

Committee on Military and Veterans Affairs, Space, and Domestic Security

CS/CS/HB 7015 — Military and Veteran Support

by Economic Affairs Committee; Appropriations Committee; Veteran and Military Affairs Subcommittee; and Rep. Smith and others (CS/SB 860 by Appropriations Committee; Military and Veterans Affairs, Space, and Domestic Security Committee; and Senators Benacquisto, Hukill, Sachs, Gaetz, Abruzzo, Altman, Bean, Bradley, Brandes, Braynon, Bullard, Clemens, Dean, Detert, Diaz de la Portilla, Evers, Flores, Galvano, Garcia, Gardiner, Gibson, Grimsley, Hays, Joyner, Latvala, Lee, Legg, Montford, Negron, Richter, Ring, Simmons, Simpson, Sobel, Soto, Stargel, Thompson, and Thrasher)

The bill (Chapter 2014-1, L.O.F.) amends various sections of law relating to employment, education, services, and benefits for current and former military personnel and their families.

Florida National Guard Education Dollars for Duty Program

The bill amends the existing Education Dollars for Duty (EDD) Program to authorize a broader use of program funds. The EDD program is the tuition assistance program for Florida National Guard members and is administered by the Florida Department of Military Affairs. Expanded authorized uses include online courses, training to obtain industry certifications, continuing education to maintain license certifications, industry examination fees, and reimbursement for books and fees. The bill also requires eligible Florida National Guard members who have deployed on federal military orders to be given priority consideration for participation in the program.

The bill appropriates \$1.53 million in recurring funds and \$250,000 in non-recurring funds to the Department of Military Affairs to supplement the EDD program and to upgrade EDD information technology infrastructure.

Florida Veterans' Walk of Honor and Memorial Garden

The bill authorizes the construction of a Florida Veterans' Walk of Honor and a Florida Veterans' Memorial Garden on the Capitol Complex grounds to recognize and honor those veterans who have made significant contributions to Florida through their service to the United States. The two memorials are to be administered and funded by the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs' direct support organization, without appropriation of state funds.

This provision became law upon approval by the Governor on March 31, 2014.

Veterans' Employment Preference

Current law mandates that priority and preference be given to certain veterans and their spouses in obtaining or retaining public sector employment in Florida. The bill expands eligibility for veterans' preference to also include:

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- Any honorably discharged veteran;
- A current member of the Florida National Guard or the reserves; and
- The mother, father, legal guardian, or unremarried widow or widower of a servicemember who died in the line of duty.

The bill also removes the existing requirement that a person receiving veterans' preference be a Florida resident and modifies the point system for which preference is awarded.

As it relates to veterans' preference in private sector employment, the bill authorizes, but does not require, a private sector employer to establish a voluntary veterans' employment preference. The bill authorizes preference to be given to an honorably discharged veteran, spouses of certain disabled veterans, and the widow or widower of a servicemember who died in the line of duty.

Enhancing Florida's Veteran-Friendly Status

The bill creates Florida Is For Veterans, Inc. (FIFV), a nonprofit corporation housed within the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs. The FIFV is governed by a nine member board of directors appointed by the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and is created to:

- Promote Florida as a veteran-friendly state;
- Encourage retired and recently separated military personnel to reside in Florida;
- Promote the value of military skill sets to Florida businesses;
- Assist in tailoring the training of veterans to match the needs of Florida employers; and
- Assist in enhancing the entrepreneurial skills of veterans.

The FIFV and the Florida Tourism Industry Marketing Corporation (VISIT Florida) will partner to promote Florida as a veteran-friendly state. The FIFV is responsible for identifying the veteran target market. VISIT Florida is responsible for implementing a marketing campaign to encourage retired and recently separated military personnel to reside in Florida and must also perform outreach efforts to disseminate information regarding veteran benefits.

The bill creates the Veterans Employment and Training Services Program (VETS) to be administered by the FIFV. In addition to assisting veterans in achieving employment objectives, the FIFV will administer a grants program directed at providing matching funds to businesses to train veterans for the specific needs of each participating business. The FIFV will also contract with public or private universities or colleges to provide entrepreneur mentoring programs for Florida veterans.

The FIFV is also responsible for submitting a report to the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives that identifies existing gaps in veteran resources and recommends best practices that may be used to assist veterans and improve current or new resources and programs.

The bill contains accountability provisions regarding the FIFV, the marketing campaign, and the VETS program, including the requirement to develop performance measures for approval by the Legislative Budget Commission prior to expenditure of program funds. In addition to the FIFV annual status reports to the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, the bill requires periodic review and evaluation by the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Governmental Accountability, and the Office of Economic and Demographic Research.

The bill directs VISIT Florida to expend \$1 million annually to market Florida to veterans as a permanent home and disseminate information to veterans. In addition, it directs VISIT Florida to provide the FIFV with \$300,000 to conduct the market research required in the bill. The bill provides \$344,106 recurring and \$14,391 nonrecurring funds for the general operations and staffing of the FIFV. Finally, the bill provides \$56,768 in recurring and \$4,258 in nonrecurring funds for one full-time equivalent position in the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs to assist the FIFV in performing state financial activities.

Florida State Veterans' Homes

The bill removes the requirement that a veteran be a resident of Florida for one year prior to applying for admission into a state veterans' nursing home or the state veterans' domiciliary home. Other existing admission requirements still apply, including the requirement that a veteran be a resident of Florida at the time of applying for admission. The Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs currently operates six veterans' nursing homes and one veterans' domiciliary home in Florida.

Driver License Privileges for Military Spouses and Dependents

The bill entitles military spouses and dependents to certain driver license privileges currently extended to active duty servicemembers. In doing so, the bill exempts a servicemember's spouse and dependents from the requirement to obtain a Florida driver license solely for the purpose of enrolling a child in a Florida public school or accepting employment in Florida. The bill also clarifies that the spouse of a servicemember stationed outside of Florida is eligible for an automatic extension of a Florida driver license while the spouse resides with the servicemember outside of Florida.

Professional Licensing Initial Fee Waiver

The bill broadens eligibility for initial licensing fee waivers for professions regulated by the Department of Business and Professional Regulation and the Department of Health. Current law waives initial licensing fees for honorably discharged veterans who have separated from the military within 24 months. The bill expands the timeframe for eligibility to 60 months of separation and also extends the fee waiver to the spouse of an honorably discharged veteran (separated from the military within 60 months).

Reciprocal Licensure for Separated Military Health Care Practitioners

The bill authorizes a recently separated military servicemember who served as a health care practitioner in the military to obtain a license to practice as a health care practitioner in Florida if the applicant:

- Has an active license in another state;
- Had no disciplinary actions taken against his or her license within five years of applying for licensure;
- Received or will receive an honorable discharge within 6 months of applying for licensure; and
- Actively practiced the profession for three years prior to applying for licensure.

This reciprocal licensure process applies to a wide range of health care occupations that are licensed and regulated by the Division of Medical Quality Assurance within the Department of Health.

Temporary Certificates for Active Duty and Veteran Physicians

Current law allows active duty military physicians and veterans who served as military physicians to obtain a temporary certificate to practice medicine in an area of critical need in Florida. The bill requires the Board of Medicine and the Board of Osteopathic Medicine to establish a simplified application process for military and veteran physicians to obtain such a temporary certificate. The bill also allows a military or veteran physician with a temporary certificate to enter into a contract to provide volunteer services and obtain sovereign immunity pursuant to s. 766.1115, F.S.

Prescription Drug Wholesale Distributor Certification

The bill permits specified experience in the U.S. military to satisfy work experience requirements for certification by the Department of Business and Professional Regulation as a designated representative of a prescription drug wholesaler distributor. Specifically, the bill allows an applicant with at least two years of “managerial experience with the U.S. military, where the applicant’s responsibilities included, but were not limited to, recordkeeping, warehousing, distribution, or other logistics services pertaining to prescription drugs” to meet the work experience required for certification.

Charter Schools

The bill provides legislative intent that the unique needs of military families be met and a framework be established to provide children of military families with a high-quality education. Military installation commanders are encouraged to work with the Commissioner of Education to increase military family student achievement, which may include the establishment of charter schools on military bases.

Out-of-state Fee Waivers for Non-resident Veterans

The bill creates the “Congressman C.W. Bill Young Veteran Tuition Waiver Act” to waive out-of-state tuition fees for veterans pursuing higher education in Florida who are not residents of this state. The fee waiver may be applied up to 110 percent of the credit hours needed to complete a degree or certificate program at a state university, a Florida College System institution, a career center operated by a school district, or a charter technical career center. A veteran must have received an honorable discharge and reside in Florida at the time of enrollment to qualify for the out-of-state fee waiver.

Florida National Guard Armory Renovation Funding

The bill appropriates \$12.5 million in nonrecurring funds to the Department of Military Affairs for the continuing renovations of the state’s National Guard armories to meet state and federal building codes.

Military Base Encroachment Protection Funding

The bill provides almost \$7.5 million in nonrecurring funds for the acquisition of nonconservation lands adjacent to MacDill Air Force Base, Naval Support Activity Panama City, and Naval Station Mayport for the purpose of securing and protecting those installations against encroachment. The lands are to be acquired by the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund pursuant to the nonconservation base buffering process outlined in s. 288.980, F.S.

These provisions were approved by the Governor and, except as otherwise provided, take effect July 1, 2014.

Vote: Senate 38-0; House 116-0