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Representative Kane backs licensing and education bill to support military families

BOSTON – The House and Senate have finalized legislation to assist military personnel and their families with accessing education benefits and meeting professional licensure requirements, with State Representative Hannah Kane (R-Shrewsbury) voting to support the bill.

Senate Bill 3075, *An Act relative to military spouse-licensure portability, education and enrollment of dependents* (aka, the SPEED Act), was enacted in both legislative branches on July 29 and is now before Governor Charlie Baker for his review and signature. The bill contains compromise language negotiated by a six-member conference committee, which worked to resolve the differences between earlier House and Senate versions of the bill.

Representative Kane said the conference committee report retains language from the House version of the bill establishing a Massachusetts National Guard Family Education Program. Under this program, National Guard members can transfer their unused education benefits provided under the National Guard Education Assistance Program to their children or dependents. In addition, the bill classifies military personnel stationed in Massachusetts, as well as their spouse and children, as in-state residents for tuition purposes when they enroll at one of the state's public colleges or universities.

According to Representative Kane, the SPEED Act requires the Commissioner of Public Health and each of the boards of registration and examination under their supervision to expedite the issuance of a license or certification to the spouses of military personnel who are certified or licensed in another state. The directive is designed to assist individuals who left their previous employment to accompany their spouse to Massachusetts following a military transfer.

To help encourage more small businesses to hire military personnel, the SPEED Act establishes a tax credit of \$2,000 per year for up to two years for every National Guard member they employ. Filed as an amendment to the original House bill by State Representative David Vieira (R-Falmouth), the credit will be made available to certain partnerships, limited liability corporations and other legal entities engaged in business in Massachusetts that employ less than 100 workers and will be capped at \$1 million per year.

The SPEED Act also creates a 15-member special legislative commission charged with developing a suitable memorial to recognize Deborah Samson, the Official Heroine of the Commonwealth, who fought during the American Revolutionary War after disguising herself as a man and enlisting in the Continental Army. The language, which mirrors a stand-alone bill filed by Representative Vieira, requires the commission to file its recommendations by June 1, 2023.

Representative Kane noted that the bill also requires licensed funeral directors and their staffs to provide information on funeral and burial benefits for veterans. The language is similar to a stand-alone bill previously filed by Representative Steven Howitt (R-Seekonk).

The SPEED Act includes the House language establishing a Massachusetts Medal of Fidelity, which was first proposed by Governor Baker as a stand-alone bill during the 2019-2020 legislative session and was refiled this session by both the Governor and House Minority Leader Bradley H. Jones, Jr. (R-North Reading). According to Representative Kane, this medal will be provided to the next of kin of any Massachusetts service member or veteran who died as a result of a service-connected post-traumatic stress disorder; conditions resulting from a service-connected traumatic brain injury; or a service-connected disease, condition or injury related to exposure to harmful toxin, herbicides, agents or materials.

The SPEED Act also requires the Commissioner of Public Health, in consultation with the Commissioner of Veterans Services and the Adjutant General of the Massachusetts National Guard, to develop informational materials for military personnel who may have been exposed to harmful chemicals and toxins emanating from open burn pits while deployed overseas. The bill directs the Commissioner of Veterans Services to create a database of self-identifying service members and veterans who have been exposed to open burn pits and calls upon the Commissioner and the Adjutant General to encourage the United States Department of Veterans Affairs to enhance and simplify the registration process for the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry.

The SPEED ACT also:

- establishes a process for schools to be designated a Purple Star Campus by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education;
- requires the Governor to issue annual proclamations recognizing the anniversaries of the founding of the U.S. Army (June 14); US Air Force (September 18); National Guard (December 13); and US Coast Guard (August 4); and
- creates a special legislative commission to study allowing limited slot machine licenses for veterans organizations

Governor Baker now has 10 days to sign the bill.

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