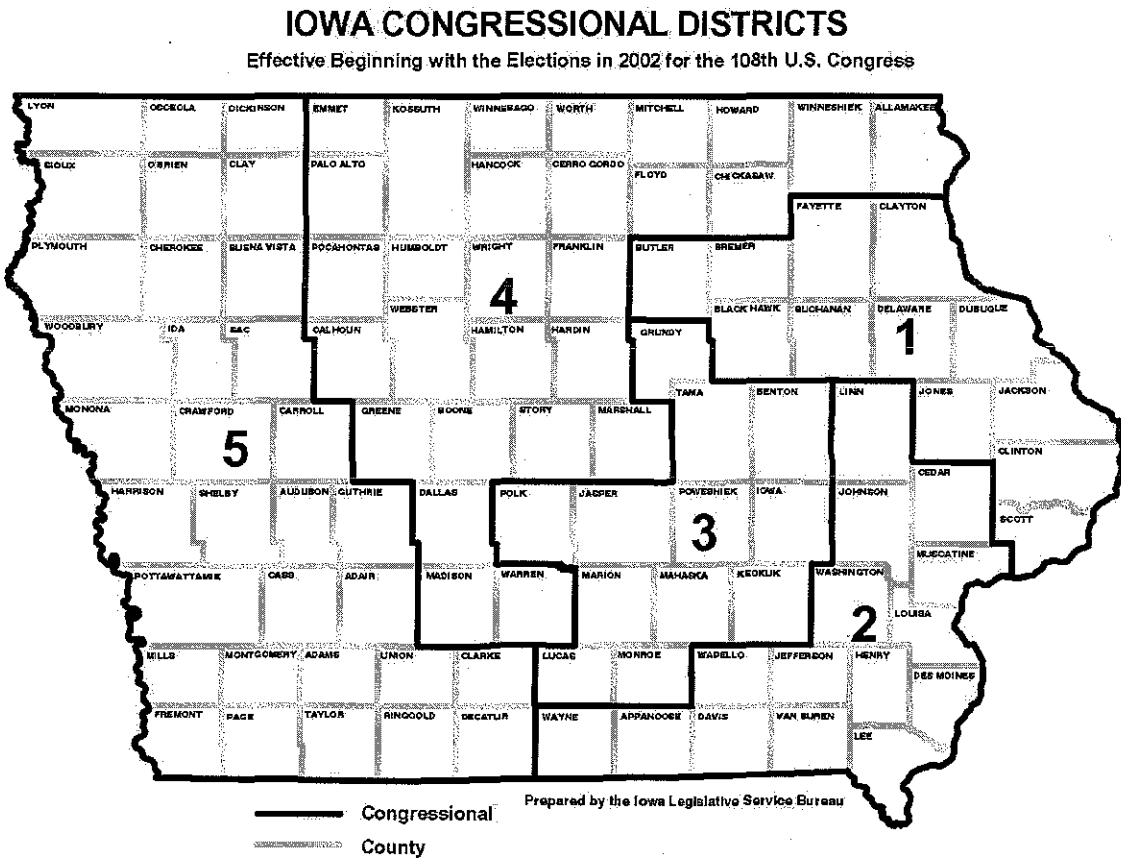
Region	Office Location	IWD Average Total Cost Per Advisor	IDVA Estimated Total Cost Per Advisor
1	Burlington	\$88,207	\$72,457
2	Dubuque	\$98,322	\$82,572
3	Waterloo	\$84,323	\$68,573
4	Des Moines	\$99,681	\$83,931
5	Fort Dodge	\$86,764	\$71,014
6	Carroll	\$94,557	\$78,807
7	Council Bluffs	\$88,780	\$73,030
<b>Totals</b>		<b>\$635,291</b>	<b>\$530,384</b>

**EXAMPLES 3 & 4: FIVE REGIONAL OFFICES**

There are two options for a scenario comprised with five regions. One could be based on Iowa's Congressional Districts, and the other would establish new regions that would be more uniform in number of counties and size.

**Congressional District Model**

A regional office model based on congressional districts would be manageable for the 1<sup>st</sup> (12 counties), 2<sup>nd</sup> (15 counties), and 3<sup>rd</sup> (12 counties) districts. These three districts are relatively compact and would provide the regional officer with a reasonable workload. However, the 4<sup>th</sup> (28 counties) and 5<sup>th</sup> (32 counties) districts are considerably larger. These regions would make it difficult for the regional officer to have a noticeable presence in each county. The congressional district map is below:



Based on this scenario, IDVA would increase the travel reimbursement amounts for the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> region to \$10,000 and set the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> reimbursements at \$5,000. The average IWD and IDVA estimated costs for suggested offices are as follows:





This scenario would require an additional travel reimbursement amount of \$7,000 for each region. The average IWD and IDVA estimated costs for suggested offices are as follows:

<b>Region</b>	<b>Office Location</b>	<b>IWD Average Total Cost Per Advisor</b>	<b>IDVA Estimated Total Cost Per Advisor</b>
1	Waterloo	\$84,323	\$70,573
2	Burlington	\$88,207	\$74,457
3	Des Moines	\$99,681	\$85,931
4	Council Bluffs	\$88,780	\$75,030
5	Fort Dodge	\$86,764	\$73,014
<b>Totals</b>		<b>\$467,531</b>	<b>\$379,005</b>

**Location and Cost Summary**

All of the above examples have their positives and negatives. Ideally, a regional plan with a low case load would allow optimal service, but comes at an increased cost. A regional plan with too few regions is less expensive but does not allow for a reasonable case load. Ultimately, a plan that keeps expenses down and contains a moderate amount of counties would be the best option.

Space limitations are also a concern for northwestern Iowa. Regions in this area cannot locate offices in either Sioux City or Spencer. This requires locating officers in Carroll or Fort Dodge, quite a distance to the northwest corner of the state.

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**REGIONAL OFFICER DUTIES**

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The regional officers' duties will vary from day-to-day and between regions based on need. The following provides an outline of the potential duties:

**Counties without Veterans Affairs Offices**

In general, regional officers should be tasked with ensuring veterans have a representative in counties where there is currently no county director or administrator. When this is the case, the regional officer will utilize their training as a Nationally Accredited Service Officer through IDVA to assist veterans in filling out claims for service connected disability compensation and pensions. The regional officer will also assist veterans in applying for state funds and programs, such as the Vietnam Bonus, Veterans Trust Fund, etc.

While performing these duties for counties without office staff, the regional officer will also meet frequently with the County Supervisors and the County Commissioners of Veterans Affairs. The purpose of these meetings will be to make them aware of the number of veterans the regional officer has assisted, to highlight the additional aid going to veterans from the federal government, and to demonstrate the influx of money to the county. By identifying the benefits of creating a county veterans affairs office, the regional officer will pursue with the County Supervisors a strategic plan for the creation of an office, staffed with a trained individual for at least 20 hours a week.

### **Counties with Offices Open Less Than 20 Hours per Week**

In counties with offices staffed for less than 20 hours a week, the regional officer will create a formal agreement with the County Veterans Affairs Office and their Commission to determine when the regional officer will meet with veterans in the county to assist the county office. This formal agreement will increase the hours of the county office to at least 20 hours a week. The regional officer will also meet regularly with the County Supervisors and County Veterans Affairs Commissioners to identify the progress the County Director or Administrator and the regional officer have had in filing new claims for federal benefits and to develop a strategic plan for increasing their office hours to at least 20 hours per week.

### **Counties with Offices Open 20 Hours or More per Week**

In cases where county offices are open at least 20 hours a week, an agreement will be made with these counties as to the role of the regional officer in assisting with federal paperwork. It is assumed that the regional officer will only file claims if the County Commission of Veterans Affairs approves. In most cases, if the officer identifies a veteran in need, they will refer the veteran to the county office and follow up with the county staff to ensure the veteran has been served.

A county at any time can contact their regional officer to assist in complex claims, or to ask for guidance on any issue, regardless of whether there is a formal agreement established.

### **Training**

When not engaged in the primary duties of assisting counties in developing offices or increasing office hours, the regional officer should make available several training sessions throughout the year for their respective regions. These regional training sessions would not fulfill the training requirements found in Iowa Code 35B and provided by IDVA, but would be an additional benefit.

The sessions would be broken down into groups based on skill level, with experienced county staff meeting less frequently and in specific classes to brainstorm difficult cases and to pass on best practices. New or less experienced staff will meet quarterly to receive basic instruction and to grow their knowledge base.

Training sessions will be coordinated with county staff and the district director to ensure the training material is beneficial, and meeting the needs of the counties.

### **Outreach/Advertising**

The regional officer should perform several outreach events in the region throughout the year. These events should include publicized availabilities or seminars at locations where unidentified veterans could be, such as supermarkets or coffee shops. These availabilities will attempt to make veterans and dependents aware of benefits that they may be entitled to. These veterans will then be referred to their county veterans affairs office for assistance in applying for benefits.

The regional officer should also manage press releases and media events to highlight the services available in the area. This could be in the way of a monthly column in local newspapers, a

newsletter that is sent to interested individuals, or in radio segments. The regional officer will also coordinate with counties to publicize events that are sponsored at the local level.

It is hopeful that the regional officer will also utilize innovative ideas for identifying and navigating veterans to the county. Successful ideas will be shared between regions and duplicated statewide.

To further aid in outreach, the regional officer should network with local veteran service organizations to provide further assistance to veterans.

#### **State Liaison to the Counties**

The regional officer would be a first stop for local officials when addressing concerns or questions with the state. The regional officer will update IDVA on county issues and will then be the entity for remedying the situation.

The regional officer will also provide assistance related to the County Grant Program for Veterans by working with counties and local officials to increase the uses of the funds and to assist them in the application process.

#### **Returning Soldier Identification**

Once informed of the demobilization of Iowa soldiers from the National Guard and Reserves, IDVA will send several of the closest regional officers to meet with the demobilized troops while they are still being debriefed. At that time, the regional officer will meet individually with the Iowa soldier to receive a copy of their DD Form 214 and to complete a reintegration questionnaire. This questionnaire will cover concerns the service member has regarding their medical needs or potential items of concern that may qualify them for a service connected disability. This information will be kept by IDVA and provided to the county for their records and for them to begin assisting these veterans in applying for federal benefits.

#### **Partnership with Iowa Workforce Development Veterans Staff**

Currently, IWD has Veteran Service Representatives in Burlington, Cedar Rapids, Council Bluffs, Davenport, Des Moines, Dubuque, Fort Dodge, Iowa City, Mason City, Ottumwa, Sioux City, and Waterloo. These federally funded individuals work to steer unemployed veterans to hiring employers and to assist in improving the job skills of unemployed veterans. As case managers, they provide intensive services to assist veterans in transition from the military to civilian employment. Regional officers will need to have a close working relationship with these representatives to navigate veterans to their services and to enhance the operation of this veteran service.

#### **Duplication of Services**

The regional officer's duty is to grow services and not to duplicate functions currently provided at the local and state level. The regional officer will work in tandem with the county and IWD veterans' staff, and will not be providing direction or interference. In order for the regional office concept to succeed, the county and the officer must have a respectful relationship based on the common goal of increasing services to veterans.

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## WAIVER FOR FEDERAL GRANT FUNDING

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The Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) and Local Veterans Employment Representative (LVER) Grant is very different than most federal grants the state receives. This grant is a staffing grant that is specific to the roles and responsibilities of the funded staff. There are no provisions in the grant to waive the LVER/DVOP staffs' required duties or to require them to work outside of those prescribed duties. Any variance from the current procedure would be a violation of the grant agreement and the federal funding would be subject to recapture.

At this time, there is no ability to modify the grant proceeds referenced above to fund a regional officer program.

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## COUNTY COMMISSIONS OF VETERANS AFFAIRS INPUT

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In order to complete this report, IDVA determined it was essential to engage the county veterans affairs directors and administrators. This was accomplished by providing a questionnaire to each county and a different questionnaire to the directors of each district. In all, 71 counties and five districts responded to the survey. Two meetings were also held to gain input from counties and to answer questions related to the report. These meetings occurred in Clinton, Iowa, on October 5, 2007 and in Des Moines, Iowa, at the County Fall School of Instruction on October 15, 2007.

In general, counties were opposed to the idea of creating regional offices; however, there were ideas provided to IDVA relating to the potential duties of a regional officer. These suggestions have been incorporated into the recommended plan.

### **County Concerns**

Most counties felt regional offices would be an extra layer of bureaucracy, causing confusion and communication challenges between the state and counties. Furthermore, funding could be better used to establish additional benefits for veterans through the state or for providing direct assistance to counties to establish offices.

The major concern from county veterans offices revolved around budgeting. Numerous county directors and administrators have expressed frustration in gaining additional resources for their offices. Further concern arises once a regional officer begins providing services in their counties, because the county veterans affairs staff will have an even more difficult time convincing their Supervisors to increase their budget if a regional officer is assisting them at no cost. This concern is expressed especially for counties without an office or with less than part-time offices. The belief is that Supervisors in these counties are dealing with tight budgets, and the state officer's presence will present an opportunity for Supervisors to spend county money elsewhere.

There was consensus among the counties that there needs to be legislation requiring counties to have an office that is staffed at least 20 hours a week. Without such a requirement, it is likely, County Supervisors will refuse to provide resources for a veterans affairs office when a state regional officer is providing the service for free.

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## RECOMMENDED PLAN

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If it is the will of the Iowa General Assembly and the Governor to enact legislation and appropriate funding for establishing regional offices, the Iowa Department of Veterans Affairs would suggest establishing seven regional offices (example 2) and apply the duties described in this report. Funding for the regional offices should be an additional state appropriation to IDVA, supporting the entire cost of the proposed offices.

Seven offices create relatively equally sized regions that will allow the regional officer a county level that is manageable but challenging. Furthermore, these seven regions are currently being used by the county association and would be a logical fit for regional offices. Although this scenario is more expensive than a five region plan, the size and county load of that proposal would significantly impact the effectiveness of the plan.

IDVA would also suggest that any regional plan should include a provision to establish County Veterans Affairs Offices. These county funded offices should be staffed by a trained individual for at least 20 hours a week in every county by the year 2010. The regional officer will work with the county to establish a plan for achieving this goal.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In compliance with 2007 Iowa Acts, House File 817, section 17, the Iowa Department of Veterans Affairs has created this report to the legislature. The report outlines several options for collocating IDVA staff in existing Iowa Workforce Development One-Stop locations and identifies appropriate state funding needs for these positions. IDVA also suggests a cost effective plan of creating seven regional offices, if it is the will of the legislature to implement a regional plan. Funding for this program will be required to come from state appropriations due to the inability to modify the DVOP/LVER staffing grant.

Several duties of a regional officer are identified in this report including, utilizing training as a Nationally Accredited Service Officer to assist veterans in counties with less than part-time staff and to provide training sessions. The regional officer could also be called upon to engage local media outlets, provide veterans outreach, assist in identifying returning troops, and to serve as the local liaison to IDVA. The regional officer should work with local officials and to keep in mind at all times the goal of serving Iowa's veterans.

County Directors and Administrators have expressed concern regarding the adoption of a regional model, but did present ideas on potential duties for the new positions. The counties raise a legitimate issue regarding potential reductions in county veterans' budgets if a regional officer begins providing services. This concern would need to be addressed to ensure the success of a regional model. A potential solution would be to establish a timeline for counties to have veterans offices staffed part-time by the year 2010.