

From the Desk of SSG Loran D Osborne, USA (Ret.)

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To the Assessment and Taxation Committee

Kansas State Senate

State Capitol,

300 SW 10th Ave.,

Topeka 66612

RE: Senate Bill 58

Greetings, distinguished Senators, and thank you for your time,

I am Loran Osborne, a retired US Army Staff Sergeant, a current Veteran Advocate with the Southeast Kansas Veteran Providers Coalition, and an SMVF (Service Member, Veteran, and Family/Dependents) Navigator with Four County Mental Health, Inc. As a transplant to this state, I have lived among several other states that all have differing ideas about how they desire to honor their Veterans, Servicemembers, and Dependents. In Oregon, a balanced budget state, there was already no sales tax (retail or otherwise) so there was little to judge from; and for Missouri and Oklahoma Veterans, significant offsets were made in vehicular and real property taxes as well as exemptions to some other taxes and fees.

I first came to Kansas from Washington in 1997. Having moved from Oregon to Washington for work, I had already suffered a culture shock driven by the dissonance between a state with no sales tax and King County in Washington which had one of the highest in the Pacific Northwest. When I moved from there after 3 years to Dickinson County, Kansas, it was a pleasant surprise to note that the sales tax was significantly lower.

I started in the US Navy in mid-1998, in the Active Guard/Reserve (AGR) from 2005-2007, and in the Active Duty (AD) Army from mid-2007 until my forced medical retirement in October 2014. During that time, I served in Florida, Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, back in Kansas, California, and Missouri. I also served in Korea, Germany, Iraq, and Kuwait, maintaining my Kansas residency throughout almost all of that time. When I retired, it was a natural transition to just come home there. Over the years, I have watched a phenomenon that I always hoped would spark change, but did not seem to have the support or catalyst to do so. This phenomenon is something many in the circles through which I move refer to as “the Leak.”

Our State’s Motto is Ad Astra Per Aspera, a less common Latin way to say “To the Stars through Difficulties (or Hardships).” When it was coined in 1861, I am certain that John James Ingalls had no inkling of the process by which man would accomplish this daring aspiration. Some of us are, however, quite familiar with it. When a rocket or starship is fueled to ascend into the heavens, many factors can cause a leak or hemorrhage. If enough of the precious fuel is not saved and the leak is not stopped, the necessary impetus to launch will not be there, and the stars lost to our grasp. This is not to say that our Veterans are the only way for our state to succeed, but indeed they are a vital element in the total success we seek.

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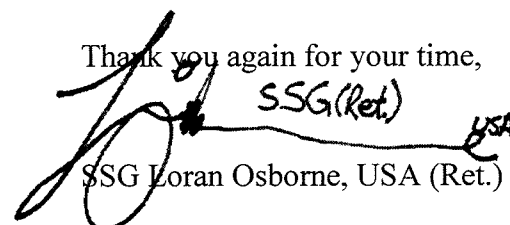
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Currently, we see a large number of Veterans who seek forever homes in semi-rural areas where the toils of their wartime past can be allowed to lie in fertile soil and a new future may be grown. The lure of improved access to benefits, the wide array of available programs, and the relief available from many forms of taxation divert the tracks of many of these into our neighboring states, and this results in a significant loss to us on many levels. Not only does it cost us in revenue spent at home and in growing communities, but it also diminishes the utilization of available housing which results in cities showing a growing number of unoccupied residences which become havens for criminal trouble and vermin infestation if left unchecked. Additionally, it costs us in other areas.

I am a Veteran Service Officer and Advocate, and in this role, I and several compatriots teach a seminar called the "Community Green Zone." This course is predicated on the two concepts that skill sets and personal motivations in the Veteran population can be a catalyst and tool to revitalize communities, and that communities who are invested in the Veterans who reside in and around them will better the lives of those Veterans. This idea and paradigm have been taking hold in Southeast Kansas, and it is beginning to show fruits as it spreads. We have seen minor increases in the already rich concentration of Veterans in our corner of the state, not just in three or four counties, but in the 10 we have managed to reach, and also into Topeka itself. The only possible impediment to its continuing to do so is the steady "Leak" which we have not yet been able to completely stop. You see, increasing the richness and availability of programs and collaboration takes more than just instituting statewide CCBHC (Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics) certification with their SMVF workers to manage and enhance it. It takes a population of Veterans to serve that attracts federal and state attention in the form of grants and investment. The states which show that investment through tax reliefs and offsets are continuing to siphon off our "Star Fuel."

I am not a 100% Service-Connected Veteran, but I work with and support many of them, and many more between the ratings of 70%-90%. In this fairly unique position, I am able to see many of the trends which exist in data tracked by our behavioral health and physical health providers, both civilian and VA. I am aware of the growing inertia other states have shown in increasing and improving state-driven Veteran benefits and offsets to attract the moderate fixed-income stability they represent in community support calculations, as well as care and utilization or re-utilization of homes and real property. Their progress in attracting our prospective Veteran population is slowing in our area because of our deep investment and volunteerism, but the work we are doing to stanch the flow will not remain effective without lasting supports to bolster it. I thank you for the kind opportunity to stand before you and share testimony as to why you should approve Senate Bill 58, or even broaden it to include some lesser ratings; and why you should vehemently support it as it crosses the aisle to the State House.

Thank you again for your time,

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