

PERFORMANCE AUDIT REPORT

Examining Selected Areas of the Veteran's Commission's Operations

**A Report to the Legislative Post Audit Committee
By the Legislative Division of Post Audit
State of Kansas
April 1983**

Legislative Post Audit Committee

Legislative Division of Post Audit

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EXAMINING SELECTED AREAS OF THE VETERANS' COMMISSION'S OPERATIONS A SUMMARY BY THE LEGISLATIVE DIVISION OF POST AUDIT

This limited-scope performance audit addressed four specific questions relating to veterans' service representatives' job qualifications and training, the requirements for "power of attorney" in obtaining veterans' benefits or Commission services, preferential treatment of some veterans who belong to veterans' organizations represented by Commission staff, and options for improving the efficiency of the Commission's operations. A brief summary of the audit's findings is presented below. Additional information is provided in the accompanying report and attachments.

1. **Job qualifications and training.** Veterans' service representatives hired since the current experience requirements went into effect in 1978 have all met or exceeded those job qualifications. There are no education requirements, but almost all current employees have either taken some college course work or attended trade/technical schools beyond the high school level. The Commission provides no formal training for its service representatives, which may hinder the assistance they can provide to disabled veterans.
2. **Power of attorney requirements.** The federal Veterans' Administration requires claimants for federal veterans' benefits who want to be represented in preparing and filing their claims to assign the power of attorney to an individual or organization. In Kansas, the Veterans' Commission does not allow its employees to formally represent a claimant by accepting the power of attorney on the State's behalf, even though it is authorized to do so. However, all service representatives are accredited by at least one veterans' organization (like the American Legion), so they can represent claimants by accepting power of attorney on behalf of the organization, not the Commission. Veterans' Commission employees can provide general assistance to veterans without obtaining power of attorney.
3. **Preferential treatment.** No evidence was found that veterans' organization members received preferential treatment by service representatives assigned to those particular organizations. However, service representatives are closely linked with the veterans' organizations they represent (sometimes to the point of being mistaken as organization employees), and some Commission employees receive additional compensation from those organizations for duties they perform.
4. **Options for improving efficiency.** Several options merit consideration. These include reallocating staff in the field offices to help equalize workloads and provide more uniform coverage, establishing a WATS Line to provide greater access to veterans' information on a Statewide basis, requiring service representatives assigned to veterans' hospitals to be accredited by multiple organizations, and eliminating the overlap in coverage now provided by representatives in field and hospital facility offices.



EXAMINING SELECTED AREAS OF THE KANSAS VETERANS' COMMISSION'S OPERATIONS

At its March 28, 1983, meeting, the Legislative Post Audit Committee directed the Legislative Division of Post Audit to conduct a limited-scope performance audit of the Department of Human Resources' Veterans' Commission. The purpose of this audit was to answer the following specific questions asked by a Senate Ways and Means subcommittee concerning the Commission's performance: What are the job qualifications of veterans' service representatives and what training are they provided by the Veterans' Commission? What are the requirements for "power of attorney" in obtaining federal veterans' benefits or the services of the Veterans' Commission? Does the Veterans' Commission's practice of allocating staff to various veterans' organizations result in preferential treatment for veterans who are affiliated with those groups? What options may be available for improving the efficiency of the Veterans' Commission's performance? Following a brief description of the Commission's operations, each of these questions is answered below.

Veterans' Commission Operations

The Veterans' Commission provides direct services to veterans and their dependents through a staff of veterans' service representatives. The Commission's primary duties are as follows:

- make information on benefits available to veterans and their dependents, and help eligible claimants obtain their benefits
- coordinate the programs of other agencies that deal with veterans' problems
- provide a central contact between federal and State agencies dealing with veterans
- provide services not available from the federal government
- maintain field services

To carry out these duties, the Commission is authorized 59 full-time equivalent positions, 29 of which are service representatives. It maintains an administrative office in Topeka and 14 field offices across the State. Service representatives located in field offices also schedule itinerant visits to office locations in the county seats in their service areas and personally visit claimants who cannot come to their offices. The Commission also maintains offices in the Veterans' Administration hospital facilities in Topeka, Leavenworth, and Wichita in association with the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Disabled American Veterans. For fiscal year 1982, the Commission estimates it helped complete and file about 12,600 claims for veterans and their dependents, who received about \$20 million in benefits. The Commission's total expenditures that year were nearly \$1.1 million.

What Are Veterans' Service Representatives' Qualifications And What Training Do They Receive?

The auditors reviewed both the civil-service job specifications for veterans' service representatives and the personnel files of current representatives. It was necessary to contact certain representatives to obtain qualification and training information not available in personnel records. The auditors

also obtained comparative information through a telephone survey of veterans' agencies in adjacent states.

Qualifications of Current Employees

Experience requirements. Veterans' service representatives became classified State employees in 1978. The entry-level experience requirement for the Veterans' Service Representative I position is one year of work involving public contact. The salary range is \$14,000-\$17,000. A Veterans' Service Representative II applicant must have three years of experience advising veterans of special benefits and services available to them. The salary for this supervisory position ranges from \$16,000 to about \$21,000. Both positions require an honorable discharge from the United States Armed Forces.

The auditors found that all of the representatives hired since these requirements went into effect in 1978 met or exceeded the State's experience requirement. Many had obtained public contact experience while working in personnel management, retail management, or sales. More than one-third had the following relevant types of experience in interviewing or counseling:

- Five representatives worked at employment centers and helped veterans find employment. One of the five also worked for the Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program.
- Three representatives provided information about benefits to veterans as service officers for other veterans' organizations; two of the three were volunteers.
- Three had specific counseling experience; one was a volunteer veterans' counselor for a veterans' organization.

Of the 27 service representatives now employed by the Commission (there are two vacancies), nine have been there for three years or less, six have been there four to 10 years, six for 11 to 18 years, and the remaining six have been employed for 24 years or longer.

Education requirements. There are no minimum education requirements for veterans' service representatives in Kansas. However, the auditors found that the employees who currently occupy these positions all have at least a high school diploma or the equivalent. Approximately 75 percent had also either attended or graduated from a four-year college when they were hired by the Veterans' Commission, and most of the others had obtained some form of non-college education past the high school level. Their education statistics can be summarized as follows:

- Ten service representatives had 14-19 college credit hours.
- Ten had received college degrees in such fields as business (the most common major), history, and the social sciences. Two of these 10 also had 8-24 post-graduate credit hours.
- Four of the remaining seven representatives had obtained non-college education through such outlets as trade/technical schools and the American Legion Leadership College.

Education/experience requirements in neighboring states. These requirements for comparable positions in three of the four neighboring states are more stringent than those in Kansas. In Oklahoma, Missouri, and Colorado, service officers must have graduated from a four-year college or have equivalent experience (on a year-for-year basis) performing similar duties. Counseling experience is the most commonly valued type of experience; interviewing and social work experience are also acceptable. Veteran status is mandatory for a service officer in three states and is preferred in Colorado.

Training of Service Representatives Provided By the Commission

According to the job description, a veterans' service representative must be knowledgeable about the benefits and services available to veterans and their dependents, the procedures used to obtain these benefits, and some medical terminology used to describe disabilities. These positions also require the ability to prepare and present cases, conduct effective interviews, maintain satisfactory relationships with veterans, veterans' organizations, and government agencies, and prepare reports complete with recommendations. A Veterans' Service Representative II must also be able to supervise and coordinate the work of other employees.

The Kansas Veterans' Commission does not provide formal training for its service representatives. In general, the training they receive must come through actual on-the-job experience. New hires tend to rely on the secretaries in their offices, frequent calls to representatives at the Veterans' Administration Center in Wichita, and occasional contact with Veterans' Commission administrative personnel. They must study applicable laws, regulations, and other written information provided by the Veterans' Administration and the various veterans' organizations on their own. Service officers' conferences sponsored by those organizations and periodic Commission staff meetings (as the budget permits) appear to have facilitated the receipt and dissemination of information among representatives and the veterans they serve.

Training policies in surrounding states. Two of the three states contacted have formal on-the-job training programs. In Oklahoma, new employees spend three to six weeks in the regional office with a claims analyst. They also spend one to two weeks in each of the following ways: in the central administrative office, traveling with a field officer, and in their own offices assisted and observed by a supervisor. Missouri employees receive six months of on-the-job training. The veterans' agencies in both states hold regional or statewide staff meetings at least twice each year. Colorado, like Kansas, places more emphasis on self-training.

What Are the Requirements for "Power of Attorney" in Obtaining Federal Veterans' Benefits or the Services of the Veterans' Commission?

All claims for federal veterans' benefits must be filed with the federal Veterans' Administration. Claims filed by Kansas veterans or their dependents are processed at the Veterans' Administration Center in Wichita. A claim may be filed for federal veterans' benefits in one of three ways, but only the third method involves granting the "power of attorney." First, the individual can complete the necessary paperwork and file a claim directly with the Veterans' Administration in Wichita. Second, the individual may obtain assistance from

the Veterans' Commission in completing the paperwork, provided the claim does not require information from the veteran's confidential records. The Commission's service representatives may then file all claim forms and documents for a claimant directly with the Veterans' Administration.

Third, if a claimant needs access to his medical and service records to help build a complete case, he must appoint a person or organization to represent him in getting access to the needed records. Federal law provides that the Veterans' Administration may recognize representatives of approved organizations in the preparation, presentation, and prosecution of claims for federal veterans' benefits. Altogether, 28 national veterans' service organizations and veterans' agencies in 45 states--including Kansas--are recognized by the Veterans' Administration to present claims.

Filing a Claim Through Power of Attorney in Kansas

To appoint a representative, a claimant must complete and sign a form referred to as power of attorney, indicating the name of the person or organization he has selected to represent him. This form is filed with the Veterans' Administration and the service organization, and authorizes the Veterans' Administration to release that claimant's records and information regarding the status of his claim to the designated organization.

Even though Kansas' Veterans' Commission is recognized by the Veterans' Administration to represent claimants through the power of attorney, the Commission does not allow its staff to accept power of attorney on the State's behalf. In order to perform this task, each representative employed by the Commission is accredited through one or more veterans' organizations. This accreditation allows the service representative to represent a claimant by accepting power of attorney on behalf of that organization, not the Commission. According to the Commission, the major advantages to this arrangement center on the fact that all veterans' organizations maintain offices in Washington, D.C. If a case is appealed to the Board of Veterans' Appeals there, or when new laws or regulations effecting veterans are passed, these organizations have quick access to needed information.

All claims and related paperwork filed for Kansas claimants through a power of attorney are then sent to the designated veterans' organization office in Wichita. The Commission's staff in the offices of the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars review the claims represented by those organizations. Claims represented by the Disabled American Veterans are reviewed by a staff person of that organization because the Commission has no employees in that office. All claims are then filed with the Veterans' Administration. Claims filed through veterans' organization offices in the veterans' hospitals (rather than field offices) generally follow a similar path.

Does the Veterans' Commission's Practice of Allocating Staff To Various Veterans' Organizations' Offices Result in Preferential Treatment For Veterans Affiliated With Those Groups?

In an effort to identify Commission practices that might result in preferential treatment for members of veterans' organizations, the auditors interviewed Veterans' Commission staff members and Veterans' Administration

staff with whom they are frequently in contact, and contacted officials from seven veterans' organization. The auditors also interviewed Commission service representatives assigned to the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars offices at the Topeka Veterans' Administration Hospital, and gave veterans living in the Hospital an opportunity to comment on the services they receive.

No evidence was found that veterans' organization members received preferential treatment. According to the Commission's service representatives at the Topeka Hospital, fewer than half the veterans served by each representative are members of their respective veterans' organizations. The auditors reviewed 42 individual patient case files and found that only 10 individuals were identified in those files as members of the American Legion. (The service representative assigned to the Veterans of Foreign Wars office does not record past membership in individual case files.)

None of the individuals interviewed by the auditors said they were aware of any incidents of veterans being denied services because they were not members of a veterans' organization represented by Commission staff. Nor were they aware of veterans receiving preferential treatment because they were members of a represented veterans' organization.

Kansas' system of providing services to veterans was generally well regarded by those who were interviewed. The auditors noted, however, that this system allows several management practices that are unusual in a State agency and can give at least the appearance of preferential treatment. These involve service representatives' close ties to veterans' organizations, both in terms of physical office space and additional compensation they receive from those organizations.

Facility offices are closely identified with veterans' organizations. A casual observer might assume that the Veterans' Commission staff located in Veterans' Administration facilities are employees of the organization or organizations they represent, not a State agency. For instance, the Commission's offices in the Veterans' Administration Hospital in Topeka are listed in the Yellow Pages under the organizations they represent (such as the American Legion or the Veterans of Foreign Wars), and the telephones are answered with the name of those organizations, not the Commission. The Commission's service representatives also wear pins identifying the organization they represent.

Veterans' Administration staff in several locations acknowledged that they did not know, or had not realized for some time, that the service representatives in their facilities were employed by the Veterans' Commission. One chief social worker indicated he thought the service representatives worked for private organizations, and so only referred claims to them if the claimant specifically requested organization representation.

Some Veterans' Commission employees receive additional compensation from veterans' organizations. Both Veterans' Commission staff and representatives of veterans' organizations acknowledge that some Commission employees receive additional compensation from veterans' organizations. Commission employees perform some services for the organizations during the State work

week, such as accepting membership dues and distributing canteen coupons, and also attend veterans' organization activities and perform some services for those organizations on their off-duty hours. Veterans' services representatives also travel to organization activities during both on- and off-duty hours, sometimes with and sometimes without State travel and per diem. According to the Commission, these activities are performed as a service to veterans, and are therefore an acceptable part of their State employment. The auditors asked the Commission's Executive Director to obtain information regarding this compensation from the veterans' organizations. However, these organizations refused to provide it. The letter of response is included as Attachment 1.

Are There Options for Improving The Efficiency of the Veterans' Commission?

The Commission's primary duties are making information on benefits available to veterans and their dependents and helping them file claims for benefits. Preparing these claims generally requires veterans' service representatives to contact claimants either by telephone or in person. During fiscal year 1982, service representatives in the Commission's field offices had a total of 38,245 office contacts and made 8,813 field contacts. Service representatives assigned to veterans' hospitals--who provide information and claims assistance to hospitalized or outpatient veterans and their dependents--reported 57,700 office contacts and 13,886 ward contacts.

To identify potential options for improving service representatives' efficiency in carrying out these duties, the auditors reviewed the Commission's 1982 workload data by area and by office. They also compared this information to the veterans' populations in the areas served by each field office. In addition, the auditors analyzed the workload of staff members working within the same facility (such as the Veterans' Administration Hospital in Topeka), and compared workloads of service representatives in field offices and facilities within the same town. For this comparison, they also reviewed field staff logs and all staff members' vouchers for the month of October 1982.

Based on these reviews and comparisons, several options for improving efficiency appear to merit consideration. These include reallocating field staff to equalize workloads and provide more uniform coverage, providing full-time Statewide access to information on veterans' benefits through a WATS line, requiring service representatives assigned to Veterans' Administration facilities to be accredited by several veterans' organizations, and eliminating overlap in coverage provided by service representatives in field and facility offices in the same town. Each of these options is discussed briefly below.

Reallocating Field Staff To Equalize Workloads And Provide More Uniform Coverage

The auditors found that the average monthly workload (number of office visits, field contacts, and forms completed and filed) varied significantly among the different field offices, even though each of the 14 field offices is staffed with one service representative and one Clerk-Steno II. For example, the field office in Pittsburg had ~~285~~ office contacts and completed and filed 281 forms,

compared with only 122 office contacts and 57 forms in the Dodge City field office. Another example: the Lawrence field office made 65 field contacts and filed 196 forms, compared with only four field contacts and 79 forms in the nearby Kansas City field office. (This information is presented by field office in Attachment 2.)

Because veteran populations vary in different parts of the State, a comparison on a workload-per-1,000-veterans basis for each field office does help even out some differences. For example, the Lawrence office serves nearly twice as many veterans as Kansas City, and the workload data per 1,000 veterans for these two offices are much more comparable. However, many differences still remain. With about 61,000 veterans to serve, Commission staff in the Lawrence field office made only 4.6 office and field visits per 1,000 veterans in fiscal year 1982, compared with 35.9 visits per 1,000 veterans in the Colby field office, which serves only about 5,500 veterans. Further, although the veterans' populations served by the Hutchinson and Salina field offices are about the same, the Salina office made 16.5 office and field visits and completed 15 forms per 1,000 veterans, compared with Hutchinson's 10.1 office and field visits and four forms per 1,000 veterans. (This information is listed for all field offices in Attachment 3.)

Although the auditors were not able to fully examine the reasons for such variations, it appears possible that some field offices serving a large number of veterans may not have sufficient staff to maintain more frequent contact. In other offices, the staff may not be working up to their capacity, or they may not serve enough veterans to keep fully occupied. By reallocating staff in the field to equalize workload and provide a more uniform level of coverage, the Commission may be able to eliminate such wide variations and improve staff efficiency.

Establishing a WATS Line to Provide Benefit Information

Field service representatives now travel to the county seats within their service areas to visit claimants who cannot come to the field office. Some of the trips made to provide general benefit or claims information may not be necessary. The Commission could consider establishing a WATS Line in the Topeka office to provide Statewide access to all interested parties about veterans benefits and the requirements for filing a claim. Personnel in this office could prepare a list of people who need to be contacted in person by a service representative. Representatives could then make these trips on an as-needed basis.

Requiring Commission Staff Working at Hospital Facilities To Be Accredited By Several Veterans' Organizations

Each veterans' service representative allocated to the Veterans' Administration Hospital in Topeka, Leavenworth, or Wichita is generally accredited by only one veterans' organization. In the Topeka Veterans' Administration Hospital, for example, two representatives are accredited by the American Legion only, one is accredited only by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and one only by the Disabled American Veterans. Thus, if a veteran wants a particular organization to represent him--such as the Disabled American Veterans--only the one representative accredited by that organization can provide assistance.

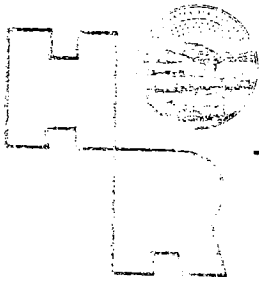
As Attachment 4 shows, three of the service representatives at the Topeka Hospital had an average of 787 office contacts, compared with only 177 office contacts for the representative accredited by the Veterans of Foreign Wars. If all four service representatives were accredited by the three veterans organizations at that hospital facility, they would be able to divide their workload more evenly and cover for each other during vacations or when a vacancy occurs. This practice is followed by Oklahoma and Colorado. Multiple accreditation would also help in identifying veterans' service representatives in Veterans' Administration hospital facilities as staff of the Veterans' Commission.

Eliminating Overlap in Coverage By Commission Staff in Field and Facility Offices

Veterans' service representatives assigned to field offices in Lawrence, Arkansas City, and Topeka provide services to veterans in Leavenworth, Sedgwick, and Shawnee Counties, respectively, despite the presence of service representatives at veterans' hospital facilities in those locations. According to the Commission's Administrative Officer, this overlap is necessary because the facility representatives' workload is too great to spend time making field contacts as well. However, a review of the field offices' workload data indicates that the additional field contacts in those areas would not appreciably increase facility representatives' workload. Field contacts in these areas could possibly be handled by the facility representatives if their secretaries were trained to complete paperwork while they were in the field, as is the practice in the field offices.

Another example of overlap: conventions and other veterans' organization events are generally attended by veterans' service representatives who represent those specific organizations in the facility offices. However, those activities may be held in locations where field service representatives could attend them at considerably less expense to the agency. A review of travel vouchers for October 1982 showed that the Veterans' Commission could have saved one-third of the amount it spent on travel to organization activities by sending the veterans' service representative whose field office was closest to the location of the activity.

Based on these findings, it appears that having the service representatives assigned to veterans' hospital facilities also serve the county in which their facility is located could result in more efficient use of staff without impairing service. Further, field representatives could cover meetings of veterans organizations that are held in their immediate area. This would reduce the Commission's travel and per-diem costs without diminishing the amount of outreach service provided to veterans' organization members.



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KANSAS VETERANS' COMMISSION

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13 April 1983

"ATTACHMENT 1"

Trudy Racine
Audit Supervisor
Legislative Post Audit
301 Mills Building
Topeka, KS 66612

Dear Ms. Racine:

Your request for a breakdown of Kansas Veterans Commission employees receiving compensation from Veterans Organizations was forwarded to The American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

I have been informed by Mr. Barney Aldridge, Adjutant-Quartermaster, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Mr. Floyd Rogers, State Adjutant, The American Legion, that it is their opinion this is not an appropriate request from the State of Kansas and therefore, they will not abide with this request. They are of the opinion that this compensation strictly pertains to activities performed by Kansas Veterans Commission employees after hours and on weekends. In addition, they stated that this should not be construed in a fashion whereby one concludes that these organizations have anything to hide. This position is based upon the feeling that it is not appropriate for the State of Kansas to be involved in the affairs of Veterans Organizations.

It appears to me that their denial is a matter of principle and fear of setting an inappropriate precedent.

If this office can be of any further service on this matter or any other matter, do not hesitate calling.

Sincerely,

St Teasley

STAN TEASLEY
Executive Director

ST:ejc

ATTACHMENT 2

AVERAGE MONTHLY WORKLOAD BY FIELD OFFICE
FISCAL YEAR 1982

Field Office	Average Monthly Workload		Forms Completed & Filed
	Office Visits	Field Contacts	
Arkansas City	265	46	240
Colby	146	52	73
Dodge City	122	48	57
Emporia	183	42	107
Garden City	144	36	143
Hutchinson	111	67	71
Independence	319	83	210
Junction City	274	89	121
Kansas City	154	4	79
Lawrence	218	65	196
Marysville	100	37	121
Pittsburg	285	50	281
Salina	231	46	252
Stockton	80	57	170
Average	188	52	152
Topeka (Central Office)	554	13	1,942

Source: Kansas Veterans' Commission Annual Traffic Report - Fiscal Year 1982.

ATTACHMENT 3

WORKLOAD COMPARED TO VETERAN POPULATION
FISCAL YEAR 1982

<u>Regional Office</u>	<u>Veteran Population (a)</u>	<u>Average Monthly Workload Per 100 Veterans</u>	
		<u>Total Contacts Office & Field</u>	<u>Forms Completed & Filed</u>
Arkansas City	67,270	4.6	3.5
Colby	5,510	35.9	13.3
Dodge City	7,430	22.9	7.8
Emporia	10,020	22.5	10.8
Garden City	9,230	19.5	15.4
Hutchinson	17,660	10.1	4.0
Independence	13,270	30.3	15.8
Junction City	15,360	23.6	7.8
Kansas City	27,900	5.7	2.9
Lawrence	61,000	4.6	3.2
Marysville	7,760	17.7	15.6
Pittsburg	12,580	26.6	22.3
Salina	16,830	16.5	15.0
Stockton	10,270	13.3	16.5
Average	20,149	18.1	11.0
Topeka	26,100	21.7	74.4

(a) As of March 31, 1982

Source: Veterans' Administration Office of Consumer and Public Affairs and Kansas Veterans' Commission Annual Traffic Report - Fiscal Year 1982.

ATTACHMENT 4

WORKLOAD IN VETERANS' ADMINISTRATION FACILITIES

Office	Average Monthly Workload				Number of Veterans' Service Representatives	
	Contacts		Forms		VSR I	VSR II
	Office	Field	Completed	Filed		
Topeka						
American Legion Veterans of Foreign Wars	1,705	205	177	29	2	
Disabled American Veterans	<u>177</u>	<u>74</u>	<u>82</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>1</u>	
	<u>657</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>152</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	
TOTAL	<u>2,539</u>	<u>288</u>	<u>411</u>	<u>47</u>	<u>4</u>	
Leavenworth						
American Legion Veterans of Foreign Wars	905	301	246	0	1	
	<u>663</u>	<u>259</u>	<u>145</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>1</u>	
TOTAL	<u>1,568</u>	<u>560</u>	<u>391</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>2</u>	
Wichita						
American Legion Veterans of Foreign Wars	370	250	59	827	4	1
Disabled American Veterans	331	60	57	570	2	1
	<u>185</u>	<u>375</u>	<u>317</u>	<u>475</u>	<u>0(a)</u>	<u>-</u>
TOTAL	<u>886</u>	<u>685</u>	<u>433</u>	<u>1,872</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>2</u>

(a) Staff in this office is employed by the Disabled American Veterans.

Source: Kansas Veterans' Commission Monthly Traffic Reports for Fiscal Year 1982.

