



South Alabama Veterans Council

An organization for all people, to serve all veterans.

A coalition of Veterans, Friends and Organizations working together
to further the cause of Veterans in the South Alabama area

5 February 2025

Attention Alabama Elected Officials,

I learned yesterday evening that Senators Andrew Jones and Donnie Chesteen introduced SB67 simply titled "ADVA Bill". (House version is HB154 was sponsored by Representatives Oliver, Moore (P), Bolton, Mooney, Starnes, Pettus, Shaver, DuBose, Butler, Rehm). From what I understand this bill will completely abolish the long-standing Alabama Board of Veterans Affairs and make the Commissioner of the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs a political appointee. Please note that throughout my military career I have avoided partisan politics. However, the damage this bill will do to veterans and their families causes me to adamantly oppose this legislation. Speaking on behalf of the South Alabama Veterans Council (SAVC), I urge all service members, veterans, and their families to contact their state legislators and voice their opposition.

The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs (ADVA) was established in 1945 after a number of Veterans Service Organizations led by the American Legion advocated for the need of a state department to provide assistance to and advocacy for the thousands of veterans returning from World War II. In keeping with military tradition, the idea was to make the department non-political; that way, the focus could be on the needs of the state's veterans and not subject to the whims of various administrations. Therefore, the position of Commissioner was created to be answerable not to the Governor of Alabama or any other politician but to the Alabama State Board of Veterans Affairs (SBVA). The first members of the State Board were comprised of members of the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Spanish-American War Veterans. Since its establishment, the SBVA has provided oversight and administrative of ADVA and has expanded to represent a multitude of Veterans Service Organizations that nominate members who are approved by the Governor, who serves as chairman of the SBVA. Importantly, the Governor's vote is no more powerful than any other board members.

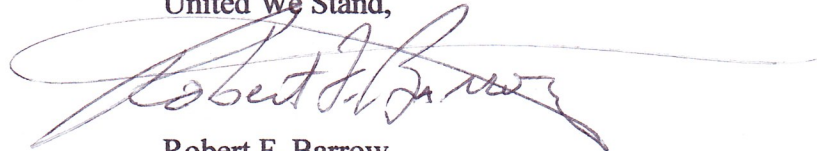
The continued independence of both the Commissioner and the State Board of Veterans Affairs from political influence is crucial to ensuring that Alabama's nearly 400,000 veterans receive consistent, fair, and nonpartisan support. Veterans' issues—such as healthcare, housing, employment, and mental health services—are not political in nature but rather matters of honoring service and providing essential resources to those who have sacrificed for their nation. When a board is subject to political influence, as is now being proposed by Alabama State Senator Andrew Jones, decision-making can shift based on changing administrations rather than the long-term needs of veterans. The independence of the Commissioner and board allows for continuity in policies and programs, preventing the disruption of services that can occur when leadership changes due to political appointments. If a board is heavily influenced by political interests, there is a risk that veterans' needs may become secondary to partisan agendas and/or

budgetary considerations. Decisions should be based on expertise, data, and the lived experiences of veterans rather than shifting political priorities.

Additionally, an independent Commissioner and board can ensure equitable treatment for all veterans, regardless of political affiliation or background. The mission of a State Board of Veterans Affairs should be solely focused on advocating for and serving veterans, without being swayed by external political pressures that could introduce bias into funding, programming, or eligibility requirements. By maintaining independence, the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs and the Alabama State Board of Veterans Affairs can foster public trust, ensuring that veterans and their families receive stable, unbiased, and effective support. The sacrifices made by veterans deserve a system that prioritizes their well-being over political considerations, making independence not just beneficial but essential.

I often hear our political candidates talk of their support for veterans and their families...while Alabama once led the nation in terms of benefits offered to veterans, we can no longer make that claim. Talk is cheap...actions speak louder than words. As a voting block veterans and their families deserve better than what this bill offers. The fact is that this bill originated from a personal dispute between the Governor and the former Commissioner of the SBVA. There seems to be a personal vendetta against the SBVA resulting from this disagreement...the proposed legislation potentially hurts thousands of veterans who were not directly involved in this quarrel. If this bill passes, I can assure you that Alabama veterans will not forget who voted for this poor piece of legislation!

United We Stand,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert F. Barrow", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Robert F. Barrow
President
South Alabama Veterans Council