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# Study will look at veterans' issues in West Virginia

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Delegate Barbara Evans Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, helped secure approval of a study to survey the physical and mental health and employment needs of veterans who have returned to civilian life. Delegate Linda Longstreth, D-Marion, also played a role in moving the study forward.

Washington, D.C.-based Atlas Research will perform the study as a follow up to the Select Committee on Veterans Affairs' 2008 study of veterans' issues in West Virginia.

Atlas said in its proposal that in the four years since:

■ An increased number of service members are returning home from deployment, and more are expected. Along with those are 7,000 vets from previous eras living in the

state. Vitale said the Morgantown Statistical Area has about 1,200 veterans.

■ Since 9/11, veteran unemployment has hovered at just under 12 percent. Younger vets may have no or limited health insurance, may not have enrolled for Veterans Affairs benefits, may be trying to support families and may be facing home foreclosures.

■ Older veterans, from World War II to pre-9/11, may also be facing health, financial and employment problems.

The study will survey 1,000 West Virginia veterans from WWII onward. It will address their overall well-being; their employment status and eligibility for VA benefits, workforce and education programs; and the state and quality of physical and mental health care programs for veterans.

Longstreth said the study should particularly help the many rural veterans who may lack access to services or simply may not know where to turn.

"What can we do to help? Anything we can do to reach out to them" is important, she said.

Fleischauer explained that the select committee voted to pursue the study, and the Joint Committee on Government and Finance, which has final say on all spending for internal legislative matters, approved it Tuesday.

There is no final cost figure yet. Atlas will negotiate a formal contract with Legislative Services. Atlas then estimates it will take from eight to 10 months to complete the project and deliver a report.

"I hope they will be ready by next fall in case

there are discoveries that will suggest a need for legislative policy or funding changes," Fleischauer said.

"We felt it was time to get another look," she said. "We are the only state which has ever surveyed its veterans to find out what they want and need, and since it's been about four years, we thought it was time to check in again."

Vitale said the study will be helpful. "However, the information must be used to alter the way we support our military and their families," he said. "It's in the action plans and execution of those plans that we will make the difference. I believe the study will show very similar traits among the generations. However, the times and economic conditions will be very unique for our modern veterans."