

Sponsor Testimony

Uploaded by: Senator Jack Bailey

Position: FWA

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Budget & Taxation Committee



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Senate Bill 1178 – Higher Education - Douglas J. J. Peters Veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq Conflicts Scholarship - Repeal of Service Terminal Date

Dear Chairman Feldman and Members of the Committee,

I am writing to introduce Senate Bill 1178. This bill would ensure that all Maryland veterans who served our nation in combat in Afghanistan or Iraq are eligible for the Douglas J. J. Peters Veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq Conflicts Scholarship regardless of when they served.

Last month, a resident of my district contacted my office to request assistance on an issue that they were experiencing with the Maryland Higher Education Commission. This constituent had inquired with MHEC about the eligibility requirements of this scholarship and was informed that the open-ended language that this bill repeals was being interpreted as prohibiting scholarships from being issued for service after May 1, 2003. This was the date that then-President George W. Bush declared that "major combat operations in Iraq have ended." Of course, as we all know, American forces continued fighting in Iraq long after that date.

Upon learning of this interpretation, my office inquired with MHEC about this matter. During these conversations, we were told that changing this would require a statutory revision. This bill represents the most straightforward way of resolving the issue by repealing the "terminal date" language that has been causing this confusion and, in my opinion, misinterpretation of this law in a manner inconsistent with its intent.

Service in these conflicts should count regardless of when in their course it occurred. Senate Bill 1178 clarifies that veterans who served in these wars are eligible for this scholarship regardless of the date of their service by removing the vague language that is open to such misinterpretation. It is important to note that this bill makes no other changes to the Scholarship's other eligibility requirements. For example, currently, a veteran must have served in one of these conflicts for at least 60 days, and no awards are permitted after June 30, 2030.

I am submitting with this bill an amendment to address another concern that has arisen regarding student financial aid in our State. At a recent budget hearing, I was made aware that only about \$17,000 of the \$8.5 million that was set aside for the Maryland Police Officers and Probation Agents Scholarship Program in Fiscal Year 2023 was used. After this hearing, I learned that community college students are ineligible for this scholarship. This amendment will alter current law to allow these scholarships to be used at community colleges with the intention of increasing utilization of this program. I believe that this amendment is consistent with the intent of the underlying bill of expanding access to State financial aid to our hometown heroes.

I respectfully request a favorable report with this amendment on Senate Bill 1178. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Bailey".

Senator Jack Bailey