



**Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs
Office of the Secretary**

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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF Senate Bill 831

**Veterans - Persons Providing Veterans Benefits Services and Veterans Benefits Appeals Services -
Fees and Compensation
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
February 29, 2024**

Thank you Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the committee.

I am Tony Woods, Secretary of the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs.

I am honored to appear before you today and I respectfully ask the Committee for a favorable report on SB 831.

This bill seeks to penalize unaccredited actors that prey on Maryland veterans and I'm grateful to Senator Klausmeier and Delegate Allen for their leadership on this.

Since my department's creation, in partnership with the legislature, we've invested Maryland taxpayer dollars into creating a benefits program that accredits veteran benefits specialists and assists veterans with filing their initial claim. We do this at no cost to a veteran.

Last year, my department made 153,000 contacts with veterans, and submitted nearly 4,500 claims resulting in nearly \$40 million in compensation benefits for veterans.

Claim sharks operate by promising a veteran guaranteed disability rating in exchange for a cut of their earned benefits. If documentation is thin, claim sharks have been known to work with unscrupulous medical professionals to produce fraudulent documentation, opening veterans up to penalties and even criminal prosecution.

Fines collected from claim sharks who violate this law are deposited into the Maryland Veterans Trust Fund, which provides vital assistance to veterans and their families that have fallen on hard times.

While we wait for federal legislation to reinstate criminal penalties at the Federal level, we must pass SB 831 to fill the gap and protect Maryland veterans and their families from bad actors who seek to profit from their service benefits.

For this, I respectfully ask the Committee for a favorable report on SB 831.

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